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Measuring up: comparing first year students' and tutors' expectations of assessment

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The Freshman Myth has been used to demonstrate that students frequently enter tertiary education with unrealistically high expectations of various aspects of university life. This research explored the Freshman Myth in relation to assessment and predicted it would be reversed for academic issues, with students' having lower and more negative expectations of assessment than those of their tutors, as communicated via module descriptors, the initial source of information for incoming students. Data were gathered from students during their first class of the module before assessment had been discussed, and through the information and expectations communicated via the module descriptor. Results suggested that student expectations were clearer and more positive than those expressed by their lecturers in many aspects of assessment, including timing and frequency, and range of methods. Module descriptors provided little indication of the standards expected of students or insight into areas in which students were less clear, such as the role of assessment in learning. Information currently available through module descriptors does little to progress student perception of assessment beyond that experienced at secondary level or to prepare students for the academic rigour of their first module in higher education.

Keywords: assessment; first year; expectations; Freshman Myth; module descriptor

Expectations of the first year

Expectations of the first year of university are not fixed or objective. From the lecturers' perspective such expectations generally require students to raise their game, academically speaking and to become independent, critical learners in all aspects of their course (Brinkworth et al. 2009). From the students' perspective such expectations presupposes that they have considered, reflected upon and created some type of schema or understanding of what it means to learn in higher education.

One important area within the first year experience concerns assessment. Most academics now accept that assessment is at the core of learning process (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Ramsden 2003), a major driver for learning (Ben-David 2000; Schwartz and Webb 2002) and a motivating factor that has a major influence on how students learn (Stiggins 2005). For new students, however, their conceptualisation of assessment is unlikely to have developed beyond the methods and techniques that proved successful in their educational careers to date (Ruban and Reis 2006).

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Lost in transition

Students spend 12–14 years learning in a carefully controlled and structured system when they are suddenly faced with the challenge of adjusting to radically different styles of teaching, learning and assessment (Jessen and Elander 2009). Despite evidence to the contrary, it is frequently presumed that they have become autonomous learners with the requisite metacognition to enable them to think about their own learning processes, to rapidly synthesise and utilise knowledge, and to demonstrate the analytical skills expected of them in assessment (Ballinger 2003; Nordell 2009).

This fallacy of a seamless progression from one academic level to the next has increasingly received scrutiny globally (Brinkworth et al. 2009). Krause et al. (2005) reported in Australia that almost two-thirds of first year students did not feel adequately prepared for higher education, with over one-third describing their first semester marks as a ‘reality-shock’, while in America Kirst, Venezia, and Antonio (2004) reported that many new students were not aware of what was expected of them. Pain and Mowl (1996) stated that half of students experienced difficulties with writing essays and three-quarters did not know the criteria that they were being marked against, and others reported that students failed to adapt learning strategies for the higher cognitive demands of higher education (Broekkamp and Van Hout-Wolter 2007).

As a result, many students enter third-level education with unrealistic conceptions of what is expected of them in many aspects of teaching and learning, including assessment (Harrington et al. 2003; Norton, Dickins, and McLaughlin Cook 1996).

Student perspective

At the outset of their third-level career students are still driven by the ideas and methods that achieved secondary-level success (Gibbs and Simpson 2005) and are often academically unprepared for the challenges of third-level education (Thomas 2003). A continuation of such learning and assessment techniques results in minimal class participation during term time (Isaksson 2008) and a strategic approach to examinations that aims to ensure maximum marks with minimal effort (Norton 2007).

Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) state that mechanisms are required to help students integrate and adapt to the rigours of tertiary education, though often students are provided with little or no information about what is expected of them as new university students and of the level at which they are supposed to operate. Prior to entering higher education their main access to assessment expectations are in the form of module descriptors for their course.

Lecturer perspective

Research suggests a degree of frustration on the part of academics when considering the knowledge and expectations of first year students. Students have been accused of failing to grasp the most basic assumptions of assessment, not only in terms of the specifics of the course, but of the role of assessment in general (Collier and Morgan 2008). Stevenson, MacKeogh, and Sander (2006) report that over one-third of tutors were surprised at the expectations of their students, while others have described their failure to master basic expectations as ‘dispiriting’ (Pardoe 2000).

There appears to be an assumption, therefore, that students who have reached this educational level should have a realistic, informed idea of the academic level at which they are expected to perform (Hagan and Macdonald 2000).

Theoretical framework

The Freshman Myth is concerned with the expectations students have of college life and all that this entails before entering into third-level education. The term was first coined by Stern (1966, 1970) who noted that students tended to have unrealistically high expectations of various facets of university life that are subsequently proven to be much more positive than their actual experiences.

The phenomenon has been consistently reported across gender, demographic and socio-economic characteristics, as well as institutional environment (Keup 2007). While it has been applied to a range of areas, these tend to be focused on social, rather than academic issues, such as behaviour and performance (Baker and Schultz 1992a, 1992b); adjustment and commitment to college (Baker, McNeil, and Siryk 1985); student engagement (Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler 1995); levels of adjustment (Gerdes and Mallinckrodt 1994) or classroom experiences (Gigliotti 1987; Koermer and Petelee 1991).

Aims

This study will investigate the Freshman Myth as it pertains to the first year assessment in a leading Irish university. Based on 'academic preparedness' and the assumptions and expectations of their tutors there is a reason to purport that for academic issues the Freshman Myth may be turned on its head. The application of the Freshman Myth to assessment would suggest that students should demonstrate unrealistically high expectations in relation to facets of assessment. However, this study hypothesises that contrary to this and due to the discrepancy between secondary- and tertiary-level education, students will demonstrate lower expectations than those of their tutors towards aspects of assessment.

The six facets of assessment that will be considered in this study are: range of assessment methods; purpose of assessment; timing and frequency of assessment; marking criteria; assessment feedback and strategic approach to assessment.

Method

Sample

The population of interest was first year students at an Irish university before assessment had been discussed in their modules. A sample frame, i.e. a list of every member of the target population from which the sample can be randomly selected, was compiled for each of the university's five colleges (C1–C5), excluding part-time, distance learning and graduate-entry courses. The sample frame included all students, not just a small subsection or discipline, so that the findings would be applicable to the entire student population of the university. Analysis will be conducted to ascertain whether this adversely affected validity.

Three first year modules (commencing in semester 1) were randomly selected from each and the appropriate module coordinators were contacted with details of the study. Of these, eight module coordinators agreed to participate, one each for

colleges C1–C3, two modules for college C4 and three modules for college C5. The participating modules included representations from Law, Economics, Computer Science, Physiotherapy, Neuroscience, Food Science, Engineering and Horticulture. Each module coordinator agreed to permit access to students in the selected module in their first class of the semester and provide a copy of the relevant module descriptor.

A total of 571 questionnaires were completed by first year students within their first week of term. Since the focus of this study was students transitioning directly from secondary to tertiary education, students that indicated they had previously been assessed in post-secondary education were omitted ($n=97$). A total of 474 questionnaires were therefore available for analysis, over half of which (59%) were completed by males.

Data

Data for the study came from two sources: lecturer expectations were investigated through the information conveyed in their module descriptors and student expectations were ascertained by a questionnaire. Module descriptors were selected as a unit of analysis because they are the first means of communicating the lecturer's standards and expectations. While module handbooks, class discussions, tutorials and material produced at school or college level may later convey more detailed information about standards and expectations, the module descriptor remains the first point of contact for the new student and the only detailed source of module-specific information accessible to them before the beginning of the academic term.

Questionnaire construction

The questionnaire had a mixture of open-ended and Likert-type questions. This facilitated the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data: the former providing the basis for statistical analysis and the latter providing an opportunity to explore the perceptions of the first year students' perception of, and attitude to, assessment.

A review of relevant literature led to the formation of six scales for the Likert items, addressing the main areas of: assessment methods; purpose of assessment; timing and frequency; marking criteria; feedback and a strategic approach to assessment. Each scale had a minimum of five items, though the total number of items in the final questionnaire was reduced to 28 following a small pilot study with students who had just completed their first year at university.

Process

Each module coordinator was contacted and informed of the study. In addition to access to their students they provided a module descriptor and agreed not to discuss assessment with the class until the questionnaire had been administered.

To ensure opinions and attitudes were captured from students before assessment was addressed by other lecturers or students, all of the questionnaires were completed and returned on the first day of the selected module, all of which fell within two days of the academic term. The ethical implications of asking lecturers to withhold discussion of assessment, an issue known to drive students' learning, were fully considered. Questionnaires were administered according to a timetable that

enabled distribution and completion during students' first class. This not only permitted lecturers the chance to discuss the module's assessment, but may have had the consequence of enriching any subsequent discussion on the topic by serving as a primer and stimulating their interest in the area.

Results

The aim of this research was to compare student and tutor expectations of assessment in the first year of higher education. Data are analysed in three sections: the first details the statistical analyses conducted on the student questionnaire data; the second contains the discourse analysis on module descriptors and the final section compares the expectations of students and lecturers based on these findings.

Questionnaire data

Scale properties

An exploratory factor analysis conducted on the 474 completed questionnaires, suppressing factor loadings of <0.3 (Stevens 1996), resulted in eight factors. Reliability analyses demonstrated that four of these largely matched the scales originally proposed and (Table 1) exceeded the 0.6 level of acceptability (Hair et al. 1998; Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1991). These four factors formed four scales: timing and frequency of assessment; assessment methods; deep learning through assessment and marking and feedback. The items which did not load on these four scales were excluded from the analysis.

In terms of validity, multivariate analyses of variance did not identify any significant differences on any of the scale scores by college. This suggested that the data could be considered as a homogenous group, and not simply by college or subject, and that inclusion of all subjects rather than specific discipline would not impact on validity.

Timing and frequency of assessment

Mean percentage scores were calculated for each scale based on the maximum total value that could be obtained. The high mean score on the timing and frequency

Table 1. Reliability of scales identified by factor analysis.

Scale	Measures	Items	Alpha
Timing and frequency	Measures attitudes towards the timing and distribution of assessment throughout the year. High values are associated with a preference for continuous, evenly spaced assessment	3	0.7
Assessment methods	Measures attitudes towards diversity of assessment methods, with higher scores representing the desire for a broad range	4	0.6
Deep learning	Measures the students' attitude to assessment in terms of deep or strategic learning. Higher values represent a deeper approach to learning	6	0.6
Marking and feedback	Measures the importance placed on feedback and marking criteria for success in assessments. Higher values equate to greater importance	5	0.6

scale (78.7%, SD= 16.1) suggests that students had a preference for more frequent, continuous assessments.

While deemed to be an integral part of their module by virtually all respondents (98%), there was some disagreement over how often students felt they should be assessed. Based on their experience over half (57%) expected to be assessed only once or twice per module. The majority preferred the option of more coursework and fewer exams (60.3%), smaller and more numerous assignments rather than larger but fewer ones, and for assessment to be evenly spaced through the year (90.1%).

Assessment methods

The mean score of 66.2% (SD=15.0) suggests a general preference for a broad range of assessment methods. A consideration of individual scale items reveals a preference to try new methods of assessment (81.9%), though a considerable proportion (71.5%) reported feeling more secure using methods with which they're already familiar.

Students were presented with a list of methods and asked to identify those they had already used, would like to use and hoped to use in their first year of third-level education. Responses are displayed in Figure 1.

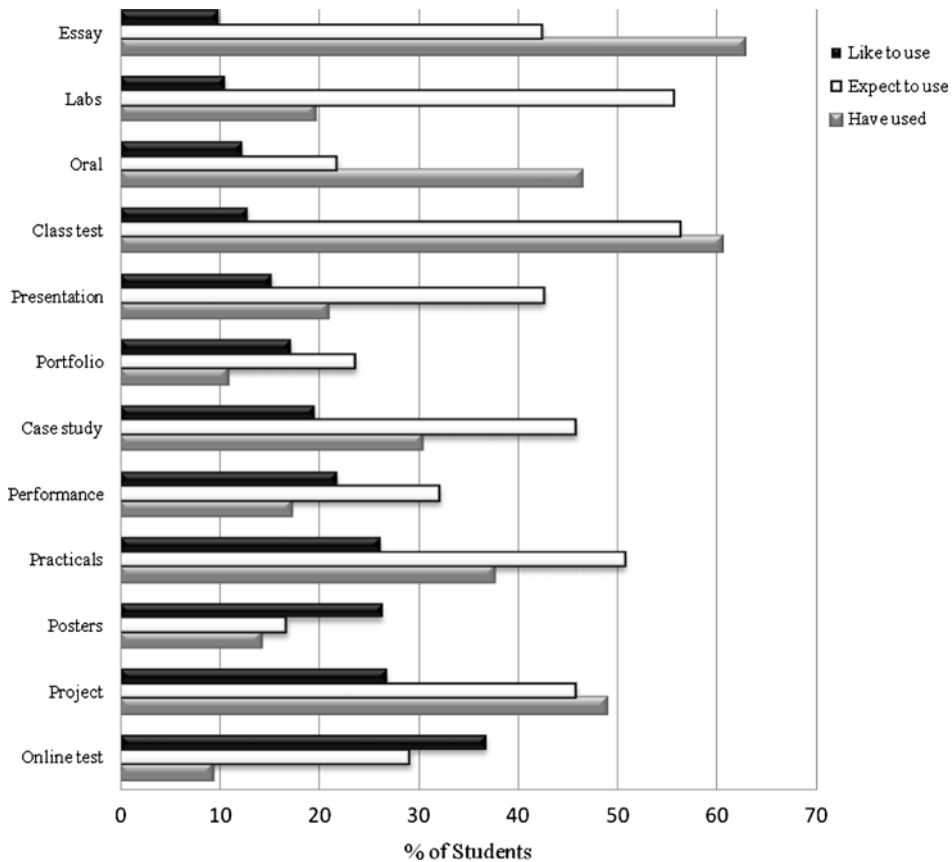


Figure 1. Types of assessment students have used, would like to use and hope to use.

The most common methods experienced by students were an essay (62.7%) or class test (60.4%), while few had experience of portfolios (10.7%) or online methods (9.7%). Class tests (56.3%), essays (42.4%) and labs (55.7%) were expected, but not warmly anticipated by students. Most reported that they were hoping to encounter techniques they had previously not experienced, notably online tests and more engaging methods such as projects, posters and practicals.

Students were asked to identify which assessment methods they considered easiest to do, encouraged most learning, helped achieve highest grades, and which they preferred (see Figure 2).

The data in Figure 2 display a clear pattern of assessment across all four categories, with the class test being the most popular option for each. Essays, practicals

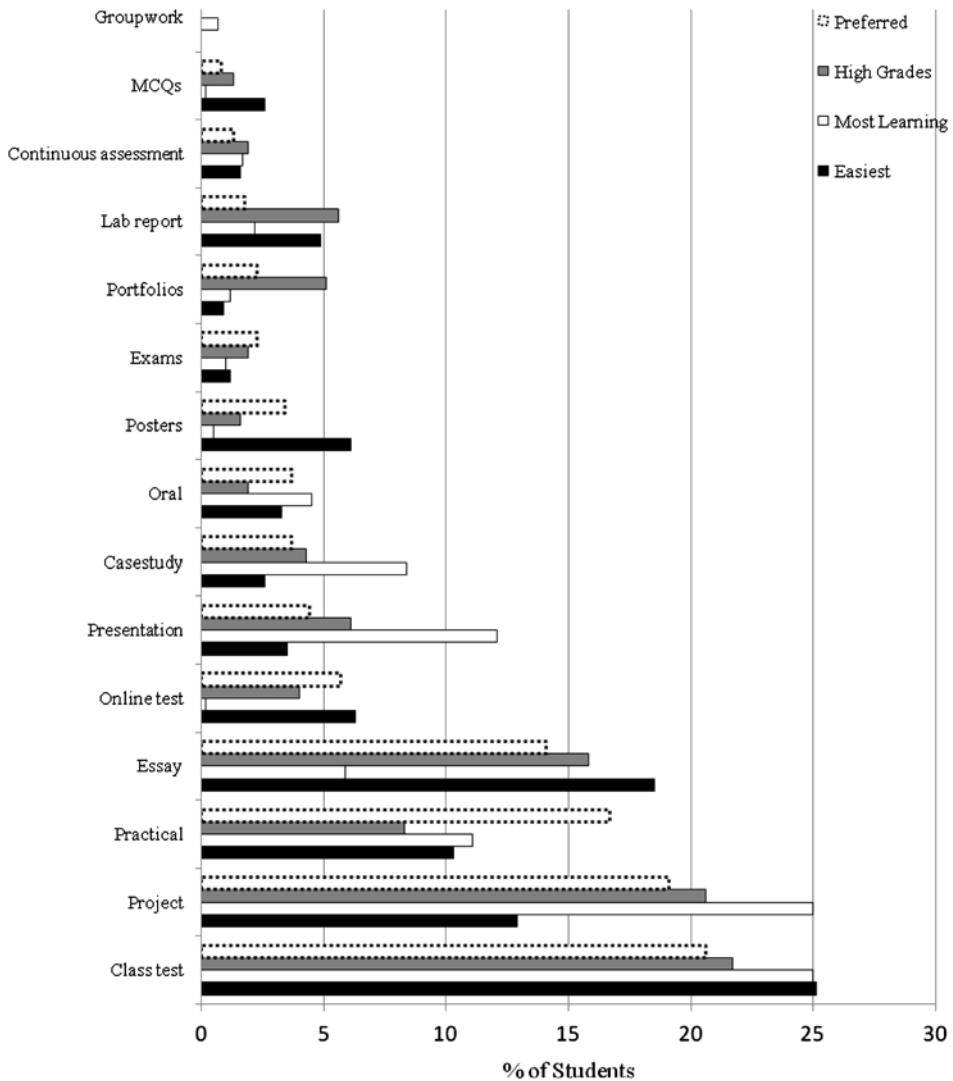


Figure 2. Assessment methods that students find easiest, encourage most learning, permit highest grades and are most preferred.

and projects are similarly popular across the board, with fewer students identifying the less familiar methods as their most preferred, the easiest or the likeliest to facilitate learning or high grades.

Deep learning

The mean student score on the deep learning scale (65.4%, SD = 13.7) suggests that the majority of students were more likely to regard assessment as an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the subject, than simply a strategic opportunity to improve grades.

Closer analysis of the individual scale items assessing a deep or strategic approach; however, suggests that the mean score may be obscuring a less homogenous picture. While most agreed that the lessons learned from one assignment would inform future work (87.4%), a sizeable minority were consistently strategic in their outlook, with 36.2% stating that they should not have to learn material not included on the syllabus, 43.4% reporting that assessment was just a way to secure marks before an exam and three-quarters (74.8%) claiming that assessment was primarily a performance indicator.

Marking and feedback

The high mean percentage score on the marking and feedback scale (77.4%, SD = 12.6) suggests that students are aware of the importance of these procedures. Almost all students (96.8%) agreed that an awareness of the marking criteria would be beneficial and 83% predicted that they would consult relevant criteria when approaching an assignment. Despite these high figures students indicated that they might have difficulty in practically applying these criteria to the assessment process. A large proportion (82.2%) claimed that they had no idea how their assignments would be marked and a further two-thirds (66.4%) stated that they did not know how to find out what was required to pass an assignment.

Virtually all respondents (99%) felt strongly about receiving feedback on their work, preferably written or emailed comments (59%) or during face to face meetings (30.4%) with the lecturer. Most (80.6%) expected to receive feedback on every assignment submitted and considered it a vital part of the assessment process. Contradicting this, students also stated that while it was helpful, the grade was the most important concern (90.2%).

Open-ended items exploring this issue identified feedback as a useful evaluation tool, helping to identify areas of strength or weakness, and found that feedback was beneficial for motivation and guidance, and to enable them to learn from their mistakes.

Role of assessment

Additional items explored students' perceptions of the role of assessment and suggested that there was no clear consensus on the role that assessment would play in higher education. Only a small proportion of students (22.4%) perceived assessment as a means of furthering their understanding, while the rest regarded it as a method of monitoring performance (38.1%), a measure of their knowledge (28.3%) or a test of their ability to store and recall information (11.1%).

The differing roles of assessment were particularly evident when asked about the perceived difference between assessment and exams.

Assignments were considered by most to be a more formative experience, an opportunity to cover new topics and develop understanding and a means of facilitating communication between a student and a lecturer through feedback. It was also regarded as something that would prepare them for their end of term exam, which was considered their 'real' assessment. Exams were seen as having a more summative and less beneficial function, and comments frequently related to demonstrating knowledge, attaining grades or marks towards degree classification or testing memory and recall.

Module descriptor analysis

Module descriptors were examined to explore the messages conveyed to students prior to commencing third-level education, specifically the messages about the standards and expectations related to assessment. These were analysed using discourse analysis, a common method of examining written or spoken text. In this study discourse analysis refers to analysis of the content and language of module descriptors, and how this reveals the underlying ideas and attitudes of the author (Matthews and Ross 2010).

Eight module descriptors were provided: one each for colleges C1–C3; two for college C4 (C4a and C4b) and three for college C5 (C5a, C5b and C5c).

Structure of module descriptors

Seven module descriptors followed the same four-section format: description/introduction; what will I learn and how will I learn and how will I be assessed. While providing a uniform overview the distinct separation of assessment and learning within this structure suggests independence between the two and the positioning of assessment at the end of the descriptor suggests a terminal, and less integral function.

The eighth module (C5c) only included information for two of these sections and excluded any information on assessment. Aside from providing no verification for students' perceived standards or workload, this exclusion suggests an inconsequential role of assessment in learning and may serve to lower students' expectations.

Descriptor part 1: description

Few modules made any reference to assessment in this opening description, suggesting that it is not a major component of teaching or learning. Five heavily emphasised the elementary nature of the modules, frequently using the words 'basic' and 'introduces' or 'introduction'. These tended to list the topics to be covered, providing no indication of what the student would actually be required to do. This suggested that a relatively low level of involvement or engagement was expected in these modules.

Three descriptors used more dynamic language (e.g. 'fast moving', 'exciting' – C5b) and emphasised student involvement in learning ('students will learn' – C5b, 'expected to produce' – C5b, 'enable them to complete project reports – C5a' and 'you will use again and again – C3'). Two of these include references to assessment methods that new students may have less experience of, including a reflective

portfolio and a web-based poster, informing them that they will encounter new methods and approaches to assessment. References in two descriptions to working ‘at a university level’ (C5a) and applying problem-solving techniques in this module and beyond (C3) suggest a level of complexity or challenge absent from other descriptions.

Descriptor part 2: what will I learn?

This portion contains the module’s learning outcomes and the content and language used provides an indication of the cognitive level expected of the students. Language corresponding to more demanding learning (associated with the synthesis, evaluation or analysis levels of Bloom’s cognitive taxonomy) suggests a greater challenge than the lower cognitive domains (knowledge, comprehension or application).

Five of the seven descriptors relied almost exclusively on lower-order verbs in their learning outcomes. In attempting to establish the academic level expected of them the reliance on terms such as ‘have a knowledge of’ (C1), ‘be familiar with’ (C3), ‘explain the significance of ...’ (C4b), ‘describe’ (C5a) or ‘understand’ (C5c) does not suggest an intense or intellectually challenging development form their secondary experiences.

Only two stated that students would be required to analyse, apply learned information to new settings or problems, or construct or synthesis something new based on the material presented, and of these one lowers expectations by stating that they will only be required to construct ‘simple arguments’ (C2). Only one set of learning outcomes (C5b) includes phrases such as ‘in an effective manner’ or ‘well-researched’ to qualify the level expected of them.

In general the language used in the learning outcomes does not convey the level expected of them in third-level education as significantly higher than that expected at secondary level.

Descriptor part 3: how will I learn?

The universal absence of assessment in this section could be interpreted by students as a clear indication of the mutual exclusivity of assessment and learning. The common inclusion of methods such as lectures, tutorials and autonomous learning could be seen to reinforce the idea that learning only occurs in these settings.

Three descriptors (C1, C5a and C5b) also include reference to ‘specified learning activities’. While the inclusion of this term provides students with an indication that they will engage in learning tasks, and lecturers with some flexibility in their interpretation of what these activities may entail, this vagueness does nothing to further student understanding of what is expected of them.

Descriptor part 4: how will I be assessed?

In four of the modules (C1, C2, C4a and C4b) the end of term exam counted for the vast majority of the assessment workload, ranging from 70 to 95%. This breakdown demonstrates a heavy emphasis on the summative function of assessment, suggesting to students that the primary role of assessment in higher education is to test knowledge retention and recall. In this respect, the expectations of their tutors

in higher education may appear no different to those of their teachers in secondary education.

In two modules (C5a and C5b) the final exam accounts for 40% of the overall grade. While the remaining 60% was completed throughout the semester the language used provided little clarity for prospective students as to what this actually entailed. These were described as ‘three written projects’ (C5a) and three ‘take home assignments’ (C3). Neither descriptions hint at the level expected of them nor the precise nature of the methods and the timing for both is described as ‘varies over semester’. While the more balanced distribution of grades suggests a greater developmental role for assessment, the information provided does not clearly communicate any of the expectations that may be held by the tutor, or establish a level to which they should aspire.

The lack of the traditional end of year exam in the final module (C5b) implies from the outset that the assessment procedure is different from that previously experienced at the secondary level. The grade for the module is equally divided between a ‘group based web project’ and a ‘reflective portfolio based on seminars’. Irish students are less likely to have previously encountered these methods or the collaboration and reflection skills suggested by these techniques. Clear information is also included on the timing and frequency of the assessment.

Summary

In some areas students expressed a clear consensus. They stated a preference for more frequent, continuous assessments that were evenly spaced throughout the year; for a broad range of assessment methods; to encounter techniques which they had previously not experienced; and on the whole, a perception that assessment would help them to gain a better understanding of the subject.

The issue of deep vs. surface or strategic learning is where opinion became more divided. While supporting the concept of deep learning, many considered assessment predominantly as a means to monitor their performance or a way to secure marks before an exam. Some believed that they should not have to read anything other than the sources specified in the syllabus, and only a small proportion of students actually identified the main role of assessment as a means of learning.

This confusion over the role of assessment was also evident in attitudes towards feedback and marking criteria. A disturbingly large proportion of students did not link ‘marking criteria’ (considered important by most students) with how their assessment would be marked or how to find out what was required to pass. Almost all expressed a desire for feedback, though a similar proportion stated that the grade was the most important concern.

It is unfortunate, then, that the areas in which student expectations were least clear received no mention in the module descriptor. The schism between assessment and learning in the minds of students is also reinforced by their separation in all of the descriptors, and by the absence of reference to assessment in the ‘How will I learn’ section.

The language in the majority of descriptors also suggested a lack of cognitive challenge, relying on a more basic ‘understand and recall’ approach to learning in which the students were largely passive. Only two descriptors alluded to the higher standards expected in higher education and to the engagement in a higher-order task to develop problem-solving skills.

The student perception of assignments as precursors to the real assessment (i.e. summative end of term exams) was also reinforced. In half of the module descriptors the end of term examinations accounted for between 70 and 95% of the total module grade.

Discussion

Based on suggestions of students' lack of academic preparedness for the transition to tertiary education (Thomas 2003), this research hypothesised that the Freshman Myth would not apply to attitudes towards assessment. Rather than an unrealistically high expectation of assessment requirements and standards it was hypothesised that student expectations would fall below those outlined in module descriptors. While such descriptors are not the only source of information, or indeed, perhaps entirely representative of lecturers' true expectations, they are the only source of module-specific information for students entering higher education for the first time, and therefore the message they convey regarding standards are of paramount importance. Findings from this study, however, suggest that the Freshman Myth does indeed apply to attitudes towards assessment.

Students were much clearer in their expectations of timing and frequency of assessment than lecturers. They expected assessment once or twice per year though preferred more continuous assessment. Lecturers either provided no information on timing or stated that it varied over the semester, giving no clear indication of timing to prospective students. While students expected a move away from the more traditional emphasis on more summative end of term assessment, and to engage in more continuous assessment, most module descriptors stated that the module grade would be predominantly based on the end of term exam. Contrary to expectations, therefore, students had a more progressive, contemporary perspective that exceeded the secondary-based approach with which students were already familiar.

Students identified the class test and essay as the easiest methods of assessment and those most likely to ensure high marks. These two stalwarts of assessment were the approaches students most expected at third-level, as well as being the least anticipated. Students were keen to experiment with newer methods, particularly those involving an online or more practical, hands-on component. For the most part the message expressed through the module descriptors was that little had changed from their secondary assessment experiences. Many lecturers relied heavily on the more traditional techniques, with only a small minority introducing methods that may be considered novel or interesting to students. The image conveyed, on the whole, is that student expectations in relation to assessment range, variety and scope of assessment methods exceeded those expressed by lecturer in their descriptors.

Student attitudes to assessment produced mixed messages at times, for example, in relation to the purpose of assessment, its potential role in learning, and effective use of feedback and marking criteria. This was interpreted as student uncertainty, a range of attitudes representing a lack of cohesive idea of what exactly assessment would be used for and how it would affect their learning. This was in direct contrast to other, more basic aspects of assessment, such as methods, timing and frequency where they demonstrated more certainty. In some respects, therefore, while students' expectations were low, they were not technically lower than those

expressed by lecturers, since there were no clear statements in relation to expectations or standards in third-level assessment in the module descriptors.

Only a minority of lecturers stated or implied the higher level or standards required in tertiary education, and fewer than half expected students to be able to surpass the most basic cognitive functions (based on the specified learning outcomes).

The key finding from this research is that the module descriptor is seriously under-developed as a tool to inform and prepare students for the academic rigour of their first module in higher education. Results from this study suggest that students enter university with clear ideas of the frequency, but confusion in terms of the role and impact of assessment, and in its current incarnation, the module descriptors produced by lecturers do little to clarify matters. Consequently students continue to rely on the learning techniques that brought success at a secondary-level, and fail to perform in the independent and autonomous manner expected of them by their tutors. There are several possible means of redressing this problem. The first would be to revise the structure and content of module descriptors to clarify and emphasise the role of assessment in learning and the cognitive and academic standards expected of third-level students. Alternatively it may be valuable to reconsider the availability of more expansive and explanatory material that students may receive within their first few weeks of a module, such as module handbooks, assessment timetables or marking criteria. One final option would be to attempt to educate and inform students to the level at which academics operate, by providing a succinct overview of contemporary pedagogic best practice in the field of assessment and of the expected role of students within this process.

This study supports research that cites differences in the expectations of students and tutors in their first year (Brinkworth et al. 2009; Jessen and Elander 2009; Smith and Zhang 2009; Yorke and Longden 2008), though posits that it is the tutors and not the students who are to be found wanting. In line with the Freshman Myth students in this sample held many attitudes and expectations about assessment that were more progressive or optimistic than the message communicated in their module descriptors, and further research may determine whether the differences between expectations and reality have an adverse impact on their first year experience, and on their likelihood to return to education after their first semester or their first year.

Limitations of this study

There were two minor limitations with this study. The first was that the small number of modules involved meant that while there was a sufficiently large, representative sample of students, there were only eight module descriptors available for analysis. Also, although every effort was made to capture initial student attitudes to assessment before it was discussed, it is possible that within the two day window those students may have received information from peers or other lecturers.

Notes on contributor

Paul Surgenor is a lecturer in Educational Development at University College Dublin, Ireland. His interests include psychology in education, student evaluation of teaching, and the first year experience.

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