Academic and student perceptions of assessment

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Background. The assessment environment significantly affects the learning environment of students, determining the quantity and quality of student learning. An important factor of this environment is the quantity and quality of feedback received by students. Data from Australia and other countries (USA and UK) have consistently reported student dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive during their undergraduate studies.

The Biomedical Science degree at Monash University recently became a direct pathway for entry to graduate medicine. This has had an effect on course assessments with students becoming more strategic, focusing on assessment instead of learning and challenging staff regarding marks. The situation has strained the student-staff relationship, causing us to ask "what type of assessment/feedback environment are students experiencing in the Biomedical Science program" and "is there an alignment of student and staff conceptions of assessment".

Aims. The aim of this research was to i) explore final year Biomedical science students' experiences of assessment and feedback across their whole degree and to ii) evaluate whether there is a mismatch in staff and students' conceptions of assessment with the intention to use the data as a basis for improving staff-student relations and for assessment/feedback reform.

Design and methods. Two questionnaires were administered to final year Biomedical Science students *via* SurveyMonkey. An Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ, Gibbs & Simpson, 2004) contained 27 closed and 6 open-ended questions relating to assessment and feedback experiences within the whole degree program. The Conceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (CoA, Brown, 2011) consisted of 27 items and was also administered to academic staff. Quantitative responses were analysed using SPSS. A Mann-Whitney U Test was used to determine significant differences between staff and students responses. Thematic analysis was used to group open-ended responses into broad themes.

Results. *Assessment Experience:* The closed questions from the AEQ formed 9 categories; i) quantity of effort, ii) coverage of syllabus, iii) quantity of feedback, iv) use of feedback, v) appropriate assessment, vi) clear goals and standards, vii) surface approaches, viii) deep approaches and ix) learning from exams. The AEQ was completed by 189 students. Students gave the highest ratings to "quantity of effort" (3.81/5) indicating that consistent work was required of them across the whole degree. Lowest rating was given to "clear goals and standards" (2.44/5) where only 42% of students agreed that they knew what was expected of them. An average of 46% of students agreed that they received hardly any feedback and that feedback came too late to be useful. Surprisingly 67% of students stated that they learnt from exam preparation.

Five major themes with sub themes emerged from the qualitative data. Themes included: amount and timing of assessment (too many assessments falling due at the same time), quality of assessment (good quality, more guidance wanted, relevance to course content), quantity and timing of feedback (too little too late) and the quality of feedback (more detail wanted).

Conceptions of Assessment: The response rate for the CoA for staff (n=18) was 55.5% and for students (n=92) was 69.6%. Students gave a significantly higher rating than staff to all items on the survey that related to assessment as an indicator of institutional quality (2.92/4.0 *versus* 2.27/4.0, $P<0.003$). Students also gave a higher rating to the item "assessment is assigning a grade to student work" (3.25/4.0 *versus* 2.72/4.0, $P<0.021$). Staff and students were in agreement with the role of assessment in ranking students and determining if a student has met qualification standards. Students and staff conceptions were also similar for items relating to the integrity of assessment. There was a significant difference in the views regarding the use of assessment in modifying ongoing teaching practices. Fewer students agreed that ongoing teaching was modified by assessment information (2.75/4 and 3.18/4, $P<0.040$) and more students agreed with the statements that "Assessment is unfair to students" (2.06/4 and 1.64/4, $P<0.017$), and that "Lecturers should take into account the errors and imprecision in all assessments" (3.20/4 and 2.82/4, $P<0.013$).

Conclusions. This pilot study provided a snapshot of final year Biomedical Science students' experiences with assessment and feedback. The AEQ results illustrate a need for academics to i) better communicate to students the goals and standards expected of them and to ii) improve the quantity and timing of feedback provided. These findings were supported by the qualitative data obtained from the written comments on the AEQ. An unexpected finding of the study was the positive rating given by students for their learning from examination preparation.

There was general alignment of students and staff with respect to their conceptions of assessment (CoA). Areas of discrepancy related to the use of assessment as an indicator of institutional quality and its use to

modify ongoing teaching. Further differences were seen where students did not think that assessment information impacted on teaching or modified ongoing teaching practices. This data indicates a need for staff to better articulate to students the use they make of assessment in shaping teaching practices.

Another area of discrepancy included items associated with the fairness and accuracy of assessment. Data from these items contrasts that given by students on the trustworthiness, consistency and dependability of assessment results. Further research is needed to clarify this aspect. The data presented here is a pilot study and further quantitative and qualitative data from students across the degree program is currently being gathered.

The results of this study may be used to inform assessment practices in higher education. The findings provide guidance for initiatives and improvements in assessment practice to meet the needs of students. Further research involving a broader sampling across multiple degree programs would help to identify and confirm positive and negative emerging trends in higher education assessment and feedback.

Brown GTL. (2011) Self-regulation of assessment beliefs and attitudes: a review of the Students' Conceptions of Assessment inventory. *Educational Psychology* **31(6)**: 731-748.

Gibbs G & Simpson C. (2004) Conditions under which assessment supports student learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* **1**: 3-31.