

Surveying an institution's assessment mechanisms towards new measures of success.

Abstract

Widening participation can create challenges of student retention, an issue being constantly addressed by such initiatives as increased student support. Supposedly 'elite' universities, it has been argued, attract 'better' students, a term largely defined in terms of academic success. The research presented here argues that 'better' is entirely misleading and invites reflection as to whether a change from traditional didactic assessment approaches to more innovative modes could enhance achievement, success and therefore retention by recognising and recording the qualities of a student populace with widely varying experiences and talents without undermining academic rigour. An analysis of the types of assessment within a widening participation university as recorded on the validated module database against the highest weighting level revealed a wide variety of imaginative approaches to measuring student engagement reflecting the commitment and professionalism of staff in providing an educational context that is varied and meaningful. Whilst acknowledging this strength, it is argued that further flexibility is required to more exactly measure student abilities, both in assessment timing and form, the emphasis presently being very much upon tutor-led modes with insufficient attention given to recognising the potential of students to contribute to the assessment process. Present assessment modes can therefore perhaps be viewed as an additional barrier and there is a need to reflect upon form to recognise more fully student ability.

Keywords; *initial, diagnostic, formative, summative assessment; timing, retention, measurement.*

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Introduction

The study, completed at the University of Bolton in 2011, examines the types of assessment employed within a widening participation institution characterised by a diverse student body. The university has instigated a series of effective support strategies including student liaison officers, enhanced learning support facilities and electronic register systems but, like many other widening participation institutions, student retention and successful completion of studies remains a challenge, particularly at Bolton with its first year undergraduates. Such support strategies are common across the sector but there has been less attention given to the impact of assessment. The theme of the paper, with a view to enhancing retention and successful study, is to debate the nature of assessment and whether it should or could be changed to celebrate and record more accurately the talent and potential of students largely unused to traditional approaches. The central question is whether there is a disparity between assessment form and opportunities for students to display their abilities, and if so, does this create an additional barrier to success? The context of the study is explained and a discussion of assessment types provided followed by an analysis of Bolton's approach to measuring learning. The study invites reflection and suggests finally that the funding changes from 2012 might act as a catalyst to peruse this under-researched area.

Context

Bolton Institute of Higher Education was formed in 1982 by the merger of the Bolton Institute of Technology and Bolton College of Education (Technical). Bolton Institute was awarded the right to award taught degrees in 1992, with the powers to award research degrees in 1995. In April 2004, the Institute was awarded university status with immediate effect. The origins of a centre of study can be traced back to the Bolton Mechanics Institute in 1824. Bolton as a centre for study has then its roots firmly grounded within a working class community as remains the case today in contrast to its more illustrious neighbour in Manchester. The 2009/10 HESA return profiles 23% of students are drawn from non-white ethnic categories, 99% studied previously in state schools, 42% of full time undergraduate students are within NS-SEC 4,5,6, and 7 categories and 80% of full time undergraduate students live within 50 miles of Bolton of which 33% actually reside in the Metropolitan Borough of Bolton. The student profile reflects Feinstein et al (2004)'s analysis of the disparity between education achievement and lower socio-economic status. As a widening participation university, Bolton successfully achieves the expectations expressed by HEFCE (2006) in attracting a diverse student body. The challenge, as revealed in table 2 below later, is retaining students to the successful completion of their studies.

Defining educational assessment

In very general terms, assessment falls into the three broad bands of initial (at the start of learning), formative (during learning) and summative (at the end of a section of learning). Such terms only provide a very superficial overview, for example, when does one define the

conclusion of learning (end of module/year/degree?) and that a formative measurement might inform the degree level classification via summative grading. Sadler (1989, p.120) captures succinctly the difference,

“Formative assessment is concerned with how judgments about the quality of student responses (performance, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the student’s competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning.....The primary distinction between formative and summative assessment relates to purpose and effect, not to timing”

York (2003) and Boud (1986) both emphasize the need for students to be given the ability and opportunity to utilise feedback to self reflect on performance and understand how to make adjustments to meet assessment norms. Black and William (1998) note a frequently overlooked aspect of assessment in that students need to understand if they are to respond to the tutor’s perceived criteria. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) see formative assessment as a model that helps students take control of their own learning and that universities should build on this with students taking a proactive rather than reactive role. The end of the first year of study is crucial to students and is a time when developmental needs, largely determined by assessment, become apparent. The type of feedback in this delicate period becomes crucial. There was strong evidence in this study of highly effective practices of students being invited in after exam boards to discuss their progress to set new targets, a strategy which almost certainly will enhance learning and retention, though the emphasis tended to be upon those receiving ‘refer’ or ‘defer’ grades. Following the feedback, some students would be faced with a succession of repeated assessments to be delivered to the same deadline, possibly to be completed during the summer holiday when availability of support is minimal, which unsurprisingly is demotivating and leads in some cases to students being overwhelmed and departing. It could be argued that such procedures create unnecessary difficulties and inhibit the ability of the student to perform at the required level.

Assessment should also be viewed an integral part of the teaching and learning experience, not something ‘tacked on’ (Rust, 2001, p.1). It should also of course be reliable, the consistency in measuring a level of attainment (McMillan, 2008: Heywood, 2000), and should have a high level of validity, that is it measures what it is purports to measure (Brown *et al*, 1997: Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Tutors create the assessment criteria, albeit sometimes under the remit of a professional body, and by a variety of means measure the extent the criteria have been achieved and tutors record the assessment. In this study there was minimal evidence of tutors asking students how best they would like to be assessed. Assessment therefore would appear to be a tutor-led activity but there is much research highlighting how integral and important it is to students who crave, if not ownership, at least an appreciative understanding, and it is not a new phenomenon. For example, Snyder (1971) and Miller and Parlett (1974) found that what influenced students the most was not the teaching, but the assessment. They wanted to gauge how best they could be graded as successful and this was at least as important as the

educational experience. Some of these student quotes from Synder's study are extremely revealing:

From the beginning I found the whole thing to be a kind of exercise in time budgeting.... You had to filter out what was really important in each course ... you couldn't physically do it all. I found out that if you did a good job of filtering out what was important you could do well enough to do well in every course. (p.62-63)

I just don't bother doing the homework now. I approach the courses so I can get an 'A' in the easiest manner, and its amazing how little work you have to do if you really don't like the course. (p.50).

Miller and Parlett discovered similar traits:

I am positive there is an examination game. You don't learn certain facts, for instance, you don't take the whole course, you go and look at the examination papers and you say 'looks as though there have been four questions on a certain theme this year, last year the professor said that the examination would be much the same as before', so you excise a good bit of the course immediately (p.60)

The student quote from Gibbs (1992) below highlights the conundrum of the purpose of assessment and how its purpose can be circumvented:

"If you are under a lot of pressure then you will just concentrate on passing the course. I know that from bitter experience. One subject I wasn't very good at I tried to understand the subject and I failed the exam. When I re-took the exam I just concentrated on passing the exam. I got 96% and the guy couldn't understand why I failed the first time. I told him this time I just concentrated on passing the exam rather

than understanding the subject. I still don't understand the subject so it defeated the object, in a way." (p101)

Rowntree's (1987, p.1) comment that, "if we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures", is revealing but perhaps unsurprising. Thomas (2000, p.434), who in a study of a university succeeding in retaining students whilst widening participation notes a key point, the relationship between assessment and student performance is guided by staff attitudes:

"A central aspect of the academic experience of students relates to assessment. In one focus group for example, the students thought it was difficult to fail as long as you put the work in. This can be attributed to the fact that the staff are supportive and work through academic difficulties with students: 'I don't know many people who have failed. It isn't hard as long as you put the work in'. This statement suggests that success is seen to be within the grasp of all students (as long as they put the work in), and that cultural capital (such as language, style and other symbols) does not dominate the assessment process."

Assessment clearly then is more than selecting out those with the greatest developmental need. The key perhaps to its intrinsic purpose relates to the earlier point, does assessment measure what it is intended to do and significantly is there a relationship between students' learning styles, staff teaching approaches and the recording (the assessment) of the whole process? Studies by Säljö, (1975) and Marton and Säljö, (1997) suggest there is a positive correlation in successful attainment of learning outcomes when the assessment mirrors the learning styles adopted by students. Ramsden (1997) found that surface learning can result from inappropriate assessment types, the intended learning not being sufficiently addressed by the assessment requirements. The midway point in the conundrum is ensuring the learning activities and module learning outcomes closely align with the tasks and assessment methods (Joughin and Macdonald (2002). The following section begins to address some of these complex issues.

The University of Bolton assessment profile

Table 1 below provides an overview as to how students are assessed. The 1743 validated modules as recorded on the university database were examined and the type of assessment recorded against the highest weighting. Where two or more assessments had an equal weighting, each was recorded separately, which equates to 2139 items of assessment.

Table 1. Profile of validated modules. Numbers indicate frequency of occurrence as the highest assessment weighting.

ESSAY/PAPER	540	GROUP ASSIGNMENT/ROLE PLAY/PRESENTATION/PEER REVIEW/COACHING SESSION	34	INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATION INCLUDING PEER ASSESSED POSTER AND SEMINAR PAPERS	79
JOURNAL/REFLECTIVE LEARNING LOG/DIARY	91	INTERVIEW/VIVA	10	PRACTICAL OR CREATIVE PROJECT/RESEARCH OR WORK BASED ASSIGNMENT	376
PERSONAL PROGRESS REPORT/PLAN/RECORDED BOOK	44	SCRIPT/OUTLINE/PLAY/SHORT STORY/POEMS/REWRITE TEXT/FILM/VIDEO/BOOK REVIEW/SOUND TRACK ANALYSIS/REHEARSAL/LISTENING TEST	30	RESEARCH PROJECT OR DISSERTATION PROPOSAL OR PLAN/ COST INFORMATION	25
DATA ANALYSIS	10	BUSINESS /MARKETING PLAN	5	EXHIBITION/POSTER PRESENTATION	16
EXAMINATION/TEST	279	CRITICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH PAPER/PRIMARY SOURCE	8	TEACHING OBSERVATION	9
CASE STUDY	100	DISSERTATION/THESIS	51	LISTENING, SPEAKING, READING AND WRITING TASKS *	33
REPORT/CRITICAL REVIEW	212	PORTFOLIO/PRACTICAL FOLDER/WORKBOOK	207		

*language courses only

Findings

- 1743 modules are listed as validated but there was no way of ascertaining how many of them were actually delivered. However, any presently not utilised are unlikely to represent a particular type of assessment which would skew the results, so it is a fair assumption they do largely reflect how the university assesses its students.
- The 10 categories can be viewed as occasionally overlapping in their interpretation but there is still an impressive and imaginative range. However, where two assessments have an equal highest weighting (50/50) the majority adopt the same format twice such as two portfolios.

- The terms Case Study and Report are occasionally used interchangeably and somewhat vaguely. Some case studies could be construed as a report and vice versa and each even possibly viewed as an essay. The recording of the frequency of the terms reflect what is listed on the module database.
- The figures represent highest weightings which suggest perhaps finality in the assessment mode. However, for a student reaching this stage might mean actually achieving several smaller assessments. Portfolio building was the strongest indicator of layered assessment, one module requiring 24 separate assessments to be completed successfully to meet all of the learning outcomes!
- It was not always absolutely clear how an assessment was to be conducted, measured and applied. When in 'class assessment' and 'class work' were listed as the mode it was not always stated clearly what assessments are intended. This is not to say they had no merit but from the information it was difficult to ascertain how achievement was to be verified. This gives rise to questions of standardisation across a programme. Similarly, 'individual assignment' is occasionally listed as the intended form of assessment but this was too vague a term to arrive at a conclusion as to what is intended. This means that issues of assessment reliability possibly rest with an individual and their expertise. How would someone else deliver the module assessment given unstated criteria?
- It was not unusual for a presentation to have lower weighting than an essay even though similar aspects of learning were being assessed. This brings into question issues of validity in why assess a student more than once to similar criteria via different types of assessment?
- It was interesting to note lower weighted assessments whilst scrutinizing the module database and occasionally a Reflective Journal (a very strong measure of attainment) was weighted as a zero. In such cases it is unclear as to its purpose.
- Very revealingly, there were only four examples of negotiated assessment. This suggests assessment is prescribed for the majority of modules to an unchallengeable format. Once a module is validated to include a certain type of assessment this is what has to apply, no matter what the learning needs of the students are. Such a format implies an annual homogenous group of students which clearly is not the case. This lack of flexibility in how we sometimes approach assessment is explored later.
- No examples of peer assessment were uncovered suggesting assessment is almost entirely tutor-led.
- There were very few examples of study skills being taught as an accredited module and recorded as a final assessment.

The findings present a complex and varied picture of how student learning is measured and raises the complex issue as to whether the present structures inhibit and constrain the ability to display academic worth by their narrow definitions? If one creates more imaginative approaches to assessment, which might mean assessing less as well as introducing new modes, it might be feasible to reduce failure which would improve retention whilst not compromising academic rigour. This theme is explored in more detail later.

We clearly assess in a variety of ways but perhaps not to the extent suggested by Brown and Smith (1997, p.23) that “multiple methods are necessary to assess multiple talents for multiple audiences.” This study suggests we have not included a debate with students as how they would like to be assessed. Why does a module of learning have to have a prescriptive genre (type) when what we are concerned with is the evidence (content)? For example, why couldn't students have a choice between say a portfolio and an essay? There is this flexibility at doctorate level (traditional 80,000 word research study/PhD by Publication/PhD by Practice), why not at all levels? Why do we need to assess all students on a module in the same way? It would make more sense to provide choices, the same learning outcomes could be measured (insight, engagement, appreciation, theoretical perspectives etc) but in a way which reflects students' strengths. As Segers and Dochy (2001) point out, asking students about their learning and assessment is likely to improve how lecturers organise learning and assessment. So why not negotiate assessment modes which reflect preferences? It would seem logical to suggest that a widening participation university with a diverse student profile should provide a diverse assessment portfolio.

It possible too that repeating assessments creates an unnecessary workload for students. As listed as the highest assessment weighting on the module database (Table 1), individual presentations including peer assessed poster and seminar papers account for only 79 entries. Looking at the content of the modules against the learning outcomes, much seminar work complements essay writing. Whilst clearly there are significant presentation skills in a seminar the chances are the essay following will cover much of the same ground. Could the seminar have as a learning outcome the inclusion of a critical commentary instead of an essay? If so, this would mean engagement could be confidently measured to learning outcomes reflecting the necessary academic requirements by one assessment instead of two. The seminar would be presented within the module, not at the end, which would remove some of the difficulties of assessment timing which bunches summative assessments together across modules to the same final submission deadline which could undermine retention because of the sheer pressure imposed upon students. Take away that final assessment and replace it with a formative model, such as a seminar, and the chances are the majority of students would have the chance to present and achieve; the nightmare of the final submission date and frequent ensuing panic would be removed, a continuous but more efficient process than the end of semester 'sink or swim' scenario common across the sector. Such an approach could also reduce the challenges of resubmissions previously described. Students bring to their learning experience a raft of outside pressures so why create further tensions via an assessment system which is convenient for staff but less so for students for whom the mechanism exists?

Within the module database there is evidence of a small amount of peer assessment but in terms of the assessment profile it is insignificant. There is perhaps an understandable reticence in devolving assessment responsibility to students, perhaps an unintentional reflection of Freire (1972) who saw education as oppressive with the teacher manipulating control to maintain the *status quo*. However, Falchokov and Goldfinch (2000) found where assessment was based on well understood and formulated criteria, peer assessments reflected teacher judgments. Dochy *et al* (1999) in an analysis of 63 studies concluded peer assessment was seen to encourage students to be more responsive and reflective. Race (2001, p.7) correctly notes peer assessment as a natural part of the learning process because,

“Students learn a great deal from each other, both in classes and outside classes. They naturally compare what they have achieved with each other, and use this to reflect on their own learning progress. Including student self assessment and peer-assessment in our assessment profile legitimates what students already do spontaneously, and can help them to do it much more effectively.”

There is much evidence that peer assessment produces reliable and valid outcomes, (Topping 1998; Hughes 2001) but it is not easier or a reduction of tutor responsibility because, though it involves less tutor marking, it necessitates very careful planning and scrutiny (Langam and Wheeler, 2003). Assessment should not be something done to the students but rather done by students (Harris and Bell, 1990). In a study of self and peer assessments, Brown and Dove, 1993, p.3) found, 'students using higher levels of reflection, developing a questioning and self analytic approach to their professional practice and engaging in deep rather than surface learning.'

There are strong arguments then for adopting some peer assessment, perhaps the fear being the loss of tutor control and the perception of lowering standards. It is a courageous act to 'let go' but this is not what the approach means. It is closely monitored, involves tutor scrutiny, with refined and specific assessment criteria reducing subjectivity and is of course moderated both internally and externally. Peer assessment by its nature would likely to be largely formative but would be part of summative assessment grading. It would in part remove the mad scramble of say 3 essays following 3 seminars in 3 modules having to be completed to a final submission date which have to be marked and tutor graded for the exam board with hurried and possibly delayed feedback. Students are engaged, active in their learning, receive prompt feedback, are able to gauge their progress and set goals, and have an opportunity to reflect *during* learning rather than at the *end* of a module. Students therefore have ownership of their learning and can make adjustments based upon developmental need within the learning process reducing the end of semester scoring with all its negative connotations of failure, an approach likely to enhance retention.

Assessment at entry or commencement of study

The first assessment filter at the application stage for undergraduate study is the calculation of points based upon qualifications. It is interesting to note the correlation between highest entry qualification and withdrawal from study suggesting certain awards are problematical as revealed in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Numbers withdrawn cross-referenced to highest entry qualification.

Qualification Description	No.	% of total	Qualification Description	No.	% of total
Higher degree of UK HEI	62	3.5%	Foundation course at HE level	5	0.3%
PgD/Cert exc. PGCE	30	1.7%	Other HE qualification of less than degree standard	6	0.3%
PGCE with QTS	10	0.6%	A' level equivalent not specified elsewhere	7	0.4%
PGCE without QTS	17	1.0%	NVQ/SVQ level 3	324	18.5%
Other postgrad qual not specified elsewhere	4	0.2%	ONC/OND	92	5.3%
First degree of UK HEI	282	16.1%	Foundation course at FE level	10	0.6%
Graduate of EU Institution	4	0.2%	Accredited ACCESS course (validated by QAA)	45	2.6%
Graduate of other overseas institution	56	3.2%	Unaccredited ACCESS course (not validated by QAA)	3	0.2%
Foundation degree	11	0.6%	Baccalaureate	1	0.1%
Graduate equivalent not elsewhere specified	1	0.1%	ACCESS course prior to 2001	2	0.1%
OU Credits	1	0.1%	GCSE 'O' level/SCE 'O' grades only	122	7.0%
Other credits from UK HEI	9	0.5%	Other non-advanced qualification	157	9.0%
Cert/Dip of education	22	1.3%	Mature student admitted on previous experience	3	0.2%
HNC/HND	148	8.5%	Other non-UK Qualification level not known	138	7.9%
Dip HE	27	1.5%	Student has no formal qualification	35	2.0%
GNVQ/GSVQ level 4	7	0.4%	Professional qualifications	104	5.9%
NVQ/SVQ level 4	3	0.2%			
			TOTAL	1748	

One reason for students leaving a course might be the form or type of assessment on the degree programme might not reflect the strengths of past learning and the modes of assessment students previously experienced. For example, the 324 students above entering with an NVQ/SVQ level 3 had a qualification equivalent to an A level but would have attained a set of skills largely competency based. They would not have gained the skills of essay writing so such an assessment would be inappropriate and would insufficiently measure their understanding of a subject yet, in part, this was expected. Lack of perceived success as measured by a prescriptive assessment mechanism inevitably will create disillusionment and lead to a departure from study. Nothing is as demotivating as failure. In conversations with colleagues, there was the occasional view that some students were not yet ready to undertake degree study, but I would suggest this is based largely on supposition or subjective appraisal frequently after study had commenced because there had been little or no formal assessment of developmental need other than an interview and/or assessed eligibility and suitability via the UCAS process. It was interesting to discover too that many programmes did not require candidates to be interviewed and so there was no opportunity to provide even a rudimentary initial assessment. A small number of programmes conducted diagnostic assessment, particularly for non-standard entry applications, and they were able to highlight issues which might possibly undermine potential. Where students declared at entry to study a disability a diagnostic assessment followed, the categories against numbers for 2009/10 being:

Table 3. Numbers and categories of assessment via disability.

Disability	Students on Campus 2009/10	
	Number	Percentage
No Disability	7659	91.55%
SpLD (Dyslexia)	292	3.49%
Blind/Visual Impairment	12	0.14%
Deaf/Hearing Impairment	39	0.47%
Wheelchair/Mobility Impairment	31	0.37%
Personal Care Support	1	0.01%
Mental Health Difficulties	56	0.67%
Unseen Disability	104	1.24%
Multiple Disabilities	55	0.66%
Other Disability	102	1.22%
Autistic Spectrum Disorder	15	0.18%
Total Disabled Students	707	8.45%

As a group facing some difficult challenges one might expect lower levels of achievement and retention but this is not the case. Richardson (2009, p.123) found, “In overall terms, disablement *per se* does not play a significant role in predicting attainment” which can be partly explained by support systems being organised to reflect learning needs as a result of diagnostic assessment. The National Audit Office (2007) notes that those students receiving a Disabled Students Allowance are more likely to continue their course as a proportion of the student body than non-disabled peers. Rigorous assessment and an organised supportive response would appear here to be enhancing retention. To provide such a system for all students would sadly prove impossible simply because of the logistics but initial assessment is feasible. Across the University, where initial assessment is conducted (and on some programmes there appears to be none) there are two systems. Some programmes will insist during the interview process a short piece of work is produced, typically an essay, and others will organise a similar exercise during induction. Even if such exercises only provide superficial data they can act as an indicator and in a few cases might highlight a particular need to be investigated further by diagnostic assessment via the disability support team, an example of assessment applied with relevance leading to a deeper understanding of developmental needs. There would again here

therefore appear to be evidence of a correlation between conducting appropriate assessment and success.

Conclusion.

Learning should not be driven by assessment but increasingly within all sectors of education the measurement of attainment is a significant determinant of institutional success. It is revealing therefore, as Boud and Falchikov (2007) point out, that the major influence on student learning is not so much teaching but rather assessment. It would be useful therefore to reflect on whether there is over assessment and of the wrong kind. This study suggests similar skills are assessed more than once and that too much summative assessment creates enormous pressures by filtering the final assessment into a short time period. A more formative (continuous) model where assessment is spread over a semester could reduce this gridlock and create opportunities for a more reflective model. The points system of suitability for undergraduate study is at best a crude measure. This could be supplemented by initial assessment, its positive effect illustrated by the disability example, preferably by interview following application, but if not then certainly during induction. Peer assessment as a model complementing tutor-led assessment could possibly provide a more meaningful learning context and enhance student engagement in the whole learning experience though this is accepted as contentious given the significant cultural shift in the role of the tutor this would entail. The study suggests It is conceivable that negotiating assessment modes rather than insisting on one assessment type such as an essay for all learners on a module could more reliably reflect understanding.

Generalising research findings to attempt to make meaningful comparisons between institutions is, of course, problematical (Hammersley, 2001: Yin, 1994). However, this study indicates that assessment procedures and form might unintentionally be undermining the student experience leading to failure which unsurprisingly reduces retention. How assessment is conducted might be one factor affecting successful widening participation, an institutional barrier. The possible correlation between assessment form and retention is an area as yet under-researched but it is conceivable that a more imaginative approach could promote engagement and learning and the study invites reflection and further studies. In other higher education institutions colleagues might want to peruse their mechanisms and assessment types to see if similar patterns and issues emerge.

It is debatable whether the success of widening participation will be continued across the higher education sector under the new 2012 funding system and It is perhaps sadly ironic that the reductionist shift to a largely fees led system where students might be perceived as 'customers' could make some of these proposals more immediate. For, don't customers demand choice? Such a choice might be the opportunity to be assessed according to potential rather than what a university demands.

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