

# Optionality in Assessment: a cross institutional exploration of the feasibility, practicality & utility of student choices in assessment in UK higher education

This final report is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership.

The project is led by the University of Manchester in partnership with Imperial College London, University College London and University of York.  
Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

## Paper citation.

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## Overview and summary

In an environment marked by technological advancements, dynamic knowledge, skills requirements, student co-design and inclusivity, higher education institutions are contemplating the integration of greater flexibility into their teaching and assessment methods. This shift is prompted by the need to support diverse student needs, address equality and wellbeing challenges in a stimulating way that engages students and leads to high level of participation. Optionality in assessment, which provides students with some choice over how they are assessed is central to this transformation and the focus of this project. This concept of assessment optionality provides some level of control over student decision-making about when, how, and in what format they submit assessments, and whether this is individual or collaborative. The potential benefits of this approach encompass greater inclusivity, prevention of academic misconduct, tailored support for diverse learning styles, and enhanced student experiences.

This collaborative project attempts to answer 3 questions:

1. What are academic & student opinions on the feasibility, practicality and utility of assessment optionality?
2. What is current practice and opinion on the use of assessment optionality across the four institutions?
3. How can we better empower and enable colleagues to design and utilise effective and appropriate options in assessment?

Through surveys and interviews with staff and students, it aims to gather insights about their expectations of assessment optionality and the challenges of providing a flexible assessment environment.

This report shares the findings of this research which involved a wide range of stakeholders, including teaching staff, students, external examiners, regulators, accreditors, international higher education professionals, and administrators. We hope the resulting recommendations, and the resources and case studies in our accompanying report will assist educators, administrators, and policy makers to create an assessment environment that stimulates students and provides them with dynamic ways to demonstrate their module and programme level learning outcomes.

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## The Collaborative Enhancement Project Group: partner institutions and teams

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## 1. Introduction

The term 'Optionality in Assessment' was used in the planning, operation and writing up of this project. Other terms used to describe the concept are Negotiated Assessment, Student Choice in Assessment, and Flexible Assessment. A literature review was undertaken to understand the relationships within this conceptual space and steps taken to ensure that our exploration considered these connections.

Through our early investigations into this term, we found that, in contrast with studies examining optionality in assessment from the perspective of students, research relating to academic and professional services staff perceptions of optionality in assessment is extremely limited, with discussion predominantly around some of the perceived drawbacks.

Our project took the term 'Optionality in Assessment' to mean assessment where students have some form of choice available to them.

### 1.1 Research Questions

As an investigatory project, we set out to answer three main questions:

1. What are academic & student opinions on the feasibility, practicality, & utility of assessment optionality?
2. What is current practice and opinion on the use of Assessment Optionality across the four institutions?
3. How can we better empower and enable colleagues to design and utilise effective and appropriate options in Assessment?

To answer these, the collaborating institutions ran:

1. Academic survey on perceptions and opinions on choice in assessment,
2. Student survey on perceptions and opinions on choice in assessment.
3. Follow up focus groups and interviews with academics and students in institutions.

The methodology for this study was derived from our exploratory approach and the completion of a literature review.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Despite an increased interest in more flexible approaches to assessment, optionality in assessment is an area that has received little attention to date in the associated literature with respect to assessment design (Rideout 2018) and inclusive practice (Tai et al 2021). What emerges from the literature is an evaluation of how optionality has been utilised in specific contexts, mainly from the perspective of students; however, it is difficult to get an holistic picture of practices across the sector. This picture is further complicated by the different structures and cultures within institutions and cross geographical locations which influence approaches and experiences of optionality in assessment, some of which may not be transferable to other higher education contexts.

This review draws on literature from the UK, Ireland, North America, Australia, South Africa and Israel and focuses on the utility, feasibility and practicality of optionality in assessment. Studies were selected using the following search terms: inclusive assessment, option\* assessment, choice assessment, choose assessment, student partnership assessment and co-construction assessment. The University of York's online catalogue, Taylor and Francis online was searched using these terms, as well as the following relevant journals: Teaching in Higher Education; Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education; Higher Education Pedagogies; International Journal of Inclusive Education; Journal of Assessment and Institutional Affectiveness; Journal of Further and Higher Education; Higher Education Research and Development; International Journal for Academic Development and Pedagogy, Culture and Society. The majority of the literature dates from the 2010s and 2020s. The initial section focuses on the different types of optionality in assessment, following this the potential benefits to students are explored and finally the potential barriers and drawbacks from the perspective of both students and staff are briefly discussed.

### **2.2 Optionality in assessment types**

Optionality within a specific assessment type and the option for students to choose between different assessment types are both widely discussed in the literature. Examples of the former include varying the word length, weighting of particular component assessments towards the final grade, the submission date and negotiation around the assessment task (Basu 2012; Cook 2001; Hanewicz et al 2017; Kahl 2017; Maxwell 2012; Monsen et al 2017; Pacharn et al 2013; Vander Schee 2011; Wanner et al 2021). Where students have the option to choose between different assessment types, examples include different submission formats, team or individual approaches to assessment, and the option to choose specific assessment types as a way of seeking to improve their grade (Brown et al 2020; Craddock and Mathias 2009; Donaghy and Saxton 2012; Easterbrook et al 2006; Holman et al 2013; Irwin and Hepplestone 2012; O'Neill 2017). In the studies

considered as part of this review, the majority focused on optionality in summative assessments.

## **2.3 Potential benefits to students**

### **2.3.1 Student outcomes**

A wide range of potential benefits of optionality in assessment to students are identified in the literature and one common approach has been to examine the impact optionality in assessment has on academic success for students. A number of studies show a positive impact on grades when students are given choice in assessment (Basu 2012; Easterbrook et al 2006; Hanewicz et al 2017; Kahl 2017; O'Neill 2017; Pacharn 2013; Wanner et al 2021) with authors attributing this improvement to contributing factors which increased motivation or enhanced wellbeing. Where studies did not find an improvement in grades, there were however improvements in other aspects of learning, for example subject satisfaction (Jopp and Cohen 2022).

### **2.3.2 Student motivation, engagement and wellbeing**

Studies which have shown the positive impact of assessment choice on motivation and engagement and student wellbeing more broadly, show how through choice students can feel more able to draw more on their strengths or their learning styles which can have a positive impact on stress levels (Craddock and Mathias 2009, Ellery 2008; Kahl 2017) as well as improving outcomes. Studies also show how students gain a greater sense of autonomy in their learning (Rideout 2018) and potentially become more active learners, with the potential for wider skills development (Pacharn et al 2013, Hanewicz et al 2017, Donaghy and Saxton 2012). Related to this, one study found that students reported optionality increased their enjoyment of their learning (Brown et al 2020).

### **2.3.3 Inclusive assessment**

The impact of assessment optionality on a range of student groups has been explored within the literature, including students with disabilities, undergraduate and postgraduate students, international students, students from widening participation backgrounds and students studying online. One emerging area of interest is a link between new technologies and optionality in assessment, with a focus on how offering options in a range of media may benefit students who are disadvantaged by text-based formats and the increasing opportunities for assessment choice with the development of new technologies (Irwin and Hepplestone 2012).

Whilst it is difficult to make generalisations, one of the key themes that emerges from this body of literature examining student outcomes is how offering optionality in assessment is an inclusive way of enabling disadvantaged or underrepresented students achieve their potential (Easterbrook et al 2006; Morris et al 2019;



Hainsworth et al 2019; O'Neill 2017), with more recent studies positioning this within a 'social justice' model of assessment (McArthur 2015; Tai et al 2021; Nieminen 2022). The benefits are less apparent for students who were achieving high grades on more conventional forms of assessment with some studies reporting a preference for maintaining that status quo (Holman et al., 2013).

This broader perspective moves beyond earlier studies which tended to focus on how optionality in assessment may reduce the need for reasonable adjustments with a focus on specific student groups, and considers how optionality in assessment may enable students to express their unique lived experiences and skills (Tai et al, 2022), with links made to the development of more authentic assessment (Maxwell 2012, Deeley et al 2019). This is based upon an understanding that current modes of assessment may reproduce or amplify inequalities (Hanesworth et al 2019). These studies examine more holistically how optionality in assessment impacts learning experiences, and more recent studies have also explored the alignment of assessment optionality with student partnership approaches, viewing student choice in assessment as a form of co-construction that may lead to an increased sense of ownership for students and a positive impact on student outcomes (Bovill et al 2021).

## **2.4 Potential drawbacks or barriers for students**

Whilst the literature is predominantly positive about the impact of optionality in assessment on student outcomes and the student experience, studies do highlight some potential issues or barriers from the perspective of students which need to be further understood. These can be grouped into two broad themes, firstly equity issues between the different options being offered and secondly the perceived challenges associated with exercising choice.

For example, Wanner et al (2021) refer to the burden of choice and Brown et al (2020) discuss the challenge that too much choice can provide. They both highlight how some students find greater choice to be more time intensive and overwhelming, although Brown et al (2020) also show the increase in work was off-set by an increase in understanding of and enjoyment in the work for some students.

Wanner et al (2021) show how opportunities for students to collaborate may be reduced when optionality is offered. In a study examining student's perceptions where choice was given between continuous and terminal assessment choice, O'Neil (2017) reported concerns about fairness of workload. Morris et al (2019) reported similar concerns when students were able to choose between assessment formats. Of note, both studies found that these concerns were offset by evidence of grade improvement and the positive impact on students being able to manage their time more effectively. The findings indicate the importance of providing students with training on alternative forms of assessment to understand the merits of it and the opportunities it brings (Tal 2005).

## **2.5 Discussion of benefits / drawbacks to academic and professional services staff of optionality in assessment**

In contrast with studies examining optionality in assessment from the perspective of students, research relating to staff perceptions of optionality in assessment is extremely limited, with discussion predominantly around some of the perceived drawbacks.

Studies note concerns that optionality may create extra administrative work for staff and concerns voiced by academic staff about having the necessary skills to design more varied assessments. They also acknowledge the need for additional staff training (Irwin and Hepplestone 2012; Morris et al 2019). More positively, it is acknowledged that this may be off-set by less time needed for reasonable adjustments and 'chasing up' missing work (where students are given choice around which ones to submit) (Pacharn et al 2013), as well as the potential for improvements in the quality of feedback given (Rideout 2018).

## **2.6 Other considerations and emerging areas of interest**

One emerging area of interest is a link between new technologies and optionality in assessment, with a focus on how offering options in a range of media may benefit students who are disadvantaged by text-based formats and the increasing opportunities for assessment choice with the development of new technologies (Irwin and Hepplestone 2012).

The pandemic encouraged institutions to promote fresh ideas for assessment - away from invigilated in-person exams to more diverse forms of assessment - as well introducing new technologies. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has continued the trend to assessment redesign towards more authentic assessment that focuses on critical thinking, problem solving and reasoning skills (Jisc 2023). Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are often perceived as dictating forms of assessment, however recent research by Jisc (Walker, 2023, forthcoming) suggests that this is largely anecdotal. PSRBs are keen to be part of transforming the education of their professions but naturally need to exert controls of verification of students taking the assessment and whether the outcomes have been met.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Participants, recruitment, and consent**

Given the mixed methods nature of this study, the epistemological underpinning was constructivist. Participants were recruited across all partner institutions and consisted of 1275 individuals who were either:

- Academic colleagues at one of the partner institutions
- Professional support/services colleagues at one of the partner institutions
- Students across all levels and contexts of study across the partner institutions.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that representation was achieved across the criteria of those who were for and those who were against optionality in assessment. Snowball sampling was also employed, whereby participants were able to refer colleagues who met the sampling criteria.

### **3.2 Data collection**

An academic survey and student survey was conducted across all four institutions completed by 702 staff and 522 students. The surveys were designed using the literature review findings and sought to ascertain answers to the first two research questions.

Piloting was completed for each research instrument and approach. This was conducted in advance and yielded minor changes to the questions posed in the methods.

The surveys were followed by 8 focus groups and 11 semi-structured interviews; the purpose of these was to ascertain answers to the third research question.

The focus group methodology was developed collaboratively by the research team. The sessions, held these separately at each institution, were aimed at three distinct audiences: (1) academic staff (with separate sessions for those who had utilised optionality and those who had not), (2) professional services staff involved in supporting assessments, and (3) students. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature, the survey results, and preliminary discussions within the research team. The guide included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes related to optionality in assessment. Probing questions were used to elicit in-depth responses and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives.

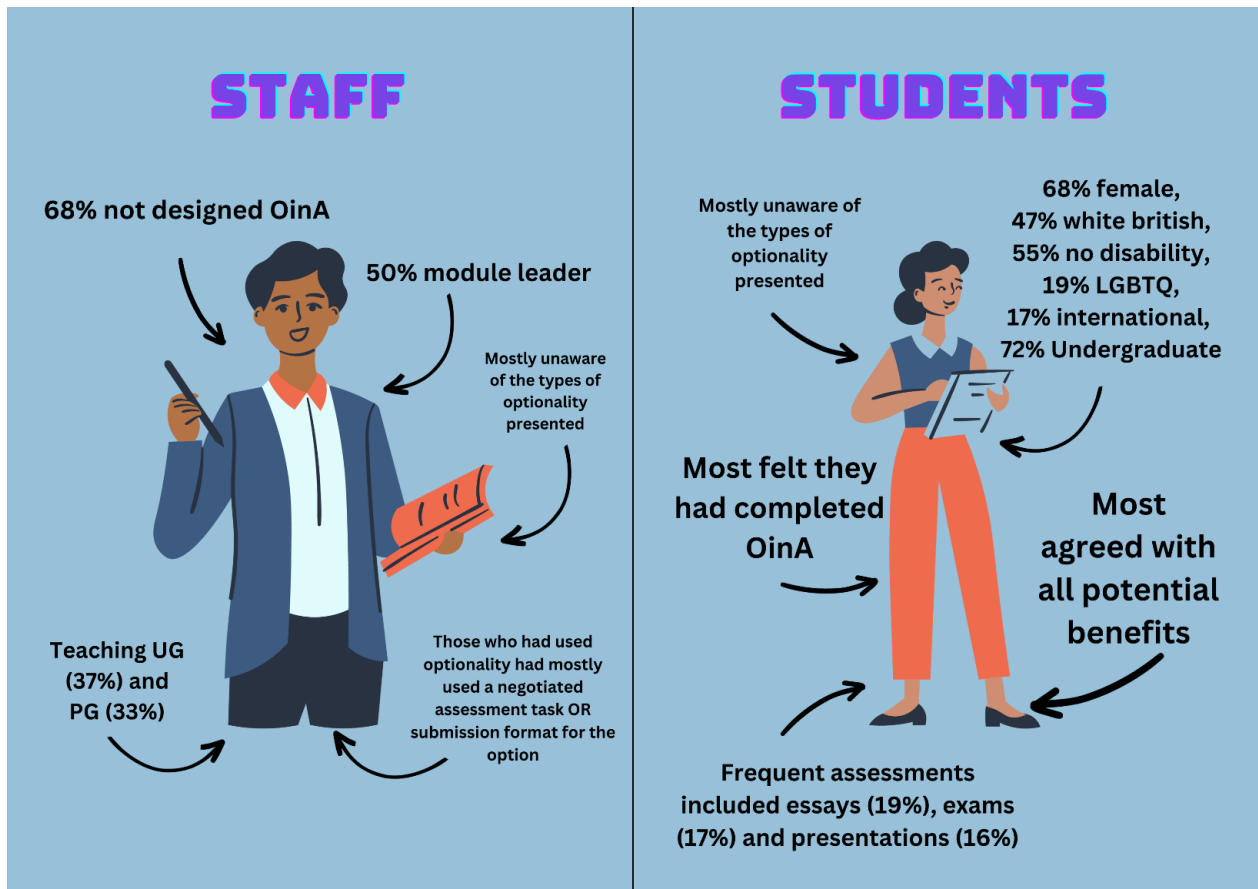
### **3.3 Data analysis**

The surveys were designed in order to complete analysis to respond to the themes found in the literature review. A total of 16 analyses of variance (ANOVA) were complete with the staff survey and 4 ANOVAs with the student survey. Questions from the surveys were then coded into barriers and advantages of optionality and a series of T-tests were conducted across the staff and student survey to assess any similar or conflicting agreements.

The interviews were all thematically analysed against the themes derived from the literature review.

## 4. Results

Typical features of the participants are noted below to offer an overview of the people who responded to the surveys:



### 4.1 Results and tests from matching between Staff survey and Student survey

23 sets of parametric tests were conducted with the staff and student survey. Two sets of data were used in this analysis, deriving from Optionality in Assessment Student Survey (N= 522) and Staff Perceptions of Assessment Optionality (N= 698), respectively. Comparison groups were created with staff as Group 1 and students as Group 2. The frequency of participants vary from the total gained for the surveys due to the options for participants to complete questions, or not.

Questions were matched between Staff survey (A) and Student survey (B) based on the statements - 13 questions concerning staff/students' perceptions of potential benefits of optionality in assessment and 10 questions concerning staff/students' perceptions of potential disadvantages of the optionality in assessment.

To get a more specific understanding of staff and students' responses to individual survey questions, non-parametric analysis was performed. Crosstabs of staff and

students' responses to each question were visualized by bar charts, together with a Mann-Whitney U test to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the staff and student groups. To provide internal consistency of the scales (i.e., Question A and Question B), Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. The items in Question A showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .942 suggesting an excellent internal consistency of the scale. The items in Question B showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .850, which suggests a good internal consistency of the scale.

Independent sample T-tests were performed to understand the differences between the staff group and the student group in their responses to the questions. Results indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the Staff group (M= 3.31, SD= .865) and the Student group (M= 4.14, SD= .693) in their average scores of Question A,  $t(791) = -14.848, p < .001$ . The results also showed that there is a statistically significant difference between the Staff group (M= 3.94, SD= .574) and the Student group (M=3.09, SD= .764) in their average scores of Question B,  $t(798) = 18.085, p < .001$ .

In the current combined surveys, each statement under Question A and Question B collected responses based on 5-point Likert scale, meanwhile, the Staff group and Student group are independent from each other. To compare differences between the two groups in their responses to on single statement level, Mann-Whitney U tests were performed.

#### **4.1.1 Staff and students' responses to the benefits of optionality in assessment**

Except for 'enhance accessibility', the responses from the Staff group and the Student group were statistically significantly different from each other in 12 statements under Question A, with U stats ranging from 26968.5 to 77026,  $p < .001$ . It is worth noting that, comparing to the Staff group, the responses from the Student group showed higher mean ranks across all 12 statements. The result indicates that the Student group were holding a relatively higher tendency of agreement on the benefits of optionality in assessment.

#### **4.1.2 Staff and students' responses to the barrier/disadvantages of optionality in assessment**

Mann-Whitney U test related to the barrier/disadvantages of optionality in assessment (Question B), showed that the responses from the Staff group and the Student group were statistically significantly different from each other in all 10 statements under Question B, with U stats ranging from 20405.5 to 71616,  $p < .001$ . The Staff group showed higher mean ranks than the Student group across all the 10 statements. The result indicates that the Staff group were holding a relatively higher tendency of agreement on the barriers/disadvantages of optionality in assessment.

## 5. Key findings from the study

*Student motivation, engagement and wellbeing, and inclusive assessment* were two distinct themes that emerged from the literature review. Other themes such as; *developing autonomy / self-directed study skills; perception of fairness between different types of assessment; student outcomes; concerns about new / unfamiliar methods and impacts on grades; and impact on wellbeing/ compassionate approaches* were also mentioned but these particular areas surfaced in the focus groups and interviews.

There were also two themes that did not appear in the literature review that warrant particular attention. These are:

- Links between new technologies and optionality in assessment
- Administrative barriers / Concerns about workload management.

The findings will be discussed in turn, and appropriate recommendations made.

### 5.1 Student motivation and engagement

Most staff and students were unaware of the varied forms of optionality in assessment feasible:

Before starting this survey, were you aware of the potential to offer assessment with student choice in...	Staff Aware	N=	Student Aware	N=
Word count	30.67%	161	14.76%	174
Relative weighting of assignment to calculate final grade	27.86%	146	11.87%	140
Optional to zero weight some elements	29.83%	156	N/A	
Submission format	56.55%	298	15.10%	178
Submission dates	46.12%	244	16.03%	189
Intended learning outcome aligned the assessment	29.29%	152	N/A	
Negotiated assessment task/question	53.07%	277	N/A	
Assessment type chosen from a pre-selected list	58.67%	308	26.89%	317
Programmatic choices in assessment	31.52%	162	N/A	
Team OR individual approach to assessment	45.14%	237	13.83%	163
Feedback format	43.32%	227	N/A	
Choice of assessment criteria to be applied to the piece of work	19.62%	102	N/A	

Despite being unaware of the forms of optionality in assessment over half of the student respondents confirmed they had completed optionality in assessment, and

over a third of staff had designed this in their institution. There is clear engagement and use of optionality in assessment, but a lack of in-depth awareness of the types feasible or available.

Academics and professional services staff reported how student choice exerted a positive influence on student motivation, reducing stress and increasing their autonomy in learning. Staff noted that some formats were preferred by certain students; offering various assessment options tailored to students' interests and learning styles, boosted their sense of ownership in learning and led to an increase in student-teacher interaction.

*They all want to learn different sorts of things for different sorts of purposes.*

#### **Academic staff quote**

However, some staff noted that students might perceive assessment choice as a way to avoid assessments they find difficult, so the design of assessment was critical to maintain high levels of student engagement. They discussed emphasising the value and relevance of each assessment format, creating assessments that align with students' interests, and fostering a sense of ownership over their learning.

*[Students] stick in their comfort zone ... [they will] choose some kind of optionality which is close to their strengths. Is that the outcome you want?*

#### **Professional services staff quote**

Staff also expressed concerns about workload, complexity, and resistance to change. They suggested that institutions should actively engage students in the assessment design process, seeking their input and feedback to ensure that any new assessment methods align with their learning preferences and goals. Students agreed, noting that assessment methods that provide flexibility, extended time and lead to thoughtful responses tend to be more motivating. They emphasised the importance of agency in selecting meaningful assessment options but also noted that optionality could result in increased workloads and feelings of being overwhelmed, thereby leading to a reduction in their motivation and engagement. All stakeholders agreed that optionality provided clear benefits and considered that any disadvantages could be mitigated through clear guidance, support and information to help students take good decisions.

***Recommendation:*** *Academic staff should actively engage their students in the design process to create meaningful assessment options that reflect students' interests. This should include the design of guidance and identifying what support is needed.*



## 5.2 Inclusive assessment

Staff and students agreed that assessment optionality could enhance inclusiveness so long as the introduction of different assessment formats explicitly addressed accessibility and fairness. Providing assessment alternatives, for example, for student with disabilities, could ensure a level playing field for all students. They also noted some challenges faced by non-native English speakers. They emphasised the importance of access to resources and the development of skills, including digital skills, that might underpin different assessment formats. Failure to identify and align resources might inadvertently result in widening awarding gaps.

*Students all learn in very different ways [and] all respond in very different ways to different types of assessments. [Assessment optionality] creates the opportunity for them to produce their best possible output. Some like essays, some hate, or here are some alternatives.*

### Academic staff quote

*Giving [students] a voice in terms of what they want to be assessed in is something that does hopefully make them feel more empowered and also makes them more independent and ready for whatever it is that they're going to be facing when they enter the world of work.*

### Professional services staff quote

**Recommendation:** *Educational institutions should prioritise the introduction of diverse assessment formats to explicitly address accessibility and concerns about fairness, ensuring access to necessary resources and skills development to prevent the unintentional widening of awarding gaps.*

## 5.3 Developing autonomy / self-directed study skills

Academic and Professional services staff recognised the potential of assessment optionality to enabling students to play to their strengths and achieve a wide range of learning outcomes. They believed that students' freedom to select assessment formats that aligned with their preferences, would help develop autonomy in managing assessment schedules and tasks. It would also develop a wide range of skills including self-awareness, decision-making, time management, self-directed study skills leading to greater control and independence. They note how, for example, traditional exams, completed in a standardised assessment structure might not always capture the full range of skills and abilities that students develop during their studies.

They thought that teaching staff could support greater autonomy by offering guidance and resources thereby helping students to make effective choices aligned

with their learning objectives. They considered diverse assessment options would encourage students to take greater ownership of their learning, by emphasizing metacognition, reflection, and goal setting. Encouraging students to reflect on their learning preferences, choices and strengths would lead to greater self-awareness and independence in their studies.

They noted, however, that whilst assessment choice might promote autonomy, it also raised concerns about students gravitating towards easier assessments, potentially limiting skill development opportunities. They identified the dual role of assessment optionality can play in enhancing self-directed study skills with the need to address potential challenges in this process.

*I feel like it is important to have applicable skills. Things that we learn that we can apply in different situations.*

**Student quote**

*An ability to think critically or to work without assistance...are types of skills that are important especially when we have AI.*

**Student quote**

**Recommendation:** *Educational institutions should embrace assessment optionality as a means to develop students' self-regulation and skills development. Teaching staff should provide guidance and resources that facilitate effective decision-making and addresses concerns regarding the potential for students to gravitate towards assessments they find less challenging to ensure a balanced approach to meeting learning outcomes.*

## **5.4 Perception of fairness between different types of assessment**

Results from the staff survey found that staff agreed that optionality increased fairness in assessment for both students and staff, reduces student stress, enhances student understanding of the course, reduces the need for reasonable adjustments or alternative assessments, and offers greater opportunities for authentic / real-world assessments.

Students considered that choice of assessment methods should be guided by principles of fairness to ensure that no method is punitive or disadvantageous. In discussing fairness, academics were keen to emphasise the important relationship between assessment format and assessment criteria. They thought that students would perceive the assessment process as fairer if they were given the freedom to select assessments that align with their strengths and interests. For example, traditional assessment methods, such as essays, may be perceived as unfair by students with varying abilities or backgrounds. They also believed it would boost students' confidence and potentially lower barriers to success. Nonetheless, they expressed concerns about perceived differences in the difficulty of various

assessment types and underscored the need to maintain student trust in the assessment process.

Professional services staff tended to emphasise the importance of maintaining student trust in the assessment process to ensure fairness. They considered that if students perceive certain assessment formats as easier or less demanding, it can create a sense of *inequality*. To build trust and confidence, they suggested educators should apply transparency and consistency in the design of assessment choice, emphasising the rigour of the assessment options and how each aligns with learning goals. Like the academic staff, they recommend the importance of setting clear grading criteria, but also effective communication to ensure students understand how assessments align with learning outcomes.

Whilst both groups agree with the importance of providing students with options to choose their assessment formats, academics suggested that students might select assessments "strategically," implying that they may choose assessments they perceive as easier, which could lead to a perception of unfairness.

*As a student if I was given different types of assessments to choose from, I probably would have chosen the assessment that was the one I thought I'd get the best grade in for the least amount of effort, so I'd probably have been quite strategic with it.*

#### **Professional services staff quote**

#### **Recommendation:**

*When offering students the option to choose their assessment format, academics should prioritise transparency and consistency. This means creating and communicating well-defined grading criteria that align with learning outcomes. This approach ensures that students will have a clear grasp of expectations and how their work will be assessed.*

## **5.5 Student outcomes**

Academic staff noted the importance of aligning assessment design with course learning outcomes and criteria so that different assessments effectively measure students' acquisition of knowledge and skills. Regardless of the assessment format, they highlighted the importance of communicating expectations. They support the view that assessing students differently is essential in preparing them for the future world of work. This theme underscores the idea that education should go beyond just grades; it should equip students with skills, experiences, and competencies that are relevant and valuable in their careers. Implementing options in assessment, such as practical projects, presentations, or real-world simulations, could better align education with the needs of the job market, potentially enhancing students' employability and long-term career prospects.

However, the professional service staff were concerned that students consistently opt for assessments they believe will result in the highest grades with minimal effort, which could lead to unintended consequences for their learning outcomes. They might miss out on valuable learning experiences and fail to develop essential skills simply because they prioritise grades over genuine learning. The emphasis here is on the need for assessments to align with desired learning outcomes and the potential challenge of achieving this alignment when students have the freedom to choose.

*I get quite nervous about my writing skills. So if I was given a choice, do I submit a video or do I write a little essay? I'd probably go for the video every time and then just never practise those writing skills that I feel nervous about.*

#### **Professional services staff quote**

Students agreed that in having the flexibility to choose assessment methods that align with their individual backgrounds, personalities, abilities, and skills, they are more likely to perform better academically. This is because they can tailor their learning experiences to suit their unique needs, ultimately leading to improved outcomes. They also noted the importance that choice can have by developing skills that are required in the context of the constantly changing job market. Their collective voice reflects a desire for assessments that go beyond theoretical understanding and contribute to real-world application.

*If I am going for to look for jobs, I will have something substantial to show that this is what I have learned. If not, then it is difficult to explain to people what I know and the kind of skills that I have.*

#### **Student quote**

#### **Recommendation:**

*Allowing students to choose methods aligned with their individual backgrounds, personalities, abilities, and skills can enable them to tailor their learning experiences, potentially leading to improved academic performance and the development of skills relevant to the evolving job market. However, there is a need to carefully balance freedom of choice to prevent students from consistently opting for the assessments they are more comfortable with and potentially missing out on valuable learning experiences.*

## **5.6 Concerns about new / unfamiliar methods and impacts on grades**

Academic staff members express anxiety about adopting varied assessment methods without additional training to develop the skills for designing and evaluating the success of a range of assessment options. They believe that for students, the use of new technology and software in optional assessments could be a barrier as

many students may not be familiar with these tools and would require support from academic staff to help them navigate technological challenges.

They also thought that students might be hesitant to embrace unfamiliar assessment methods, particularly in undergraduate programmes where concerns focus on grades. Students may resist change, preferring familiar approaches perceived as safer. Academics were also concerned that introducing different assessment methods might impact on grading consistency. Additionally, careful monitoring is necessary to ensure that students are not penalised when attempting new assessment approaches. They thought that quality assurance mechanisms might help maintain grading integrity and address concerns about grade inflation or deflation.

**Recommendation:**

*To successfully implement varied assessment methods and address potential barriers, educational institutions need to invest in training and support for academic staff. This training should focus on developing the skills needed to design and evaluate diverse assessment options effectively. Additionally, students should receive support to navigate technological challenges associated with new technology and software in assessments. This support should extend to helping students overcome hesitance toward unfamiliar assessment methods. Furthermore, institutions should establish quality assurance mechanisms and implement careful monitoring to ensure fair assessment practices and grading consistency, preventing potential grade inflation or deflation.*

## **5.7 Impact on wellbeing / compassionate approaches**

Considering the impact on student wellbeing is crucial in assessment design. Staff identified the potential positive impact of offering assessment options on student wellbeing by reducing stress and anxiety associated with more rigid assessment strategies. However, they also acknowledged that providing optionality can unintentionally create stress and additional pressure.

*I tend to have decision paralysis. So I think having freedom of choice would be terrifying in some ways.*

### **Student quote**

Adopting a compassionate approach to the design of assessment optionality prioritises students' mental and emotional health and allows students to feel supported in their assessment choices. It creates a more student-centred and empathetic learning environment. However, appropriate support is needed such as clear guidelines, providing opportunities for questions and clarification, and ensuring that students feel supported in their assessment choices.

**Recommendation:**

*Assessment optionality can offer a compassionate approach to assessment so long as it is accompanied by clear guidelines, opportunities for questions and clarifications to ensure that students feel supported in their assessment choices.*

## **5.8 Links between new technologies and optionality in assessment**

Staff identified a link between technology and assessment options suggesting the potential benefits of integrating technology into assessments. Examples like video essays and podcasts suggest a willingness to use new technologies to diversify assessment methods and engage students innovatively. This approach offers opportunities for students to express their knowledge and creativity while also benefiting students who struggle with text-based formats.

They believe that their institutions should invest in technology that simplifies assessment workflows, enhances accessibility, and facilitates the design and delivery of innovative assessment methods. However they also point out that attitudes toward assessment optionality vary, with colleagues either embracing or resisting it. They acknowledged that adopting new technologies can provide opportunities for innovative and flexible assessment options, but it requires a shift in mindset and teaching approaches.

**Recommendation**

*Institutions should be encouraged to invest in technology that simplifies assessment workflows, enhances accessibility, and supports the design and delivery of innovative assessment methods. To enhance the use of technology for assessment institutions need to provide specific training and support to help staff adopt new technologies in their assessment design.*

## **5.9 Administrative barriers/ concerns about workload management**

Academic workload is a major hurdle to adopting assessment optionality. However, whilst the staff interviewed acknowledged that this approach can be more time-consuming for both students and teachers, the professional services staff noted some potential administrative benefits. For example, if adoption led to developing streamlined administrative processes, or providing adequate support and resources for teachers. They also suggested that this approach might discourage opportunities for cheating.

*The problem is the administration of all of those different flows, getting the students into the right bits, getting all of the right bits back from the students, getting it to the right markers. It's quite a big task.*

**Professional services staff quote**

**Recommendation:**

*Institutions should invest in streamlining administrative processes to alleviate the workload associated with assessment optionality. This could involve creating efficient systems for managing diverse assessment formats, grading, and feedback.*

## 6. Recommendations for the sector

As a result of this project we have the following 9 recommendations for the sector. These could be applied in new policy, process, or guidance within an education institution interested in developing or enhancing student choices in assessment.

N.	Area	Recommendation
1	Student motivation and engagement	<i>Academic staff should actively engage their students in the design process to create meaningful assessment options that reflect students' interests. This should include the design of guidance and identifying what support is needed.</i>
2	Inclusive Assessment	<i>Educational institutions should prioritise the introduction of diverse assessment formats to explicitly address accessibility and concerns about fairness, ensuring access to necessary resources and skills development to prevent the unintentional widening of awarding gaps.</i>
3	Developing autonomy / self-directed study skills	Educational institutions should embrace assessment optionality as a means to develop students' self-regulation and skills development. Teaching staff should provide guidance and resources that facilitate effective decision-making and addresses concerns regarding the potential for students to gravitate towards assessments they find less challenging to ensure a balanced approach to meeting learning outcomes
4	Perception of fairness between different types of assessment	When offering students the option to choose their assessment format, academics should prioritise transparency and consistency. This means creating and communicating well-defined grading criteria that align with learning outcomes. This approach ensures that students will have a clear grasp of expectations and how their work will be assessed.
5	Student outcomes	Allowing students to choose methods aligned with their individual backgrounds, personalities, abilities, and skills can enable them to tailor their learning experiences, potentially leading to improved academic performance and the development of skills relevant to the evolving job market. However, there is a need to carefully balance freedom of choice to prevent students from consistently opting for the easiest assessments and potentially missing out on valuable learning experiences.
6	Concerns about new / unfamiliar methods and impacts on grades	To successfully implement varied assessment methods and address potential barriers, educational institutions need to invest in training and support for academic staff. This training should focus on developing the skills needed to design and evaluate diverse assessment options effectively. Additionally, students should receive support to navigate technological challenges associated with new technology and software in assessments. This support should extend to helping students overcome hesitation toward unfamiliar assessment methods. Furthermore, institutions should establish quality assurance mechanisms and implement careful monitoring to ensure fair assessment practices and grading consistency, preventing potential grade inflation or deflation.
7	Impact on wellbeing /	Assessment optionality can offer a compassionate approach to assessment so long as it is accompanied by clear guidelines,



	compassionate approaches	opportunities for questions and clarifications to ensure that students feel supported in their assessment choices.
8	Links between new technologies and optionality in assessment	Institutions should be encouraged to invest in technology that simplifies assessment workflows, enhances accessibility, and supports the design and delivery of innovative assessment methods. To enhance the use of technology for assessment institutions need to provide specific training and support to help staff adopt new technologies in their assessment design.
9	Administrative barriers / concerns about workload management	Institutions should invest in streamlining administrative processes to alleviate the workload associated with assessment optionality. This could involve creating efficient systems for managing diverse assessment formats, grading, and feedback.

## 7. Insights and next steps for optionality in assessment research and implementation

The research has provided some important insights that reveal some ways that institutions and their staff can continue to improve the student experience and develop more inclusive and effective assessment methods. These findings are like small ripples in the large and complex higher education pond. Creating the cultural shift whereby assessment optionality will become accepted practice will be a challenging task. As a way forward, we propose the following steps:

1. Institutions could encourage student-teacher collaboration to design assessment optionality using funding and career advancement mechanisms. This might include incorporating cultural change as part of institutional-wide assessment and feedback projects. Where co-design with students is not part of the institutional fabric, linking to other institutions who have success in this area could be a point of departure as well as training on how to effectively engage students in any collaborative process.
2. Sharing effective practices and examples would raise awareness and could develop staff interest and creativity thinking. Institutions are rightfully sensitive to weak NSS results and example ways to improve student voice, assessment and feedback and reduce awarding gaps might be useful levers for improving results.
3. Lastly, engaging with sector organisations, such as NUS or AdvanceHE could be ways to promote and support sector-wide initiatives and training. Jisc could also play key role in identifying digital tools, platforms and frameworks that could promote digital assessment, as well as identifying productivity gains offered by new artificial intelligence integrations into systems.

By taking these steps, we believe we can increase the size of the ripples and pave the way for a more student-centric and inclusive approach to assessment in higher education.

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