Optionality in Assessment: what works and what are the barriers?

Findings from Universities in Manchester, York & London
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>What</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000-1005</td>
<td>Welcome &amp; Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1005-1025</td>
<td>Case studies from the institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1025-1100</td>
<td>Discussion 1 - Mentimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100-1115</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1115-1130</td>
<td>Presentation : Literature findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1130-1145</td>
<td>Presentation : Methodology (overview of the 3 stages of data gathering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1145-1200</td>
<td>Presentation : Survey results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200-1215</td>
<td>Presentation : interview &amp; Focus group results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1215-1315</td>
<td>Lunch break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1315-1345</td>
<td>Discussion 2 - Padlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1345-1355</td>
<td>How the Padlet notes will be taken forwards as examples and support for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1355-1405</td>
<td>Case studies from the institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1405-1415</td>
<td>Q&amp;A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1415-1430</td>
<td>Recommendations for the sector</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Welcome
Project Members

**Project lead**: Miriam Firth (UoM)
**Project administrators**: Lindsay Dunn, Sam Ward & Ben Murray (UoM)
**Project managers**: Lara Melville, Fran Edwards & Hannah Brown (UoM)
**QAA liaison**: Ann Cotterill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UoM (Gabrielle Finn)</th>
<th>York (Jill Webb)</th>
<th>Imperial (Martyn Kingsbury)</th>
<th>UCL (Jesper Hansen)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miriam Firth</td>
<td>Tracey Lightfoot</td>
<td>Monika Pazio</td>
<td>Leo Havemann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sian Yeowell</td>
<td>Jan Ball-Smith</td>
<td></td>
<td>Karen Shackleford-Cesare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Horn</td>
<td>Paul Tiffin</td>
<td></td>
<td>Marieke Guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy Williams</td>
<td>Jess Penn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Godden</td>
<td>Caroline Chaffer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Green</td>
<td>Tom Cantrell</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Hickson</td>
<td>Duncan Jackson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara Melville</td>
<td>Patrick Galimore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabita-Gabriela Juravel</td>
<td>Claire Hughes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Student Partner)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Project Assessment in HE consultant: Simon Walker
Project data analysts: Margarita Panayiotou, Ono Ojobo, and Tom Burgess (all in UoM)
Research 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?
## Assessments: Letting students decide

### Context and background

Level 4 module "Literacy, Language and Communication" exploring range of media and forms of communication, but assessment via essay

Level 5 and 6 module "Disability, chronic illness and neurodivergence in contemporary society" attracting higher numbers of SORA students

Introduction of assessment: artefact plus written or spoken (recorded) critical commentary

Artefacts: video, collage, knitting, baking, crocheting, painting, installation,…

---

## Advantages of optionality

- sense of agency
- avoidance of plagiarism
- deeper engagement with module contents and materials
- fascinating materials to mark

## Challenges of optionality

- fairness of equivalencies
- creating assessment rubric
- commitment and investment for staff and students
- supporting self-directed study

## More information

**Co-authored publication**


**Recordings for UCL**

[https://www.nicole-brown.co.uk/?s=letting+students+decide](https://www.nicole-brown.co.uk/?s=letting+students+decide)

---

## Contact

Dr Nicole Brown
Associate Professor

Email
nicole.brown@ucl.ac.uk

Website
[www.nicole-brown.co.uk](http://www.nicole-brown.co.uk)
“Design and carry out a project to explore or change your own experience of happiness. Your project submission should communicate your experience of conducting the project.”

- Set in assignment brief:
  - 7 weeks working time
  - Submission questionnaire to determine academic merit and process of project
  - Weekly check in and feedback from lecturer

- Whole class then negotiate:
  - Range of possible projects
  - Examples of possible submissions
  - Marking criteria that equally value all student projects and determine academic rigor
Negotiated Study
Dr Susan Ramsdale

Unit structure

- 10 credits at Level 5
- 6 sessions
- Offer a flexible mode of study and the opportunity to pursue a topic of relevance to the overall programme
- Facilitate the student’s ability to co-develop (with their supervisor) an assignment
- Field specific sessions with supervisor and supervision at individual level

Assessment

- Summative Assessment task to be negotiated with a 2500-word effort equivalent.
- Typical types of assessment choice:
  - Essay, PPT, Poster, Writing for Publication, Lit Review
- Topics:
  - Varied across the three fields
- Cannot undertake primary research
Optionality in assessment in the BSc Medical Bioscience discovery practical modules Lab Pod 1 and 2

Dr Manuela Mura & Dr Jacqueline Dickson

**Term 1**  
Students make choices

- Theoretical
- Reading of relevant research papers
- Identification of research gap
- Hypothesis formulation
- Scaffolding on preparation: discussion with supervisors, guidance on experimental planning

**Term 2 and 3**  
Students implement choices

- The project is investigated twice weekly
- Guidance for assessment with eModules
- Followed by Face-to-face interactive sessions

**Assessments**

**Lab Pod 1**

- Project Oral presentation

**Lab Pod 2**

- Project experimental write-up

**Lab Pod 2**

- Exam: Experimental planning

**Optionality**

- Choice of pathway
- Choice of molecular target
- Choice of presented data/results

- Choice of research question/pathway
- Choice of presented data/results
- Selection of supporting material

- Formulation of three experimental plans to test a student-devised hypothesis

Acknowledgements: Dr Silke Donahue & Dr Luisa Garcia-Haro (current and past Lab Pod 1 module leads) and Lab Pods team members
Discussion 1 : What are your thoughts? 1025-1100hrs
Break
Findings from the literature

Untapped potential?

• "providing students with some variety in assessment encourages student motivation and also allows them to showcase different skills, exhibit varied understandings, and demonstrate a range of learning outcomes" (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012)

• Received little attention with the associated literature

  – assessment design (Rideout, 2018)
  – inclusive practice (Tai et al., 2021)

• "trying harder with more of the same may not always help inclusion" (Tai, et al., 2021)

• Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB’s) are supportive (Walker, 2023, forthcoming)

• New technologies may increase opportunities for assessment choice

• Difficult to get a holistic picture of practice across the sector
Findings from the literature

Optionality Types

• Optionality within assessments
• Choose between different types
• Focus on summative assessment

Potential Benefits

• Student outcomes
• Motivation / engagement / wellbeing
• Inclusive assessment

Drawbacks/Barriers

• Student - Equity / Burden of choice
• Staff - Additional administrative Work?
• All - need for training
Methodology

- Student survey
- Staff survey
- Focus Groups & Interviews
Staff survey results (n=702)

- Word count
- Relative weighting of assignment to calculate final grade
- Optional to zero weight some elements
- Submission format
- Submission dates
- Intended learning outcome aligned the assessment
- Negotiated assessment task/question
- Assessment type chosen from a pre-selected list
- Programmatic choices in assessment
- Team OR Individual approach to assessment
- Feedback format
- Choice of assessment criteria to be applied to the piece of work
- Other (please detail below)
Student survey results (n=522)

- Essay
- Report
- Exam
- Online Blog
- Presentation
- Practical
- Other
- Performance
- Reflective Assessment
- Portfolio
- Project

Reduces stress
Comparisons between the surveys

- Staff think there are more barriers than students,
- Students feel there are more benefits than staff,
- All agree on concerns but the benefits outweigh the negatives from a student’s perspective.
Narratives from the interviews & focus groups
Lunch
Discussion 2 1230-1300hrs

https://padlet.com/miriam_firth/optionalityinassessment
Principles:
- Students as partners
- Involved in design
- Aligned to practice

written essay
3000 words

Briefing report
3000 words

YouTube video
7 mins

Case-study

Topic

Topic

Research Theory

Research Theory

Research Theory

"really liked that I could choose how I was to be assessed"
"felt less anxious about the module assessment"
"being able to choose your assessment should be compulsory in all modules"
"I felt more at ease with the module assessment and didn't have a last-minute panic"
Assessment Overview

Select two examples of educational literature (articles, chapters, policy documents etc.) and critically examine the claims made in your chosen literature in relation to your own teaching and learning context.

Each source of educational literature must represent a different type of literature, as listed below (i.e. at least two types of literature should be represented): theoretical literature, research literature, practice literature, policy literature

written form through an essay of 3000 words (+10%)

through a recorded oral presentation of 17 minutes (+10%)

• Appropriate reading and engagement with the literature
• Critical use of literature
• Reflection, insight, evaluation
• Technical accuracy

Dr. Monika Rossiter
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in International Education – MA
Professor Susie Miles

Optional Formative Assignment – a 500 word article about an EDI issue of your choice for the Enabling Education Network (EENET), written in a non-academic style

Written assignment: A 3000 word analysis of an EDI issue, or an example of EDI in an educational policy or practice context of your choice

• Choose an EDI issue
• Choose a context - ideally one with which you are familiar
• Choose a framework (4 possible frameworks) which you will use to analyse the issue you have chosen
• If appropriate, include a short, critically reflective statement about your own personal or professional experience of this EDI issue/example

Optional 15 credit course; 150 students from a range of MA programmes; lecturers draw on examples of practice from the Global North and Global South; the majority of students enjoy writing non-academically in the formative assignment and this enhances their final assignment; lecturers are mostly excited and moved by reading students’ writing; personal accounts bring originality
Q&A
# Recommendations for the sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student motivation and engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Inclusive Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Developing autonomy / self-directed study skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Perception of fairness between different types of assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Student outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Concerns about new / unfamiliar methods and impacts on grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Impact on wellbeing / compassionate approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Links between new technologies and optionality in assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Administrative barriers / concerns about workload management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next steps....

1. Encourage student-teacher collaboration to design assessment optionality using funding and career advancement mechanisms.
2. Sharing effective practices and examples would raise awareness and could develop staff interest and creativity thinking.
3. Engaging with sector organizations, such as NUS or AdvanceHE to promote and support sector-wide initiatives and training.
Thank you
Keep in touch via flexiblelearning@manchester.ac.uk