



## STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

### A Curriculum Design Collaboration

#### Evaluating Assessment for Learning in Introduction to Academic Practice

**College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Student Partners:**

- Courtney-Alex Lieberman - (Foundation student – Life Sciences)
- Irum Bhola - (Foundation student – Life Sciences)
- Anisa Ibrahim - (Foundation student – Life Sciences)
- Jedeane Gayle-Walters - (Foundation student – Social Sciences)
- Claire Webb - (Foundation student – Social Sciences)

**CETI Academic Partners (Foundation):**

- Venetia Tzanni – Module Leader for Introduction to Academic Practice, Foundation Lecturer (Social Sciences & Humanities)
- Moonisah Usman – Foundation Lecturer (Life Sciences)
- Ugo Obibuaku – Foundation Lecturer (Law)

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## 1. Where did the inspiration to do the project come from?

The strong relationship between assessment and learning has long been acknowledged in educational literature (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carless, 2007; Sambell et al., 2012). Assessment in higher education, aside from assessing student progress, can be a rich source of learning opportunities encouraging further development. Several techniques contributing to making assessment meaningful for learning have been implemented in Introduction to Academic Practice in 2020-2021, based on Careless' (2007) learning-oriented assessment framework. These techniques, following Carless' (2007) model, were relevant to promoting the role of assessment tasks as learning tasks, facilitating the role of feedback as feedforward and involving students in the assessment process.

The purpose of our project was to evaluate the effectiveness of these techniques and seek ways to strengthen the role of assessment in the learning process. Given that assessment for learning is closely associated with students' and tutors' understanding of experiences of assessment (Carless, 2007), we decided that reviewing our assessment for learning practices should take into account not only the markers-tutors' perspectives but also the students'. For that reason, we formed a team of lecturers from the CETI and foundation students from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, who believe that enhancing the role of assessment as a learning tool will ultimately have a positive impact on learning, create stronger links between assessment and learning and improve student experience. The team members worked in partnership to evaluate the impact of certain assessment practices used in Introduction to Academic Practice on student learning.

## 2. What did you set out to achieve?

Working in partnership enabled us to collect valuable data on the impact of the IAP CW1 (Portfolio) assessment strategies on student learning. To facilitate the process of data collection and analysis, we grouped these strategies under three categories:

- a. assessment rubric and feedback;
- b. learning resources and deadlines;
- c. task requirements.

A summary of our main findings in relation to each of the three categories above is presented in the following paragraphs.

## **2.1. Assessment rubric and feedback**

Concerning the assessment rubric and feedback used in the Introduction to Academic Practice portfolio, we found that these were generally perceived as effective by the students who participated in our study. More specifically, the level of detail in our rubric was helpful and, in our focus group, its use as a self-assessment tool was reported; this is quite promising, as rubrics have been reported to enhance learning when facilitating self-regulated learning (Jönsson & Panadero, 2017). Despite that, it seems that our student participants had difficulty distinguishing between 'excellent' and 'outstanding' performance based on the rubric descriptors, which can be addressed through the use of exemplars in future. What was also interesting was that our students seem to need more training on how to use our Turnitin rubrics; even though these were reported as useful, several students seem to have had difficulty accessing their feedback through Turnitin.

Our student participants also reported that the feedback they received was generally effective, especially in terms of clarity and specificity. Furthermore, based on data from our focus group, bubble feedback comments were appreciated. These findings are consistent with literature showing that students find detailed feedback effective (e.g. Dawson et al., 2019) and publications on features of effective feedback (e.g. Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006). It also seems that feedback given on IAP CW1 tasks was used to improve performance in other assessment tasks, both in IAP and in other modules; feedback on referencing was highlighted as especially useful for other tasks. This is in agreement with QAA recommendations suggesting that feedback should enable students to understand how to improve performance in future tasks (QAA, 2018). Another interesting finding was that praise, while appreciated, was not considered to be a valuable form of feedback; this is consistent with findings by Zhang and Zheng (2018). It seems that our students value constructive criticism as an opportunity to understand weaknesses and improve future performance, which we will consider in our future feedback provision.

## **2.2. Learning resources and deadlines**

In Introduction to Academic Practice, our students can submit some of their tasks by an early submission deadline (with no resubmission allowed). Both of our early and final deadlines were perceived as useful in general; students showed an appreciation towards early submission deadlines, as they felt that they helped them with time and stress management while, at the same time, allowed them to receive feedback early and use it in other tasks. This is consistent with Boud & Molloy's (2013)

report that students need to have opportunities to put feedback into practice; this completes the 'feedback loop' and ensures that processes of self-regulation are complete.

Furthermore, we found that the task exemplars shared with students before the deadlines were useful for them, as they helped with gaining a better understanding of the structure of academic texts. Student participants also reported that they used these examples in other modules, too; this finding is promising as it implies that these examples helped students understand how texts in their discipline function (Handley and Williams, 2011). In addition to that, content covered in the classes provided further opportunities to practice useful academic skills, through feedback; this is consistent with literature highlighting the importance of feedback for learning in formative exercises (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1998). Furthermore, our participants commented on the importance of feedback presence in both summative and formative assessment, which underlines the role of feedback in making assessment meaningful for learning.

Another strategy that was evaluated in our study was the use of an independent study checklist created for our students, offering them suggestions for independent study each week and ensuring that assessment tasks would be completed on time. It seems that few of the students who participated in the focus group used it and a reason reported is that they felt there was no 'push' for it. This finding is quite interesting, as it implies that students may invest time studying independently when they feel that something is compulsory or required. On top of that, another observation was that our students seem to think that independent study is equivalent to spending time for assessment completion. In future, we will take further steps to promote the use of the self-study checklist and we will take further steps to ensure that our assessment offers maximum opportunities for skills practice.

### **2.3. Task requirements**

Another promising finding was that the CW1 (Portfolio) tasks were perceived as not too easy not too hard by our student participants. The most challenging aspects were referencing and academic writing style, however, as raised in our focus group, it seems that when support was available this made the tasks manageable. We believe that task difficulty has an impact on student motivation to engage with assessment, therefore, we will continue offering additional support to our students in understanding and completing their assessment tasks.

Furthermore, the approach we had taken when designing the portfolio tasks was developmental, meaning that earlier tasks required skills that students would need to work on to use in the next tasks. This seems to have worked in practice based on our findings; in addition to that, skills practiced through the IAP CW1 (Portfolio) assessment (e.g. referencing) were reported to have been transferred to other modules, too. On top of that, skills covered in IAP assessment were generally considered important or very important by our participants. An interesting observation was that the least important skill for our student participants was setting goals for further learning; more emphasis on the value of setting goals for further learning in the reflective task of IAP CW1 may encourage students to appreciate the value of that skill.

### 3. [How did students and staff work together on this project?](#)

We used several strategies to work together on this project.

We met regularly online at pre-agreed times and, after each meeting, a follow-up email would be sent around, summarizing the points covered and outlining the tasks that needed to be completed before the next meeting. During meetings, apart from engaging in fruitful discussions on issues relevant to our project, we also used the time to identify tasks that we needed to complete before our next meeting and assigned these tasks to specific members of our team. This helped us to stay organized, and the subtle reminders of the deadlines sent around helped us to manage our time more efficiently.

Given the social distancing restrictions that were in place during the pandemic, we worked on this project remotely. Apart from using BB Collaborate for our meetings, we worked on brainstorming, researching, planning our project and analysing our findings through shared documents. These included documents we worked on collaboratively through a shared folder as well as Padlet. Furthermore, we decided that it would be beneficial for our project if the student partners managed the focus group session. For that reason, apart from working together to prepare relevant questions and ensuring that the process would run smoothly, the student participants set up a WhatsApp group chat to discuss and consolidate the plans for the session, which was a great way of keeping in direct contact with our peers during the days leading up to our focus group session.

### 4. [What kind of impact do you anticipate that your work may have on learning and teaching going forward \(specific to your course/module or in a broader context\)?](#)

Our work in this project is invaluable in strengthening the learning character of assessment in Introduction to Academic Practice, supporting student learning, and ultimately improving student experience at the foundation level. More specifically, we will use or have already used our findings to make changes and improvements to the CW1 (Portfolio) assessment of the module Introduction to Academic Practice. For example, following findings from our project, we modified Task 3 for next year, aiming to enhance its reflective character and encourage students to use their experiences to set goals for future learning. Furthermore, we made some amendments to our 2021-2022 blackboard sites to promote training content on accessing and using Turnitin feedback and the independent study checklist while we intend to introduce in-class content covering these areas, too.

On top of that, considering the fruitful discussions and experiences from working in partnership with students, we are hoping to be involved in further partnership projects in future, as we believe that students are partners in developing, supporting and transforming learning experiences.

Finally, our promising findings on the effectiveness of the assessment strategies we used in IAP CW1 (Portfolio) in 2020-2021 encourage us to recommend using similar techniques in other modules, too, to strengthen the learning character of assessment across the university.

#### 5. [Any lessons learned from working in partnership?](#)

Working in partnership was an invaluable experience for both students and lecturers who took part in this project. By sharing and developing ideas together, students and tutors were engaged in fruitful discussions on the effectiveness of our assessment practices. As a result of that, we gained a better understanding of the effectiveness of our current assessment practices which helped us identify ways of not only improving them but also strengthening the role of assessment as a learning tool.

More specifically, from a lecturer's perspective, we enjoyed working closely with our students and we appreciated the meaningful contributions they made to this project. Working together helped us approach our assessment and teaching practices from perspectives that enriched our understanding of the multiple aspects of our role as lecturers at the foundation level, and ultimately equipped us with invaluable tools to support our future students in improving their academic performance and learning experience. Furthermore, our student partners greatly supported this project by taking an active role in distributing our questionnaire and leading our focus group discussion; the IAP co-creators team feel that this encouraged our research participants to be more active and keener to share

their honest views in a relaxed and familiar environment, which certainly encourages us to work more closely with our students in future research projects.

From a student's perspective, working in partnership has taught us the significance of respecting others' viewpoints while still upholding the principles that we set out to maintain as a team. It has also given us more confidence as we were able to give a presentation and lead a focus group. We were able to establish a good set of communication skills by expressing the goals of our project to an audience. The focus group gave us the opportunity to lead the discussion among our peers and get their honest feedback on the IAP course. This helped us improve our leadership skills, and the data gained from that focus group was vital in establishing the research project's outcome. Furthermore, working with academics who have the experience and skills to contribute to the project has also been invaluable. Collaborating with them has given us a better understanding of the relevance of the IAP course and the effort that instructors devote to improving their students' learning quality. We gained an appreciation for the research process and the numerous aspects that make up a research project, from gathering raw data to defining the project's key objectives. By harnessing each of our strengths and contributing it to the research project, we were able to overcome the barrier of working remotely and commit our time to complete this project throughout the summer break. It was an eye-opening and rewarding experience that will undoubtedly benefit us in our future studies and university work.

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