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A paper presented at the 17th International Technology, Education and Development Conference, Valencia, Spain 06 - 08 Mar 2023, IATED Digital Library.

<https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2023.0625>

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# WIDENING STUDENT ACCESS TO IMPLICIT ASSESSMENT CRITERIA USING RECORDED VERBAL INSTRUCTIONS

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## Abstract

A recent exploration of pre-assessment support for students, in light of a persistent awarding gap, has revealed differing preferences for support between White and BAME students [1]. The understanding of assessment criteria is potentially an area where improvements can be implemented to take into account preferences cited by all students. While academic staff offer drop-in sessions and tutorials to help with assessments, traditionally take up is low, particularly among BAME students [2]. One issue related to not accessing academic support is availability and location, with BAME students being more likely to have longer journey times to University and therefore less time to engage in optional face-to-face support activities. [1]. In the current study we produced short films of verbal instructions for students that addressed the *implicit* assessment criteria used by academics when marking work. These short films were made available to all students in their virtual learning environments, supplementary to traditional written coursework guidelines. The films were designed to mirror a one-to-one advice session, such as might be requested by individual students, and featured staff talking informally to the camera and offering tips for higher marks in assignments based on implicit criteria that academics use when marking. Final module marks were compared for two runs of the same module – one from a previous year in which the films had not been developed and one which used the films as supplementary pre-assessment information. Student focus group suggestions and initial data analyses of assessment marks and the number of times the films were accessed suggest a positive response to this initiative. Future plans include expanding the use of supplementary assessment advice films within all first-year undergraduate modules and possible implementation for second-year modules in time.

Keywords: Pre-assessment, BAME, widening participation

## 1 INTRODUCTION

While progress has been made and some excellent initiatives have been implemented, much work still must be done to reduce the persistent awarding gap in Higher Education institutions. The University of Westminster is one institution at the forefront of much of this vital work, and has developed equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives at national and institutional levels. Westminster's location in Central London helps the University to recruit students from a diverse range of backgrounds. Almost 60% of the University's UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants are Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) [3]. This diverse student population affords the opportunity to explore module and course-level innovations that can support academic achievement for all students, as reflected in awarding practices at an institutional level.

Students have recommended several ways to address the awarding gap across the HE sector. These include decolonising the curriculum, challenging all forms of racism, increasing the presence of minority ethnic academic staff, and providing economic support to students. It is also suggested there are structural barriers to attainment that traditionally have supported the differential achievement of White compared to BAME students [4]. The research reported here is a pilot study exploring the use of universally accessible pre-assessment support, which has been designed to address some of the ambiguity around expectations of what students need to do to achieve high marks in assessed work.

Students are often confused about the purpose(s) of assessment and what is expected of them regarding performance. [5] Academics may talk about coursework in seminars, offer informal drop-in sessions, and publish learning outcomes and assessment criteria to aid the transparency of assessment

and marking processes. Despite these educational practices students will often seek further advice and clarification from academics and are particularly likely to need and value face-to-face interactions as they transition from school/college to university-level study [6]. This is an unintentional yet potentially divisive framework of practice because BAME students are less likely than White students to approach academic staff for face-to-face advice and clarification of what is required to attain a 'high grade' for assessed work [1]. Further to this, while access to HE has broadened, tutor/student ratios have declined [7], and with most universities developing hybrid delivery of courses post-lockdown, students inevitably have a reduced amount of face-to-face contact and, therefore even less opportunity to seek advice.

Previous research has highlighted that BAME students are more reluctant to seek available support at university [8], possibly due to differences in cultural expectations or obligations, which can negatively impact their degree outcomes. A key enabler for promoting equity across all students involves acknowledging that students learn in different ways and that teaching that caters to a range of student preferences can potentially help reduce the awarding gap [2]. The provision of filmed pre-assessment academic advice in this pilot study that is accessible online increases access for all students to the nuances and complexity of academic judgement that might only otherwise be conveyed when seeking face-to-face advice, if at all. Written assessment guidelines cannot fully express the different aspects of quality or the influences that shape academic decision-making when marking students' work [5]. While it is difficult to adequately convey the complex holistic processes that academic judgment demands when assessing student work, it is essential to try to do so. Research has demonstrated that in addition to explicit written criteria, implicit criteria commonly exist in grading judgments [9] that are usually personally determined by the marker [10].

For this reason, individual module leaders who set the coursework and lead a team of markers were invited to develop short recordings that displayed the lecturer informally talking to camera, as if the camera were a student asking for extra guidance on coursework. Module leaders were invited to offer students information supplementary to the written coursework guidelines rather than explicitly repeating them. Two short films in a conversational style were recorded for each piece of coursework and made available to the students electronically via Blackboard in the same area in which the written coursework guidelines were available. It is predicted that students who view the supplementary pre-assessment recordings will have a greater understanding of implicit marking criteria, as demonstrated in higher grades for coursework.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

A natural independent groups design was employed. There were two independent variables. The first independent variable was the voluntary viewing of recorded implicit marking criteria provided on Blackboard prior to assessment hand-in dates, with two levels, (level 4, 2022 intake) students who accessed the recorded implicit marking criteria and (level 4, 2022 intake) students who did not. The second independent variable was the provision of pre-assessment recorded support to level 4 students with two levels, recordings provided (level 4, 2022 cohort) and recordings not provided (level 4, 2021 cohort) as they were yet to be developed. The dependent variables were the individual coursework and final recorded module marks for the cohort of students taking the modules in which the recordings were and were not available.

### **Participants**

Level 4 students enrolled on the BSc Psychology and Criminology course at the University of Westminster in the academic years 2021 and 2022. 2021 cohort – n = 56, 10 males (mean age 23.7, s.d. 6.4) and 46 females (mean age 20.6, s.d. 1.96) consisting of 34 BAME students and 22 White students. 2022 cohort – n = 88, 11 males (mean age 19.5, s.d. 1.37) and 77 females (mean age 19.3, s.d. 1.5) consisting of 64 BAME students and 24 White students.

## Materials

Short video recordings (2 per each piece of coursework) were produced by the leaders of the participating modules using Panopto, mean duration 2.5 minutes per video. Each recording consisted of the module leader talking to camera in an informal manner about aspects of work that attract higher marks not explicitly expressed in the coursework guidelines, as if they were addressing each student personally. Examples of the recordings are available from the author on request (d.taylor4@westminster.ac.uk).

## Procedure

Two 20-credit modules from the first semester of the BSc Psychology and Criminology course were chosen to take part in the initial pilot of the scheme. 'Introduction to Social and Developmental Psychology' and 'Introduction to Psychological and Criminological Research Methods'. All students registered on the modules for 21/22 and 22/23 were given the usual access to both verbal in-class and written guidelines on the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment designed to support them in successfully completing their coursework for the modules. In addition to the written guidelines, the 22/23 cohort of level 4 students were provided with short recordings of module leaders verbalizing some explicit and implicit marking criteria for the coursework and offering marking guidelines that are implicit in the marking process. The students were made aware that the recordings were available to them as extra guidance. It was left to individual students to decide whether to access the recordings in their own time. Module marks were compared for the level 4 intake of 2021 and the level 4 intake of 2022. Module marks were also compared for the level 4 intake of 2022 between those who accessed the short video recordings and those who did not.

## 3 RESULTS

The first comparison was between the 2022 cohort of students who accessed the pre-assessed recorded support films and those who did not. The films were accessed by 58 of 88 students (45 BAME and 13 White students) and were not accessed by 30 students (19 BAME and 11 White students). Independent *t*-tests revealed no significant difference in the Introduction to Social and Developmental final module scores ( $p = .349$ ) between students who had watched the films and students who had not.

However, Table 1 shows the aggregate module scores for the Research Methods module between groups.

Table 1. Combined coursework scores on the Research Methods module

<i>Coursework Scores</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Watched films	88.36	35.75
Did not watch films	70.28	25.05

An independent *t*-test revealed there was a difference in combined coursework scores for the Research Methods module where students who accessed the films scored significantly higher marks overall ( $t = 1.746$ ,  $df = 53$ ,  $p < .05$ ). 71% of all BAME students in the 2022 cohort accessed the films, compared to 54% of all White students in the cohort.

To compare marks attained by students who completed two Semester One level 4 modules in the academic years beginning September 2021 and September 2022, a series of between-subjects 2 (Ethnicity: BAME/White) X 2 (Cohort: 2021/2022) ANOVAs were performed on individual coursework marks and final module marks. There were no effects of Ethnicity across both cohorts, and no Ethnicity\*Cohort interaction (all  $p$ 's  $> .05$ ).

However, there was a significant main effect of Cohort (see Fig. 1) in coursework 2 marks within the Introduction to Social and Developmental Psychology module, with all students in the 2022 cohort receiving significantly lower marks ( $m = 57.36$ ,  $sd = 14.93$ ) than students in the 2021 cohort, ( $m = 63.82$ ,  $sd = 10.52$ )  $F = 6.147$ ,  $df = 1, 119$ ,  $p < .05$ .

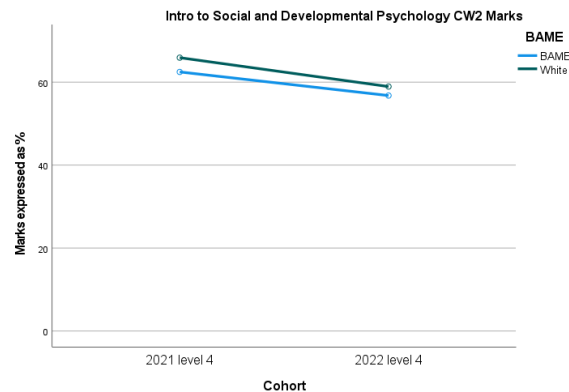


Figure 1. Main effect of Coursework 2 marks across cohorts

These results shall be discussed considering the overall aims and ambitions of this pilot study.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this pilot study was to evaluate the introduction of pre-assessment recorded coursework guidance for all students that would be accessible at any time and might provide support in a form other than written guidelines that may not convey the nuances of criteria used by academics when marking. Results were mixed, with only one of two modules evaluated showing improvement across student marks. The 'Introduction to Social and Developmental Psychology' module showed no significant differences in marks attained between students who had watched the recordings and those who had not. Additionally, there were no significant differences in marks attained between BAME and White students in the cohort. There was however a significant main effect of cohort between the years 2021 and 2022, with the entire 2021 cohort attaining higher marks overall within this module. Results differed in the 'Research Methods' module however, where significantly higher marks were attained by students who had viewed the recordings. Possible explanations for these findings shall be discussed, alongside directions for future research in this area.

Results of this pilot study are exciting for two reasons. Firstly, the finding that there were no significant differences between BAME and White students in terms of module marks attained is very encouraging. While an awarding gap still exists, these findings suggest that the gap is narrowing, at least within the cohorts that took part in this study, and within the modules evaluated. The finding that the entire cohort of 2022 received significantly lower marks for the Social and Developmental Psychology module is not what was hoped for, as recordings were provided for the 2022 cohort, but this does highlight the large number of variables that can account for this discrepancy. Arguably one of the most significant of these would be the change in module leadership between the two cohorts and the different interpretations of marking criteria that may have been applied consequently. It is encouraging to note however that there were significant correlations between individual coursework marks for students across this module for both cohorts, indicating a consistency of the application of marking criteria between groups, regardless of module leadership.

Secondly, students that viewed the films found them to be useful (anecdotal commentary). It cannot be known whether it was the more conscientious students who accessed the films rather than the maybe less conscientious, thus skewing the results in favour of students who might attain higher marks anyway— however the results do not seem to support this interpretation. If this were the case, then it would be expected that the more conscientious students would have accessed the recordings for both

modules. Further evidence for the possible utility of the recordings is the finding that more students accessed the Research Methods module films than the Social and Developmental Psychology films (54% vs. 33%). Research methods is widely acknowledged to be one of the topics that students struggle to understand, so it would seem appropriate that more students accessed the Research Methods recordings while preparing their assessed work.

There are limitations of this study that suggest proceeding with cautious optimism. It must be acknowledged that if it is accepted that other variables likely contributed to the cohort effect within the Social and Developmental module marks, then it is highly likely that other variables also contributed to the improvement in marks seen for the Research Methods group who watched the recordings for that module. While it is beyond the scope of this report to consider all the variables that contribute to both student academic performance and/or the awarding gap, the focus here is on one small aspect of systemic support offered that may serve as beneficial to all students and to cater for a diverse range of needs and learning preferences. It is heartening to note that a higher proportion of BAME students, relative to cohort proportions accessed the recordings than White students (just over 75% of the BAME student cohort vs. just over 50% of the White student cohort).

In summary, the aim of this study was to widen student access to the type of implicit assessment criteria that can lead to higher marks in coursework, by recording informal tips from academics and making them available for all students. These resources can also be used by academic module teams to aid consistency in marking practices, supplementary to module team meetings. A qualitative study of students' experiences of accessing the recordings and which aspects they found most useful will help to further develop and refine the content for future recordings. Consideration also needs to be given to the reasons why the recordings were not accessed by all the student cohort, hopefully to be addressed in the near future in order that these extra resources may be effective in terms of access to education and academic advice for all.

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