



Compassionate assessment: the value of programme-level student-staff collaborations

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Abstract

Assessment practices in the high-stakes environment of contemporary tertiary institutions can appear to be far from compassionate. Over-assessment, heavy assignment weightings, and clustered deadlines, among other challenges, contribute to the risk of student anxiety, stress, and imposter syndrome, and create an assessment landscape that is not conducive to joyful learning or student wellbeing. Considering the impact assessment experiences have on student confidence and identity formation, alongside grade award and job prospects, assessment practices that have student wellbeing at their core are vital. This opinion piece is co-authored by student and staff colleagues at the University of Aberdeen, the former of whom were appointed through a recruitment call for paid assessment and feedback internships. These were offered to students in their final year of undergraduate study during the 2022-2023 academic year. Our contribution focuses on a jointly implemented degree programme assessment review as a means of enhancing student assessment experiences. We posit that the inclusion of students as colleagues rather than simply as data sources provides a unique vantage point from which to begin thinking about the ways in which assessment practices can be made more compassionate.

Keywords: student-staff collaboration; degree programme reviews; compassionate assessment.

Introduction

A compassionate curriculum is one in which student wellbeing is prioritised, and calls are increasingly made for compassionate pedagogies to be situated ‘at the heart of higher education and universities of the future’ (Waddington et al., 2024, p.1). While compassionate pedagogies emphasise the significance of discursive practices, human connection, and wellbeing (Andrew et al., 2023), the latter rarely aligns with the realities of the fast-paced landscape and culture of overassessment that contemporary students face. A slow-paced learning environment can provide room for acclimatisation and sense checking, and prevent imposter syndrome evolving. However, slow learning does not easily find a place within current curriculum practices, especially in the assessment and feedback cycle. Thus, calls have been made for ways in which a slowing down can occur (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Gearhart and Chambers, 2019). While imperative, these frequently focus on the theoretical benefits of mitigating heavy workloads of staff, including those involved in teaching and supporting learning. However, heavy student assessment loads continue to form the typical student experience. These workloads can be a profound source of anxiety for students (and staff) and do not contribute to an environment of wellbeing or encourage a joyful or compassionate learning journey for students because of the ‘bidirectional relationship’ that exists between assessment experiences and wellbeing (Jones et al., 2020, p.439). Fears surrounding assessment, Amanda Chapman (2017, p.117) argues, ‘should not be underestimated and anxiety-reducing measures could and should be built in to programme design’. Alongside institutional structural assessment changes, students’ lived experiences of assessment have become more apparent post COVID, with the pandemic having ‘brought to the fore our need for compassion’ (Andrew et al., 2023, p.2).

In this short opinion piece, we – an authorial team comprised of former students and staff colleagues – argue for the importance of such programme design (and, indeed, redesign) and suggest that internal programme reviews of assessment and feedback practices can usefully highlight areas of over-assessment, heavy assignment weightings, bunched deadlines, and other problematic practices that are inconsistent with a compassionate

approach to learning. They allow us to consider, to borrow from Andrew et al. (2023, p.5), which 'structural or systemic elements of assessment may be causing certain damage to students'. Such detailed inspection of current practices can result in the redesign of programmes through identifying areas in which assessment could potentially be made more compassionate or be used to encourage what Meer and Chapman (2014, p.186) refer to as 'assessment for confidence'. Students who have faith in their own abilities are more likely than others 'to engage deeply with their studies, persist in the face of difficulties and adopt growth mindsets' (O'Hara and Preymann, 2024). Programme reviews are even more insightful when students are involved in the process as valued partner members of a review team, rather than simply as sources of data or passive recipients of suggested enhancements (Matthews, 2018; Weller and Mahbul, 2018). It is students, after all, who have the greatest insight into the experience of being a student (Healey, 2023). We contribute to this existing student partnership literature by exploring the role partnership can play in programme reviews.

We emphasise the link between assessment and wellbeing through the lenses of Meer and Chapman's (2014, p.186) work on 'assessment for confidence' and Nieminen and Yang's (2023) study of assessment and student identity. We offer a collaborative perspective informed by our student-staff collaboration and our implementation of programme reviews within individual academic disciplines, which aimed to enhance student assessment and feedback experiences through the collection of experiential data from students and staff at the University. Our core team comprised three members of staff working in the field of educational development and two undergraduate students, recruited through a call within the two pilot academic schools, who were subsequently hired as paid assessment and feedback project interns. Through the experiences gained during this collaboration, we collectively offer insight into how incorporating students as collaborators or as change agents (Dunne, 2016) in programme reviews can result in a sense of belonging, value, and trust for the individuals involved. We also emphasise the unique and highly informed perspective that student collaborators possess on over-assessment and other assessment challenges, such as designing caring and compassionate assessments. This vantage point weaves together the first-hand experience of the student as the assessment target and the more critical student reflection as a member of a programme review team tasked with analysing assessment practices, alongside staff perspectives. In short, we posit that students must be involved in revision and decision-making processes if assessment is to be truly compassionate.

Confidence, identity construction, and compassion in assessment

For better or worse, assessment experiences are at the heart of the student experience, and, coupled with feedback, have a profound effect on student confidence and sense of belonging – or lack thereof (Chapman, 2017). Beyond its link with learning and teaching, ‘assessment carries a more profound social function’ in that it plays a role in ‘how students are shaped and shape themselves’ through the construction of their identity (Nieminen and Yang, 2023, p.1). If what is at stake is not only important considerations such as grades and job prospects but also identity formation, a compassionate approach to assessment is even more critical. Ongoing practices of over-assessment prompt a need for a more compassionate approach to assessment design in order to encourage student confidence and wellbeing. If students are not shown compassion, they will not know how to be compassionate to themselves in the high-stakes academic environment.

Internal programme reviews can shed light on what is working well in assessment and feedback practices, and what could benefit from reconsideration, revision, or even removal. The collection of data from both student and staff stakeholders reveals the views and experiences of those most impacted by current assessment practices. Beyond being sources of data, however, students have the potential to strengthen reviews when incorporated into the review team as change agents or collaborators with a specialist perspective in this learning development partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Collaborating in pursuit of compassionate assessment

As a result of our collaboration on internal programme reviews with academic schools, the two undergraduate student interns developed what they observed to be a ‘newfound sense of belonging within the university community’, which they linked with improving their academic achievements (Besson and Turi, forthcoming). They participated in a variety of activities, from those that were promotional (e.g., a cross-institutional presentation) to those that were procedural (e.g., gathering, analysing, and discussing assessment data). Working closely with their staff colleagues, they developed trust as ideas and perspectives from all involved were welcomed. An outcome of the collaborative approach to the

programme reviews was that the students grew in confidence (assessment for confidence; Meer and Chapman, 2014) and developed their sense of identity (assessment for identity development; Nieminen and Yang, 2023), by analysing and reflecting on assessments both as colleagues within a review team and as students within their own studies and assessment experiences.

Beyond the positive individual outcomes of participating in the review process, there were benefits for the wider student body, both contemporary and future. Among other duties, the interns worked with their staff colleagues to review current assessment and feedback practices and to analyse how assessment information is communicated to students via the University's virtual learning environment. This allowed the interns to shed light on how assessment information designed for students is received by students, and to share and discuss this with their staff colleagues. By working collaboratively, students and staff were able to develop a picture of what was working and what was perhaps not working well within current assessment practices, and to arrive at recommendations for improvements in conjunction with academic colleagues. These recommendations have the potential to be implemented across relevant degree programmes and in some instances informed changes that academic staff made to the assessment structure of their modules (e.g., addressing areas of identified over-assessment).

During their review of the assessment data, the interns identified common issues, such as instances of over-assessment, bunched deadlines, and an absence of formative assessments in favour of summative ones (see Jessop, 2017). However, their insight and involvement in the programme reviews, along with subsequent conversations with their staff colleagues, also led to more nuanced understandings of the student-staff relationship within assessment practices. For example, we found that students often feel that they cannot approach staff (framed frequently by the interns as 'disturbing' or 'bothering' staff) due to the latter's busy schedules. This can be conceptualised as a persisting hierarchy, or a spectrum of the value of workload and time, in which the commitments, time, and availability of some stakeholders (staff) are valued more highly than those of others (students). This was mirrored in the informal comments of some academic staff, who expressed the perspective that a heavy assessment schedule was part and parcel of the student experience, implying that the situation was normal rather than problematic. The need for a compassionate perspective that informs compassionate design of the

assessment cycle within institutional processes is clear. Indicators of such compassionate assessment have been explored elsewhere (Hill et al., 2023).

Scaffolding learning through the inclusion of formative assessments is a marker of good assessment practice, which can be instrumental alongside feedback in empowering students to become 'self-regulated learners' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p.203; see also Sambell et al., 2019, for assessment for learning). Compassionate assessment practices can also encourage self-compassion, whereby students learn, for example, that 'mistakes can be viewed as opportunities for learning and growth rather than as indicators of an individual's lack of worth or limited capabilities' (O'Hara and Preymann, 2024), thus contributing to students' confidence and positive identity formation.

However, alongside the implementation of such compassionate approaches, it is vital that staff provide more space for the student voice and recognise that students also labour under a heavy workload, one often exacerbated by external commitments such as part- or full-time jobs and caring responsibilities. Including students in degree programme reviews as co-creators and co-inquirers, not just data sources, has beneficial outcomes. Using this approach provides a platform for student team members to use their more nuanced knowledge to offer recommendations and emphasise to their staff colleagues the impact and value of a compassionate approach to assessment practices, one that strives to overcome current issues. The inclusion of students as co-creators exposes staff to new ideas and understanding, helping them see the need for refreshed and more compassionate assessment approaches and how they could be implemented. In so doing, student and staff colleagues can work together towards reigniting a joy of learning through an assessment landscape that puts student wellbeing and compassion, alongside the importance of the student voice, at the heart of the process.

Conclusion

Despite calls for a slowing down within higher education, assessment practices continue to be intense for many students and staff, resulting in stress and anxiety (Chapman, 2017). A first step towards challenging the assessment practices that regrettably exist in a fast-paced and high-stakes learning environment is recognising that students labour under heavy workloads, both in and outside their studies. Further, addressing the anxiety that

assessment practices can induce in students is critical, with awareness that the stakes are higher than grade allocation and job prospects. Assessment and feedback experiences directly affect student confidence and even their sense of identity. Consideration of the way in which students could be adversely impacted should be a minimum requirement of a compassionate approach across higher education institutions.

Working with students as curriculum co-creators and not simply as data sources is a step towards designing assessment practices that are characterised by compassion. Students possess more nuanced understanding than staff of the challenges their assessments produce. As data sources, they can inform but not always actively work towards shaping change. As members of a programme review team, students can collaborate with staff colleagues to analyse current practices, identify areas of enhancement, and, therefore, contribute towards positive change. It is only with the involvement of students that compassion can sit front and centre of the higher education assessment landscape.

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