

## EXPLORING STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND AND BRAZIL: EMBARGO OR EMPOWERMENT?

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### Abstract

Education policy in Scotland and Brazil has increased the number of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) presenting challenges in learning and teaching in online, conventional and hybrid contexts. Academic writing remains a key factor in assessment of academic achievement. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, 14 participants (Scotland n=7, Brazil n=7) who completed assessable written work were interviewed. Using Paulo Freire's concept of empowerment (1971), this paper explores students' perceptions of assessment in the two countries. Results presented thematically indicate that perceptions of the purpose of both the assessment and academic qualification are at odds with institutional habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

### Introduction

Changes in higher education (HE) have occurred globally and an increasingly number of universities operates using business models that require an increased number of students. Scotland and Brazil have recently begun processes of democratising education and widening access, key drivers of employment and economic success (Costa, 2013; Riddell, Raffe, Croxford, Weedon, & Minty, 2013), which impact on rates of academic failure (Osborne, 2003). This paper considers quality issues in HE by exploring students' understandings of the function of assessment and their experiences of accessing and receiving written feedback using the virtual learning environment (VLE) Moodle.

### The Theoretical Constructs

Based on Freire's concept of empowerment (1971), we explore the consequences of institutional practices that underpin academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004) of introducing *markets* in HE to provide a theoretical framework to explain the impact of shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within universities on the student experience of academic writing and assessment.

### Academic Capitalism

Readings' thesis on the university (1996) described changes he believed to be damaging HE and impacting on academic success. The adoption of business principles in HEI known as *academic capitalism* is typified by student loans

and tuition fees that transform students into consumers, universities into service-providers, and degree programmes into investment projects (Rhodes & Slaughter, 2004). It also refers to several key factors that impact on academic success, particularly widening access and increased student numbers. Hence, universities increasingly provide opportunities to enhance *employability* rather than offer transformative educational experiences (Chertkovskaya, Watt, Tramer & Spoelstra, 2013).

The focus on qualifications as commodities has two related consequences: students perceive the degree as a product of learning; and, in the context of widening access, institutional approaches to learning and teaching locate academic success or failure with the student, downplaying wider structural factors such as inequality. The increased number of students created by widening access creates workload in producing meaningful formative feedback provided (Cassidy, 2007). However virtual learning environments (VLE) can enhance flexibility and pedagogical practice. They can also increase tutor workload (McPhee, 2009).

### **Cultural Capital and Institutional Habitus**

For Bourdieu (1984) cultural capital exists in three forms: (a) embodied, (b) objectified, and (c) institutionalised. Mode of speech and accent are examples of embodied cultural capital, while owning a personal computer is an example of cultural capital in its objectified state. Cultural capital in institutional form refers to qualifications that symbolise cultural competence and authority. Habitus, Bourdieu's most influential yet ambiguous concept, refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital in individuals and to deeply embedded structural practices, used by Bourdieu to refer to the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The habitus refers to a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories, including experiences and understanding of *reality*. In this sense *institutional habitus* refers to the practices of assessment, which remain firmly rooted in serving the needs of affluent students who have few barriers in achieving academic success.

### **Empowerment**

Places of learning are instruments of social control (Illich, 1971) that lead to alienation (Freire, 2005), but also potential places of empowerment and resistance. Referring to traditional ways of teaching as *banking* models, Freire (2005, p.72) notes that institutions consider students as vessels to be filled by the teacher or the institution, and writes that "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students." Freire (2014) recognised that the learning places were potentially spaces of domination and liberation, empowerment and restriction.

### **Embargo**

The term embargo means typically *a ban on trade* when used as a noun, and, when used as a verb *the practice of government to seize or impose a ban on trade*. We introduce the term to describe barriers, both real and imaginary, levied on individual students via structural factors and institutional practices

related to teaching, learning and assessment. To date there has been little research investigating the students' experience of learning and assessment in the context of *open* access to HE. We note that "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (Freire, 1985, p.122).

### Methods

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling identifying students who had completed all assessments required to complete each programme. All participants had received formative feedback via the VLE. Using this inclusion criterion, we recruited 7 students from a cohort of 53 in Scotland and 7 from a cohort of 18 in Brazil, to explore students' experiences of the nature and function of assessment.

### The context and participants

Since 1999, The University of the West of Scotland has offered online flexible postgraduate programmes in Alcohol and Drugs Studies, while The Faculdade Cultura Inglesa, São Paulo, Brazil, has since 2014, provided flexible courses in teaching English programmes. Both programmes are supported on and off-campus, in a *blended learning* or an *integrated learning* approach, using continuous assessment. The Scottish programme uses a 1,500 word mid-term essay and a 3,500 end of module essay, while the Brazilian uses a mid-term test and a 1,500-word end of module essay. Assessments are accessed through the VLE and grading and the Scottish programme feedback is delivered by Turnitin software ([http://www.turnitin.com/en\\_us/features/grademark](http://www.turnitin.com/en_us/features/grademark)).

Table 1

#### *Postgraduate Students in Scotland*

Name	Age	Sex	Study mode	Hours (week) Employed	Highest qualification	Children
Mr JJM	41	M	F/T	16	2:1 hon's Chemical Engineering	0
Ms J2	39	F	F/T	04	2:1 hon's Social Science	4
Ms D	33	F	P/T	00 disabled	2:1 hon's Social Science	3
Ms P	50	F	F/T	40	2:1 Nursing	2
Ms M	32	F	P/T	10	2:2 Social Medicine	1
Mr F	23	M	F/T	10	BA Commercial Music	0
Ms J1	24	F	F/T	10	2:1 BA Graphic Design	0

Table 1 indicates that the participants' age ranged from 23-50; five were full time students, and two used a blended mix of both off and on campus learning. Four had dependent children. Six had paid work to supplement their incomes to allow them to study. One did not work, being registered disabled as profoundly deaf.

Table 2

*Graduate Students in Brazil*

Name	Age	Sex	Study mode	Hours (week) Employed	Highest qualification	Children
Ms F	19	F	P/T	44	High School	0
Ms C	33	F	F/T	40	Specialization – Law	0
Ms G	27	F	F/T	35	BA – International Relations	0
Ms M	29	F	F/T	42	Technical course – Computer networking	0
Mr A	28	M	F/T	40	Specialization – not mentioned	0
Mr M	48	M	F/T	44	BA – Library	0
Ms P	29	F	F/T	0 – Disabled	BA – Marketing	0

Table 2 indicates that the participants' age ranged from 19-48, all but one was employed full time, with one registered disabled student did not work. Three of them are part of a student-financing fund to allow them to study. None had dependent children.

### Results

The interview schedule allowed the researchers to reflexively explore factors that aided academic success or acted as barriers to programme completion.

#### Results from Scotland

Participants were asked to recall experiences of accessing learning materials and the assessment from the VLE. Ms J2 indicates that assessment is a test of knowledge, referring to the *core material*, that is, the minimum reading made available in the VLE required to meet the learning outcomes for the module:

It's to see if you've learned what you are supposed to learn over your trimester at university ... To see what your knowledge is, to see if you've taken in the core material or went above the core material.

Ms M agrees that the VLE is helpful however the amount of reading material is overwhelming:

... I think it is really helpful, these selected journals, but obviously you are expected to [read] beyond. It can be overwhelming; you think: do I have to read all of this (Laughs)?

Ms J1 reveals that learning is a source of great stress:

... I suppose it's almost as if someone's sort of checking up on you ... I get a little bit nervous and a little bit scared.

For Mr JJM assessment of learning is a test of critical ability, insisting that his beliefs about specialist subject knowledge are irrelevant:

Well ... it doesn't matter what I believe or not believe as long as I can write balanced ... for a critical essay it doesn't matter what my belief is.

Mr JJM an engineering graduate, with a strong science background, is unsure of his ability in completing essays with the required level of critical analysis. His degree in engineering taught him absolute laws, and relies on scientific training to consider the assessment as an equation. He explains his formula for completing the written assessment:

It's almost like splitting into equal paragraphs so roughly for a 3000 word essay my aim is not to write less than 200 words for a paragraph and not to go above 550 ... (Mr JJM)

### **Accessing the Assessment: The VLE**

Participants were asked about the use of the VLE in accessing the assessment. Mr JJM suggests that he wonders how students coped without technology:

... its all-digital ... it amazes me how people [completed] essays 20 years ago when there was less electronic availability.

### **Support**

Three sources of support were revealed in the data, peer support, staff support, and institutional support. Students organised peer support networks beyond the VLE, most often using social media, to organise informal support meetings:

... there's about two or three of us, that'll sit and open up discussion forums and help each other, and get out our essays and say 'oh you've missed whatever.' We're quite open; we're adults so we help each other without actually copying. (Mr JJM)

Ms M relies on social media to connect with other students, however was unwilling to appear 'needy' asking for support. She explains:

... they have their own life and I have my own. ... I don't want to be needy. (Ms M)

Participants seek help from peers, and while helpful, some tension is revealed in the motives for seeking help, and sharing work. Sources of help are also sources of competition:

... It's not that you don't want to tell them it's just that you're not sure whether they would want to tell you so you're [kind of] conscious of, and no we don't share, no we don't look at each other's writing at all. (Ms J1)

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the usefulness of feedback given by staff members to them at their midterm assessment:

... feedback was really helpful ... you gave me pointers on what I was doing wrong. But with another lecturer, I felt like leaving the course ... It [formative feedback] seemed like sarcasm in a sense. There was nothing supportive at all... (Ms M)

University habitus locates the source of academic failure firmly with the student, and this is where learning support interventions are directed.

However, accessing formal institutional ‘effective learning’ support revealed negative experiences:

Effective learning is not absolutely good ... I mean couldn't fault them I think they are poorly staffed ... (Ms P)

Well, the effective learning is available ... but unfortunately I just had a bad experience. I don't know what other support there is other than that. (Ms J1)

Ms D, a student with a hearing disability, is fulsome in her praise for the support afforded to her in completing assessments:

Having a disability I have access to a proof reader. I can ask for extensions but I tend not to ask for that. The lecturers do offer a lot of help ... (Ms D)

### **Barriers to Academic Success**

Students faced several barriers in completing the essay: many had families, including young children, as most students had to work; they often had little time to study. Ms M a young mother of one child explains how she copes with academic life:

My daughter, I used to sort her out and the do a little bit of reading when it was her nap time ... recently I have not been able to do that. (Ms M)

As many students worked to pay for tuition, it was acknowledged that this impacted on the academic experience at university:

... I've got to work to survive ... I think it's just a huge issue. (Mr JJM)

Engaging with the assessment meant that tough decisions were made: continue working and risk failing the assessment; seek an extension; or, stop working, reducing income, to complete the assessment. Ms J1 explains her decision:

... I've kind of cut back on [work] at the moment just while I've got my essays and things on, so nothing at the moment right now (Ms J1)

For many, they were often the first in the family to attend university; which impacted on perceived ability to complete assessments:

... coming from a working class background I was the first person from the family to come to university... I've put in quite a lot of years of education and still not getting it. No doubt I'll get it eventually. (Mr JJM)

### **Employability**

Participants were asked if they believed assessments were helpful in making them more employable. Ms D states:

Yes, I actually do think it will help me get a job. As I want to get into research and it's teaching me how to ask the appropriate questions. I think this will help me prepare for that. (Ms D)

However, Ms M acknowledges that she will be seeking employment on graduation, and she worries about being tested on practice, even if she becomes comfortable with theory:

... it [assessment] makes you realise how much you don't know  
 ... I would like a job to put it into practice; but then I think oh my God! What if I get tested? (Ms M)

The results presented thematically reveal that participants consider assessment necessary to document learning and understanding, and useful in gaining employment. However, several barriers to academic success were revealed. That all but one of the participants worked over 10 hours per week (one worked 40 hours) had an impact on ability to engage academically. While institution support was offered, participants created informal support networks that were also revealed to be sources of competition.

### **Results from Brazil**

Ms G suggests that the term assessment is broad and difficult to define. After some reflection she describes written assessment as a necessary instrument to evaluate learning:

Actually assessment is a very broad word...lots of varied kinds of assessment ... I think it's important to have something, something physical like an essay, a test or a presentation to evaluate ... (Ms G)

### **The Purpose of Assessment**

Participants reveal that the assessment serves several functions: for some it is an important process to check and certify that learning and understanding has taken place, and to test subject specific knowledge:

[assessment] means to evaluate the knowledge a person has in relation to a certain topic or subject. (Ms P)

For others, it is a process that helps the teacher to diagnose progress, academic difficulties and knowledge construction, as well as provide guidance to rethink the teaching practice. Ms G explains:

[the assessment] is a way of diagnosing, a way of getting the real diagnosis of what the students have been learning and what they lack, their difficulties, their problems ... (Ms G)

### **Academic Progress**

In explaining the writing process participants saw it as productive and relevant challenge wanting to use it to gauge their academic progress.

Many challenges ... there were lots of possibilities and people could address the topic from different perspectives ... it's something great, but it's kind of overwhelming when you think about it. ... But I think it's intentional and it's **good** (hesitation) but it makes us feel a bit worried and anxious. But I like challenges so (hesitation) it's not **bad** for me to feel that way. (Ms G)

... it was a sense of accomplishment. I managed to do it. (Ms C)

Participants noticed that the process made them more autonomous, helping them to develop relevant subject specialist skills:

If the aim of evaluation is to check your technical competence I agree that it helps us to notice our technical evolution. (Mr M)

Some participants expressed concerns and noted several barriers to completion, in particular, lack of time:

I got scared because I think that everything is very difficult ... oh this is hard, it's going to require lots of work, I'll need to spend a lot of time working on it; I don't have time. (Ms F)

### **Using the VLE**

Participants had access to numerous sources of information and materials to aid the academic writing process:

... we had the material we used during the course, and texts, and some extra materials like the handbook, we have the library (hesitation) I didn't use it but we had it. (Ms G)

The VLE Moodle was considered useful in developing independent learning:

... (Moodle) gives us autonomy. I just think Moodle gives us even more because it makes us committed ... it's easier for us, if we have any doubts, if we need to talk, if we need to ask something. (Ms F)

On the other hand, Ms C expressed resistance to use of the VLE, preferring to seek the tutor:

I wanted you to sit with me to talk about it ... I don't want to look at it on the computer ... I need to talk, to sit down. To me that makes much more sense. Maybe I would memorize my feedback better or understand it better. (Ms C)

### **Seeking Formal Help**

The main support received was from the teacher who, according to participants, was available, promptly replied providing feedback on the content and text organization, without influencing but guiding.

There were the guidelines ... you were following us. You gave us feedback in the middle of the process. So, I felt more relaxed. (Mr M)

Participants also used less formal sources of help, and shared ideas via email in addition to seeking and receiving formal help and support from their tutor:

The tutor ... I talked to you and I could get your feedback...I showed you the skeleton and you said ok ...oh, we had the material we used during the course, and texts, and some extra materials like the handbook, we have the library (hesitation) I didn't use it but we had it ... I lent my piece of writing to some students ... (Ms G)



Participants considered feedback meaningful, relevant; allowing them space to reconsider aspects, look for alternatives, showing how and what to improve in terms of content and organisation:

That was great ... I really liked the way you corrected it because we could see exactly where we should pay attention in terms of mistakes, or getting confused ... (Ms G)

It made sense in relation to what that I had to do better. I think it also gave some direction ... the feedback also brings a certain security to the student to know what he has to improve ... (Mr A)

Impact of institutional and disciplinary *ownership* of the rules, conventions and practices of academic writing were sources of much stress. However, the tutor could minimize these:

The way I got the feedback showed that you cared (hesitation) you care about the student ... it's not just about what is wrong or right (hesitation) but it's to indicate, make us think, what we could have done, what was nice ... It makes us feel important... And it was pretty clear, very clear. (Ms F)

### **Barriers to Academic Success**

All of the participants work to pay for tuition, and describe how this impacts on ability to study:

... time management ... I work long hours ... we had to study for the other subjects; do other papers ... I didn't have much time. (Ms G)

### **Employability**

Participants were asked if the assessment processes were helpful in making them more employable. This proved to be a difficult question to answer. Mr A, for example, notes that his academic success translated into employment gain, he explains:

I think there has been a gain at work ... and academically. I think there is a connection between them [the assessment and employability] and I guess I couldn't see it before. I thought the academic part was one thing and the profession another ... I also had it recognized at work. I even had opportunities to have other duties. So, it was certainly something very positive for me and with good results ... (Mr A)

The results presented thematically reveal participants consider assessment an integral part of the academic experience and describe several barriers to academic success. All but one of the participants worked around 40 hours per week, which impacted on the ability to engage with the learning material in the VLE. Many comment on time management and lack of time to complete assessments. Participants described several ways to resist barriers to completion, seeking support from peers the teacher and the institution

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

One of the fundamental principles underpinning a global HE education system is the meritocratic idea that, irrespective of social background, all citizens have equal opportunity to develop their academic potential. However, evidence demonstrates that the majority of people who successfully complete university are from middle class backgrounds (Riddell et al., 2013). Widening access, a feature of global academic capitalism, presents challenges to staff, institutions, and students. Despite clear differences in course content in Brazil and Scotland, results reveal similarities in student perceptions of the assessment process and its function. Participants reveal several barriers to educational success that include having to work long hours to support learning, family commitments, and in perceived academic ability.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction is useful in explaining why academic success is not universal and structural inequality impacts on educational inequality. According to Bourdieu, education in industrialised societies legitimates and perpetuates class inequalities. Success in education is facilitated by cultural or academic capital.

Freire posits that education should allow the powerless to regain their humanity, and in turn overcome their oppression. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that for this to occur, the oppressed individual must play a role in their emancipation. Freire (2005, p. 54) notes that:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.

We consider the connections between Bourdieu and Freire useful in describing transformative pedagogies in light of resistance by institutions to address the tensions between institutional habitus in relation to the student academic experience of assessments. Widening access has increased student numbers, however institutional assessment practices remain fixed and unyielding in both institutions. We re-present and reintroduce the term *embargo* to describe barriers, both real and imagined levied on individual students via structural factors and institutional practices relating to teaching, learning and assessment. Participants resist several embargos that impact on academic success, accessing help from several sources, including peer, staff, and institutional support.

### **Limitation and Future Research**

The study provides small samples from Scotland and Brazil, and results may be complicated by the researchers also teaching the students recruited into the study. Results indicate the need for further research to understand the impact of shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within HEIs on the student experience of academic writing and assessment.

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