



STUDENTS AS  
CO-CREATORS

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER 

**EDI and  
Authentic  
Assessments:  
how truly  
authentic are  
we?**



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# 1. Executive summary

As the University's Education Strategy 2020-2023 now focuses on adopting authenticity in their approach to assessment as a team, we thought it was time to reflect on the My Graduate Journey module (MGJ) Level 6 final year core module to investigate whether the reflective nature of the assessment is truly authentic. The project brings together 'a correlation between exposure to authentic assessments techniques and improved general academic performance.'<sup>1</sup> Through two focus groups the facilitators were able to gain feedback, as well as develop key actions to improve and enhance the assessment. The project has led to an insight into the student experience and has informed the MGJ team in terms of enhancing the assessment for future iterations of the module. The data has highlighted best practice that will be used to inform the Law School. This is in keeping with our institution's endeavours to 'decolonise' the curriculum by ensuring the assessments we use allow students to excel and bring themselves into the University.

We decided to use focus groups to capture the data. Our primary research questions focused on authenticity, inclusion diversity and equality. Most students highlighted the meaning of 'creativity' to mean something artistic. This is not necessarily the case or expectation from the module. Students concluded that this module may appeal to those students who are 'less academic' and this potentially allows for the expression of vulnerabilities. Students reported that emphasis on creativity can get in the way of inclusivity. In fact, the MGJ team believe the opposite in that it encourages inclusion as students can focus on extra-curricular activities such as film making, spoken word, and art to name a few. This contributes to our institution's attempts in decolonising the curriculum. One example of a creative project was the brewing of tea. It must be stressed that creativity does not have to be art or a sculpture, it is an idea that can be developed and presented as an artefact, video, performance written piece (poem, diary entries – the list goes on) or even an objet d'art – there is no limit. The team recognised that some students may have misinterpreted or even invented the meaning of creativity. This is something we will continue to work on to raise awareness and highlight creativity in its broadest sense.

In the spirit and ethos of MGJ 'creativity' includes a variety of formats in terms of submissions of projects which enables this type of assessment to be accessible to all students including those who may have a disability. It was also interesting to note that students felt that the module did not address equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) although the ethos of the module is targeted at addressing these issues. Most of the projects submitted on the module allow students to bring in cultural experiences, and the majority of projects throughout the years demonstrate this. It is clear from the recommendations that this is something that requires promoting and celebrating within the Law School to raise awareness. Students clearly benefit from freedom although some would like more structure even though this is the opposite of what we are trying to achieve in terms of our attempts as an institution to decolonise the curriculum by fighting injustice and barriers to inclusion. It was clear that students welcomed this type of reflection earlier on in their studies in order to prepare for the final year MGJ module.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wild and Daniel Berger 'Get real: using authentic assessment techniques to improve law degree academic performance' (2nd Teaching and Education Conference Florence September 2015) available from: [https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/16953/Get Real Berger and Wild 16 09 15.pdf?sequence=2](https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/16953/Get%20Real%20Berger%20and%20Wild%2016%2009%2015.pdf?sequence=2) accessed 24 March 2022



## 2. Background and Research Questions

This learning and teaching research collaboration allowed student partners and staff from Westminster Law School to conduct research and provide opportunities to enhance learning and teaching at the University of Westminster. Our Law School is diverse in that the '...majority is of second or third generation Asian and Black<sup>2</sup> ethnic origin, from inner city London families, often the first ones in their family to attend university; and we also have a minority of white working and middle-class students<sup>3</sup>. The funding awarded gave us the opportunity to partner with students to assess the meaning of authenticity in assessment design and its links with diversity, inclusion and equality. The MGJ module is assessed by way of a reflective project where students can choose their submission format. The module finishes with a ground-breaking Degree Show for final year students where tutors observe students work which mainly consists of artefacts, such as paintings, sculptures, installations, but also performance pieces and even baking.

This allows final year students to chat about their work with tutors, family friends, and peers in an art space gallery.

It is the final time when tutors see their students' finished work, have the opportunity to chat and gain more of an insight into understanding the deeper motivation behind the choice of concept, format and execution. It is also an opportunity for tutors to mark the work they have supervised, with the marks<sup>4</sup> counting towards the student's final degree classification.

This is a core module on the LLB Qualifying Law Degree which all students must take. Students were asked questions about their experience on the module and their final submissions projects which may have consisted of an artefact with an accompanying commentary or a reflective written text.

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<sup>2</sup> Although Black students constitute a small minority in the Law School.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Bunbury and Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 'The Law School Degree Show: law, materiality, decolonisation and authentic assessment' [2022] (unpublished article).

<sup>4</sup> 5% for each level 6 module.

The purpose of this project was to assist us in identifying issues of inclusion, diversity and authenticity especially in relation to assessment. The findings were used to identify solutions to enhance curriculum design. Although Newmann and Archbald originally developed the term 'authentic' it has been redefined over the years to focus on '...the quality and utility of assessment rest upon the extent to which the outcomes measured represent appropriate, meaningful, significant, and worthwhile forms of human accomplishment...'<sup>5</sup> Our aim has always been to provide for authentic assessment avenues since we found that this was the best way of enhancing inclusion, diversity and authentic assessment within the Law School.

The team set out to answer the following questions:

Are the current authentic assessments employed in our LLB curriculum truly authentic?

What makes an authentic assessment?

How important is inclusivity and equality in terms of diversity?

What is the relevance of decolonisation of the curriculum in the context of authentic assessments?

We explore these questions in the context of our innovative and in many respects ground-breaking, interdisciplinary and skills-intensive final year MGJ module with the aim of informing the rest of the curriculum too.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Joy Cumming & Graham S. Maxwell 'Contextualising Authentic Assessment' [1999] *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 6:2 177

# 3. Project Aims

This synoptic assessment is designed to provide students with an opportunity to make links between their studies, the law, extracurricular life, work experience and ultimately give them the opportunity and space to communicate these in innovative and creative ways, thus enhancing employability prospects. Through review, we identified whether the assessment used to assess students addresses diversity, equality and inclusion in terms of accessibility and opportunities to bring in other skills that encourage community belonging (i.e. being part of Westminster) and inclusivity. The University's Education Strategy 2020-2023 commits the University to adopting varied, authentic and inclusive means of assessment. Law has traditionally been assessed by coursework and closed-book exams which does not prepare students for employment. The move away from formal examination as a key tool for assessment has had a positive impact on the awarding gaps as they have been significantly reduced since the move from formal examinations. Students excel in the MGJ module, therefore we wanted to explore this further and the reasons for this. This module allows students to reflect on themselves and allows them to bring the skills they have developed beyond the Law Programme into their projects. This often includes cultural life experiences which in turn encourages diversity and inclusion.

The collaboration was essential since our students outperform even themselves in relation to other modules. Their input is essential if we are to implement this type of assessment for other modules.

We believe that this assessment addresses issues of inclusivity and diversity by encouraging students to explore their backgrounds/families/roots/culturally determined hobbies and other skills. If this is the case, then we could extend this kind of assessment (namely a more hands-on, material, project-based mode of assessment than the usual essay/exam/presentation options) as a means of enhancing the curriculum. This will ensure that even more diversity and inclusion issues are addressed in our LLB Undergraduate Law Degree. It will also attempt to add to the effort to decolonise the curriculum by looking at the assessments we employ in our modules across the LLB Undergraduate Law Degree to cater for a diverse student body.



# 4. Methodology

Students and staff worked together to identify areas of their projects that allowed them to bring in themselves and skills developed within and outside the University with a special focus on diversity, inclusion and authentic assessment.

The project had three phases:



1

Brainstorming with the students. This is the moment where we truly listened to students' ideas about diversity and inclusion. We then focused on:

- Whether the module addresses these and to what extent?
- Are there ways of making these issues and priorities more explicit?
- Are there ways in which we can encourage students to look deeper into these issues through their artefacts?
- What is it that is lacking from other modules and that can be informed by what is happening in My Graduate Journey? How can the former benefit from lessons learned in the latter?

2

We then took key themes from Phase 1 to explore further in smaller groups with students and specific questions.

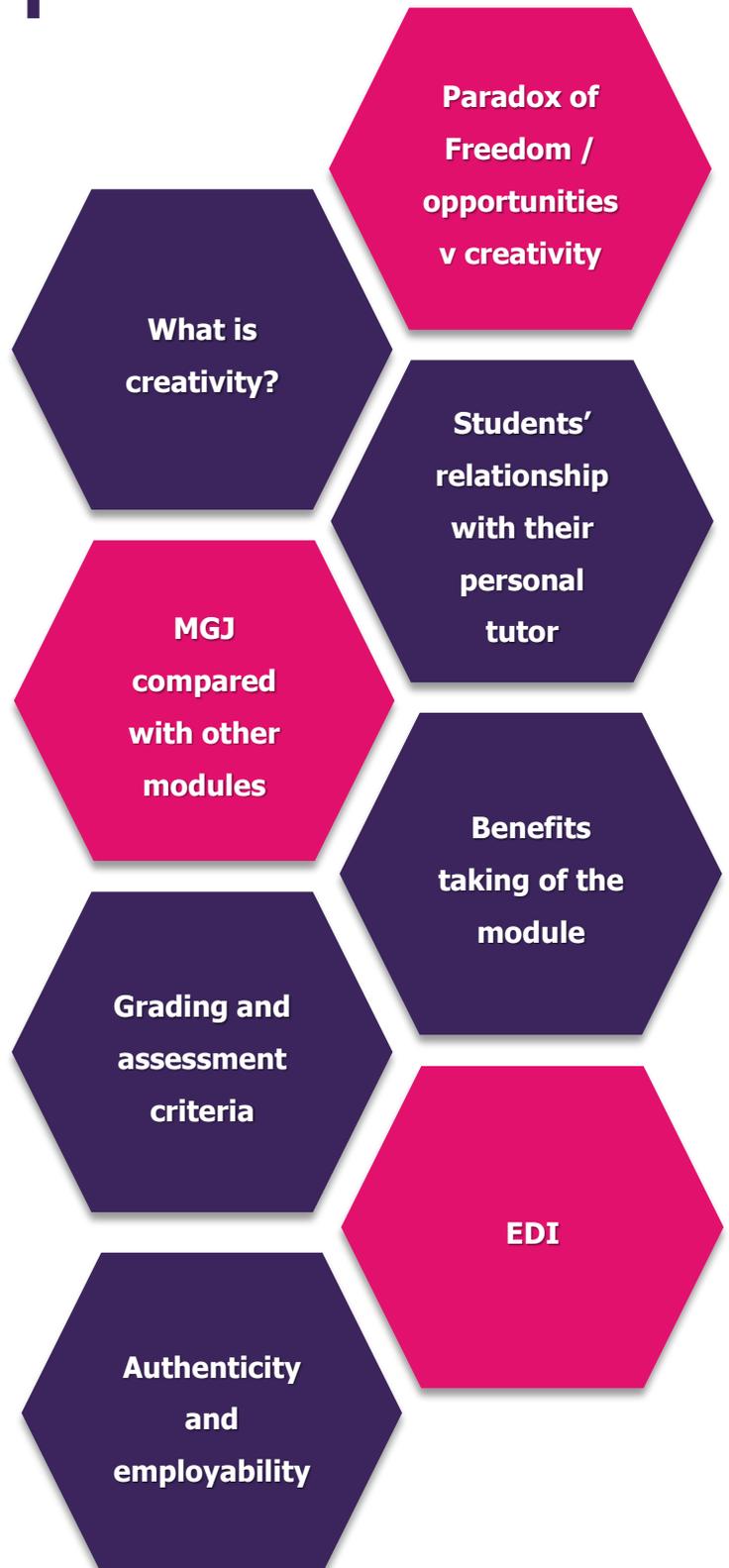
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Using the discussions from Phase 1 and Phase 2 the facilitators produced a Recommendation Report recommending key changes for development of decolonised learning materials and pedagogic strategy.

# 5. Results and Discussion

Phase 1 consisted of a brainstorming session with two students who recently completed the MGJ module. The facilitator of the session was familiar with the module and had been supervising students over the years. Phase 2 consisted of interviews with the same two students. The facilitator for these interviews was an external academic who had discussions with the co-module leader about the content and structure of the course. The semi-structured interviews utilised the themes that emerged in Phase 1 to create a series of base questions to guide discussion with the students to gain a greater understanding of their thoughts and feelings of the module and assessment. The guide questions used can be found at Appendix A. This report will be structured thematically, using many of the themes outlined in the Phase 1 report.

There were several themes which emerged from discussions with students:





## Paradox of Freedom/opportunities v creativity

Students reported that the nature of the assessment provides countless opportunities and complete academic freedom. One student commented and said that 'You can do anything you want.' The feedback highlighted that the module was refreshing and provides a nice change from the rigidity of the rest of the course, 'a break from the law' but that freedom is not necessarily welcomed by all students. The theme of paradox of freedom relates to how well received the openness of the assessment is but that freedom may often lead to added confusion and stress.

The assessment allows for academic freedom in terms of being creative and "thinking outside of the box". Students welcomed the ability to think differently and have the freedom to explore more avenues of assessment; however, the lack of clearly defined guidance as to what they could or could not do led to a great deal of confusion. One student said that they felt great "anxiety" and "stress" due to the guidance, or lack thereof. It must be noted that the projects are supervised by the student's personal academic tutor (PAT). The purpose of this is to build the student and PAT relationship to enable students to discuss any concerns they have about their project, academic progress and personal issues. It is hoped that the personal tutoring system continues to support personal tutees that may be feeling 'anxious', 'stressed' and lost in their final year at the University of Westminster. However, we are aware of some inconsistencies within the tutor-tutee relationship.

One student said that "the freedom and flexibility caters for people who are like, outgoing and are like more willing to put themselves out there and produce something more creative... in my circumstances as well it really catered for me as I was stuck at home." This was one of our challenges, particularly heightened with Covid. We had to encourage the students to become creative domestically, to reinvent their environment, their connection to their family or peers and think of the law in such close quarters.

The freedom to not have to do a formal sit-down examination was clearly well received; however, the lack of detailed guidance or of examples of the type of material they can produce was equally criticised.

As mentioned in the Phase 1 report, the open assessment meant that students were often left confused. They believed that the assessment heavily favoured those who were more creatively minded. "Some people don't have the time, or creative nature, to go and produce something... I feel like that might create a little bit of imbalance in terms of ... oh someone's been more creative than this person and so... it could look like they've put in more effort or... got more initiative but like they (the markers) aren't looking at what these two people's creative differences are."

## What is creativity?

There is pressure to be 'creative'. Creativity is sometimes perceived as art. Students felt that the markers perceived creativity as being art, or any non-written piece. The feeling that students knew one of the co-module leaders likes more obscure pieces is what led to this assumption, rightly or wrongly. Some students see themselves as not creative and this creates a mental block. They decide to produce an essay or a piece of writing but there is a perception that this will not attract as high a mark than something 'creative' / artistic. 'There is pressure to be creative even if you are not'. We have often and repeatedly though explained to the students that creativity is not only artistic. One can be creative even with an essay or a reflective piece of writing – from the simple way of including visuals to thinking about its format, whether epistolary or journalistic or diary entry.

## Relationship with PAT

It is clear from what the students said that the relationship they had with their PAT was highly influential on what work they produced and their overall success on the module. Students had very different experiences with their PATs and therefore their views on the module. Feedback from the School Senior Tutor highlighted that some colleagues were not comfortable supervising these projects as this assessment was something they were not familiar with, which therefore had an impact on the supervision process. We have provided consistent support and mentoring through the personal tutoring process.

One student described her relationship with her PAT as "non-existent" and stated that when she had attempted to reach out to her PAT to discuss what her plan was, there was no response on multiple occasions. When asked what she would have liked from her PAT she stated that she would have liked to "have some kinda (sic) engagement and discussion to try and see if my idea was good or not". She expressed disappointment that even when she submitted the work, there was no discussion about what it meant to her or even what she had done. It must be noted that the feedback the student receives via Turnitin provides the opportunity for this and also the opportunity to engage with their PAT.

Another student, however, noted that her relationship with her PAT was always very strong and that the PAT was "trying to convince me to be more creative". This student had intended on writing a standard form reflective essay as she believed she was not creative and did not know the form in which to present her assessment. Her PAT instead suggested that she create something that, while being a written piece, would be more elaborate. She went on to say "had it not been for [PAT] I probably would have just written an essay and that wouldn't have been received as well...". Students reported that the assessment is highly dependent on the student's relationship with their PAT. Some PATs are less engaged and do not prompt students to reflect or do not help them to think outside the box. It must be noted that this is an issue the Law School has addressed and has now recruited a Lecturer in Student Well-being and Legal Education.

## MGJ Compared to other modules

The MGJ module was described as being “a breath of fresh air”, “an escape” and as “less stressful”. Although, as described above, the MGJ was said to be stressful, it was stressful in a different way to the core or more traditionally assessed modules. MGJ caused stress in trying to decide the form of the assessment, whereas other modules caused stress due to the sheer amount of content which had to be learned and understood for exams.

It is clear that the authentic nature of the assessment allowed students to develop skills they use outside of University and incorporated these into their reflective project. All students did, however, mention that they were not sure whether or not this type of assessment lends itself to a law degree as it is all rather unstructured. One student mentioned that “its risky throwing students who aren’t used to this kinda (sic) style into it blind almost”. The law degree is structured and MGJ is chaos in comparison to other structured modules. Students are taken out of their comfort zone, and this can create stress, fear and anxiety. There is a huge gap between the rest of the course and MGJ. Things, however, are set to change. There is a general appreciation of the benefits of the MGJ approach and a suggestion, coming from our current Head of School, that the ethos and practice of MGJ should run throughout the three years. Efforts are being made to coordinate and implement this.



## Benefits / Gains

All students interviewed noted that they did receive some kind of benefit from the module, specifically from the type of assessment. One student noted "it makes you like, think outside of the box and have to think in a different way to the ordinary exams". Another said that it could "offer us the ability to show some other skills that employers might like."

When discussing the benefits and employment prospects students said that they could gain some new skills, that may benefit employability but that it was rather limited in its scope as one student said "the module itself won't likely make employers any more or less likely to hire you... it's not like proper topic." What we have tried to tell students is that employers are often looking for the way extracurricular skills have been put into service towards one's degree. This is a good way of ensuring that the employer notices them and the difference they embody.

**"it makes you like, think outside of the box and have to think in a different way to the ordinary exams".**

In addition to this, each student expressed that they enjoyed having the chance to "look back" at their time studying in the Law School. Students also expressed that they would have liked the opportunity to have done this kind of assessment every year so as to be able to more accurately reflect on their journey. As noted earlier, this is something that is and will hopefully be incorporated into the new Undergraduate Law Degree. One student said "it can really be pretty hard to like reflect on three years, You forget all the stuff you've done by this point and because you're ... in the middle of final exams and stuff you're not really ready to reflect".

Similarly, it was said by the other student that "I think I'd more like it (sic) if this was a yearly thing and you could sorta go over your year in hindsight and it would probably like help you think of what you could do differently in year two and three you know." Students commented on the benefits of taking the module and stated that the module has a 'therapeutic effect.' "It is enjoyable and useful to look back at the three years." "It is the culmination of three years of hard work. " Students concluded that there is flexibility in the assessment. The content can be reflective and relatable, thereby emphasising the authentic nature of the assessment.

**"I think I'd more like it (sic) if this was a yearly thing and you could sorta go over your year in hindsight and it would probably like help you think of what you could do differently in year two and three you know."**

## Grading and assessment criteria

It was shown in Phase 2 that marks received were a common theme that came up in the brainstorming sessions. When asked about grades during interviews it was clearly an area students had issues with, either good or bad.

When asked if there was a general feeling among students that this was a module that was an 'easy' grade both students responded that yes it was genuinely perceived to be an easier grade and that was often the motivation behind it. One student said, "it's bad I know, but I didn't even feel like I had to start writing it until like a week before the deadline".

Further to this, one student expressed how disappointed she was with her grade by something that was so personal to her. It appears that the grading for this module can be taken rather personally as a result of students often submitting material about their personal life, which is unlike other modules. One student stated that when the mark is disappointing it can give the student the impression that the mark reflects the three years – the three years are worth only '50%'. The MGJ grade can be perceived as valuing the entire degree as it embodies the degree. Therefore, not getting a high grade can be psychologically disturbing for students if they feel that they had put effort into the work. Equally some students disclose some very personal information, and those projects can be difficult to grade because one does not want to put a mark on a state of mind. Often those pieces do not fully meet the LOs and are weaker in design and format.

## EDI

Students agreed that there could be some sense of inclusivity in the module in that one student for example said that students who had English as their second language could well benefit from such a module "as they could opt for something more creative than a written piece". Similarly, another student noted that "students who might come from backgrounds with weaker language skills could probably benefit". This allows students to focus on other skills developed outside of academia which can be incorporated in their submissions.

However, when pushed as to whether or not they felt that this module included a greater level of diversity or lent itself well to increasing inclusivity and diversity students were unconvinced. One student noted that if you have a language barrier and a lack of creativity then "they're at even more of a disadvantage than other students, so it kind of flips around". She also continued that people from other backgrounds may not like to discuss their personal lives from some kind of fear of "being judged" and when people on this module were reflecting on themselves this would add another disadvantage to them. It must be noted that there is no such requirement to disclose personal experiences. Students are able to choose whether they want to showcase their projects at the end of year Degree Show. There is also an option for students to showcase a different version of their commentary for the Degree Show.

# 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the module as a whole is well received by students and the form of assessment is praised in its openness. It provides an opportunity for students to try something new and potentially experiment with forms of assessment they may have encountered previously in their studies. The reflective aspect allows students to think about how they position themselves in relation to the law and their degree. The reflection is beneficial and should happen at every level – not just level 6. As these students were Level 6 students, they have not all experienced the reflective elements now incorporated at level 4 and level 5, although the assessment and format at these levels remains traditional. It is recommended that less traditional formats should be introduced earlier on in the degree to equip students for the MGJ module.

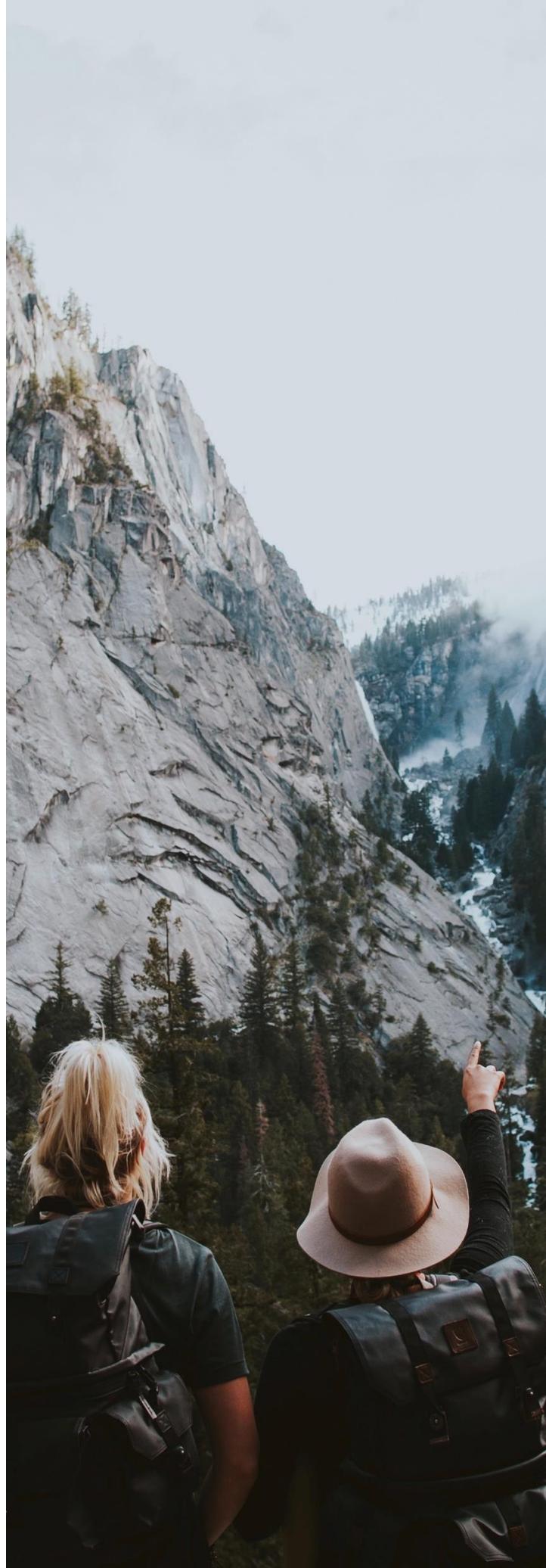
The consensus from the interviews was, however, that they did not like the lack of specific guidance. As the module is so far removed from the traditional types of assessment used in law modules, students feel like they have little idea of what form their assessment can take; and without examples ultimately say they fall back on essays or other predominantly written pieces. However, it must be noted that students were able to review a selection of projects during the first MGJ briefing session. Perhaps the team will consider providing more opportunities for students to view projects for inspiration throughout the year.

While there are no obvious limits on the size of the artefact there is a word limit on the writing. It is restrictive for those students who choose to write an essay/letter/prayer/poem, although it must be noted that the word limit can normally be negotiated with the supervisor.

The findings highlight that students are clearly torn between enjoying the change of assessment from the traditional style of assessment (i.e. essays and exams) and the fact that the form they are allowed to take is too broad. They each noted that the lack of clear guidance or explanation of what kind of things they are allowed to do led to a great deal of stress, as not everybody is 'creative' and yet it tended to favour those who are more 'creative.'



The paradox of freedom can be 'confusing' and 'stressful' as it differs from other traditional modules studied on their undergraduate degree. Students stated that there is 'no guidance' beyond what is provided, and as a result, creates a fear of the unknown. With the MGJ module the safety net of the structure is lost, and students reported that because of this it is difficult to break away from the rigidity of the academic mindset. However, students noted that freedom is good when you know how to use it but can create a fear of not getting a good grade. If you do not know how to manage freedom it can create confusion. It was agreed that students want better explanations as to what to do. This will be incorporated in future iterations but in a measured way since we emphatically do not want students to be firmly guided towards a desired effect but rather explore their abilities and the way of connecting them to the law. Students clearly believe that this module caters for those who are "less academic" and gives them a more equal chance to get better grades; however, one student noted "they are still doing a law degree and so if you're not academic in nature then you probably shouldn't be doing it". As highlighted earlier, when pushed as to whether such modules and assessments such as this could increase diversity, students were unable to think of any reason why that would be the case. The responses demonstrate that students are not aware of the aims of the module, however the MGJ team recognises the importance of making students aware of the aims from the outset. This is something that will be implemented in future iterations.



# 7. Appendix A

## My Graduate Journey Interviews Phase 2

### Freedom

- How do you find the form of assessment in comparison to more traditional essay style assessments?
- Do you feel that this sort of assessment lends itself well to law degrees?
- Do you think that you are required to know the material more or less than if it were to be a traditional essay style assessment?
- Do you think that the openness of the assessment is a good or bad thing? Would you have a more structured form of assessment, i.e a guide as to what kind of project may be produced and how to go about it?
- Do you feel that the openness of the assessment criteria may lead to the student not knowing what to do?

### Confusion

- How would you recommend changing the form of assessment on my graduate journey?

### Creativity

- Do you feel like there is a pressure to be 'creative'? To produce something other than a simple essay?
- Do you think this kind of pressure is fair?
- How would you change it?
- Do you think that those who make a written submission are at a disadvantage in anyway?

### PAT Relationship

- How would you describe your relationship with your PAT?
- Do you think that this assessment relies heavily on whether your PAT is engaged?
- How do you think your PAT assisted with this assessment?

### Stress

- Do you feel as though the module is stressful in comparison to the more traditional subjects?
- How would you say this could be changed so as to make the experience less stressful or anxiety inducing?

### Gains from the module

- Do you feel a sense of pride in being able to look back at your 3 years in the law school and being able to reflect on yourself?
- Do you appreciate the flexibility of the module? Or would you prefer more structure?

### Grades

- Do you find it is easier to obtain a higher grade on this module?
- Do you find the marking to be fair?
- Would you prefer a more objective assessment guide?

### Inclusivity

- Do you think that this module and the open assessment lends itself to inclusivity?
- Do you think that certain people are put at an advantage or disadvantage by this mode?