

An Investigation Into the Association Between Intended Purpose Versus Students' Perception of Assessments on an Extended Degree Academic Writing Course

Harriet Lowe
University of Greenwich

The educational value of portfolios as assessments has been widely acknowledged across the higher education sector and literature as providing a platform to promote student-centred and reflective learning (Brown, 1997; Snadden & Thomas, 1998; Karłowicz, 2000). While there is plentiful research investigating the benefits of providing portfolios at undergraduate level, little has focused on the role of assessment from a students' perspective. This study sought to examine how students from an Academic English course at a UK university perceive assessments in comparison to the intention of the assessment, as designed for the course. A correlation can be seen between the questionnaire results measuring students' perceptions and scores on the assessments. Students who, as intended by the course creator, "related the portfolio tasks to the essay" and "consciously thought about the link between the two assessments" received a higher grade in both assessments; whereas, those who disagreed with these statements, unaligned to the course aims, generally received lower grades in both their portfolio and essay. These results suggest that the intentions of an assessment should be made explicitly clear to the cohort, developing their understanding and thus potentially the importance they assign to the task and the benefits and skills they gain.

The role of assessment in higher education (HE) has become a central component in course design, reflecting the development of students' core skills and knowledge to achieve course aims (Coe, Higgins & Major, 2014). Assessments can be a stressful experience for students (Lynam & Cachia, 2018), especially if there is a detachment between the assessment's goal and students' perception of that goal. The use of portfolios as an assessment tool has been popular in contemporary HE programmes (Klenowski, Askew & Carnell, 2006), particularly in preparatory courses included in the foundation year of extended degrees. These assessment tools are used to measure students' progress and level of understanding over a period time, while developing their knowledge through practical application and encouraging reflective practice. These "practice-oriented" assessment styles engage learning through a series of activities which can be applied to, or cumulate as, a final assessment. The successful involvement of a portfolio as an assessment requires guidance and feedback from the instructor to direct students' understanding of the purpose of the portfolio and to promote the skills needed to complete it. Although this may be done when introducing the assessment, few researchers have looked at whether the intended purpose of an assessment, as given by the course and the instructor, is perceived as intended by the student and whether this affects the students' ability to complete the assessment. Crook, Gross and Dymott's (2006) focus-group study discovered that students' perceptions of the role of assessments often differed from the academic's perceptions. The current study furthers this line of thought, investigating the extent to which students perceive an assessment in the way it was intended and questions whether students'

misperception of an assessment has a negative impact on their scores of that assessment.

These questions were tested with students in an Academic Writing course, finishing their foundation year on a variety of extended undergraduate degree programmes at a UK university. The choice of this specific cohort and course will be expanded upon later in this paper. Students completed two items: 1) a portfolio, and 2) an essay, as assessments for the course in order for students to develop the skills necessary to write an academic essay through the portfolio tasks; they received feedback in order to help them further apply their knowledge. The connection between these two assessments was highlighted to students when presenting the assessments in the second week of the term. After submission of the portfolio tasks and the final essay, students were asked to complete a questionnaire related to their perception of the two assessments, in particular the connection between these two assessments. Results from the questionnaire responses and the students' scores on the assessments show that some students perceived the intended purposes of the assessment, while others did not connect the task with the purpose. The results from this study suggest that instructors should be aware of how the intention of an assessment is perceived and understood by students, and should take measures to ensure that students comprehend the purpose of an assessment, including the knowledge they should develop.

Literature Review

Assessment is widely considered as an "essential component of teaching" and defined as a "systematic process for gathering data" to demonstrate students'

progress towards a learning goal (Dhindsa, Omar & Waldrip, 2007, p. 1261; Lam, 2014; Linn & Miller, 2005). Assessment is used as an umbrella term for a variety of both longstanding and contemporary methods and has numerous definitions across the literature. It is suggested that often the understanding of the term depends on how one sees that assessment itself in the educational process (van de Watering, Gijbels, Dochy, & van der Rijt, 2008). This concept has developed from the tradition pen and paper tests and extended writing, to the performance of authentic tasks, teacher observations, self-reports, and portfolio work (Linn & Miller, 2005). These contemporary assessment styles encourage students to use their “cognitive development, academic knowledge, and language skills to read, comprehend, synthesise, analysis, compare, contrast, relate, articulate, write, evaluate, and more” (Herrera, Murry & Cabral, 2007, p. 23). Despite this shift in assessment activities, assessments are still used for two different purposes that carry different roles of evaluation: 1) formative, to improve instruction, and 2) summative, to measure students’ achievement (Scriven, 1967, p. 41). Although the former is still used to determine the extent to which the student has reached the intended objectives, the potential benefits of assessing are considered to be much wider and are relevant and used at every stage of the learning process (van de Watering et al., 2008). Weeden, Winter, and Broadfoot (2002) state that despite assessment practices improving over the years, teachers could better use information from assessments to tailor lessons to meet students’ needs and improve learning. The use of assessment can be more than classifying and predicting student achievement; it can also advance the process of teaching and learning, used as a “tool for learning” (Dochy & McDowell, 1997; Lam, 2014).

The portfolio is an assessment technique frequently found in the contemporary classroom that can be used as a tool for learning. The use of portfolios as an assessment tool is not a new concept in the history of education but has recently been more frequently used to demonstrate students’ progression and level of understanding over a period of time in academic courses (William & Thompson, 2008). Found in all phases of education and professional development, the educational value of portfolios has been widely accepted across the HE sector and literature as providing a platform to promote student-centred and reflective learning (Brown, 1997; Karłowicz, 2000; Kwok, 2011; Snadden & Thomas, 1998). Predominantly used to demonstrate evidence of achievement for summative purposes (Brown, 2003; Baume & Yorke, 2002), these types of assessment create a personalised, longitudinal representation of a student’s own efforts and achievements which is suggested to drive students’ ability to autonomously reflect and measure their learning outcomes (Beckers, Dolmans, Knapen & Van

Merriënboer, 2019; Carless & Boud, 2018; Friedman Ben – David et al., 2001). Portfolio assessment has also been adapted for online learning platforms and are seen as an equally positive form of assessment for learning (Deneen, Brown & Carless, 2018).

In the contemporary HE environment, portfolios are being designed as “practice-oriented” (Brown, 2003), with the view that portfolios should include “a range of small tasks throughout the learning programme to ensure participants are actively engaged in learning activities that can culminate in the final assessment” (2003, p. 7). In this case, it is vital to ensure that students understand the purpose of the portfolio and how to construct it in order to benefit their future assessments. In the present study, writing portfolios were used to promote skills and revisions which contributed towards a final essay. These types of portfolios make learning concrete and visible (Burner, 2014), providing learners with opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for writing an academic essay (Lam, 2019). Research suggests that students are often not given the opportunity to revise assignments (Bader, Burner, Iversen & Varga, 2019; Lopez-Pastor & Sicilia-Camacho, 2017); therefore, these activities provided reflection, interaction, and opportunities for peer feedback and instructor feedback before the submission of a final essay. However, if the purpose the portfolio is not perceived in the intended way, then learners may not benefit from these types of assessments as intended. Whether the intended purpose is perceived and understood by learners has not yet been questioned extensively in the literature.

As assessment has a key role in learning, HE institutions take time to validate and develop their assessments with specific purposes to reflect the course goals and effective learning. Effective learning occurs when there is a connection between teaching, evaluation, and results (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014). It is assumed that if an assessment is created in order to measure a skill or knowledge, it will measure that skill or particular knowledge. However, Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) suggest that the way students approach learning determines their approach to assessments and tasks within assessments. There can be discrepancies between what the assessment requires, what the students prefer, and what the students expect (van de Watering et al., 2008). Typically, when an assessment is set, the purpose varies among the various stakeholders: the students, teachers, parents, school, and policy makers (Cavangah et al., 2005). The students’ and teachers’ approach to the assessment may vary. The perception of assessment is defined as the “students’ act of perceiving the assessment in the course under investigation” (van de Watering & van der Rijt, 2006); the way students prepare themselves for an assessment can depend on how they perceive the assessment and subsequently positively or

negatively influence learning (Boud, 1990; Gielen, Dochy & Dierick, 2003). Previous studies have researched assessment preferences (Ben-Chaim & Zoller, 1997; Traub & McRury, 1990; Zeidner, 1987), finding that students generally prefer multiple choice assessments, or single de-contextualised questions over essay formatted assessments.

In particular, van de Watering et al (2008) attempted to gain insight into students' preferences and perceptions regarding various assessment formats and the effects of these different formats on the students' performance. The study measured 83 students' perceptions of assessment through a pre-test, post-test design using the Assessment Preferences Inventory along with a questionnaire of open ended and multiple choice questions assessing learning outcomes. They found that there was some relationship between students' preferences of assessment and assessment scores, but highlighted that often students prefer assessments due to familiarity rather than achievement. The study saw no relationship between the perception of assessment and scores. However, this study measured perception in relation to what the student thought the assessment was measuring in relation to cognitive level, rather than the intention and necessary skills for that assessment.

Scouller and Prosser (1994) investigated the learning process used and the perceptions of 190 students completing multiple-choice question examinations. Their study consisted of reproduction-oriented questions, which measured the students' ability to recall information, the students' general orientation towards their studies and the study strategies used. Their results suggested that the students' perceptions of the purpose of assessments were not always correct. They found that some students wrongly understood the examination to be assessing higher order thinking skills, subsequently utilising "deep study" strategies to prepare for their exam; other students could not make a distinction between understanding and reproduction and therefore had incorrect perceptions of what was being assessed. The study found no correlation between students' perceptions of the examination and the resulting grades.

Scouller (1998) further examined relationships between student preferences, perceptions, and performance outcomes. A sample of 206 education students completed questionnaires relating to their preparation for and perceptions of two methods of assessment. The results from this study showed that students often applied an unsuitable study approach due to an incorrect perception of what the assessment was measuring, resulting in a poor performance. Students who used deep learning strategies for multiple choice question examinations resulted in poorer performance, perceiving the assessment to assess higher levels of cognitive processing. Additionally, poorer performance

was seen with students who associated assignment essays with surface strategies. This study reveals some interesting relationships between students' learning approaches, their perceptions of the assessments, and the performance outcome of the assessment along with their preferred method of assessment. It was seen that students prepare for assessments depending on what they perceive that assessment to measure. The current study aims to further this research by measuring students' perception and how that correlates with their scores on the assessment.

More recently, Deneen, Brown and Carless (2018) measured students' conceptions of e-portfolios and the impact on students' performance. Collecting survey data from 360 students across multiple faculties, the study investigated Students' Conceptions of Assessments (SCoA) and their technology attitudes (TAM). The study saw an overall positive attitude towards the use of e-portfolios as an assessment for learning and a greater acceptance of e-portfolios from a technology perspective. Deneen et al. (2018) suggest that the use of e-portfolios for assessment requires "active consideration" of how the students understand the assessment aspects of the e-portfolio and the technology behind it. Deneen et al. (2018) also mention that "it matters how students understand assessment" (p. 10) and that further research should look into the relationship between conceptions and performance and thus a focus of the present study.

The aforementioned studies, which measure the correlation between preference and assessment, refer to level of enjoyment towards the assessment. Those that refer to perception only mention perception in relation to the cognitive level being assessed rather the students' awareness of the task. Previous research in this area has not yet looked at the effects of understanding of the purpose of the assessment from the perspective of the student on scores and engagement. With the improvements in student-centred learning and learner-centred teaching, there should be some consideration of how the students themselves understand and perceive the intended purpose of an assessment or activity. The current study addresses this gap.

Empirical Study

The present study investigates students' perceptions of assessments in regard to the intentional benefits from completing an assessment as originally intended by the course aims. The goal is to measure whether understanding the original intention of an assessment affects engagement, completion, and overall grade of the assessment. In order to gain more insight into the connection between students' perceptions and lecturer intentions of assessments, two research questions were formulated as follows:

1. To what extent do students completing an assessment understand the intention or purpose of that assessment?
2. How does this understanding of the intent of the assessment affect the final score received by the student?

The focus of this study is whether the purpose of the assessment as created by the course leader is perceived accurately by the student, and if this understanding subsequently influences higher scores. The assessments mentioned are a set of portfolio tasks and an extended essay, which will be outlined below.

Method

Procedure

In order to investigate whether students perceive summative assessments in the way originally designed by the instructor in higher education, and if so, whether this understanding affects scores, this explorative study used a questionnaire survey. Questionnaire data on students' understanding and attitudes towards the assessments was correlated with scores from the assessments in question.

Participants

A total of 58 students, in their second term of the foundation year of their extended degree programme at a university in London, UK, completed the portfolio and essay assessments for the Academic Writing course. 22 participants completed the questionnaire regarding the two assessments, creating a response rate of 37.93%. Response rate is a continuing issue in education research, and it is important to consider reasons for this (De Rijdt, Tiquet, Dochy & Devolder, 2006). Possible causes for non-response in this study could be due to the fact that participants were sent the questionnaire after their term had finished and after they learned of their results. Questionnaires were sent via institution emails which may not have been checked by students after the end of term. Only the participants who completed both assessment tasks and the questionnaire were considered for this study. Although small in number, the sample represents a significant and balanced proportion of the student body on the Academic Writing course.

Participants were from various degree programmes, including Marketing, Events, and Tourism; Public Relations; Childhood and Youth Studies; Public Health; and International Relations. Despite their varying degrees, all students were completing their first foundation year and did not have any prior experience in higher or Further Education.

This criterion was necessary for participant selection as it ensured participants had no previous experience of HE assessments and therefore had not established any preconceived ideas of assessments. The foundation year cohort was used as they had not received any indirect training on the use of assessment in HE through feedback and experience throughout their studies.

While other studies have used students studying the same degree or subject, the differences in participants' degree programmes had little observed effects in the present study, as this research investigated perceptions of an assessment focused on academic writing skill rather than content knowledge. Additionally, participants had not attended content-specific lectures at the time of study and all degree programmes studied by participants require the use of academic writing to some extent, ensuring the Academic Writing course was essential.

Academic Writing course outline

The Academic Writing course is a compulsory course in the second term of the undergraduate foundation year of extended degree programmes. During the 12 weeks of the course, students attended 6 hours of contact hours, comprising of a 3-hour seminar focusing on specific academic writing skills, and 3 hours in a computer lab, with consolidation activities guided by the instructor. During this time, students were also encouraged to work on their portfolio tasks, which were closely related to the in-class activities and the process of writing an essay, and additionally, given time to work on their extended essays in the company of the instructor. This specific course was used in the current study because the skills required for the essay were assumed to be unfamiliar to students in the course as they had no previous university experience; therefore, it was more likely they would need to develop these skills through the portfolio. This reduced the possibility for lack of engagement with the portfolio.

The portfolio consisted of 10 tasks, which were submitted by students continuously throughout the 12 weeks. Each task focused on an area of academic writing, particularly essay writing in HE (i.e., reported speech, developing paragraphs, writing introductions, using cohesive devices, writing conclusions, and editing work), which were also covered in the seminar content. These tasks encouraged autonomy and a chance for students to reflect on their work before applying it to their essay. This attempted to encourage criticality of their own work, utilising feedback to feed-forward, and being able to identify strengths and weaknesses. The portfolio tasks were created in order to provide revision opportunities of the seminar's content and scaffolding for the writing of the essay. The extended essay required students to research and write an essay of 1,500 words on a topic relevant to their academic

Table 1
Questionnaire Sections

Section	Example questions	Number of questions
Overall attitude towards the portfolios	I worked hard on the portfolio because I found the portfolio relevant	5
The relation between the portfolio and the essay	I found the portfolio tasks relevant to my essay I am clear about what my essay should include because of my portfolio tasks	5
Breakdown of each portfolio task	Did this task help you decide your essay title? Did you use the introduction from this task in your essay? Did you notice any problems with your referencing in your essay after completing this task?	22 (3 questions per task)

discipline in an academic style appropriate to level 4. Students had the opportunity to provide peer feedback on a draft in week six. The summative assessment was submitted on the last week of term.

These two assessments were created with the intention for students to use the portfolio tasks to assist in writing their essay. Each task directly correlated with their essay and they received feedback after each portfolio section in order to improve their extended essay. The three instructors who taught the classes were asked to keep information regarding the assessments consistent, highlighting the connection between the two without making this overtly explicit. This was also seen in the course handbook:

Students are guided through the process and complete tasks through the portfolio en-route to submitting the final essay which allows for formative feedback to be given during the research and writing process.

The two assessments were weighted equally, and students had access to the marking criteria for both. The two marking criteria were designed to work together. Essays and portfolios were marked anonymously, and a selection were moderated by the programme leader. These marks were then compared to questionnaire responses.

Questionnaire

Similar to previous work in the field (e.g. Kwok, 2011; Mussawy, 2009), and for the purpose of this explorative research, a questionnaire was developed and distributed online as the main data collection method. The questionnaire was designed via Google Forms and sent to students by email to students after the

final submission of their coursework for the course with an anonymous number that they could use when completing the questions. A total of 34 questions were divided into four sections which were related to the background of the participant, attitudes towards the portfolio independently, the relation between the portfolio and the essay and a breakdown of the portfolio tasks (see Table 1), designed to measure students' understanding of the assessments and the application of the individual tasks. Each section had a short explanation at the beginning, and the breakdown of tasks had a reminder of each of the tasks. The sections included Likert-scale questions (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree), multiple choice questions, and two open-ended questions to encourage personalized answers from the participants. The end of each section had a space for students to write freely for the same reason. The questions were counterbalanced with positive and negative wording to remove potential bias. The Likert-scale questions in the questionnaire resulted in an acceptable Cronbach's alpha value (.747).

The questions in section two attempted to measure participants' attitudes toward the portfolio in particular, attempting to answer the second research question guiding this research. These questions were loosely based on Biggs' (1987a, b) Study Process Questionnaire in order to measure learners approaches to the portfolio. Five questions from the original questionnaire were adapted for the current research.

The third section attempted to establish an understanding for the relationship between the portfolio and the essay, looking at the first research question. These questions were created for the current study, using an adapted version of The Student Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ), developed by Fisher, Waldrup and Dorman (2005). The current study used adapted items

from the “Authenticity of Assessment” and “Transparency of Assessment” scales of the SPAQ.

The final section provided further evidence for section three, looking at whether participants used portfolio tasks in their essay, as expected by the instructor. These were created in line with the Academic Writing Handbook created for this course.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the quantitative questionnaire data, a Pearson Correlation was first used to establish any trends between the essay and portfolio scores. Following this, additional Pearson Correlations were run to compare the questionnaire responses with the essay scores and the portfolio scores. The answers to the open ended questions were analysed in a qualitative way, using the content of these answers to classify and deduce categories of participants.

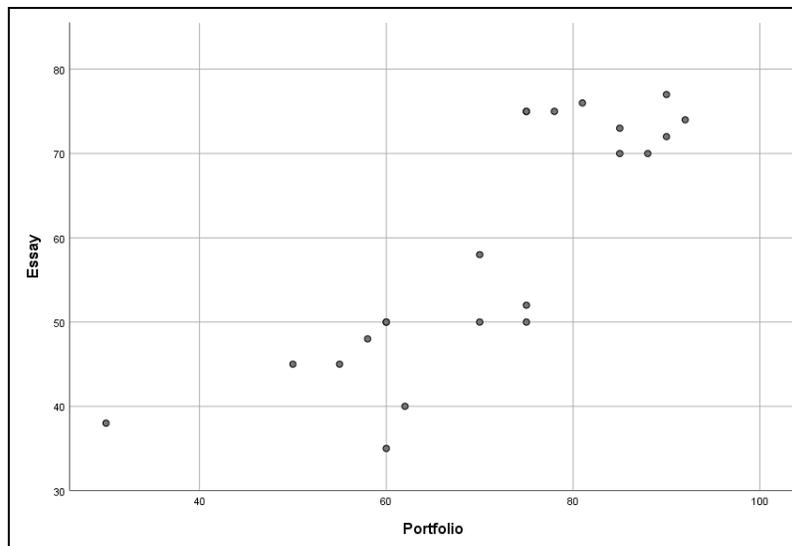
Results

To establish any correlation between the essay and portfolio, the mean scores for the two assessments were calculated for all 22 participants. The mean portfolio score was 71.36 (*sd* = 15.631) with a range of 62 and the mean score for the essay was 59 (*sd* = 14.603) with a range of 42. These large ranges show the variety between this group of students. The individual scores for these two assessments were plotted on a scatter plot in order to note any observable

trends. A clear trend can be seen in Figure 1, with high scores in one assessment correlating with high scores in the other. A Pearson Correlation was run and saw a significant positive correlation between the essay and portfolio scores ($r = .831, p = .000$). This demonstrates that those who achieved highly on their portfolio subsequently scored highly on their essay. A cluster of students can be seen all scoring above 70 on both their essay and portfolio, while all other students scored below 80 on their portfolio and below 60 on their essay. Those that scored below 50 on their essay can generally be seen as scoring below 60 on their portfolio. However; there were 5 outliers identified from this correlation. These students’ scores saw an opposite correlation to the others, with low scores on their essays (50-58) and high scores on their portfolios (>70). This does not follow the trend of the other students who demonstrated a correlation between scores on both assessments. This will be discussed subsequently.

Results from the questionnaires were collected and analysed individually and then compared with the final scores from the essay and portfolios. Through the questionnaire data, it was seen that 45.45% of students consistently noted the connection between the essay and portfolio, and actively utilised tasks and skills from the portfolio to support their essay writing. The remaining students noted some understanding throughout the questionnaire. However, this was not consistent. The qualitative responses to the questionnaire will be analysed shortly.

Figure 1
Essay and portfolio scores



To analyse the questionnaire responses with the essay and portfolio scores, questionnaire responses were calculated into a “perception value”. The higher the score, the more the responses demonstrated an understanding of the intention of the assessments. These totals were correlated with the assessment scores and saw that questionnaire responses correlated positively with both essay scores ($r = .816, p = .000$) and portfolio scores ($r = .742, p = .000$). This suggests that those students who demonstrated awareness of the connection between the portfolio and essay through their Likert scale questionnaire responses also scored highly on the assessments. Looking at the correlation between individual question responses and the essay and portfolio scores saw a statistically significant correlation between most of the questions and the essay and portfolio scores. There were, however, 7 questions identified which did not correlate with the essay and portfolio scores. Upon further observation, all of the questions which did not correlate with assessment scores were those focused on the individual tasks. These questions were particularly specific regarding how the student used the portfolio task in their essays. Factors such as memory may have played a role in the lack of correlation here.

To further analyse this data, we turn to the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions. From the previously seen grouping of scores, two main groups were noted of interest, specifically those scoring high (>70) on both assessments and those low (<62) on both assessments. The answers to the open-ended questions from the survey are analysed in relation to these two sub-sets of participants. The previously mentioned outliers are also reviewed as an independent group in attempt to explain the difference in their scores. It is noted that other variations may have played a role in the scores gained by these students; however, the correlation between the questionnaire responses and scores may demonstrate that an increased understanding may contribute to higher scores. This research does not attempt to comment on how these students achieved these high scores but comments on the correlation between perception and assessment achievement.

For the general questions relating to the portfolio and the essay, students wrote comments regarding how they thought the portfolio tasks and the essay connected. From the first group determined by the correlation of essay and portfolio scores, students said:

- The tasks helped while writing the essay. Moreover, it improved my essay.
- It was well connected, really similar to my essay
- Helped to know what a introduction and conclusion should include.
- THEY DID CONNECT WELL

This suggests that these students understood the intended connection between the portfolio tasks and the essay, especially in relation to the feedback given to students to apply to their essay. This groups’ generally higher scores on both assessment tasks suggests that this understanding contributed to their engagement and ability on the assessments.

For the open-ended questions asking how the two assessments connected, students in group 2 wrote:

- Did not. Portfolio too long and uninteresting.
- N/A
- the writing structure
- The tasks were based on the essay so therefore we had to have an idea of what we were to write and had already started writing parts of the essay meanwhile completing the portfolio.

The final comment shows more understanding of the connection between the two tasks than the other students; however, the answers throughout the questionnaire suggest this connection was not made as strongly by group 2 students as group 1 students who received high grades on both assessments. The lower achievements in relation to scores could be contributed to the lack of understanding between the two tasks. This would account for the lower scores on the essay achieved by this group.

Finally, it is important to review the outliers noted in the correlation. It was seen that 5 students achieved high scores on their portfolio, but did not achieve high scores in their essay. This could be due to previous other effects; however, the answers and comments from this group on the questionnaire suggests a lack of association between the two tasks, which may account for their higher score on the portfolio but lower score on the essay. Although these students were able to achieve on the portfolio, they did not transfer this knowledge onto the essay, suggesting they did not apply or reflect on the skills developed by the portfolio tasks, contributing to a lower essay score. Comments from these students are as follows:

- Potfolio [sic] was pushing me to do my essay but I did not use it a lot
- I didn't think that the essay really connected with the portfolio tasks and I found it difficult

At the end of the questionnaire, students were given the opportunity to provide any additional comments regarding the portfolio tasks and/or the essay, however this was not compulsory. Group 1 included the following:

- To do the task separately was really helpful when writing the essay. It gave you guidance and time to see what you have to improve in your essay.
- It honestly helped me get through my essay, however, most of the task are focused on the introduction, It will be usefull [sic] to have more diversity.
- I enjoyed most tasks of the portfolio and thought that the feedback was incredibly useful.

These statements demonstrate the perception of the two assessments from group 1, understanding the intended connection between the two, using and reflecting on tasks throughout the process. On the other hand, the comments from group 2 did not highlight this understanding:

- Enjoy Academic Writing but not the tasks. Far too long. Would have preferred to edit and improve a previous essay for the course.
- I would have preferred to rewrite a [sic] essay I did before and make it better

These comments suggest that these students did not understand the reason for carrying out the portfolio tasks and purely wished to be given feedback directly on an essay and re-draft. This would not assist them to develop the necessary skills to prepare them for academic study, therefore their perception of these tasks and the assessments were not in line with their intention.

These results suggest clear patterns in relation to their perception of the assessments and students' scores. These patterns will subsequently be summarised in relation to the three research questions.

General Discussion

Considering the first research question, "to what extent do students completing an assessment understand the intention or purpose of that assessment?", the results from the questionnaire suggest that not all students understood the intended purpose of the assessments on the Academic Writing course. Although this course had been designed and validated with the particular purpose to "develop the practical academic writing skills that are essential for success at undergraduate level and beyond" (Academic Writing Course Handbook), which was attempted to be developed through the use of series of portfolio tasks to support the writing of an academic essay, not all students perceived this connection. This is important to highlight, as it may not often be considered by instructors that students are not "on the same wavelength". This study hopes to highlight the need for instructors to be explicit regarding the intended outcomes of assessments, both what is

expected from the students as their products as well as what the students should achieve during the development process of the assessment.

There were some observations which suggests that students had made the connection between the two assessments, with 45.45% of students demonstrating an understanding of this connection through the questionnaire responses. This was also seen through the correlation between the questionnaire results and scores achieved for the essay and portfolio, which will be discussed further with research question two. This data suggest that some students may perceive or make assumptions about the intended meaning of an assessment, but this should be made explicit to the entire cohort to provide equal opportunity. The ways in which this can be done will be discussed subsequently.

Turning to the second research question, "how does this understanding of the intent of the assessment affect the final score received by the student?", the results from the questionnaire were compared with students' assessment scores on both the portfolio tasks and the essay. A statistically significant correlation was seen between understanding the intent of the assessments in some questionnaire responses and the assessment scores. The students receiving the highest scores for both the portfolio and the essay indicated a strong understanding of the connection between the two assessments for the course. It was suggested through the questionnaire responses that those students who scored highly in both assessments and produced a high "perception score" via the questionnaire used the portfolio tasks and feedback to inform their essay, which was seen to improve their scores. This demonstrated that the students who consistently stated that they used the content, knowledge, or skills from the portfolio tasks to aid the writing of their academic essay produced high quality assessments. Those that scored poorly on both their portfolio and essay, with lower scores on the latter assessment, did not demonstrate an understanding of the intention of either of these assessments. This provides further support for the correlation between understanding the intended purpose of the two assessments and scores on those assessments. A group of outliers were identified which provides evidence that understanding the correlation between the two assessments as intended contributed to scores. This group demonstrated this because they generally had higher scores for the portfolio, yet they did not score highly in the essay. This could be attributed to the lack of understanding of the intention behind the assessments, rather than purely low-scoring students because they were able to achieve throughout the portfolio tasks. By not using the skills developed in the portfolio, this group was unable to transfer their knowledge of the tasks, which were designed to aid in the writing of the essay, to the essay itself. These results

further suggest that the understanding of the purpose of an assessment contributes to the assessment scores achieved by students.

Conclusion

This study was designed to examine the extent to which students were able to understand the intention of an assessment, and whether this understanding contributed to their scores on the assessment and their engagement with the assessment. The study recruited students completing an Academic Writing course during their foundation year and measured their answers on a questionnaire in relation to the two interrelated assessments on the course. A questionnaire sought to determine whether students perceived the two assessments in the way intended by the course. Specifically, whether the students connected the two by using the tasks from the portfolio to develop their skills to write an academic style essay. The questionnaire also measured students' perception of each task and whether they used, or considered, the task during the writing of their essay. These results were measured against students' scores on their two assessments.

Results saw a significant correlation between portfolio and essay scores. Additionally, the scores achieved by students for these two assessments significantly correlated with their responses on a questionnaire. Those students who received high scores of their portfolio and essay generally demonstrated knowledge of a connection between the two assessments, as intended. They displayed an understanding of the purpose of the two assessments and used the skills and knowledge developed in the portfolio tasks in their essay. This was not consistent with the other students, who demonstrated a lack of understanding of the connection between the two assessments. These students consistently suggested through their questionnaire responses that they did not use the portfolio to inform or enhance their academic essay, as intended by the course's design and received lower grades for their assessments. This demonstrates the significance of providing students with clear instructions and clear aims for assessments, including details regarding their intended purpose and opportunity to check students' understanding of the intention.

As with any research, the current study has several limitations. As mentioned, out of the 58 students on the Academic Writing course across the three classes approached, only 22 students completed the questionnaire. It could be hypothesised that the students who completed the questionnaire were either engaged students or were using the questionnaire as a course review or place to complain. This could not be measured for ethical purposes because the questionnaire was given after the end of term. However, the sample, while small in number, represents a

significant and balanced proportion of the student body and allowed for a more detailed qualitative analysis of questionnaire responses. This research serves as a springboard for further research with larger groups of students, widening the scope of the participants.

Additionally, it is worth noting that these students were completing the foundation year for a variety of reasons, therefore their previous experiences and perceptions of assessments may have not been positive. This may explain the reason why some students achieved higher scores in their portfolio because it was a new concept, versus their essay, an assessment tool previously used with potentially negative connotations. Although this was not measured, it may be something to consider in future research. It would also be interesting to measure whether similar results would be seen with students completing a subject-specific course rather than a skills-based course.

This study raises the question of how the intention of an assessment can be appropriately presented to students in order to ensure sufficient understanding from all students. The students in this research who did not demonstrate an understanding of the intention between the portfolio and essay were not specifically "bad students" but rather did not perceive the assessments in the intended way. As mentioned, this connection was highlighted to the students and a mark scheme was provided; however, despite this, some students did not make this connection. This provides further evidence that students should not be passive recipients and regurgitators of information, and the creation of assessments should encourage them to take responsibility and an active role in their learning. To minimise incorrect perceptions of the purpose of an assessment, students should be encouraged to take an active role in their creation, in line with the course aims and necessary skill development. Although there is little direct evidence exists suggesting the inclusion of students in the process of assessment creation and design, investigation into this concept is recommended in future research. Similarly, the data from the present study suggests students should be made more aware of the role of assessments, which may be beneficial when involving students in decision-making or as co-creators of courses and assessments. This is especially important with the shift to online teaching and learning in wake of COVID-19. During online teaching, there is less opportunity for clarification and students can become even more passive behind their screens. It is therefore essential for lecturers and course creators alike to 1) make the assessment rubric salient and understandable, 2) explain and review the purpose of the assessment, including the skills expected to be developed during that assessment, and 3) support students throughout the assessment process, reviewing the connection between the purpose and their perception throughout the process.

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HARRIET LOWE is the pre-sessional coordinator and a lecturer at the University of Greenwich. She also worked as an MA supervisor and Academic English lecturer at the University of Westminster before joining the Postgraduate Supervisor team at UCL. She has recently completed her PhD in Applied Linguistics, with a particular focus on second language processing and individual differences, while maintaining an interest and further research in Higher Education, particularly with a student-centred focus. More details can be found on her personal website: harrietllowe.wordpress.com