Full Report

Designing Assessment Activities for All: Presenting the Perspectives of Historically Excluded Students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, the University of Bristol

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June 2024

Abbreviated terms

BAME – Black and Minority Ethnic
DEI – Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion
FSSL – Faculty of Social Sciences and Law
HE – Higher Education
ILO – Intended Learning Outcome
P – Participant
SoE – School of Education
SoL – School of Law
SoTL – Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
SPS – School for Policy Studies
UoB – University of Bristol

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Assessments are one of the cornerstones of the Higher Education (HE) experience for students. As Boud and Falchikov (2008: 3) emphasise, “assessment frames students’ views of higher education”. They signal which elements of learning are important, incentivise study, and communicate the requirements for ‘success’. Research indicates that poor experiences of assessment can have a long-term negative impact on students’ psychological health, through alienation, loss of agency and self-esteem (Mann, 2001; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Sambell, 2016). Critically, these effects are mediated by certain social, cultural, and economic factors that may predispose an individual’s adaptation to the environment and culture of HE. The notion of the ‘traditional’ HE student has developed in tandem with the social history of the institution, which in the early twentieth century was a privilege reserved for the economic elite, something which maps onto other compounding systems of privilege, such as whiteness, gender, and class. Two related phenomena have largely shaped the modern landscape of HE in the UK: universalisation and commercialisation. The universalisation of HE describes a trend towards massification, in which an explosion of post-secondary institutions during the post-war years that made HE more accessible (Zeleza, 2016). Crucially, this shift in the social demography of UK universities (Shain, 2013; Blessinger, Hoffman and Makhanya, 2018; Tai *et al.*, 2023) has changed their rationale, organisation, and governance.

Widening participation in HE is often related to social mobility in the UK, as it promotes inclusion through the enhancement of life chances for socially disadvantaged groups (Hinton-Smith, 2012). However, research shows that graduate outcomes remain worse for marginalised groups, despite enjoying the same formalised benefits of HE participation (Tomaszewski *et al.*, 2021; Mateos-González and Wakeling, 2022). Gale and Hodge (2014, cited in Gibson, 2016: 41) argue that efforts to widen participation thus constitute a ‘social justice imaginary’, in that diversity short of inclusion is better understood as a consequence of the commercialisation of HE, in which the growth of the sector is derived from the increasingly-marketized behaviour of HE institutions. This itself is a consequence of massification, as an influx in the number of HE providers compete over increasingly scare status goods and occupational outcomes (Tomlinson and Watermeyer, 2022).

Trow (2000) argues that for elite research universities (in the UK largely designated by ‘Russell Group’ status), this transition to mass education constitutes a ‘crisis’ as a rapid growth in ‘non-traditional’ students who are primarily oriented towards new skills and knowledge (see Stehr, 1998) is at odds with the historic purpose of HE institutions: access to membership of a cultural elite. Critically, this produces a tension between diversity and inclusion in HE. Beyond acceptance to HE institutions as a measure of inclusion, retention and attainment must also comprise important

indicators (Brewster, 2016). In recent years there has been a semantic shift towards the notion of 'intentional inclusion' within Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) policy circles (e.g., Ulrich *et al.*, 2022; Jepsen and Cooke, 2023), denoting a need to embed values and practices to foster diversity *within* core aspects of institutional governance, as opposed to a strategy of addendums that tends to conflate diversity with inclusion.

Operationalisations of inclusivity in assessment usually take the form of either individual adjustments or as transformation at the top-level design phase (Tai et al., 2022: 14). The former is reactive, relies on the differentiation of students (Florian, 2015), and places a larger burden on those already experiencing the compounding effects of marginalisation or exclusion. The latter could be seen as a more proactive approach, which "promote[s] the inclusion of marginalised students as fully accepted, agentic members of academic communities" (Nieminen, 2021: 1). There are significant gaps in the practical application of assessment that is 'intentionally inclusive' that relate to a lack of empirical data on this nascent theoretical direction. This research was conceptualised under an emerging thematic focus on 'students as partners' (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014), which emphasises the value of co-creation with students as an integral aspect of transforming assessment practices in education. Specifically, this study aims to operationalise this in the micro-context of a singular HE institution: the University of Bristol. The qualitative case study presented explores the perceptions of 'historically excluded' students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol on their experiences of assessment practices and inclusion. Here, 'historically excluded' refers to the identification with groups that have been historically excluded from full participation and engagement with the rights, privileges and opportunities afforded within HE (Collins-Warfield *et al.*, 2023: 55).

The University of Bristol (n.d.b) outlines three strategic priorities in its 2022-30 Assessment and Feedback Strategy: 'integrated', 'designed for all', and 'authentic'. The aim of this report is to contribute to the development and future directions related to the second priority, which aims to embed principles of inclusivity from the very inception of planning assessment activities for students. The primary objectives are to understand of how 'historically excluded' students experience assessment practices within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law (FSSL) at the University of Bristol and use these insights to generate contextually situated recommendations for practice that will enhance the inclusivity of assessment practices within this study's field.

2. Conceptual Framework

In this research context, an assessment is defined as a measurement of student learning. These inform our understanding of student 'success' by establishing grades (as a quantitative performance indicator) as well as instructing a continuous

feedback loop of learning (Figure 1). The latter relate to what Collins-Warfield *et al.* (2023) understand as the broader psycho-social outcomes of learning, such as fostering the development of a 'growth mindset' and the ability to integrate knowledge. Rust (2002: 1) also characterises assessment as a "quality assurance mechanism", for both internal (i.e., for the use of students and their educators) and external (i.e., as conferring value within the broader system of social and financial capital) purposes. The tension between these two is characterised in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literature as heterogeneous 'assessment *of* learning' and 'assessment *for* learning' cultures (Gipps, 1994; Sambell, Gibson and Montgomery, 2007; Wiliam, 2011).

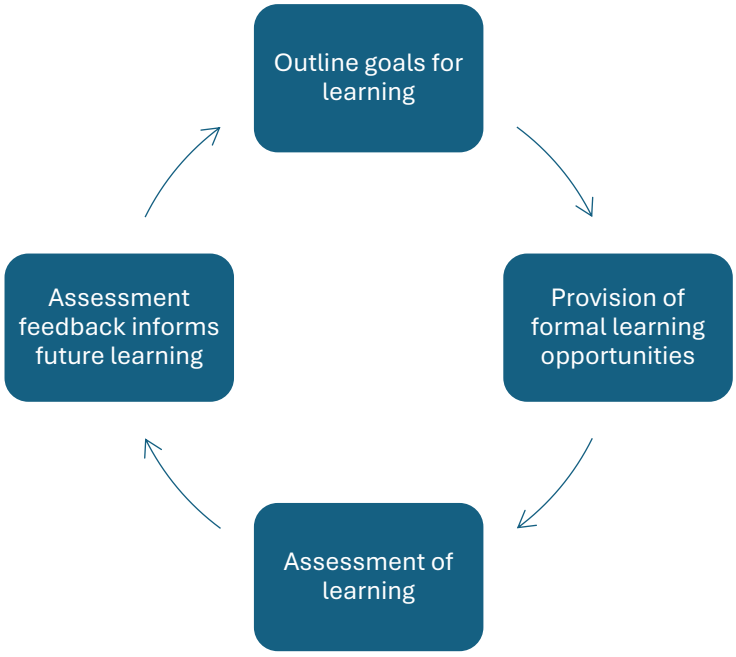

Figure 1: Learning as a continuous feedback loop (adapted from Suskie, 2018)

Assessment practices have both moral and practical significance. Boud (2000: 159) describes this as the 'double duty' of assessment: on the surface assessments function as tools for learning and certification, but equally, they are also "an act of communication about what we value". As Hanesworth (2019) points out, "[a]ssessment in higher education is neither value-neutral nor culture-free: within its procedures, structures and systems it codifies cultural, disciplinary and individual norms, values and knowledge hierarchies". Critically, this means that assessments have implications for inclusion: they are 'practices' in the sociological sense that they (re)produce a specific set of social relations.

From a review of the assessment literature, three features are identified as contributing to their prospective inclusivity: assessment types, formats, and timings. Assessment types refer to their instructional purpose. In the context of HE, assessment types tend to be categorised as formative or summative, differing in

certain theoretical and philosophical aspects. Formative assessments do not bear credited weight, meaning they are intended to *monitor* the learning of students (Sambell, 2013). They are therefore characterised as a constructive learning tool designed for the specific audience of students and their educators, helping to clarify expectations and develop students' assessment literacy (Irons and Elkington, 2021a). Feedback is a key component of formative assessment as it identifies principles that can improve future work. 'Good' feedback has a more powerful influence on students' learning that almost any other factor (Winstone and Boud, 2019) and therefore is also seen as a facilitator for inclusion.

Conversely, summative assessments are credited weight-bearing and therefore are a *measure* of how much students have learned for an external audience. Grades are important credentials for progression to further study or into the labour market and therefore have material consequence for students. Rust (2002: 1) argues that assessments ought to "be seen as an intrinsic part of the learning process rather than something which is just 'tacked on' at the end in order to get some marks". This underscores the importance of variation in assessment type in light of their different instructional purposes.

Assessment formats are conceptualised as the specifics of task, which are designed to test competencies in different skills. Assessment formats are commonly related to two factors: purpose/validity (*does the task assess the skills that you want it to?*) and authenticity (*can these skills be placed into a recognisable 'real world' context?*). Contemporary market forces have induced a greater focus on employability, which in tandem with the changing nature of the labour market in the UK has changed the suite of assessment formats common within HE courses (Wiggins, 1990; Cranmer, 2006).

Assessment timings refer to the temporal spread of assessment activities and the trajectory of credit weighting across that time period. Research has indicated that negative emotional responses to assessments are primarily resultant of the timing and weighting of assessment (Wass *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, where institutions have a modular degree structure, there is an increase in assessment frequency and a disproportionate focus on summative assessment (Sursock and Smidt, 2010; Jessop, McNab and Gubby, 2012). The practice of modularisation, in which the curriculum is divided into smaller, independent, and nonsequential modules or units, has become the norm in UK HE institutions. The discrete bounding of credit-bearing units promotes a system of outcome-based learning and continuous assessment (Dejene, 2019), which some argue promotes an approach to learning that under-develops key skills such as synthesis and discourages in-depth topical engagement (Boud and Falchikov, 2008; Pekrun, 2011; Trigwell, Ellis and Han, 2012; Kahu *et al.*, 2015; Grayson, 2021; Irons and Elkington, 2021a, p. 15). Alongside factors such as larger class sizes and overextension of staff responsibilities, this also makes the delivery of personalised, detailed, and timely feedback more difficult.

3. *Research Questions*

This research project was guided by the following research questions:

> **Q1.** How do historically excluded students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law define ‘inclusive assessments’?
>
> **Q2.** How are the types, formats, and timings of assessment activities related to inclusivity by historically excluded students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol?

These aim to operationalise an understanding of the perceptions of historically excluded students in a specific empirical context, as relating to their experience of assessments in HE. The interpretation of this data is used to generate substantive recommendations for practice.

4. *Methodology*

4.1. Approach to research

This research was conducted in my capacity as a Student Fellow at the Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching, University of Bristol. The project theme, ‘Designed for All Assessment Activities’, intended to facilitate the inclusion of student voice in the current discourse surrounding assessment and feedback within (and beyond) the University, specifically in relation to ‘inclusivity’. This research operationalises the ‘students as partners’ approach to HE development, which uses student voice as an instrument to promote inclusion (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014; Gibson, 2016).

4.2. Data collection

Semi-structured focus groups were used to collect qualitative data. Participants were recruited through posters around campus and student email bulletins that communicated information about the study’s aims and purpose (Appendix A). The inclusion criteria were current undergraduate and postgraduate taught students within the FSSL at the University of Bristol that self-identified as ‘historically excluded’. This term was a deliberate methodological choice, selected above other means of categorisation (such as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘widening participation’ students) in order to underscore the deliberate nature of historical barriers to HE access in a system that was originally designed for a specific privileged minority (Hockings, 2010: 2; Cardemil, 2018: 272). Such social categories might extend to those such as race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, age, and parental status. Hancock (2007: 63-64) argues that intersectionality ought to refer to “both a

normative theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research that emphasises the interaction of categories of difference (including, but not limited to race, gender, class, and sexual orientation)". Currently, research on inclusive assessment tends to be siloed into these as static entities, ignoring the compounding nature of oppression they entail (Heng and White, 2019: 95). A further benefit of self-categorisation of 'historically excluded' was the prevention of harm to participants, as it circumvented more-sensitive topics such as race and sexuality, as opposed to the shared experiential qualities that might arise from belonging to the more amorphous category of being 'historically excluded'.

Insofar as assessment practices in HE reflect disciplinary norms and practices, meaningful evaluation ought to be contextually situated. Having been a student within the FSSL between 2018-2023 I was able to negotiate access to students and other key gatekeepers with relative ease due to my position as 'insider'. Furthermore, while there are a variety of schools captured by the mantle of Social Sciences and Law, the foundational assumptions and practices of disciplines overlap enough to warrant it as a distinct unit of analysis. The FSSL offer a combined 110 undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, boasting a total of 7,774 students in 2019/20 (University of Bristol, n.d.a). Widening participation initiatives such as the Access to Bristol and Next Steps Bristol scheme have been relatively successful in diversifying the student population in recent years. Therefore, my pool of potential participants was relatively large.

The composition of the focus groups followed a single-category design (Krueger and Casey, 2015: 70), placing the focus on a shared 'historically excluded' experiential category rather than the segmentation of identity groups. It is suggested that three single-category focus groups will sufficiently capture the breadth of themes within a topic (Gilflores and Alonso, 1995; Guest, Namey and McKenna, 2017). Participants were briefed with a participant information sheet (Appendix B) and signed consent forms (Appendix C). The question guide encompassed topics such as perceptions of 'inclusive assessments', experiences relating to different types, formats, and timings of assessment, and evaluation of instruments such as feedback and grading rubrics (Appendix D). I produced 28 cards, with different types and formats of assessments written on one side and their definitions on the other. I invited participants to pick up and inspect these cards as a springboard to the discussion of questions 4a-d. Between questions 4b and 4c, I invited the students to sort the cards as a group, which was successful in prompting debate between participants with differing views and therefore elicited more in-depth data.

4.3. Data analysis

The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in four steps, loosely based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) thematic analysis approach: (1) initial coding (semantic); (2) second level coding (latent); (3) initial themes; (4)

iterative refinement of themes in conversation with the literature (writing up phase). Thematic analysis offered a flexible approach that was useful for an exploratory study of this nature. While the study had a theoretical focus (in that its design was based upon a specific empirical problem set within a specific institution), I developed semantic themes in order to help "bring the voices of students alive in the discussion" (Richardson, 2000, cited in Jessop, 2023: 34). These are presented in the results section of this report. The subsequent discussion aims to translate these findings into recommendations for practice.

5. Results

The qualitative data were used to infer students' perceptions of how to define 'inclusive assessment' (RQ1) and how they relate assessment types, formats, and timings to inclusion. The results are conveyed here with a focus on direct quotation in order to present the views of students as authentically as possible.

5.1. RQ1: Defining 'inclusive assessments' in the research context

Broadly, students' experiential definitions of inclusion were related to four criteria: accessibility, empowerment, belonging, and wellbeing.

5.1.1. Accessibility

The SoTL literature has traditionally focused on disability as a social category when conceptualising the remit 'inclusivity'. Indeed, this was reflected in the data:

> "*The first thing came to my mind was not necessarily based on like, race, per se, it was more so like, when I think of assessment and I think equality and assessment, I would think* […] *maybe disabilities like learning disabilities and accessibility terms*." (P10, international postgraduate student, SoL)

However, this was expanded to a broader notion of accessibility of information:

> "*[W]hen the teacher prepares the material, they have to think and how the student will receive the information, or how they will perform the same assignment*." (P4, mature international postgraduate student, SPS)

Students operationalised 'accessibility' in terms of the clarity of information received in relation to assessments, such as question wording and clarity of assessment criteria:

> "*[L]ike the way things are phrased, or also like the grading criteria… I know, with people I've talked to, it's unfamiliar for a lot of people how like, what does it mean?*" (P8)

"…*the interpretation of the questions, some of them are, like so vague, they're so vague*." (P10, international postgraduate student, SoL)

"…*what comes to mind is accessibility and inclusivity. Particularly with like the wording of like assessment questions. For example, because I know that with my cohort, it's quite international, and I guess sometimes the wording may not come across the same way as it would to like a home student*." (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE)

5.1.2. Empowerment

Inclusion was also conceptualised as empowerment. While accessibility relates to a responsibility for staff, empowerment captured the agency of students in this interaction:

"*For me, that whenever an assessment is announced, everyone does not just start panicking on what to do about it. It's like they already know, that it's already ingrained within them, how to proceed with the assessment […] I think that's the thing, if it's something that everyone can understand […] then I think that is an inclusive assessment because everyone knows where they stand and there is a base understanding that provides a fair opportunity*." (P7, international postgraduate student, SoL)

The data identified choice and freedom as key substantive mechanisms through which empowerment might be actualised in assessment practices:

"*…you have enough choice in the actual questions that you can choose which area to focus on more* […] *that's something that I would say, would make it designed for everyone."* (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL)

5.1.3. Belonging

Students made a conceptual link between assessment practices and the sense of belonging to an academic community at the University of Bristol. This was based upon the institutional values that assessment practices communicated to students and how this constructed in-groups and out-groups:

"*[T]here's no room to talk about; how does it work in another jurisdiction? Because they're so focused to make you learn the UK law. And it's like what if the UK law is wrong? How about the Mexican perspective or the Malaysian perspective?*" (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL)

Interestingly, the data also pointed to the role of physical place in constructing these categories:

> "*[T]hey don't have like, for some reason, the classroom size or like the lecture hall size to accommodate for us. Which is insane considering how big the Uni is. So I feel like that would help in terms of like, again with student, lecturer, Professor, whatever you want to call it, relations*." (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE)

> "*[C]onsidering that we're doing psych in education, we're never in the psych or the education building for lectures, we're always in the math building, or at Wills or something, which also kind of makes it seem like they're not, I don't know, prepared for us?*" (P8)

5.1.4. Wellbeing

Wellbeing outcomes were also associated with inclusive assessment practice in that experiences of perceived exclusion cultivated negative emotions in students. Indeed, emotive language was a key feature of the data. A word frequency analysis in NVivo revealed that the word "stressful" was counted 29 times, "struggle" 20 times, "anxiety" nine times, and "panic" twice.

5.2. RQ2: Relating the types, formats, and timings of assessments to inclusive practice

5.2.1. Assessment types

In the HE context, assessment types constitute both formative (non-credited weight bearing) and summative (credited weight bearing) categories, both with different purposes in teaching and learning. The data highlighted the role that different types of transitions which 'historically excluded' students face have in shaping learning preferences in regard to assessment. Participant 3, a first-year international undergraduate student from the School of Law, pointed out that many international students "*aren't kind of used to that system [of learning]*".

Formative assessments were understood as a tool for confidence-building, as students were able to familiarise themselves with the specific expectations of assessments in a low-stakes environment:

> "*[D]esigned for all […] it's an assessment that you have been prepared for by your tutor, so maybe through formatives or through maybe class discussions that, so you know what to expect*." (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL)

> "*So, just learning things won't be enough. I really, we need to practice on how these things are being done to be assessed, right?*" (P9, mature international postgraduate student, SoB)

Self-efficacy, students' perceived capability for learning, is a key cognitive variable influencing student engagement. Given the positive correlation of factors such as socioeconomic status with latent self-efficacy, assessment tasks relating to the development of such can be seen to promote inclusion (Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2022).

However, an alternative perspective was proffered by Participant 1, a time-poor mature postgraduate student working 24 hours a week alongside full-time study:

> RG: *Who put that down there?* [referring to 'formative' card being placed next to 'hate it']
> P1: *That was me!*
> RG: *Can you elaborate?*
> P1: *Yeah, of course. And so that just goes with my, my panic over how much time there is for me to do everything in a week […] if it's something that I have to put a lot of time into it, I want it to be marked*.

Critically, the inclination towards formatives was dependant on the quality of feedback, which helped students establish links between learning experiences:

> P1: *…they can be so useful before you've got your summative and to make sure that you're writing in the right style—*
> P2: *--I mean if you get the right feedback.*

This also extended to the perceived 'relatedness' of specific formative and summative assessments:

> *"The summative was a type of assessment that's very new to everyone, and that wasn't in the formative, so that really sort of gave us a panic attack – literally! – because we were not familiar with how to do that assessment.*" (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL)

5.2.2. Assessment formats

Assessment formats were conceptualised as the specific tasks which students were required to complete. Here, different formats are designed to establish competence in different skills. Currently, there is an appeal to diversify assessment formats in order to maximise opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery. However, the data contradicted this perspective. Many students indicated that they preferred 'traditional' assessment formats, such as examinations and essays:

> "*I'm a writing machine. They, all my assessments [are] essays. I feel quite comfortable with that because if someone asked me to do like a podcast, I will struggle a lot.*" (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL)

> "*I did feel like I knew what an essay, like what was required.*" (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL)

> "*I feel comfortable because it's very consistent.*" (P6, first-year undergraduate BAME home student)

Given the divergence of requirements that undergird different assessment formats, a clear limitation on the repertoire of skills that they are required to demonstrate allowed students to better familiarise themselves with specific task-related expectations. This also related to the availability of clear and comprehensible assessment criteria: "*I think on the things that we've put love, these are the things that I feel like we're most clearly told what the assessment criteria is.*" (P1, mature postgraduate student, SoL).

This perceived familiarity was linked to more positive wellbeing outcomes. Where new formats of assessment were introduced, students emphasised that they did not want them to be credit-bearing: "*I think I would like to maybe learn how to do that. But again, I wouldn't want my grade based on it*" (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL). In the context of group-based assessment, students felt the effects of uncertainty more strikingly:

> "*It stresses me out knowing that my grades are dependent on someone who I have never spoken to*." (P1, mature postgraduate student, SoL)

> "*I wouldn't want my grade based on group work [all laugh] You can never, like judge everyone's grades on that group*." (P6, first-year undergraduate BAME home student)

However, this view is predicated on a framework for learning that privileges outcomes (i.e., grades) over process (i.e., skills development). Unsurprisingly, a positive view of varied assessment formats was more prevalent when students valued the development of skills over grades:

> "*So, in terms of actual assessment, I like that the diversity of it prepares you for kind of like the role, like the various roles, because it's not just about like teaching, because everyone like initially thinks like, if you want to go into policy, they prepare you for that with the policy module and the policy document analysis thing*." (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE)

Attention to credentials was more pronounced in international students, postgraduates, and mature students in the study sample, who tended to place more emphasis on a degree from Bristol as a form of financial exchange, to be 'cashed in' upon (re-)entrance to the labour market:

> "*[E]ven if I do learn a lot of things, I do not, I wouldn't know how to demonstrate that to a potential employer. Like, I'd say: I know a lot! I have 15 minutes for an interview to demonstrate what I know. I cannot just tell him that I know everything about this particular subject. So… he will obviously look at my grades."* (P7, international postgraduate student, SoL)

The data pointed to choice as an important aspect of inclusivity. A choice in the format of assessment would allow students the agency to play to their strengths when needed:

> "*I do think because I'm doing a Master's, so the university's expectation is that I already know some sort of skills to build on that during my Master's. So I feel like I already had a grasp on what I needed to do. But, I don't think that's true for everyone. That's why coming to my, the first point that I made about inclusivity, about everyone having different things that are comfortable with, and trying to express the knowledge that have gained*." (P7, international postgraduate student, SoL)

However, this raises the issue of feasibility. The same Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and grading criteria may not be fairly assessed through different formats. A middle ground is providing as much choice as possible *within* the format. This may go beyond the common practice of providing choice of essay questions, but rather making the assessed curriculum more dialogical in the design phase. This relates to the relinquishing of common assumptions of prior knowledge and making space for epistemological diversity within HE.

5.2.3. Assessment timings

Assessment timings were conceptualised as the spread of assessment activities across a time period and the accompanying trajectory of credited weight.

A greater frequency of assessments across a given time period are thought to be normatively desirable based on two principles: more equitable opportunities for learning and a lessened role of circumstance in attainment.

Extraneous events can also influence the abilities of students to complete assessments. Regarding end of year exams, one student claimed:

> "*It was like your entire performance over the year has been condensed into like three-hour paper, which can be very jarring because you don't necessarily, like, you might not perform your best on that day. And that that and then that is the reflection of your entire year which I found to be really unfair.*" (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL)

The data also supported the assertion that an increased frequency of assessments within a given time period facilitated a sense of 'build', in which students had more opportunities to implement formative learning experiences:

> "*I feel like it's, like it's becoming slightly more manageable* […] *it was all new to me, I think I'm slightly getting more on top of stuff, getting more used to over time*." (P6, first-year undergraduate BAME home student)

> "*When you move to a different country to study here, like or if you have a background that isn't really, you know, intellectual, and then you suddenly informed in a particular situation of course you'll start slow, and it will take you some time to get on your feet*." (P7, international postgraduate student, SoL)

> "*[E]specially because like, if other like Malaysian students who aren't kind of use that system, I feel like they would kind of benefit from having more frequent assessments rather than like one than the end of the year*." (P3, international first-year undergraduate student, SoL)

On the other hand, higher numbers of assessments during the academic year are related to the practice of modularisation, which I have established is linked to 'surface' approaches to learning. The data provided further evidence for this conclusion:

> "*We do the module, we do the assessment, and then we forget everything about that module. So like, we've spent all that time learning it, only to just forget it and go on to the next one, then forget it and then keep doing that every single year until you've done your degree and you're like, 'What have I actually learned?' […] because you're just so used to cracking it out and calling the day after that*." (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE)

It is suggested that compared to the 'traditional' HE student, 'historically excluded' students are required to navigate multiple transitions upon entry. Participant 4, a mature international postgraduate student from the School for Policy Studies, provides insight into this exigency:

> *"[Y]ou have to discover all the things like, fast […] if we're international it's more difficult […] we receive a lot of information and surveys and a lot of things from the university, but also we lack of information about NHS, about*

the dentist if we have a problem with our teeth, if we have a problem with, I don't know, your computer…"

This additional load would therefore be compounded by an increased assessment workload, thereby reducing the depth at which students are able to engage with each individual activity.

Furthermore, the data links assessment activities with short-term negative wellbeing outcomes:

> "*So right now because I'm like in the midst of like assessments, and it's like, everything's happening at the same time, so I'm perhaps a bit more stressed than usual in like, my other areas, like my personal life is taking a hit right now because I'm like, cooking properly, or maybe like, you know, not really looking after things. But, because I'm more focused on studying and making sure that all my assessments are ready by the by their deadlines*." (P5, international postgraduate student, SoL)

An increase in the frequency of assessments might then amplify the consequences thereof.

6. Discussion and implications for practice

The following section discusses the implications of the study's findings, translating these into recommendations for inclusive practice. Conceptualising student experiences of assessment as a relational process (Figure 2), the following discussion is segmented by three essential layers of this process: 'learning culture', 'communicating expectations', and 'asking for help'.

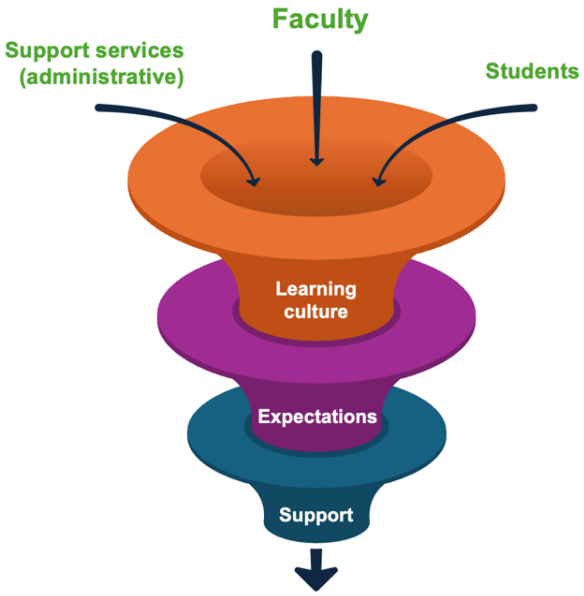

Figure 2: The student experience of assessment conceptualised as a relational process

6.1. Learning culture

Learning culture refer to the constellations of customs, practices, and values that communities develop to organise the joint activity of learning (Nasir *et al.*, 2014). These are dynamically shaped by both material (resources, policy, physical environment) and immaterial (social, political, economic) contexts. An inclusive learning culture fosters an environment for learning that provides equitable access to resources, equal opportunity for 'success', and emphasises collaboration and a sense of belonging. The data evidenced a perceptual link between an inclusive learning culture and inclusive assessment practices:

> *"I think it's like the culture of the school that kind of shapes the way that everyone like, perceives each other and works in the learning environment that obviously leads to assessment."* (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE)

The prevalent learning culture is both shaped by and productive of students' learning motivations. Irons and Elkington's (2021b: 33–34) typology of learning motivations classifies extrinsic (driven by external factors such as employment prospects), intrinsic (driven by a desire for subject-specific learning), competitive (driven by competition with peers) and social (driven by a desire to please others). Research indicates that assessment practices inform learning motivations in more significant ways than classroom-based learning activities (Higher Education Academy, 2012), yet there is a paucity of research on the relationship between the former in empirical contexts. The data provides an insight into the ways that cultures of learning shape the experiences of assessments for 'historically excluded' students through the forging of distinct learning identities based upon the perceived values of the institution. In this research context, the Russell Group status of the University of Bristol and the increasing tendency to view students as 'consumers' can be seen to foster extrinsic and competitive learning motivations. This was mirrored in the data: students expressed that they applied for their respective courses based on "*the league tables"* (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE) and the university's "*reputation as one of the world's highest-ranking universities*" (P9, mature international postgraduate student, SoB). Furthermore, one student said that peer assessment "*kind of remind[ed them] of Traitor*" (P7, international postgraduate student, SoL), a reality TV show in which contestants are placed in a team but secretly play against one another. Indeed, the modern practice of individualised assessment tends to de-emphasise collaboration (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999: 418). Irons and Elkington (2021b) conclude that a greater emphasis on formative assessments promotes intrinsic learning motivations in students, which shapes a learning culture of tolerance and reciprocity.

The data also provide an insight into the role that physical place plays in fostering a shared learner identity unique to the University of Bristol. An increase in online and

asynchronous learning has emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, now framed as a strategy to deal with rising class sizes and over-extended staff. This has undoubtedly impacted the learning culture within HE institutions. One student claimed: *"there's no distinction between being here studying a taught masters, than doing it online. Because all the classes are recorded. And pretty much what I have to do is go to my room and read the whole paper that they give me, and prepare my essay"* (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL).

As Goralnik (*et al.*, 2012: 424) point out, relationships are woven together with emotion and place-based education in order to form distinct learning cultures with the potential to unite students. To illustrate, one student recounted a situation where they had a seminar in a room without enough seats to accommodate the number of students in the class. This lack of accommodation within the physical learning environment appeared to impact their perception of belonging within the institution: *"if they can have smaller seminars rather than have the whole class, the whole lecture cohort, in one tiny room […] I feel like that would help in terms of student, lecturer, Professor, whatever you want to call it, relations"* (P8). Both factors are therefore integral to ensuring that assessments are 'designed for all', in that they shape the learning motivations and capabilities of students.

Students' engagement with learning and their emotional wellbeing are linked by the concept of 'pedagogies of care', which emphasise the role "of relationships, of connections, and of care" (Gravett, Taylor and Fairchild, 2024: 387) within teaching and learning. A focus on relationality highlights how assessment practices are entangled with structures of power in higher education: they are tools that legitimise and reproduce the authority of the academic. This traditional view of students as passive receivers of knowledge manifests as the quandary presented by different groups having understandings of what 'feedback' means in relation to assessment activities. Sambell, Gibson and Montgomery (2007) highlight that academic staff commonly feel that a disproportionate amount of their time and resources are spent providing assessment feedback that is not effectively applied, yet students tend to express that they feel they don't get enough feedback to improve. The most common complaint presented by students was lack of quality feedback, thereby supporting this observation. A shift from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning problematises a model of feedback that places tutors as sole agents in a unilateral process. By redefining feedback as an ongoing, dialogical process in which the outcome is "transformational moments of understanding" (ibid: 9), students are encouraged to situate the broader activity of learning within individual assessment activities. Coined by (Flavell, 1979), metacognition refers to the suite of cognitive and affective experiences that form an individual's knowledge of their intellectual enterprise. The process of 'conscious raising', in which students are supported to recognise different sources of feedback and support in assessments, is one way of operationalising this shift. In fact, one student meditated on this in the focus groups:

“I was complaining about written feedback, but then I remembered, it’s not the only feedback” (P6, first-year undergraduate BAME home student).

6.2. Communicating expectations

Perhaps one of the most influential sociological studies on the role of assessment in students’ academic lives, Snyder's (1970) concept of the ‘hidden curriculum’ describes a parallel set of explicit and implicit expectations. The former constitutes what is stated in the formal curriculum and the latter is understood to be the set of expectations shaped by latent assumptions and social context (Joughin, 2010). Indeed, one of the key aspects that students associated with ‘inclusivity’ was a sense of clear and explicitly stated expectations. Insofar as assessments signal the values of a given educational system, it should not be assumed that this is equally intuitive to all learners. Diversity of national culture, socio-economic background, and cognition (to name only a few categories) manifest as different expectations of the purpose and outcome of HE. According to Crozier *et al.* (2010, cited in Hockings, 2010: 11) students’ learner identities are moulded by an amalgamation an individuals’ life experiences, including their social circumstances, previous schooling, and cultural upbringing. Given the normative culture of HE institutions, ‘historically excluded’ students must then create ‘hybrid identities’ through the deconstruction and reconstruction of their social and class identities (*ibid*). Crucially, this view of the ‘traditional’ HE student influences institutional resources, curricula, and assessment practices (Hamshire, Forsyth and Player, 2018: 122). In this UK, this has manifested as an attainment gap in HE, in which there is evidence to suggest that White British students have higher levels of attainment than students from other ethnic groups, despite similar levels of academic engagement (Richardson, 2011: 134). Attainment gaps are clear moral issues in education, which Kaur, Noman and Nordin (2017: 757) argue can be remedied through inclusive assessment practices.

Key mechanisms through which expectations are communicated to students are ILOs, assessment criteria, and grading rubrics. University of Bristol guidance states that ILOs “define what a learner will have acquired and will be able to do upon successfully completing their studies” (Academic Quality and Policy Office, n.d.). These are provided at the start of a programme or unit and are crucial for students to form their approaches to learning. The data indicated that ILOs are often lost within the sheer mass of information that students consume during academic transitions. The higher burden of these cultural and environmental shifts for ‘historically excluded’ students means that this information becomes less accessible, particularly as students appear to acknowledge the subjectivity of these.

The data also indicated a certain mystique within the language used to communicate expectations. For many groups of ‘historically excluded’ students, UK-specific scholastic skills and English language proficiency are key hurdles to assessment performance (Alt and Raichel, 2021). Alongside accessibility, coherence and clarity

were also important aspects for students, who expressed a difficulty to understand how certain language was being used in student-facing documents and the implications for academic practice: *"Usually in terms of the ILOs it just says like […] high level of critical evaluation should be present in the essay. So … there is no clarity on what is the high level"* (P9, mature international postgraduate student, SoB).

This issue relates to normatively prescribed expectations of prior learning: *"They prepare the material thinking [that] the students have the same abilities, the same skills. And it's like there is not a baseline like, and all of us are very different because we have, we have many different experiences"* (P4, mature international postgraduate student, SPS). Alt and Raichel (2021) argue that diversity is often treated as something which requires compensatory education and that this can cause students to devalue 'foreign' knowledge, culture, and language. Their notion of culturally responsive assessment practices therefore aims to promote inclusion in the context of increasingly diverse HE landscape. This strategy is an outcome-based approach that extends beyond merely adapting instructional methods to cater to the needs of diverse learners, but rather deliberately employs strategies that recognize and honour the diverse cultural backgrounds and learning styles of students as they work towards academic achievement (ibid: 6). Here, what is means to be an 'expert' or 'authority' is redefined in a critical rebalancing of power, a symbolic element of the diversification of HE.

Co-creation is another mechanism through which the culture of HE can be actively shaped by its inhabitants. This can be realised through co-productive practices such as co-design of the curriculum, responsive feedback loops, and student fellowship schemes. Rooted in critical pedagogy, the notion of 'students as partners' conceptualises a dialogic approach to assessment as leading to the creation of "empowered autonomous learners" (Bain, 2010: 14). For example, Irons and Elkington (2021b: 32) suggest that co-creation principles could be applied to assessment and feedback by asking students to indicate the parameters of the feedback they wish to receive, thereby making the process more dialogical and tackling the dissonance of feedback expectations as proposed by Sambell, Gibson and Montgomery (2007).

Research by Hagar and Jabareen (2016) suggests that 'minority' students prefer teacher-centred rather than autonomous learning environments. Maringe and Sing (2014: 772–773) theorise that cultural norms relating to a continuum of collectivism-individualism within a given society influence how students relate to the role of teachers and preferences for group learning in HE. This is consistent with the data presented here, as lectures and seminars were identified as key spaces to communicate the specific expectations of HE learning and assessment, which may not be as intuitive for 'historically excluded' groups due to the normative nature of HE. Alongside student-facing materials such as unit handbooks, ILOs could be better

integrated into face-to-face learning. Pairing these with the use of worked examples and formative assessments is therefore essential to ensure these are both accessible and tangible.

Another mechanism through which expectations are communicated to students is assessment feedback. The data affirmed ‘good’ feedback as an integral component of inclusive assessment:

> *“When I was an undergrad, I did a, a thesis […] I thought it was a good work. But when I came here I saw like their standards are so higher. And with my formatives, I realised that I didn't know how to write. I had some feedback, that it was helpful. And I think that helps me a lot to improve my, my essays”* (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL)

Here, ‘good’ feedback was framed as having a palpability that enabled its utilisation in the improvement of further work:

> *“I kind of received kind of general comments, like: ‘needs more analysis’… but I kind of wish I have more guidance of like, how I could do that […] I don't really know how to progress forwards from them.”* (P3, international first-year undergraduate student, SoL)

Conversely, students felt confused by inconsistencies in expectations across teachers and units, which amounted to the ‘moving of goal posts’:

> “*I think that they all the professor have different approaches and different focuses […] There is no standard, for example, in the way that you have to write or if you're using your references correctly.*” (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL)

While it is unrealistic to expect individual written feedback to provide comprehensive instruction, more attention to how these specific academic skills work in the practice of different assessment formats would ensure that all students, regardless of prior learning, can interpret written feedback on an equal footing.

6.3. Asking for help

The final aspect of student experience of assessment within this model relates to means of support, conceptualised here as the theme ‘asking for help’. This is relevant to ‘designed for all’ assessment practices as comprehensive support mechanisms promote equitable chances for ‘success’ in assessments. In recent decades, much of the literature has focused on an after-the-fact approach to building in mechanisms of inclusion to assessment practices. This is largely practiced through the procedure of extensions and extenuating circumstances. However, the

data highlight that these processes assume all students have similar capacity to engage with them. This was particularly true for international students who faced additional cultural and bureaucratic hurdles:

> *"I felt that it was a huge bureaucratic process that gives me more stress and make me feel like… applying for an extension is going to take me long to read how to do, what to do it, where to find it. And that's then, I need to focus on my essays. For if I had to gather the evidence I need to go to the GP. And that's another bureaucratic procedure that I don't want to get into if I have to submit essays […] it was pretty hard to understand how it works."* (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL)

Home students responded more positively, highlighting that support was available as long as you knew where to look and how to ask: *"I think it's definitely the attitude that […] if you need help, you do have to ask for it. And just to tell people what they want, and then normally, those needs are able to be met"* (P1, mature home postgraduate student, SoL).

By reference to 'asking for help', I seek to highlight the vector of responsibility for this task. In a process lead by students, it is not enough to have support readily available if certain groups of students feel they cannot ask for it. The data identified robust staff-student working relationships as a key facilitator to asking for help with assessments as well as fostering a sense of belonging. Large class sizes, reduced teacher-student ratios, and 'rotating' teaching staff were identified as barriers to establishing these and therefore a barrier to effective channels for asking for help:

> *"You can't build a relationship with a lecturer, which means you're also not like, gonna maybe in some cases, find the courage to say, 'I have a question'."* (P8)

Many also indicated that a perception of heavy staff workloads promoted them to consult online resources rather than asking their teacher for help:

> RG: *So, when you do have issues like that, where you're trying to interpret an assessment and what you need to do, what are, where do you go to find information?*
> P9: *Just use online.*
> P8: *Google.*
> P10: *Google.*
> P8: *I mean, I can try to email the professor, but they have so many emails sometimes they don't see it.*

These teaching conditions are part and parcel of the current economic climate in which the dynamics of marketisation, increased student mobility, and massification

are deep-seated. Research has shown that larger class sizes reduce student engagement, promotes 'surface' approaches to learning, and reduces the quality of both verbal and written feedback (Maringe and Sing, 2014: 769-770). These issues particularly negatively impact students that fall into the so-called 'non-traditional' group, given the unique challenges that emanate from this categorisation. In light of this, pedagogic practices must be transformed to ensure both quality and equity of learning.

Overall, students recognised that support *was* available, however the seemingly complex and diffuse nature of these networks made them difficult to navigate. The massification of HE has led to a diversification in staff involved in service delivery in the sector, offering a full range of student services (Banta, Palomba and Kinzie, 2014: 7). This increase in the potential avenues for support was often seen by students as confusing: *"we have like a senior tutor, personal tutor, mental health tutor, wellbeing tutor. So if I…there's so much information, as she was saying, so I don't know how to approach one of those"* (P2, mature international postgraduate student, SoL).

Finally, the data indicated that 'historically excluded' students felt they needed more support with academic skills, rather than the content of their units, in order to feel confident completing assessments:

> *"I kind of misunderstood kind of how to do, or like write an essay properly, and like the format, so I feel like if we would get given more guidance beforehand with regards to like essay planning, it could have been really helpful."* (P3, international first-year undergraduate student, SoL)
>
> *"If they prepare you a bit more, or if they teach you the skills, rather than just feeding you content."* (P11, undergraduate BAME home student, SoE)

Better integration of differentiated support services (such as subject librarians and academic writing advisors) into teaching activities through signposting and demonstrations of use by teaching staff would help to ensure students are confident in seeking out these services for more specialised support.

7. Conclusion

While the landscape of HE has certainly become more diverse in recent years, there is an evident shortfall as to the experiences of inclusion by certain groups. As Hager and Jabareen (2016: 463) point out, minority students have further to go to bridge the different cultures of their own community and that of the modern neoliberal campus. Prevalent views of the 'traditional' HE student assume that everyone enters HE with similar skills and experiences, but this is not the case. One aspect of student

experience which is consistently highlighted as needing the most improvement is that of assessment and feedback (Winstone and Boud, 2019).

This aims of this report were to advocate for the inclusion of perspectives from 'historically excluded' students in discussions on inclusive assessments that are happening within the study's field. Banta, Palomba and Kinzie (2014) outline an approach to the continuous improvement of assessment practices as involving engagement of all stakeholders, generating consensus on key terms (here, 'inclusive assessment'), and communicating findings to stakeholders as a means to improve processes in institutional planning. The research findings have therefore been disseminated as a suite of materials intended to engage a broad range of practitioners. Alongside this full report is an executive summary, a three-part blog series, and a creative format that was designed in partnership with a student artist based in Bristol.

The analysis of RQ1 indicated that students defined the essence of 'inclusive assessment' through reference to accessibility, empowerment, belonging, and wellbeing. The results of RQ2 were presented within a framework that related key features of assessment practices to perceptions of inclusion by the study population. Students understood that different types of assessments had different learning purposes and emphasised the role of formative assessments in providing opportunities of development that ensured equitable chances of 'success' for all. Likewise, the data showed that students' understandings of what different formats required (both in terms of formal provision and the 'hidden curriculum') was influenced by their background and experiences. It was evident that varied formats provided maximum opportunity for students' academic development, but with the caveat that this was predicated on the comprehensibility and transparency of expectations associated with the task. Finally, discussion of timings reflected a similar need to provide learning opportunities that 'build up' to weight bearing assessment, so that quantifiable measures of student 'success' were deemed to be captured on a more level field. These aspects of assessment design would, in the perspectives of 'historically excluded' students within the FSSL at the University of Bristol, make them 'designed for all'.

The framework that organised the discussion was derived from a model of student experiences of assessment that conceptualised it as a relational process relating to learning culture, communicating expectations, and asking for help. Recognising that learner identities vary based on prior experience, culture, and social circumstances, key measures of success (e.g., ILOs, marking criteria) must be integrated into both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities and made tangible through worked examples. Furthermore, the results indicated that students perceived feedback to be a passive activity, which was at the root of their dissatisfaction. Reconceptualising feedback as a dialogical process promotes the understanding that assessments themselves are a learning activity and not just a measure thereof.

Barriers to asking for help included cultural differences, less familiarity with the complex eco-system of HE, and resource disparities. These were highlighted as having an impact on abilities to engage with assessment activities. Student-faculty, student-administrative, and student-student interactions are all important in students' learning in the lead up to assessment. The data highlighted the importance of robust working relationships in enabling students to access appropriate support. Students often expressed frustration with declining staff-student ratios as they felt there were not getting enough personalised support. Indeed, teaching staff often shoulder the biggest burden when it comes to providing support with assessments. This is in spite of the increasingly sophisticated networks of specialised support that are available for students to access (such as subject librarians and academic writing tutors). As these becoming increasingly complex in the modern, massified HE institution, resources need to be diverted to organising and signposting students to these

Finally, assessments shape students' learning motivations, which in turn moulds the learning culture of the institution. Here, diversity ought to be viewed as a strength of the academic culture of an institution, as it brings a rich array of experiences, cultures, and knowledges to the fore. The data also gave support to a theoretical link between physical place and a sense of belonging. Assessment activities in this context ought to promote the formation of a shared University of Bristol academic identity. Assessments ought to be conceptualised as not only an opportunity for academic development, but also for the multi-layered social and personal growth of students.

Limitations on the study's field diminish the transferability of findings across disciplines and empirical contexts, where assessment activities may have different forms and functions. Further research ought to explore the way that 'historically excluded' students experience assessments in these settings to ensure that changes to practice remain contextually situated. It is vital that institutions recognise those outside the purview of the 'traditional' HE student as "fully accepted, agentic members of academic communities" (Nieminen, 2021: 1) and that diversity is recognised not just as a condition of external forces in the HE sector, but as something that constitutes the very bedrock of our academic identity.

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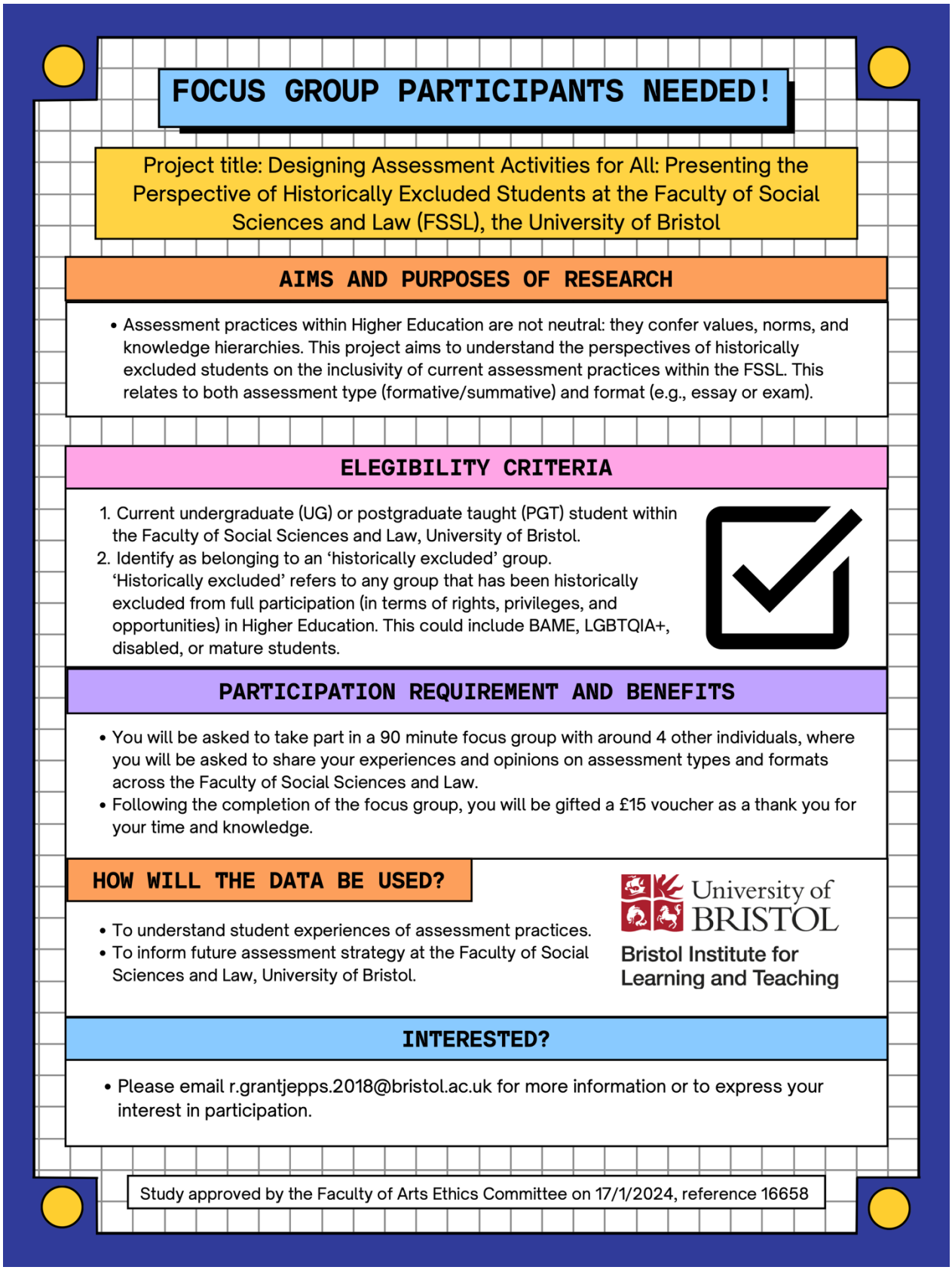
Appendix A: Recruitment materials



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

SCAN HERE

For more information and to sign up

Criteria: current taught FSSL students that identify as coming from an 'historically excluded' background

Receive a £15 voucher!

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

DESIGNING ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES FOR ALL

PROJECT TITLE

Designing Assessment Activities for All: Presenting the Perspective of Historically Excluded Students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, the University of Bristol

AIMS AND PURPOSES

Assessment practices within Higher Education are not neutral: they confer values, norms, and knowledge hierarchies. This project aims to understand the perspectives of historically excluded students on the inclusivity of current assessment practices within the FSSL.

ELEGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Current student in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Bristol.
- Identify as belonging to a 'historically excluded' group.

PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS AND BENEFITS

- Take part in a 90 minute focus group with around 4 other individuals, where you will be asked to share your experiences and opinions on assessment types and formats across the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law.
- £15 voucher as a thank you for your time and knowledge!

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Title of study: Designing Assessment Activities for All: Presenting the Perspective of Historically Excluded Students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, the University of Bristol

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time during the study without giving any reason.

Purpose of research

This research project primarily aims to explore how students from historically excluded backgrounds perceive the type and variation of assessment formats, in relation to their experiences of inclusion at university. Here, 'historically excluded' is taken to mean any group that has been historically excluded from full participation (in terms of rights, privileges, and opportunities) within Higher Education. This could include (but is not limited to) BAME students, LGBTQIA+ students, parents and carers, or students with disabilities. While this broader, shared identity of 'historically excluded' acts as background for sharing your experiences, the topics discussed in the focus group will relate to your experience of assessments at the University of Bristol and not the more sensitive topics of social categorisation and exclusion.

The research project is guided by the following questions:

Q1. *How are different types of assessment activities perceived by historically excluded students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol?*
Q2. *How do the types and diversity of assessment activities contribute or diminish to a sense of inclusion for historically excluded students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol?*

Participation requirements

Participation involves participating in a one-off focus group. You will be asked to give your perspective on assessment activities that you have undertaken during your time as a student within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol and how the type and variation of these have impacted your experience of inclusion. The focus group will be recorded, transcribed, and stored securely. These will be around 90 minutes from start to finish (including introductions and briefing). The information shared in these groups are confidential. You are also free to withdraw at any time during the focus group with no questions asked and free to withdraw your research data up to 21/02/2024.

What information will be collected and who will have access to the information collected?

We will use your name and contact details (i.e., email address) to contact you about the research study. The only individuals that will have access to information that identifies you will be myself and my line manager, Amy Palmer. It will be stored in the Personal Vault of OneDrive, which has two-factor authentication for added security. The data produced during this study will be used to produce a report as part of my role as a Student Fellow at the Bristol Institute of Learning and Teaching, working on the theme 'Designed for All Assessment Activities'.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By taking part you have the chance to meaningfully contribute to the landscape of learning and teaching within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, and pedagogic research discourse at the University of Bristol more generally. Furthermore, you will also be gifted a £15 gift voucher as compensation for your time.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
This project involves talking about your experiences of inclusion as relating to assessment practices at the University of Bristol. In order to minimise the risk of harm, the conversation will relate to how you have experienced different types and formats of assessment rather than the more sensitive topic of marginalisation and oppression. In the debrief at the end of the focus group there is space to raise any concerns resulting from the discussions and further support will be signposted. There are also procedures in place to minimise the risk of data breaches: data is anonymised and stored securely on a drive.

Will my participation in this project be kept confidential?
Your participation will be kept confidential through the following process. The focus groups will be recorded using an encrypted voice recorded. It will then be transcribed by one of the project team members, who will anonymise the transcripts and then delete the voice recordings. Your personal data (i.e., name and contact details) will be stored separately from the research data and deleted at the end of the project (July 2024).

What will happen to the results of the research project?
The results of this research project will be made openly available to the public through a written report and creative mode of dissemination (currently envisaged as a comic strip to reflect the storied nature of the prospective data). This will be published on the Bristol Institute of Learning and Teaching website and made available via paper format for students and teaching staff at the University of Bristol. The research data will be stored for a period of ten years in the *data.bris Research Data Repository* (https://data.bris.ac.uk/data/).

Who is organising and funding the research?
This study is funded by the Bristol Institute of Learning and Teaching, based at the University of Bristol. It is being carried out as part of their Student Fellow projects, under the theme 'Designed for All Assessment Activities'. To find out more visit: https://bristol.ac.uk/bilt/our-work-and-who-we-are/themes/designing-for-all---inclusive-assessment/

Has this study received ethical approval?
This study has received ethical approval from the University of Bristol Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee on 17/01/2024, reference 16658.

Who should I contact for further information relating to the research?
Robynne Grant-Jepps, *pq18150@bristol.ac.uk*

Who should I contact in order to file a complaint?
Amy Palmer, Senior Education Developer, Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching, University of Bristol, *amy.palmer@bristol.ac.uk*

If you wish to raise a complaint on how your personal data is handled, you can contact the Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter: Henry Stuart, *data-protection@bristol.ac.uk*
If you are not satisfied with their response, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO): https://ico.org.uk/

If you have any concerns related to your participation in this study, contact the Research Governance Team: *research-governance@bristol.ac.uk*

Appendix C: Consent Form

Robynne Grant-Jepps
Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching
31 Great George Street
Bristol
BS1 5QD
pq18150@bristol.ac.uk

University of BRISTOL
Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching

Consent Form for 'Designing Assessment Activities for All: Presenting the Perspective of Historically Excluded Students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, the University of Bristol'

Please tick the appropriate boxes

I confirm that I am 18 years of age or above ☐

I have read and understood the participant information sheet dated 20/12/2023.	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐
I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include taking part in a focus group that will be recorded (audio).	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary.	☐
I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time from the study, with no questions asked.	☐
I understand that I am free to withdraw my research data up until the point of anonymisation on 09/02/2024.	☐
I agree to the University of Bristol keeping and processing the personal information and research data I have provided during the course of this study. I understand that they will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in the information sheet, and my consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act / General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	☐
I understand the research data I provide will be anonymous. No link will be made between my name or other identifying information and my research data.	☐

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs but my name will not be used. ☐

I understand that after the study, the research data will be made ‘Open data’. I understand that this means the anonymised research data will be publicly available and may be used for purposes not related to this study, but it will not be possible to identify me from these data. ☐

I understand that the University of Bristol may use the research data collected for this project in a future research project but that the conditions on this form under which I have provided the research data will still apply. ☐

I understand and acknowledge that the investigation is designed to promote scientific knowledge and that the University of Bristol can keep and use the personal information I provide for research purposes only. ☐

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix D: Focus group question guide

1. Introducing myself and the aims of the research project, Ground rules: we want to encourage conversation, but please be respectful towards each other's opinions; limits of disclosure (while the data is being anonymised, you are not anonymous here) [5 mins – 0:05:00]

2. Opening question:
    - Please tell me your name, what degree you're studying for, and if there was any reason you decided to choose that subject/course? It could be to do with UoB specifically, love of the topic, or even if it was totally random! [10 mins - 0:15:00]

3. Transition question (conceptual 'priming'):
    - What does the phrase 'Designed for All Assessment Activities' mean to you? How/do you relate this to inclusion? [10 mins – 0:25:00]

4. Assessment activities: GROUP ACTIVITY, hand out cards (face up gives terms, face down gives definitions) get students to have a look through and discuss question A. Ask to sort given responses to questions B and C.
    - What are the types of assessment that you've completed over the course of your studies so far and what are your impressions of these? This includes the type (summative/formative) and format (e.g., essay, exam, presentation) [15 mins – 0:40:00)
        - *Prompt on peer assessment, group assessment, online/in-person format.*
        - *List not exhaustive, blank cards to add more!*
    - Are there any types that you've particularly enjoyed? Why/why not? ACTIVITY: sorting from 'love it' to 'hate it' [15 mins – 0:55:00]
    - Do you feel the types of assessment you've had to complete allow you to perform to the best of your abilities? Why/why not? [15 mins – 1:10:00]
        - *Varieties, choices, topics, alternatives (when?), timing/workload, practice/formative*
        - *Assessment criteria: Marking criteria, Building towards summative, Understanding expectations, ILOs*
        - *Assessment feedback: What is highlighted (i.e., strengths or weaknesses and the balance thereof), plain English, concise/actionable, posed as 'conversation'*
    - What spread or format of assessments would you have liked and why?

5. Closing questions:
    - What kinds of support could be offered to promote inclusivity in assessment activities? What do you feel you need to be able to engage with your assessments fully? Of all of the needs discussed, which do you feel is the most important to you? [5-10 mins – 1:20:00]
    - *Barriers: financial, extensions procedure, diagnosis, life circumstances*

6. Reiteration of the aims of the study and summary of the discussion given by moderator
    - How well does that capture what was said here? With these aims in mind, is there anything you would change or add? [5 mins – 1:30:00]