Co-designing assessment in Block: Students and faculty perspectives

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Study Context

- UOS adopted a Block & Blend approach in 2021-2022.

- Impact of this change on the approach to assessment – which methods are better suited to this mode of delivery?

- Identified benefits of curriculum co-design in HE (see for example Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021; Doyle, Buckley & McCarthy, 2020; Curtin & Sarju, 2021), as well as the scarcity of co-design in assessment research (Bartlett, 2021).

- Co-design as a process that allows for more agentic, innovative, and authentic types of assessment.

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Aim and Research Questions

To identify suitable assessment types in a block delivery course by exploring the views of faculty and students regarding assessment types and their experience of the co-design process.

RQ1. What are lecturers' and students' perspectives on **assessment type** in a block delivery course?

RQ2. What are lecturers' and students' perspectives on **assessment co-design** in a block delivery course?

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Methods

Phase 1

Questionnaires

- Single essays or reports

- Single exams

- Multiple smaller assessments
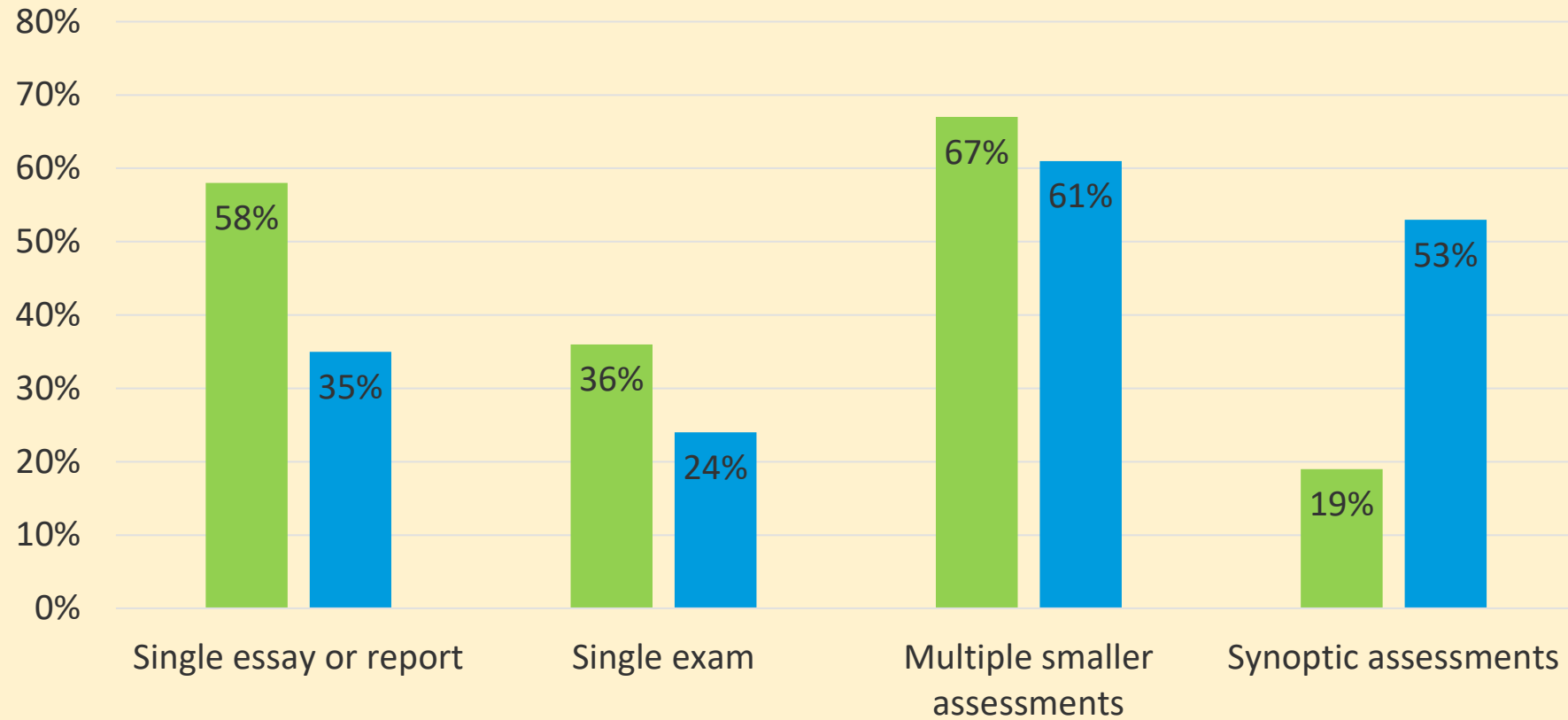
- Synoptic assessments

Phase 2

Co-design Focus Groups

- Pre co-design discussion

- Co-design task

- Post co-design discussion

Phase 1 Results: Questionnaires

Percentage of accurate views

Theme 1: Experience and Familiarity

- Participants familiar with non-traditional assessment methods perceive essays and exams as outdated and advocate for more innovative methods.

'Some people struggle with exams and the time pressures that come with it. It's an unfair and outdated form of analysing a student's knowledge and capabilities' (S1)

'Essays/ reports have not been a robust or effective measure of student attainment of learning outcomes for some time. Part of this is down to issues with essay mills and tools like ChatGPT, but other forms of assessment are more authentic in accessing students' higher-level skills required at university level' (L27)

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Theme 1: Experience and Familiarity

- Assessment seen as pre-established and unmodifiable and non-traditional methods perceived as difficult to use.

'We do no use this' (L37)

'It's the only way that I have studied at HE so know no different' (S68)

'Our assessments were not designed for block delivery. The work required for nursing assessments cannot be undertaken in one assessment week' (L36)

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Theme 1: Experience and Familiarity

- Assessment method linked to level, module, course or subject area (e.g., exams as accurate in Sciences and essays in Arts and Humanities).

'It depends which level is under discussion and which discipline is being assessed. In arts and humanities, an essay at L5 is a very accurate indicator of a student's progress. It may not be the same for science subjects' (L26)

'Artistic/creative subjects require ongoing formative assessment and practical, creative work across a number of weeks. […] Essays are not an appropriate form of assessment for practical work' (L29)

'Exams, especially for science are not particularly good at displaying whether learning has taken place as there are many practical skills for most of the units' (S20)

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Theme 2: Time Considerations

- Single essays/report or exams at the end of the block considered as not suitable for block delivery, due to time constraints.
- Multiple assessments regarded as more accurate at evaluating learning in block, as well as a more effective way of managing student workload.

'I don't feel that block delivery works well with exams. Not enough time to put the learning into practice. It leads to cramming facts in and there is also a temptation to teach to the exam' (L16)

'I think by having multiple smaller assessments it would be more beneficial as it allows students to have more manageable increments of academic work to do as opposed to one singular exam or essay. I think it would also give a truer reflection of their ongoing progress' (S28)

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Theme 2: Time Considerations

- Block as not allowing enough time to complete multiple assessments, commonly related to the idea of having multiple traditional summative assessments, resulting in an increase of workload.
- Multiple assessments as positive when considering a variety of methods (e.g., automated feedback, smaller scaffolded assessments or in-class assessment).

'It [multiple assessments] might be more accurate in giving an idea of progress, but 4 weeks with multiple, smaller assessments would make faculty workload in marking them oppressive and completely unmanageable' (L9)

'I feel that our formative assessments provide this to a degree and our MCQs punctuated throughout some modules which form a lesser part of the summative, but the student has to engage' (L7)

'I also think the block format means that there is room for formative assessment to occur more frequently in class' (L14)

Theme 3: Effectiveness

- Single essays/reports and exams seen as lacking ability to show depth of knowledge.
- Traditional essays and exams as assessing academic skills instead of more practical or authentic skills.

'If they are purely focused on the essay or report when there is a range of topics covered it could well lead them to skip over content that does need to be looked at more closely' (L16)

'Exams test for memory and the ability to perform well under extreme pressure: this only slightly reflects what a student has learnt. I feel this assessment method is quite poor' (S56)

'As Adult Nursing is such an intense academic course, my cohort alone has halved in size since the beginning as students aren't performing well in their essays […]. This feels a real shame as on placement and in practical settings these same colleagues make brilliant Nurses who are perfectly competent and capable. As we know there is a huge need for Nurses now more than ever but these gaps aren't able to be filled as not enough of us are getting through the other end of the degree due to the being assessed on our writing abilities' (S28)

Theme 3: Effectiveness

- Multiple and smaller assessments regarded as providing the opportunity to show a variety of skills, consolidate knowledge over time, improve engagement and assess progression.
- Linked to the importance of receiving timely feedback, as it allows for improvement during the block, as opposed to a single assessment method at the end of the block.

'I think by having multiple smaller assessments it would be more beneficial as it allows students to have more manageable increments of academic work to do as opposed to one singular exam or essay. I think it would also give a truer reflection of their ongoing progress' (S28)

'It [feedback] does not need to be immediate but 3 weeks means that by the time you receive feedback, you have almost finished completely different module. It no longer applies and has much less effect' (S29)

Theme 4: Design

- Faculty highlighted their responsibility to design effective assessments and the negative impact of poorly designed assessments:

> 'If done well by the academic, the assessment method is great. If done poorly, with little thought (which I have also seen the shall we say 'recalcitrant and less adaptive' colleagues do) yes it does create problems' (L25)

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Theme 4: Design

- Assessment designed as a single individual assessment at the end of the block was seen as a disadvantage to some students, while multiple assessments throughout the block were regarded as more inclusive:

'It's very hard with only one assessment method to make sure students are being fairly treated. Some are much better at verbal presentations, others are better at written. Offering a range of methods is a way of evening out that disparity' (L3)

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Theme 4: Design

- Synoptic assessment was highlighted as providing a holistic approach that avoid silo thinking and ensure authentic and comprehensive assessment. However, team coordination is key.

'What would work best in my view is if course teams would look holistically at the assessment over the course of a given year and design the individual module assessments to reinforce the key skills students need to develop from one module to another. Unfortunately, many teams don't organize themselves and their learning that way, at least not yet' (L25)

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Theme 5: Student Wellbeing

- Single assessment methods regarded as having a negative impact on students' mental health, as opposed to multiple smaller assessments, linked to feedback.

'You would spend less time panicking and waiting for large chunks of formal feedback on assignments. Having feedback throughout helps gain an understanding of where you're at' (S32)

'Rapid feedback allows students to build confidence and realign their approach to the subject if they need direction. This method may allow students to achieve better grades' (L48)

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Theme 5: Student Wellbeing

- A small number of participants considered the possibility of multiple assessments as detrimental to students' mental health due to possible increase in workload and/or deadlines.

'Can get too overwhelming and might not have a clear enough idea of the period yet to be able to answer small assessments in depth' (S31)

'Allows different topics to be covered meaning everyone gets a chance at showing the ones they understood best and a range of the ones they maybe didn't understand so well. However, it does add more stress as multiple deadlines' (S41)

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Phase 2 Results: Focus Groups

Pre co-design discussion

Co-designing allows students to have a say, to express their expectations and needs so lecturers can take those into consideration.

It is important to ensure representativeness.

Disagreement between single essays and single exams as students' preferred types of assignments.

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Phase 2 Results: Focus Groups

Co-design task

Level 4

Provide a summary of your assessment plan:

Learning outcome	Assessment method & weighting	Brief description	Time in block	Feedback
LO 3, LO 1, LO 3, LO 2	Presentation 50%	Group Presentation	end of WB3	- Verbal feedback immediate. - At least a week
1+4	Longer essay 50%	800 word reflective essay and learning objectives of module.	End of wk 5	3 weeks after submission via bright space.

Level 5

Provide a summary of your assessment plan:

Learning outcome	Assessment method	Brief description	Time in block	Feedback
1	Quiz 10%	15/20 Questions 30/40 mins	Week 3	Immediate/ automated
1,2,4	Discussion 30%	10 mins – 5 mins Question	End of Week 4	Immediate/ informal
1,2,3,4	Essay 60%	1500 – 2000 words	End of Week 5	Formal with grade

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Phase 2 Results: Focus Groups

Post co-design discussion

Reasons behind the choices included:

- receiving feedback during the block,
- using different types of assessment to accommodate different students' preferences,
- the different LOs.

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Phase 2 Results: Focus Groups

Post co-design discussion

The co-design process as allowing students to:

- relate class content to LOs,
- understand assignments,
- understand the different preferences by working with other classmates.

Lecturers enjoyed listening to students' voices and found the co-design process **useful for course revalidations**.

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Key conclusions

Multiple smaller assessments need to be included in one module/block, these can benefit from the advantages of block by having more formative and in-class assessments, and blend such as automated quizzes.

Timely feedback is crucial to ensure and monitor students' progress and wellbeing.

Variety of feedback methods needed, making use of the advantages that the blended approach offers.

Variety of assessment methods to equip students with different skills and ensure inclusivity, which needs to be acknowledged in design, to ensure universal design.

Collaboration is key to avoid the 'silo thinking' issue in block and ensure a holistic approach and continuation between modules.

Co-design allows students to be more agentic and understand the process and reasoning behind the assessment design/LOs.

Thank you!

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