



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QQI INSIGHT ON ASSESSMENT: LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

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QQI
Insights

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QQI Insight on Assessment: Learner Perspectives

What do learners think of our current approaches to assessment in higher and further education? What are the key issues and challenges for them and how would they like to see these addressed? What areas do they think are working well? Which areas could benefit from development and change?

In 2022, QQI held a series of focus groups with further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) learners, (two for FET learners; six with learners on higher education programmes) to listen to their experiences, perspectives and thoughts on assessment. All of the learners expressed an appreciation of the fundamental importance of assessment as the means by which their learning achievements could be demonstrated and qualifications valued. The discussions highlighted the importance of giving learners the space and opportunity to voice their views as what they had to say was illuminating and thought-provoking. Whilst recognising that assessment is a means of showcasing knowledge and skills, a learner's experience of assessment can have the effect of being either an incentive or an obstacle to learning and achievement. The discussions revealed a wide and diverse range of ideas, suggestions and recommendations as to how assessment processes could be improved, with the aim of enabling learners to perform to their optimal ability, capturing, monitoring, supporting and evaluating their learning at critical stages on a programme, and as end-of-course achievement.

This Insight identifies twelve key learner perspectives which were highlighted by the focus group participants, with variations dependent on the type of programme and the sector in which they were studying.

1. Transitioning from 2nd level to tertiary education

Tertiary education is a very different context from learners' previous educational experience in which assessment may have primarily focused on accurate replication and reproduction of knowledge. Learners need support in this transition to understand the different learning approaches required of them at tertiary level, whether the learner has moved onto further or higher education. New students need help in understanding concepts such as academic integrity, how to reference correctly, critical thinking, and the skills needed to structure and produce an academic essay. In addition, many participants said that better education in these areas would support learners in building resilience against the temptation to cheat, as well as help guard against any unintentional misconduct.

2. Assessment in support of the attainment of learning goals

Whilst assessment is often used to evaluate the extent of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence, it also has the potential to play a formative role in supporting learning – on condition that it has been underpinned by effective feedback. Learners suggested that although assessment can be beneficial, it depends on the individual assessment. Some assessment task types support student learning as they enable the provision of meaningful feedback, others less so or not at all.

Overloading learners with assessment can obstruct learning rather than enable it. Continuous assessment can help learners attain their goals. However, in some cases, the time investment to gain marks from continuous assessment is seen as disproportionately high for the marks available and reduces the time available to study for the final examination, which can be worth a higher proportion of the overall grade.

"... like with students, because there's such high load on assessments, they're not actually learning anything while they're doing assessment because they're like, I need to get this done, I need to get it out of the way. ... They're not thinking how am I learning from this? Or what do I need to learn from this? They are thinking I need to get this done because it's due..."

HE Learner

"We have an 80% end-of-year exam and we've 20% continuous assessment, but that was six assessments each maybe two hours. So because I'm afraid of failing and still spend two or two and a half hours doing the assessment but that also reduces the time I have to study. And like two of them were due in the final two weeks of the term. So it's a problem where you spend so much time on assessments that you don't have time to study for the final year exam but the final year exam is worth four times more than the assessments that you've been spending so much time on"

HE Learner



3. Participating in assessed group work

In theory, it was generally agreed that group work can be useful, helping participants to understand team dynamics, to share different views, and as good training for the realities of future employment. A range of experiences was reflected regarding assessed group work across the learner groups. Learners stated that working in a group can be a positive experience where:

- members are well-matched;
- there is a structure;
- there is a sense of direction;
- group members work collaboratively;
- everyone puts in an equal effort.

"Group projects done effectively are brilliant. I think working in a group is a skill that everyone should have, you know, no person is an island, and neither should your education be."

HE Learner

"Groupwork is something that I absolutely don't like. It really comes down to people not pulling their weight in the projects and that ends up falling a lot on certain people ... I had to do projects like that - it was 100% of our grade and no one had prepared for it but myself and it's very difficult, I think, for students as well to go and address the issue to lecturers."

HE Learner

However, there can be a frustration in circumstances where a non-contributing or poor member of the group has to be carried by the others, or where the poor quality of an individual contribution brings down the overall grade awarded for the whole group. In these circumstances, an individual learner's result depends on who else is in the group and may not be a fair reflection of their own performance. There are also questions around how much responsibility the lecturer/teacher should have if a learner is finding it difficult to find a group to join or a group member is not engaging. Some learners consider that it is human nature that some will do more than others in a group and that whilst a group grade may be unfair, it is reflective of the reality of life.

Concerns were also expressed about the use of peer assessment in group projects as this can cause conflict among peers and some feel that learners lack the expertise to adequately assess each other. One example of what was considered fair grading of group work was when group members were given both an individual mark crediting their contributions, as well as an overall group mark.

The COVID-19 experience posed particular challenges for group work. Some learners found online group work to be “really tough”, highlighting that it is more difficult to form a group in an online context where learners had never met each other in person. This was identified as a particular issue for international learners who may not know all of their peers in the class.

4. Information about why, how and when learners are assessed

Learners appreciate being informed about why, how, and when they will be assessed e.g., a calendar of assignments and due dates. They like to know what they can expect and what is expected of them. This information helps learners plan their work and engage optimally with assessment tasks. Some learners had positive experiences in this regard: in FET, examples were referenced whereby instructors created additional briefs to better enable learners to understand what was required; discussed the briefs in class and fielded questions from learners in relation to them; and created a video explaining what the assessments and briefs were all about. Others pointed to deficiencies, for example not being clear about the marks available for different elements or the grading criteria.

5. Reflecting on continuous assessment (CA) and end-of-course exams

In the main, continuous assessment was regarded as helpful, creating less pressure, removing the stress of cumulative end-of-course exams and spreading the assessment and grading across the programme. In addition, it allows for variation in assessment types, e.g. enabling assessment to incorporate a range of task types and approaches to suit all types of learner. FET learners in particular found CA supported them in achieving their goals and enabled them to work at a steady pace throughout the course. Learners across both sectors who had had previous negative experiences of the traditional exam approach preferred and valued continuous assessment, as they could spend time on their work, get feedback on drafts and work towards various staggered deadlines. It was also noted that CA allows for performance in tasks to be evaluated relative to the stage of the programme.

“... the only people that did well were those who had like tunnel vision, almost could put the blinkers on head down, and just almost regurgitate everything onto a page. So it was rotten, like it actually was at its core rotten. And I don't think it was a fair assessment of people's abilities, because you automatically rule out such a large proportion of the student body by doing that type of exam.”

HE Learner

The following difficulties were identified relating to CA:

- when the amount of work required is disproportionate to the grade;
- where there is so much CA that learners are overwhelmed;
- when deadlines are bunched together;

- there can be so many assignments across different modules that learners never have a period when they are not preparing to be, or actually being, assessed, i.e. no time to focus purely on learning;
- CA may tempt learners to cheat dependent on the assignment design;
- due to the modular design of programmes, outcomes are assessed more than once, leading to duplication and over-assessment.

"I think that an exam scenario where it's three hours all or nothing and you don't have any resources in front of you ... I would argue that exams maybe would be very different to how it actually would be for a career, because I don't think there's ever really a scenario when you're working where you have only three hours of just cramming and then using that information..."

HE Learner

Only in a few cases was a distinction made between CA assignments which receive a grade and count towards the summative programme grade, and assignments which are purely for feedback purposes to support further learning; generally, all assignments are given a grade which counts towards a final grade. A mixture of examination and continual assessment has advantages for some. The examination can motivate some learners to focus and to cover a broad area of the subject. However, when the examination result is a large proportion of the grade for a module, the stakes are high and a lot can depend on a learner's performance on the day of the exam and

ability to speed write large amounts of text within a set period. This was not considered reflective of an authentic context or to provide a fair reflection of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence. Exam scheduling, where end-of-semester or end-of-course exams take place over a very short time frame, was also raised as an issue.

6. Receiving feedback – its purpose and intended impact

Learners reported that providers generally have a policy on feedback, and many of these state a maximum time frame of a number of weeks from submission to receipt of feedback on the assessed piece of work. In reality, many experiences, especially in higher education, differed significantly, seemingly dependent on the individual tutor, i.e. a consistent institutional approach was not being implemented. This variability can be especially unfair in the context of final-year projects where different learners may have different supervisors.

The provision of feedback on assignments is much more common than feedback on exams, and, when received in a timely fashion, tends to be more useful in supporting learning. Feedback on examinations seems to be rare and therefore learners are losing an opportunity to get better at taking examinations. When it is given, it can be transformational if it is focussed on helping the learner improve.

Other challenges were identified where feedback:

- is late (examples of 6-month time lags were referenced) or isn't provided at all;
- is short, vague or doesn't provide advice for improvement;
- doesn't explain the reason for the grade awarded;
- is inconsistent or contradictory between different lecturers/teachers.

Generating high-quality individualised feedback can be time consuming and it was acknowledged by HE learners that staff may have too many assignments to provide feedback individually, e.g., submissions from a class of 300 students. This highlights the need for careful consideration of feedback strategies in designing large programmes.

As a whole, FET learners had a more constructive and positive experience concerning feedback with regard to its relevance, timeliness, and advice for improvement, some of this being given orally, or in 1-1 meetings. A clear link was made by FET learners between staff providing meaningful feedback which was perceived as a sign of caring about the learner's experience and progress, and better learner engagement and achievement.

"Some of our team ... did really good where they'd give us a date for a draft? Yeah, so ... get that in on this day for a draft and I'll have a look at it and tell you what's wrong with it or what's not. So I thought that was very good. Even if I hadn't got it finished, you would send it to them and they'd say, you're on the right track or you're on the wrong track or something so you get a bit of time then."

FET Learner

"I've always found feedback from essays and continuous assessment - this is both from undergraduate and my master's - to be really kind of in depth. I've always got a good amount of feedback. But from any exams that I saw from my undergraduate, I never got one bit of feedback from an exam. So I was never able to kind of, like get better at taking exams, and they weren't my strong point as it was. So like, I think it's, like, for doing continuous assessment, phenomenal. Exams are different and you need you need feedback on both sets, I think."

HE Learner

"There is a function on Moodle where they can re-upload the documents and then comments per section, and I have two or three lecturers that always do that so in depth, and then the ones that give you the one liner and I do tend to wonder like what's the guideline the lecturers are given on feedback - is it totally up to them to decide how to do it? Does someone look at what they are doing? Because some are brilliant and then like someone said you'd get 'this assignment was fabulous,' you clicked all of it, and then the grade is 60 and you're going, well, if it was that fabulous, then why wasn't it 70?"

HE Learner

"I'll take marketing, for example, the two assessments added together were 60% of my grade, and the exam was only 40%. So if I did really well, on those assessments during the year that I had a month or a month and a half to work on, then I could go into the exam, only get 20% on the exam, and then I'd still get a distinction. And that was so much better, because you have that month to work on the assessment at first. So you can go back to the tutor, ask for feedback, change things along the way, and kind of ensure that you have a good grade."

FET Learner



7. Engaging with academic integrity

Learners consider academic integrity to be important, with the higher education groups having a greater awareness of what it was and how learners could drift, or be lured, into misconduct. Whereas plagiarism was acknowledged as primarily a question of educating students on what it is and how to avoid it, the line between getting help from others and collusion was considered to be tricky and easy to cross inadvertently. Learners are encouraged to ask for help from peers so the distinction can be difficult to fully establish.

There was greater awareness of the availability of commercial cheating services among the higher education learners and some said that this was related to the shift to remote or online assessment, i.e., it gave learners an easy route to cheat. One HE learner described how the COVID-19 experience led to increased cheating, with those “who cheated badly” getting caught. In FET, some learners were surprised to learn that these services exist and considered that if there was a problem with a deadline, extensions could be sought and were generally granted.

Learners identified the following circumstances as potential drivers for cheating:

- if cheating is perceived as being prevalent, the learner may be more likely to cheat also so as not to be disadvantaged;
- the financial cost and potential progression implications associated with having to re-sit or repeat;
- if learners adopt the principle that anything that is not explicitly forbidden is permitted, then problems can arise when expectations concerning assessment are not clearly and explicitly stated;
- heavy learner workloads and bunching of assessment deadlines, leading to assessment becoming a chore rather than a learning opportunity;
- the scope of cheating opportunities offered by online assessment;
- some learners – especially where they have just transitioned from secondary school – do not yet have the academic skills to engage appropriately with their assignments;
- a lack of learner supports available, especially in higher education;
- the onslaught of continual offers of ‘help’ from ‘friendly and understanding’ companies on social media.

Content and choice in assessment can also be a driver. There are learners whose prior educational experience consisted of relatively predictable assessment and who expect that examinations should be predictable so that they don’t have to revise the whole module. When this strategy fails them, they may be tempted to cheat.

Learners had some ideas about how to reduce the likelihood of cheating by:

“Again, human nature ...you’re gonna want to help your friends, you’re gonna ask your friends how to improve, I think it is reality of the real world as well. But again, it comes down to it not being explained, told properly, given correct clear instructions on how to complete an assessment without engaging in plagiarism or collusion.”

HE Learner

“A lot of courses from my understanding don’t actually, like, have modules that actually show you ... how to academically write, how to reference, how to do any of that. So that could push people towards ... an essay mill.”

HE Learner

- better preparation of learners for the rigours of higher education;
- being clear about what is permitted and what is not;
- ensuring that learners have an opportunity to learn how to write and structure an academic paper and how to cite and use sources;
- ensuring that learners are aware of the risk of serious consequences from getting involved with contract cheating services.

8. Learning through work-based practice and assessment

Learners consider that being prepared for employment is an important aspect of education and training and that there is a need to find a balance between practical and other kinds of assessment. Some find practical assignments easier and more enjoyable as they feel they learn more through them, and that

"So with us it was theory to practice. So like you learned about all this theory, all year around and you're like, right, I don't get this. And then when you went out on placement, it was like, it was like the penny dropped. I was like, oh, okay, right now I get this."

HE Learner

they are more relevant to future employment prospects. In FET, it was noted that work-based assessments were better suited to some kinds of learning outcomes where it is easier to demonstrate a skill than to write about it in an examination or essay. In HE, it was suggested that the opportunity to connect theory and practice through practical assessment, which made clear links to future employment skills, could be both motivating and an important component in reinforcing learning.

Challenges identified related to:

- the manner in which any work-based learning, internships, professional or occupational placements are graded, and how the grade correlates to performance and the programme learning outcomes;
- a lack of consistency of approach across providers, recognising that the benchmark standard can depend on the placement and external factors not within the learner's control;
- a lack of consistency in terms of provision of formative feedback.

9. Peer Assessment

Learners can be uncomfortable grading their peers because:

- they feel that they are at the same level as their peers;
- they lack training in assessment;
- having just learned the content themselves, they may not know what to look for.

However, it depends on the nature of the topic. For example, learners consider it easier to assess concrete things like facts or languages as opposed to the quality of ideas. The provision of clear assessment criteria and a marking scheme may help make peer assessment feasible. Some learners also drew a distinction between the use

"And I hate it I just don't like criticising someone who is at the same level as me as skill. I feel like it sort of it feels wrong. And also, I am not a lecturer I ... don't know, you know, how to assess anything in reality, and we don't have the tools to do that. I mean, maybe if it's on a language it is different, because I mean, of course, there you can sort of be like, I think that is wrong, and but if it's an essay with ideas or something like that, I yeah, I wouldn't feel, I don't feel comfortable with those types of assessments."

HE Learner

of peer assessment for formative purposes and circumstances where it might be used to determine a grade, with the latter considered more problematic.

It was suggested that peer assessment could have a role in group work - particularly in circumstances where not everyone makes the same contribution. However, where it is anonymous and no reasons are given for it, it can result in the learner not knowing how to improve.

10. Assessing learners remotely

Many learners had experiences of remote online assessment as a result of the COVID-19 experience. There were mixed opinions as to whether it was preferable to in-person assessment. On the positive side, some learners consider it to be less stressful, that it allows for alternative approaches such as the time-limited assignment, and gives the learner time to think and produce work of a higher standard than in an exam setting. Learners with disabilities highlighted that remote assessment could be easier to access and allowed them to have a more equal opportunity with their non-disabled peers. However, it was also acknowledged that it can provide greater opportunities to cheat. It was suggested that online assessments were often more authentic in comparison to the traditional examination approach, which was sometimes more about rote learning.

Disadvantages were identified in relation to:

- e-proctoring systems, which can be considered invasive and can falsely identify cheating;
- practical issues, such as poor internet connectivity;
- the lack of access to campus facilities to help the learner study or receive support;
- some learners experienced a sense of isolation, detracting from a sense of belonging.

11. Viewing assessment practices through the lens of disability

In general terms, learners considered that a lot more that could be done to enable equity and fairness in assessment for learners with disabilities. It was suggested that giving learners choice about how they are assessed can help them to become more autonomous learners. It can also support more effective learning as some learners reported that the material they remember best from their programme was the material they interacted with more, e.g. in presentations or group discussions. However, it was noted that some assessment types may not be straightforward for learners who need assistive technology or personal assistants to scribe for them. In addition, learners cautioned that the introduction of choice of assessment could raise issues of fairness and that it would be important to ensure that all assessment types were equally fair to all learners.

Learners with neurodivergent conditions felt that they were at a disadvantage in assessment, and whereas accommodations may be made for them, this was not consistently the case.

" I have dyslexia so I always wished that instead of a 3000-word assignment, I could just sit in front of the lecturer and tell them what I know, and come with my, like, reference points ... one of my lecturers actually, like, allowed me to do that once and I got the best grade, one of my best grades."

HE Learner

12. Further Education & Training and Higher Education – some similarities and differences

As a general observation, learners in our focus groups enrolled on further education and training programmes tended to have a higher level of satisfaction with assessment, and this seemed, to a great extent, to be linked to the closeness of the relationship they were able to have with their teachers/instructors. In contrast, in higher education, the lack of contact or opportunity to build a relationship with lecturers was seen to be demotivating, a possible driver for academic misconduct, and a possible factor in the lack of meaningful feedback received by learners, e.g., the lecturer didn't know who they were addressing. One participant reported receiving very useful feedback from a lecturer but this was due to a personal connection rather than as a standard procedure.

In FET, formative assessment mechanisms were well-received by learners, and the flexibility to support the potential for success of all learners, was highlighted. In HE, this was not reflected in comments made and there was some frustration as to the perceived inflexibility of institutions. Learners reported that one reason sometimes given to them to explain this was the need to comply with QQI regulations.

CA has been widely experienced across both sectors and generally seems to be quite well-received; however, the following issues were all raised in this context:

- modularisation and over-assessment;
- heavy workloads for learners and staff;
- the need for scheduling of staggered deadlines to avoid bunching of deadlines;
- the need for alternative assessment tasks to mitigate the risk/ease of cheating.

A further point, specific to HE learners, was the need to understand the grading schemes being applied and the reason for the grade which was awarded.

Conclusions

The views expressed in the focus groups highlight that communication with learners on assessment design, delivery and evaluation is key. The provision of opportunities for learners to be both partners and co-creators of assessment may help to build literacy in assessment and enable real engagement with these elements.

To facilitate this, our discussions suggest that it would be beneficial for learners to:

- know what is expected of them as learners in terms of being successful in assessments;
- understand the various task types by which learners might be assessed, their design and potential purposes;
- engage with their assessment schedule well in advance so that they can manage their time and flag any bunching of deadlines;
- increase familiarity with assessment rubrics and task types within their discipline or subject area;
- build an understanding of:
 - » how grading on various assessment types works and what any grade means in terms of their learning;
 - » how to avoid unintentional breaches of academic integrity;
 - » the relationship between the overall programme learning outcomes and the assessment (and avoiding duplication of assessment/over-assessment);
 - » what authenticity means in their learning and assessment context and how the assessment (whether individual or group) relates to 'real life' tasks;
 - » any limitations imposed on approaches to assessment determined by external parties;
 - » who and where to ask for support if needed.

Since we engaged with learners in this exercise, we have seen the rapid emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) Large Language Models (LLMs), available online at minimal or no cost. At one end of the spectrum, some commentators have identified LLMs as "an existential threat to higher education"¹; at the other end, it is acknowledged as a potential game changer and a force for triggering positive reforms to traditional practices. This new suite of tools has the potential to transform education - including assessment - and the challenge is how to manage this, remaining cognisant of the risks posed by GenAI, to ensure that LLMs have a positive impact on teaching, learning and assessment and that learners are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate their use in future contexts.

1 O'Brien, C (2023) 'ChatGPT dropped like a bomb': AI chatbot rocked universities – now some are rushing to embrace it', *The Irish Times*, 23 March. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/03/31/chatgpt-dropped-like-a-bomb-ai-chatbot-rocked-universities-now-some-are-rushing-to-embrace-it/>.



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