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There is no ‘I’ in ‘a team of lawyers’: an evaluation of student perceptions of group assessment within legal higher education

Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of group assessments within Higher Education as a form of summative assessment, and the experiences of students in relation to this assessment tool.

Group assessment is becoming a very common feature of undergraduate HE courses, with an “explosion” of group assessment in more recent years.¹

This paper chooses to focus on the use of group assessment within the discipline of law, specifically the use of summative group assessment within a law discipline at a Russell Group University.

Although this paper follows numerous other studies and reviews of group work and group assessment, it has been noted that there remains a lack of qualitative studies on students’ perspectives on group assessment²

This paper progresses the literature to date by collecting qualitative insights. In particular, the paper focuses on key aspects of student experience such as building group relationships, and the fear and uncertainty of being assessed as part of a group.

Group assessment can be introduced readily by staff without always considering the complexity of group work and its related issues and this can potentially lead to negative

¹ Gibbs, ‘The Assessment of Group work: lessons from literature’ Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange, Brookes University (2010)

² Hannaford, ‘Motivation in group assessment: a phenomenological approach to post-graduate group assessment’ (2017) 42 (5) Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 823

student experiences³. Therefore, this paper also aims to highlight the benefits to student experience of well-planned group assessment that is appropriately set.

Keywords: Group assessment; student engagement; student experience

Introduction

This paper focuses on the topic of group work and assessing group work in Higher Education. Specifically, the study focuses on the use of group assessments within Higher Education as a form of summative assessment method, and the experience of students in relation to this assessment tool.

This paper chooses to focus on the use of group assessment within the discipline of law. The rationale for this focus is twofold; firstly, it is acknowledged that many law courses include some element of group assessment⁴ and so an analysis of group assessment in this discipline is warranted; secondly, the study focuses specifically on the use of summative group assessment within an undergraduate law degree programme at a Russell Group University, on the grounds that this particular law discipline has seen a recent increase in the setting of summative group assessment (rather than students working in groups without any form of summative assessment).

Group assessment is becoming a very common feature of undergraduate HE courses, with an ‘explosion’⁵ of group assessment in more recent years. A number of studies⁶ have highlighted

³ Noonan, ‘The ethical considerations associated with group work assessments’ (2012) 33 Nurse Education Today 1422

⁴ Clarke and Blissenden, ‘Assessing student group work: is there a right way to do it?’ (2013) 47 (3) The Law Teacher 368

⁵ Gibbs (n 1).

⁶ Lejk, Wyvill and Farrow, ‘Group Learning and Group Assessment on Undergraduate Computing Courses in Higher Education in the UK: Results of a Survey’ (1997) 22 (1) Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 81; Sedgwick– Reflections of a “progressive” teacher in Higher education: the opportunities involved in giving students

how working in groups, and assessing this group work, can lead to improved achievement, better student performance and engagement, as well as positively influence attitudes to learning. Also, group assessment allows students to work collaboratively in teams, a key skill for future employment⁷.

However, studies⁸ have also highlighted some of the challenges with group work including potential 'freeloading' by certain group members, a lack of perceived fairness by students if one mark is awarded for the entire group, a lack of appreciation by students of the positive influence of group work on employability, and a lack of good self-management or staff management of groups.

There has been much written⁹ on methods employed to address group assessment and group work challenges, including initiatives such as peer assessment within group work, supporting the group through the use of group 'team roles', choosing groups of a mixed ability, dividing up tasks clearly and assigning individual assignments in addition to group assessments. The common denominators of all these initiatives is adequate support for students when group assessment is set, as well as sufficient focus on the demands of staff when managing groups and group assessment.

Although this paper follows numerous other studies and reviews of group work and group assessment, it has been noted that there remains a lack of qualitative studies on students' perspectives on group assessment.¹⁰

control. (2010) CETL AFL Occasional Papers No. 5 Centre for Excellence in Assessment for Learning, Northumbria University

⁷ Sedgwich (n6)

⁸ Gibbs (n1); Gaur and Gupta, 'Is group assessment a bane or boon in Higher education? A students-teacher perspective' (2013) 6 (3) International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education 141

⁹ Kerr and Bruun, 'Dispensability of member effort and group motivation losses: Free rider effects' (1983) 44 (1) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 78; Belbin, 'Management teams: why they succeed or fail' (Routledge 2010)

¹⁰ Hannaford (n 2)

This paper therefore aims to progress the literature to date by collecting qualitative insights from students studying law at a Russell Group University. The paper is also significant as a result of its method of data collection, in that the qualitative comments were collected using synchronous/liveonline discussion forums. This method of data collection is currently relatively rare, with other studies tending to use online data collection in an asynchronous form¹¹.

This paper will also aim to show that, in addition to practical benefits such as saving time and expense, this online method of data collection may encourage participants to comment more freely than they would face-to-face¹². This is particularly significant as the data collection in this paper involves collaboration between the author and a set of students, where the students undertook the online data collection. It has been recognised that one significant advantage of this is the removal of a halo effect when collecting qualitative data¹³

This paper will draw upon the qualitative data collected, using a thematic analysis¹⁴ (which will be explained in more detail in the ‘methodology’ section). In particular, the paper focuses on key aspects of student experience such as building group relationships, and the fear and uncertainty of being assessed as part of a group (particularly where this forms a large part of the entire assessment, and only one group mark is awarded).

It is well recognised that group assessment can be introduced heedlessly by staff without always considering the complexity of group work and its related issues¹⁵, and this can

¹¹ Hayes, ‘The Habitus of Nursing – different by degree? A critical analysis of the discourses surrounding an all graduate nursing profession in the UK’ (School of Education Thesis, University of Sheffield 2012)

¹² Lynch and Mah, ‘Using internet data sources to achieve qualitative interviewing purposes: a research note’ (2017) *Qualitative Research* 1

¹³ Patton, ‘Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis (1999) 34 (5 Part 2) *Health Services Research* 1189

¹⁴ Braun and Clarke, ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’ (2006) 3 (2) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 77

¹⁵ Noonan (n 3)

potentially lead to negative student experience and motivation. Therefore, this paper also aims to highlight the potential benefits to student experience of well-planned group assessment that is appropriately set.

Literature review

Working in groups has been a relevant and important part of Higher Education for a number of years¹⁶, and the assessment of this group work an ever present additional element to the more generic concept of group work. Group assessment has been a very common feature of undergraduate HE courses for some time, and there has been studies both in particular areas such as computing courses¹⁷ as well as more recent in-depth literature studies which reference an explosion of group assessment in more recent years.¹⁸

There have been numerous studies and wide writing on the benefits of group work in Higher Education, from as early as the works of Lee Vygostky¹⁹ through to the work of Graham Gibbs²⁰. Gibbs explains how working in groups can lead to improved marks, student performance and engagement, as well as positively influencing attitudes to learning. Also Sedgwich²¹ notes the value of group work in building professional skills of students for future employment. It is well accepted that students need to experience working in groups, ideally in a co-operative way, prior to professional employment²². It has also been recognised that

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lejk, Wyvill and Farrow (n 6)

¹⁸ Gibbs (n 1)

¹⁹ Vygotsky, 'Interaction between learning and development' (1978) 23 (3) Readings on the development of children 34

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sedgwich (n 6)

²² Almond, 'Group assessment: comparing group and individual module marks' (2009) 34 (2) Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 141

group work can allow bigger tasks to be achieved by students, due a more efficient use of time and resources within a group ²³

As mentioned already, studies undertaken to date have also highlighted some of the challenges with group work and the students that take part, including potential problems of ‘freeloading’ by certain group members²⁴, a lack of perceived fairness by students if one mark is awarded for the entire group, a lack of appreciation by students of the positive influence of group work on employability, and a lack of good self-management or staff management of groups combined with a lack of clear communication leading to stress on students experiencing group assessment²⁵. The real problem with some of these challenges is that student motivation may be detrimentally affected - student motivation is key to successful learning as with motivation comes more active learning and engagement rather than passive learning²⁶.

A number of studies have sought to address group assessment and group work challenges, including peer assessment within group work; supporting the group through the use of group team roles, and through time spent on forming group relationships²⁷; choosing groups of a mixed ability²⁸ which are not too large in numbers²⁹; and dividing up tasks clearly and/or assigning individual assignments in addition to group assessments³⁰. Additionally, it has been noted, for example, that groups selecting their own group members does not accurately reflect the workplace and therefore such group work may not have the same ‘real world’

²³ Clarke and Blissenden (n 4)

²⁴ Gibbs (n 1)

²⁵ Gaur and Gupta (n 7)

²⁶ Hannaford (n 2)

²⁷ Belbin (n 8)

²⁸ Gibbs (n 1)

²⁹ Kerr and Bruun (n 8)

³⁰ Lejk and Wyvill, ‘Peer assessment of contributions to a group project: a comparison of holistic and category based approaches’ (2001) 26 (1) *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 61

benefits as a result³¹. Further, it has been recognised that there is an ever increasing need to set out the positive value of group work and assessment to students from the start and for this to be backed up in the carrying out of any group assessment activity³².

In more recent literature, it has been also increasingly recognised that it can take time for students to build up the trust needed for effective teamwork, and how this can be challenging particularly in modules that are shorter in length.³³ This can be perpetuated by the high-stakes nature of some group assessments, where summative marks are awarded – shorter semester-based modules is something that is commonly required of law school assessments for example and therefore certainly a relevant challenge to overcome in this discipline³⁴.

One common theme in the literature on the topic of group assessment is that students need adequate support when group assessment is set. In addition, it has been recognised that the clear setting of aims and outcomes of group assessment, and the tracking through of these by both staff³⁵, and by students (through some element of self-reflection on how learning fits in with outcomes³⁶), can be very positive to the learning environment.

However, it has also been noted that a focus by staff on developing group work and assessment can be very demanding, and it can be difficult with other time constraints on HE staff to work closely with all groups set³⁷.

Despite the numerous studies and reviews of group work and group assessment from a number of angles, including a consistent focus on student experience of group work and

³¹ Almond (n 20)

³² Gaur and Gupta (n 7)

³³ Clarke and Blissenden (n 4)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Biggs, 'Aligning Teaching and Assessment of Curriculum Objectives' (2003) LTSN Generic Centre, Imaginative Curriculum Project

³⁶ Croy, S, 'Development of a group work assessment pedagogy using constructive alignment theory' (2018) 61 Nurse Education Today 49

³⁷ Gaur and Gupta (n 7)

assessment in its various guises in Higher Education³⁸ it has been noted within the last year that there have not been many qualitative studies on how students feel about group assessment³⁹. Instead, much of the literature has been based on quantitative analysis, which can miss the deep understanding of group assessment from a student viewpoint. Learners are active and their views are shaped by their unique nature; and therefore understanding learners' perceptions of their experience (through qualitative analysis) can allow educators to obtain a deeper understanding of how individual learners engage with assessment tools such as group assessment⁴⁰. Therefore, through a qualitative approach, this paper aims to fill the identified lacuna in group assessment analysis.

In addition, it has been noted that the specific local learning 'milieu' can have a large effect on the particular experience of both staff and students in setting group assessment⁴¹.

Therefore, despite there being a number of studies on group work and assessment, including dissemination of good practice to address positive learning and teaching in group assessment, this study is significant for addressing the local milieu that exists in the experience of students at a particular Russell Group University in a law discipline. It has also been recognised that motivation of students can be specific to a particular set of students and a particular subject⁴² and therefore there is value in further studies, such as this, on motivation of students studying law as a discipline.

Furthermore, although there are numerous studies with suggestions for good practice in relation to group assessment, there still exists a challenge on staff to pick the right method (of

³⁸ Crack, 'Undergraduate Group projects: student experience of collaboration and self-assessment' (2007) 14 (7) *The International Journal of Learning* 163; Gaur and Gupta (n 7); Clarke and Blissenden (n 4)

³⁹ Hannaford (n 2)

⁴⁰ Scotland, 'How the experience of assessed collaborative writing impacts on undergraduate students' perceptions of assessed group work' (2014) 41 (1) *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 15

⁴¹ Gibbs (n 1)

⁴² Hannaford (n 2)

which there could be huge variation, depending on the discipline and the individuals involved) for their particular students in their particular milieu.⁴³ Certainly, group assessment can be introduced readily by staff without always considering the complexity of group work and its related issues⁴⁴, and this can potentially lead to negative student experience and motivation. This study seeks to highlight the importance of listening to, and collaborating with, those students directly affected by the particular group assessment being set in any module or programme.

Methodology

The focus of this paper is on the student experience and student 'voice' in relation to group assessment, with the related overarching aim of the paper to address feelings and thoughts (and then to analyse and present these feelings for further research and debate) of students undertaking summative group assessment

Therefore, it was felt entirely appropriate to undertake a qualitative research methodology, rather than a quantitative approach. Qualitative research can better help researchers understand why certain behaviour takes place, rather than simply the number of people undertaking such behaviour⁴⁵. It is hoped that, by gaining insight into the feelings and thoughts of students undertaking group assessment in a law discipline, that others involved in setting assessment of this nature can prioritise student experience and feelings, as well as conducting further research to continue to investigate student voice in relation to summative group assessment.

The particular significance of the study conducted here is that it has been largely student led.

The study originated from staff-student collaboration as part of a scheme involving student

⁴³ Clarke and Blissenden (n 4)

⁴⁴ Noonan (n 3)

⁴⁵ Sutton and Austin, 'Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis and Management' (2015) 68 (3) Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy 226

associates within a Russell Group University. This scheme is interdisciplinary in nature, appointing seven students in total from different departments within the institution - the students volunteer to work together in small teams, with the guidance of an academic lead, on a faculty prioritised project. The student associates discussed in this paper were given group assessment as a topic area (recognising the timely nature of this topic in Higher Education). This study is also significant as the academic lead (and author of this paper) had actually never experienced group assessment as a student or as a member of staff (other than the literature review conducted), so it created an interesting multiple analyst approach for this paper from the outset i.e. the student associates, and the academic lead, could bring distinct and different viewpoints to the project, to allow a richer and deeper research project.⁴⁶

The student associates for this particular project totally controlled the data collection process, in that it was these students alone that monitored and led the live discussion forums, without any staff member being 'present' in the forum. The benefit of data collection being through such peer interviewers (fellow students) is that it can improve the richness of any data collected. This is because peer interviewers can help to establish deeper rapport with interviewees.⁴⁷ Furthermore, an associated benefit was that the student associates also experienced personal value by actively collaborating on this project, as they were able to develop their own skills of independent pedagogical research in the process.

However, one recognised challenge with such student-led data collection is the need to remain independent. The author of this paper, as academic lead, sought to monitor and regulate the independence of the student-led work, through maintaining a consistent overview of the data collection and analysis process. This included a detailed review of initial question areas which the students had set.

⁴⁶ Lincoln and Guba, 'Naturalistic Inquiry' (Sage Publications 1985)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The multiple analyst approach to this paper (through students and a member of staff working together on the collection of data in particular), allowed for a form of triangulation, in order to help with the credibility and confirmability of the qualitative research undertaken.⁴⁸

Further, through both the involvement of student associates in data collection, and through personal experience of a number of the student associates of group assessment, the aim was that there would be less of a halo effect and also less tension generally in participant responses (a recognised problem with staff only data collection, particularly from students taught directly by such staff, is that student participants may consciously or subconsciously feel they ought to respond in a particular way to avoid offence, or to seek approval from such staff) ⁴⁹.

This paper is influenced by the theoretical theory of qualitative research⁵⁰ – in that there were areas highlighted from the literature review from which questions, and subsequent thematic analysis, were developed. It is noted that this can increase the need, particularly for the author, to remain independent and not seek to force or generalise the data collected towards the literature.

This study is also significant as a result of its method of data collection. The study makes use of online discussion forums as a model of data collection. This method of data collection is currently relatively rare as a means of qualitative analysis, and further is omitted from the literature on student experience of group assessment. It is noted⁵¹ that online forums can be a viable way of conducting qualitative research, and have can have benefits including an automatic transcript for data analysis (albeit as this data is not conducted face to face, emotional status of participants cannot be collated). In addition, there are other practical

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Patton (n 12)

⁵⁰ Braun and Clarke (n 13)

⁵¹ Eun-Ok and Wonshik, 'Online Forum as a Qualitative Research method: practical issues' (2006) 55 (4) Nursing Research 267

benefits of this method being less time consuming and more cost effective than the holding, and transcribing of, face-to-face focus groups.⁵²

This study aims to follow on from previous studies like this, in particular by allowing for a ‘real time’ collection of data through an online discussion forum (with the study moderators present on the forum to clarify and expand responses) rather than a forum that is logged into over a longer period of time where clarification and focus is harder to manage⁵³. It is anticipated that, in addition to practical benefits, this method may encourage participants to comment more freely than they would face-to-face.⁵⁴

In terms of the practical method utilised to obtain qualitative data, it was decided that the semi-structured interview method would be utilised for the method of data collection. Semi – structured interviews can allow for students to ask follow up questions and to not be too restrained, and also such an approach lends itself well to a multiple analyst approach.⁵⁵

This paper has already explained the innovative approach of collecting the data through online synchronous discussion forums (as well as highlighting some of the potential benefits and pitfalls of this method). Using Adobe Connect® software, the student associates working with the author set up a number of virtual drop-in sessions for participants to choose from – these were essentially links to the Adobe Connect® chatroom facility, which were available at different dates and different times (the aim was to give participants flexibility of choice). Each drop-in was set for an hour, and a separate web link produced for each.

Following this, the drop-in sessions were advertised widely across the law building, by way of targeted emails, lecture shout outs and flyers, all managed through the student associates.

⁵² Lynch and Mah (n 11)

⁵³ Hayes (n 10)

⁵⁴ Lynch and Mah (n 11)

⁵⁵ Devotta and others, ‘Enriching qualitative research by engaging peer interviewers: a case study (2016) 16 (6) Qualitative Research 661

The offer was an open call, and was advertised by email and in lecture shout outs to undergraduate students. The only specific pre-requisite, in addition to volunteering to take part, was that all adverts asked for students who had experienced summative group assessment in some format during their studies.

This study involved the obtaining of ethical approval, given that human participants and personal data was being collected, analysed and then published. Therefore, all participants were provided with initial information about the study when the Adobe Connect® sessions were advertised – this included each participant being told that their responses would be fully anonymous, that the data would remain confidential and that there was the right to withdraw from the sessions at any time. If any student showed interest in taking part, they were asked to email the student associates, following which further specific information of the study, how the data would be stored and used, and an informed consent agreement, were sent to participants before the timings of the specific chatroom (much in the same way as a face-to-face focus group would be run). Any participant that consented was then provided with a link to the chatroom drop-in they were available for. The whole process allowed flexibility, as any participant simply signed in remotely from any location, without having to physically attend. One unanticipated issue with this method of data collection was the ethical issues raised about storage and access of the data produced in such online forums. However, after careful analysis and explanation of how the Adobe Connect® software stored data (namely by way of encryption), combined with the transcript from Adobe Connect® being copied and pasted to an encrypted GoogleDoc® thereafter, full institutional ethical approval was granted in January 2018.

The online drop-in sessions then took place, with student associates monitoring each session advertised (this involved at least two student associates sat together monitoring a PC). As the participants started to sign in, the student associates used their pre-prepared questions (as

mentioned earlier) to conduct a semi-structured interview on the Adobe Connect® chatroom. As with all semi-structured interviews, the student associates let the conversations flow, and copied in the pre-prepared questions depending on where the conversation naturally flowed. Three drop-in sessions were attended, with 7 participants attending in total over the three sessions. The participants typed their comments to any questions asked, and were not asked to identify themselves in any way (nor were they asked to identify any specific module or teaching member of staff). The author was keen to avoid any sort of ‘name and shame’ data collection.

At the end of each session, the automatic transcript produced (comprising of the questions asked and the typed responses) was copied and pasted into an encrypted GoogleDoc® only shared between student associates and the author.

As mentioned above, the author then utilised the theoretical theory of qualitative research analysis to address the transcript.⁵⁶ The coding process could therefore be described as deductive coding when reading the transcripts.⁵⁷

The author followed the process of immersion in the transcripts (making notes as they went), then trying to code and theme the data, before finally seeking to name, analyse and interpret the emerging themes in terms of significance. The author sought to adopt a policy of prolonged engagement to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation⁵⁸ in this analysis, by repeating this process of immersion, coding and thematic highlighting over a longer period of time – the repeating of the process, with gaps inserted between each attempt, allowed for the author to look at the analysis with fresh eyes and allowed the author to both be more rigorous in the analysis as well as improving the confirmability of the themes highlighted.

⁵⁶ Braun and Clarke (n 13)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lincoln and Guba (n 48)

The researcher was guided both by the literature of group assessment, and the author's specific experience in legal education. Specifically, the author identified (as set out in the literature review above) that group assessment can help to build student engagement and performance⁵⁹; but that it can also lead to issues of stress and anxiety for students if there is a lack of proper management, explanation and direct support for students throughout the process.⁶⁰

Further, in relation to legal education specifically, the author acknowledged through personal experience of teaching in this discipline that there are a high number of summative assessments (in the undergraduate programme focused on in this paper, any student could have 6 or more summative assessments in each 12 week semester, often on overlapping skills such as essays and exams); that assessing group work is relatively rare in comparison to more traditional forms of assessment such as individual essays and exams (in the undergraduate programme focused on, less than 5% of marks are awarded from group assessment); and that legal education can be stressful particularly when individual module marks are increasingly requested by employers.

The theoretical analysis approach was preferred to a more grounded, or data-driven approach, as the author felt it important to engage with the literature prior to the data analysis to get a better sense of the significant themes in the data.

Results

The findings from a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected are discussed according to the themes identified by the author. It is acknowledged that these themes have been guided by the author's reading of the surrounding literature and own experience, and

⁵⁹ Gibbs (n 1)

⁶⁰ Gaur and Gupta (n 7); Croy (n 34)

therefore may be subject to a degree of confirmation bias. This is addressed in more detail below.

The following main themes identified in the transcripts collected were: anxiety; staff intervention/other intervention measures; general negativity; and general positivity.

General positivity

There were certainly some comments of general positivity expressed e.g.

Participant 1: *“forced me to adapt to new methods of assessment”*

Participant 2: *“It develops interpersonal skills such as listening and communicating”*

These comments certainly linked in with some of the supporting literature, which does acknowledge that group assessment can help to develop new skills.⁶¹

However, it was also noted that seemingly positive comments were sometimes caveated e.g.

Participant 3: *“I’m happy my grade was improved, but I don’t think my actual learning/knowledge was improved”*

Participant 4: *“Gaining a range of different opinions and perspectives...being able to work with new people...although I feel that these positives do not outweigh the disadvantages of group assessment”*

It is not clear from the data exactly why these particular students felt like this about the group assessment, but these comments can certainly be put into greater focus by the other themes below.

⁶¹ Sedgwich (n 6)

Anxiety

There were a number of clear indicators of general anxiety expressed, in relation to the student participant experience of group assessment e.g.

Participant 2: *“I find that group assessments can be quite stressful with regards to organising everyone and trying to make sure everyone pulls their weight”*

Participant 1: *“If people are doing things below standards, I get anxious and want to do it to a high standard so I just say I’ll do it which is more pressure/work for me”*

This again links into both the literature e.g. the fact that summative group assessment can be considered high stakes and stressful for students⁶²; and also links to the author’s own understanding of law students not being traditionally used to summative group assessment, particular where set over a shorter ‘one semester’ module.

General negativity

Unfortunately, there were some comments that could only really be themed as general negativity towards summative group assessment e.g.

Participant 5: *“I was the only one in the group who actually prepared”*

Participant 6: *“Although the workload should be spread equally, this never seems to work in practice”*

⁶² Clarke and Blissenden (n 4)

Participant 1: *“I doubt I will ever have to write a 2500-word essay outside of work hours with people who I cannot meet in person”*

It is again interesting to note here that this reflects some of the concerns from the literature that students can perceive group assessment to involve freeloading by others⁶³, and a lack of perceived positive impact on relevant skills for their future⁶⁴.

Staff intervention/other intervention

The largest proportion of the comments made related to suggestions made for staff intervention, or other intervention, in relation to group assessments:

Participant 7: *“I think we shouldn’t be able to choose our group because if we were with our friends we could end up not getting on with the work”*

Participant 5: *“Reduced frequency of group assessments...keep it as a small percentage of the grade of a module”*

Participant 1: *“I think there should be set times that are supervised by lecturers...I think it would be to check that everyone is doing what they should be”*

Participant 6: *“I believe it could be beneficial to have a non-assessed, smaller piece of group work from which a preliminary grade could be obtained”*

This certainly reflects the clear message from a number of different literature sources, that students need to feel that they have adequate support when group assessment is set.⁶⁵

⁶³ Gibbs (n 1)

⁶⁴ Gaur and Gupta (n 7)

⁶⁵ Gibbs (n 1); Belbin (n 8); Hannaford (n 2)

The data reflects specifically the point that groups selecting their own group members may not have a perceived real world benefit from students.⁶⁶ In addition, the data reflects the recognition that it can take time for students to build up the trust needed for effective teamwork, and how this can be challenging particularly in modules that are shorter in length.⁶⁷

Discussion

There are certainly some interesting points to note about the findings that have been displayed here. It is acknowledged throughout this paper that the comments were collated and analysed by the author with an element of positionality (as formed by prior knowledge). However, it is submitted that this is balanced by the lack of a halo effect being exhibited via student collection of data – as explained above, a halo effect can be created with staff involved in the data collection process, as student participants may feel a need to please that member of staff or avoid offence⁶⁸

The aim and contribution of this paper is not to generalise in relation to the findings, but instead to highlight student voice and the promotion of ongoing studies in this regard. It is important to note that the author does not seek to question the purpose of group work itself in this paper, but rather to critique the increasing regularity of the summative assessment of such group work.

The author therefore submits that several important points can be gleaned from the findings:

⁶⁶ Almond (n 20)

⁶⁷ Clarke and Blissenden (n 4)

⁶⁸ Patton (n 12)

1. It is clearly appropriate to research and collate student voice, in relation to summative group assessment specifically.

The findings clearly show that students experiencing group assessment do have important and significant points to make about their experience of summative assessment following working in groups, and this clearly needs to be explored further in other disciplines to take into account different learning milieus – with local learning milieu being a key factor to address, as set out in the literature⁶⁹ Although module feedback and evaluation is often carried out, the author submits that student voice on this particular topic needs to be further explored in addition to, and separate from, general module feedback and evaluation. The author acknowledges that student voice does not always have to lead to change, nor does it always have to be collated in the format in this paper- however, more pedagogical research in this area clearly needs to be done to better understand and explore such student voice.

2. Students clearly have an opinion on how group assessment should be set, and managed

The participants in this study have some clear, and sometimes quite starkly honest, views on how group assessment should (or shouldn't) be set by staff; and related to this how staff should manage and ensure good running of any such assessment. Given such opinions, this links in with point 4 below. The author submits, as supported by the literature, that the opinion and perceptions of students must be properly recognised and better understood.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Clarke and Blissenden (n4)

⁷⁰ Hannaford (n2)

3. Summative group assessment may lead to student anxiety and negativity

There are clear examples of anxiety and negativity expressed from the participants in this study, specifically on group assessment. These themes reflect the surrounding literature highlighted in this paper⁷¹, and reflect the importance of both anticipating such negativity and dealing with it head on. Although the literature suggests a number of potentially confusing and time consuming ways to address this, the author's own general thought is encapsulated below.

4. Staff need to clearly communicate and collaborate with students, in relation to group assessment

This study is most significant because of, as mentioned, the large number of intervention and improvement measures highlighted by the participants. Although the literature often highlights how staff have practically sought to improve group assessment through intervention, this study clearly shows how valuable and relevant student voice can be in actively contributing to such suggestions for development and change.

It is interesting that, from the literature discussed in this paper, staff measures for intervention have been implemented based on inspiration from other perceived exemplars or from other quantitative data. The author submits that this misses an extremely important point already explained – that the local learning milieu, and the opinion of voice of the specific student body being affected, is critical to good pedagogical practice.

⁷¹ Gibbs (n1); Hannaford (n2) Gaur and Gupta (n 7);

It is clear from the data in this study, that staff must communicate and genuinely collaborate with their own students when considering and planning group assessment - as a starting positive step, the acknowledgment of student voice and a clear response to this by staff in any planning is key. This could involve including students in the design of group assessment tasks as true collaborators; collecting viewpoints from students before, during and after any particular group assessment task and genuinely recognising and responding to these viewpoints (including where appropriate, responses on how student suggestions cannot be legitimately taken into account); and offering pastoral, dedicated support from staff as well as from students who have previously experienced such assessments.

The proper acknowledgment of, and response to, student voice, will hopefully allow for appropriately set group assessment, including not using group assessment where the student voice raises legitimate issues and/or where staff cannot fully respond to student opinion (which could include the amount of time required of the member of staff to implement such measures, or the short length of the particular module). The author submits that this will naturally involve a review of specific processes for approving assessments within programmes and modules, to avoid group assessments being set too hastily or readily⁷².

The author submits that, if students are treated as collaborators, they will feel more empowered in their own experiences, less anxious about what is being planned, more in control of their grading, and most importantly more trusting of the whole group assessment process. With this approach, staff will then legitimately be able to build up and develop some of the key skills that can potentially be gained from group assessment, including the skill of

⁷² Noonan (n3)

dispute management and resolution. The key is to ensure that both staff and students are fully aware of, and have contributed to, the management of such skill building in this way.

There are clearly some limitations to the research undertaken, which are acknowledged, and could well be the feature of future research in this area. The author sets these out, to guide and inspire such further research:

- (i) The data was collected following an open call for participants, at a time when students were actually experiencing group assessment – the data perhaps does not capture those students who are neutral about group assessment, and also does not capture later reflection after the dust has settled. Further research could seek to better capture such students, albeit this is challenging with any voluntary call for participants.
- (ii) The data does not differentiate those students who have experienced many group assessments from those that have not – it may well be the case that, after time, students become less anxious about group assessment (in much the same way as traditional law assessments such as essays and exams). Further research could collect and analyse such data.
- (iii) The data does not capture any general background of the student – the author cannot make any remarks about culture, gender, or learner background, which are all significant themes to address

- (iv) The data does not directly address why these feelings were expressed for these students, and what had the greatest impact on student feelings e.g. was it the type of module, the length of the module, the lack of specific staff support, the lack of perceived benefit, or a mixture of all things combined? Further research could specifically ask student participants, perhaps using a Likert scale or similar. This could also try to capture and differentiate general assessment anxiety from specific comments on group assessment.

- (v) Following on from point (iv), the study does not capture the opinion of staff in relation to this whole topic e.g. how do staff feel about these examples of student voice, do staff feel they have the time, the tools and the inclination to respond to such voice? Further research in this area is key, as it properly reflects that both staff and students are invested in the process of group assessment

Despite these limitations, the findings identified above contribute a number of significant and valuable points to the topic of using group assessment as a method of summative assessment of students, and additionally shows the value of both considering new ways to collect qualitative data and also of collaborating with student associates in the collection of such data. This paper aims to inspire further studies on the topic of group assessment, including longitudinal studies incorporating qualitative data collection and analysis, and also seeks to prompt those currently setting group assessments to avoid setting such assessments too readily or hastily without further consideration of the matters highlighted.