A qualitative insight into time-poor/grade-hungry health studies students’ perceptions of using assessment criteria and feedback in assignment writing.

Abstract
Background: Grade-led study and surface-learning approaches compromise student success at undergraduate level. However, encouraging students to adopt deeper approaches to learning can feel like an endless challenge for staff in the current consumerist university climate. Objective: This study explored undergraduate health studies students’ current use, experiences and perceptions of assessment criteria in relation to their assignment writing and feedback. Design: Using a qualitative research design, data were collected via focus groups with 18 students then analysed using thematic analysis. Results: Findings revealed three key themes: Grades as the driver; The dependent learner; and Time-poor sacrifices. Ultimately, students are primarily motivated by grades and this has been reflected in the way they use assessment criteria and feedback. A general lack of autonomy was evident among students’ attitudes towards assessment criteria and feedback and in the way these resources were utilised. Time restrictions for studying was a fundamental issue raised by this study. Students felt they should be offered greater flexibility with meeting deadlines due to balancing competing demands outside of university life. Conclusion: These findings hope to trigger initiatives that aim to shift time-poor/grade-hungry students’ toward a deeper understanding of what it means to be an effective learner in higher education.

1. Introduction
Modern UK universities habitually attract culturally and academically diverse populations of undergraduate students. A noticeable proportion, who are likely to be entering into UK Higher Education (HE) for the first time, will present with limited academic literacy and appear recurrently disappointed by their low performance; and poor attainment. Unfortunately, this observation is one that it all too commonly observed by academic staff working in UK universities that welcome diversity and promote widening participation (Mountford-Zimdars, Sanders, Moore, Sabri, Jones and Higham, 2017). Moreover, this is not a concern only to UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s),
with reports of a comparable nature seen recently from China (Yu and Liu, 2021); Europe (Arts, Jaspers and Joosten-ten Brinke, 2021) and Australia (Molloy, Boud, and Henderson, 2020). This does leave us, as educators, with the challenge of how we can best support all of our students to reach their optimal level of achievement and success.

One method by which we can attempt to address this inherent concern is by transitioning students away from the typical passive approach to learning that tends to be fostered in schools and Further Education (FE) colleges (Winstone Bretton, 2013), to a deeper, more pro-active approach to learning (Norton, 2009) that we all so often attempt to encourage in HE. Boud and Molloy (2013) proposed that a shift from the passive, to a more responsive student, can be attained through feedback becoming less mechanistic and more constructive. One method that has proved successful in achieving this goal with health psychology students is through discussions between lecturers and students about the meaning of assessment criteria in relation to learning outcomes and feedback (Lusher, 2007). Indeed, strategies aimed at making assessment criteria more explicit and linking these with the subject matter has previously shown to be fruitful at improving student performance on assessment among students from various disciplines (Harrington, Norton, Elander, Lusher, Aiyegbayo, Pitt, Robinson, and Reddy, 2006).

Considering that health studies students are often faced with an array of competing demands, including shift work in the, challenged, health and social care sector whilst simultaneously caring for families, it is key that the academic skills needs are met for these often over-stretched students (Mills, Ryden and Knight, 2020). Nevertheless, it became evident that widening participation has meant that we should be offering and exploring more practical support opportunities for students generally, to develop their confidence and autonomy through the encouragement of a more hands-on approach to academic skills practice (Norton, Harrington, Elander, Sinfield, Lusher, Reddy, Aiyegbayo, and Pitt, 2005). Most recent literature concedes that students who experience difficulties with studying at HE level also struggle with using feedback effectively and therefore more guidance is necessary for
educators; particularly in an environment where more responsibility is shifting to the student (Pitt, Bearman and Estherhazy, 2019).

2. Aim
On this premise, the present study aimed to appreciate undergraduate health studies students’ current use, experiences and perceptions of assessment criteria in relation to their assignment writing and assessment feedback using a rich and exploratory approach to apprehend the student voice.

3. Method
3.1 Participants
Participants were 18 undergraduate students enrolled on a Level 9/10 Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) Professional Health Studies (PHS) programme at the University of the West of Scotland’s London campus, UK. The PHS programme utilises a range of written assessment methods within each module, from essays to online discussions. Assessment criteria for each module tend to be organised in a grid format that maps the SCQF descriptors. The cohort was purposively sampled as teaching staff became aware of issues regarding the academic literacy of students enrolled on this course. The majority (72%) were female, mature students (median age 50 years; range 22-66 years) from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (95%; 5% Eastern European).

3.2 Materials
A list of semi-structured, open-ended questions were compiled to focus discussions and to offer standardisation across the sessions. Following obtained signed consent, general welcome and icebreakers, the facilitator posed the following 8 questions during the focus groups: 1) How do you feel about assessment? 2) How do you feel about coursework assignment writing? 3) In your opinion, what makes a good assignment? 4) Are you familiar with assessment criteria? 5) In your view, how do assessment criteria relate to the topic? 6) In your experience, how do assessment criteria relate to
feedback on assignments? 7) What is your experience of assessment feedback? 8) Is there anything else you think we should be discussing about assessment feedback?

3.3 Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of the West of Scotland, School of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee (reference ID: 7815). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants immediately prior to the focus group and included permission for the audio recording of data. Due to the conversational nature of the focus group, withdrawal after data collection was not permitted but participants were made aware that they could leave the focus group at any time.

3.4 Procedure

Participants were initially contacted via email and invited to take part in a focus group to discuss their experiences of assessment and feedback. Lunch was provided during the focus groups as a small incentive for taking part. Two focus groups were conducted during the first quarter of 2020 and prior to COVID-19 UK national lockdown. The first focus group consisted of 11 participants and recording lasted approximately 32 minutes; the second contained 7 participants and the recording lasted around 34 minutes. Both focus groups were conducted on the university campus and took place at lunchtime between timetabled sessions. After obtaining written informed consent, the facilitator (JL) used a semi-structured approach to gather qualitative data regarding participants’ experiences of assessment, and their use assessment criteria and feedback. In addition to pre-specified questions, the facilitator prompted participants to expand upon any relevant responses. All participants were verbally debriefed. Data were audio-recorded using an Olympus VN-732PC digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.5 Data analysis
The initial analysis was carried out by HC using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Audio data were first transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy against the original audio files. Familiarisation with the data was achieved through re-reading of the transcripts, during which, ideas for initial codes were noted. All data were then subjected to initial coding using an inductive approach. Candidate themes were identified by searching for patterns among these initial codes with TA focused discussions subsequently being held between HC and JL. Once agreements regarding the candidate themes were reached, they were refined by revisiting all of the coded extracts within each theme and determining whether they were consistent with that theme. Then, re-reading the entire dataset to check for any data which may have been missed earlier in the analytical process. Finally, the themes were defined and named by JL for the purposes of this manuscript.

In order to ensure trustworthiness; and to minimise risk of bias whilst maximising the credibility of findings, data collection, coding and analysis were decided based on applying relevant criteria from the COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative (COREQ) research (Tong, Sainsbury and Craig, 2007) checklist. Stringent approaches were maintained to ensure validity and rigour of the findings (Morse, 2015; Twinn, 2000). Safeguards included using an established coding frame and independent review of emergent themes.

4. Results

As summarised in Table 1, three core themes emerged though the thematic analysis.

Insert table 1 about here

4.1 Grades as the driver
Students appeared primarily motivated by the grades that they wished to achieve and this was reflected in the ways in which they used the assessment criteria and feedback. Perceptions towards the assessment criteria were generally positive, despite many students admitting that they did not consult these before beginning an assignment. Some students felt that understanding of the assessment criteria is essential to understanding what is required to achieve a target grade, although these target grades would differ according to the individual student and assignment:

“...there needs to be an understanding of what the assessment criteria is, because if you don’t understand the criteria of the assignment that is when things go wrong and then you start getting low marks and you keep getting bad feedbacks or you keep trying to redo your assignment but when you follow the criteria and you understand what you really have to do to get a good mark then you’ll be on track...”

Feedback was highly valued and appears to be more widely used than the assessment criteria, but was discussed predominantly in relation to formative feedback provided before the final submission. Students made very little reference to the use of summative feedback, although it was seen as a way of determining if one was on track to achieve a target grade. Formative feedback was viewed as a means of preventing failure or improving the final mark:

“...I personally think that feedback is very, very good, feedback helps somebody not to fail...”

“...feedback lets you know if you’re on the right track or not, so it’s a chance to let you know if you’re on the right track or if you’re not on the right track...”

Despite being highly motivated by their performance however, when questioned about what makes a ‘good’ assignment, most students failed to demonstrate an understanding of what is required to achieve higher grades. Most students focused on the technical aspects of assessment, such as using the correct referencing style, appropriate grammar and language, and adhering to the word count. There was an understanding that the purpose of assessment is to demonstrate learning, but some students appeared to believe that this could be sufficiently achieved by simply restating information:
“One thing that makes a good assignment is paraphrasing, if let’s for say example we are able to paraphrase, if we pick the information and then look for the meaning of the words and then change them, it makes the assignment turn out good”

While there was an awareness that students should conduct additional research and identify sources other than those provided by the lecturer, this primarily related to concerns around high similarity scores rather than to demonstrating a broader understanding of the topic:

“...if everyone’s using the same author, using the same author and reference every time there’s bound to be a similarity at the end of the day...”

Although some students did refer to aspects of assessment which relate to critical analysis, such as providing examples or requiring a conclusion, only one student explicitly mentioned evaluation.

4.2 The dependent learner – lack of autonomy - following instructions

Students appeared to have a general lack of autonomy. This became evident by students’ attitudes towards assessment criteria and feedback and in the way these resources were used. Students agreed that the assessment criteria were useful and there was a clear awareness that they were available via Moodle, the online learning platform:

“Everything is in the system, so all we have to [do is] focus and look, take your time and look one by one...”

“If you go to the Moodle [VLE] it’s all there for you to read and follow what the criteria is, assessment criteria”

However, actual use of the assessment criteria was variable among students, with some admitting failure to consult the assessment criteria when undertaking an assignment:

“...you follow all the criteria that is put there for you to read because if you don’t read it then you won’t understand what you have to do, so the best thing is for you to follow all the guidelines...”
“One of the lecturers gives us a printout copy that we can see and the other lecturer we don’t get it in our hand so sometimes we’re a bit, what do you call it, like lazy or something to go and look, that is the problem, so if we have it in our hand…”

Variation in levels of student autonomy was also evident by their understanding and use of feedback. The majority of students appeared to seek formative feedback from lecturers and for the most part this feedback was highly valued. It was also apparent that most students intended to use this formative feedback and felt that it helped them to improve their grades:

“…you get the teacher’s feedback then where are you supposed to go wrong? The teacher’s giving you what you are supposed to do, the teacher has actually talked you through what you’re supposed to do then, and then you’re able to follow exactly what the teacher says, then you’re going pass…”

However, students also suggested that lecturers could be doing more to support their students. Some desired feedback that was more explicit in nature whereas others desired the opportunity for more face-to-face and in-depth one-to-one discussions with lecturers regarding their assignment:

“…mostly feedback that we get is online but I think it would be good to do one-to-one, face-to-face because it’s good when your teacher is there telling you what to do, instead of writing and sending you to the online, or email, do this do that, but when you are there with them you can choose... I think it’s a good way instead of just writing on your assignment…”

4.3 Time-poor sacrifices ~ Digital (il)literacy – External distractions

Time was a controversial issue raised by many students. Several felt they should be given more time to complete assignments and that greater flexibility in deadlines was required. Perhaps reflecting that this cohort consists almost exclusively of mature students, of which many found it difficult to find a balance between their personal lives and studies. It was apparent that students felt these factors were not taken into consideration by those setting the assignment:
“There should be room for extension, you know extension to, to submit your assignment, not when they say, ‘OK this particular day for the deadline, no more, no more extension.’ A lot of people you know, they are busy sometimes, busy, plenty can happen, plenty can happen, just like what happened last time, just like what happened last week, last week the internet was down…I couldn’t meet it because of the, because the internet was down so there should be room for extension”

Use of assessment criteria and feedback was often dependent on whether the student perceived they had sufficient time to use these resources effectively. Navigating the VLE was commonly voiced as a barrier to accessing assessment criteria, as some students found this difficult and time consuming:

“…Getting into Moodle [struggles with the most] because they’re [tutors] saying it’s in the Moodle, go there and get your information there… so sometimes we struggle with opening the Moodle and things like that, so we have to find time to access materials…”

Students felt that lecturers would return coursework with suggested amendments that could not realistically be completed by the deadline. In these instances, it appeared that some students elected to simply submit the assessment without making any amendments.

“…my feedback I had, it was to restart a new topic, which was so difficult for me, it is good feedback but at the time that you sent it I can’t really do a new topic, I think when it comes to feedback you look at the time as well, I think they [lecturers] need to understand us as well, when you say to someone to restart, do a new topic, you need to look at the time, I have only two days and you want me to restart a new topic, how can I do it? For me because of time I’m just going to send my work like that because I don’t want to have that pressure…”

5. Discussion

An overarching and dominant principal that came through from this study was that students perceive the learning experience on a qualitatively different level to what staff might intend. The aim of this study was to more fully appreciate undergraduate university students’ use, experiences and perceptions of assessment criteria in relation to their assignment writing and assessment feedback.
However, the present findings revealed that students view these pedagogical attributes on a more practical and less conjectural basis than we might think. To unpack this reflection in greater depth, the first core theme that emerged through the data, ‘grades as the driver’ demonstrates that, for these health studies students, the conceptual relationship between assessment criteria, academic writing and feedback is inconsiderable when the focus for the student is to use these resources merely as a means to an ends (i.e. to achieve a high grade).

This issue of attempting to shift students’ attention from grades to learning (for the sake of learning) within the context of using feedback, is not a new one. Ali, Ahmed and Rose (2018) confirmed that as students move closer to achieving their award, they become more focused on attainment and less concerned with learning. Moreover, perception and engagement become less positive as students’ progress through their degree. With reference to this premise on data reported here, students in the present study were in the early years of their degree programme so should, theoretically, have displayed a deeper approach to learning (i.e. seeking understanding and meaning; active engagement and learning strategies; relating ideas). We failed to detect this attitude among students in the current study, which could partly be explained by the competing work and caring pressures that many health, nursing and social care students’ face (Timmins, Corroon, Byrne and Mooney, 2011; Hughes, Kenmir, Innis, O’Connell and Henry, 2020) taking precedence over learning. Therefore, as year of study has been shown to significantly predict students’ perceptions and engagement with feedback (Ali, Rose and Ahmed, 2015), year-specific strategies to encourage deeper levels of engagement with feedback should be further explored across subject groups.

Furthermore, the evident surface approach to learning that became apparent from the present data was magnified by the second emerged theme of ‘the dependent learner’ that illustrates a global lack of autonomy present among students. Health studies students voiced their mission to follow instructions in order to make the grade; as opposed to thinking for themselves by engaging with the constructive feedback being offered or indeed, by making links with the assessment criteria using independent critical thought and reflection. This issue is unlikely to be discrete to this particular sample of health
studies students in the UK, but expected to generalise to the wider student populace. In fact, it has been revealed among biology students (Esterhazy, Nerland and Damsa, 2019) supporting this conjecture, whereby case studies have described how students were expected to organise their own work and hold responsibility for both meeting submission deadlines to receive written feedback and booking appointments for feedback from tutors. Indeed, students in the present study voiced their appreciation of face to face feedback from tutors. Therefore making students accountable for ensuring that this happens may prove an indirect incentive for encouraging greater autonomy in learning.

This matter of autonomy, could also be motivated by additional challenges faced by students in today’s consumerist and diverse education setting, such as time constraints that can be further exacerbated by competing external pressures. As illustrated by the final theme that emerged from our data, students appear representative of our present-day students in modern UK universities, in that a key barrier to their engagement with assessment criteria and feedback in relation to their academic writing results from a chronic lack of time that is further compounded by poor academic and digital literacy skills; and commonly reported within the academic literature (Brown, Murphy, and Nanny, 2003; Eshet-Alkalai and Chajut, 2010).

This concern is not limited to UK HEI’s, in fact, university students across the globe are now experiencing multiple increasing demands on their time management, self-motivation and digital literacy skills due to the sudden shift in teaching practice and the learning environment, which has been prompted by the COVID-19 Pandemic (Almossa, 2021; Rajhans, Memon, Patil and Goyal, 2020; Sahu, 2020). Lockdowns and restrictions are not only impacting on how HEI’s operate, but they have also had a significant and detrimental influence on the mental health and wellbeing of university students worldwide (Sahu, 2020) and this further impedes learning (Chandasiri, 2020). It is therefore more important than ever that future research considers the whole student within the context of their past and current circumstances and surroundings; in order to gain a comprehensive explanation of academic matters of interest to the pedagogical researcher.
Overall, the implications of these findings are such that, us, as HE educators, might need to take a step out of our pedagogically-informed perceptions of how we think students should be engaging with feedback and assessment criteria to inform their assignment writing and instead, we go back-to-basics. This could be achieved by implementing initiatives that deal directly with step-by-step and hands-on skills and practical support in digital literacy prior to the introduction of any deeper academic skills training. This is especially relevant considering the firm basis in digital fluency is required in today’s atmosphere.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings from this study highlight a mismatch between students’ and tutors’ perceptions surrounding the uses of assessment criteria and feedback, with students placing less importance on these learning aids, particularly during times of adversity. Key lessons learned from this study are therefore, as educators, we must continue to explore best approaches at ensuring our students are able to cope with the basic challenges of academic life before a more profound level of pedagogy can perhaps be digested or exploited. In terms of catering for students with multiple competing external commitments (Mills, et al., 2020), future programmes should be designed with flexibility in mind, whereby summative assessment might be project/portfolio-based with minimal mid-term deadlines. Ultimately, if universities across the globe are going to continue to welcome diversity and promote widening participation, then there remains the responsibility to offer a level of support that can meet students at the point in which they arrive at university. We anticipate that this discussion might prompt other academics who share these challenges with their students both within and out-with the UK to evaluate current needs and to develop practical initiatives that are capable of shifting time-poor/grade-hungry students’ toward a deeper understanding of what it means to be an effective learner in Higher Education.

References


