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**Title: Student wellbeing and assessment in higher education: the balancing act**

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## **Student wellbeing and assessment in higher education: The balancing act**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on staff and student consultations conducted during the development of Student Minds' University Mental Health Charter to identify five key tensions which can arise in assessment design and strategy when seeking to balance the wellbeing of students with pedagogical, practical and policy considerations. It highlights the need to acknowledge the pressures of assessment on staff wellbeing, as well as students. The particular tensions explored include the need to balance challenge against the psychological threats this can entail; the varying impacts of traditional and novel forms of assessment; the differing demands of collaborative and individual work; the tensions between ideal strategies and those which are practically feasible; and the ways in which feedback is given (as a constructive learning tool) and received (often as a psychological threat). These tensions can provide a valuable point of reflection for educators who need to critically and proactively navigate these conflicts within their own assessment design and practices, as part of a wider whole university approach to promoting student wellbeing.

### **Keywords**

Assessment; wellbeing; mental health; whole university approach

## Introduction

Public and political concern around student wellbeing is growing (Cuijpers et al., 2019; Brown, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Sixty-one percent of university counselling services reported an increase in demand of at least 25% between 2012 and 2017 (Thorley, 2017). Estimates suggest that 29% of students experience clinical levels of distress (Bewick et al., 2008), with distress increasing upon entry to university and not returning to pre-university levels until after graduation (Bewick et al., 2010). Aspects of learning and teaching may impact either positively or negatively on students' mental health and, conversely, students' mental health can impact on their teaching and learning experience (Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019; Houghton and Anderson, 2017). Increasingly, there is an emphasis on taking a whole university approach to promote the wellbeing of the entire university community through 'a joined-up approach to transform cultures, and embed mental health initiatives beyond student services ... across all policies, cultures, curricula and practice' (UUK, 2018). Within a whole university approach, assessment policies and practices emerge as one potentially distinctive environmental risk factor that can impact on student wellbeing, and could increase the risk of students developing mental health difficulties or exacerbate long term mental health issues (Downie, Fyfe & Tannahill, 1990).

The effect of assessment practices on the wellbeing of students in UK higher education has not, to date, been comprehensively examined. International evidence suggests a bidirectional relationship between wellbeing and assessment experience. Examination stress

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of 'wellbeing' used in this paper encompasses 'a wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing.' The emphasis is on students being able to 'fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing' (Hughes and Spanner, 2019, p.9; see also WHO, 2004; Dodge et al, 2012).

is associated with mental health difficulties including anxiety, depression, disordered eating, self-harm, panic attacks, burnout, and thoughts of suicide (Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2018). Exam-related stress also has physiological effects that negatively affect mental health and learning, including disordered sleep, loss of appetite, physical inactivity, poor physical health, and substance misuse (Stults-Kolehmainen & Sinha, 2014; Simic, 2011; Curcio et al. 2006). Further evidence indicates that elevated levels of anxiety have a detrimental impact on students' academic achievement, with higher self-reported levels of examination stress, anxiety, and depression associated with poorer productivity, motivation, and test scores (Kotter et al., 2017; Lui, 2015; Reschly et al., 2008). Moreover, changing from norm-referenced hierarchical grading to a criterion-referenced pass or fail system has been associated with significant reductions in stress and anxiety among medical students in the USA (Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall, 2014; Bloodgood et al., 2009). Alternately, Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) argue that assessment reforms aimed at promoting student wellbeing can negatively impact on student learning and capacity for coping, reproducing discourses that undermine resilience.

This paper uses data from consultations conducted with university staff and students during the development of the University Mental Health Charter ('the Charter') led by the charity Student Minds (Hughes and Spanner, 2019), focused on assessment design and practice. The Charter aims to recognise and reward UK institutions that prioritise student and staff mental health outcomes and demonstrate good practice within a whole university approach (Hughes & Spanner, 2019).

One domain of the Charter emphasises the impact that teaching and learning methods and practices, including assessments, can have on student wellbeing (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). It highlights two principles of good practice relevant to assessment, namely that

curriculum design, pedagogy and processes should ‘consider and seek to impact positively on the mental health and wellbeing of all students’ and that academic staff should ‘understand how they can support student mental health and wellbeing through good pedagogic practice’ (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p.28).

This paper examines the tensions that arise in a whole university approach when assessment design and practices are balanced with student wellbeing, highlighting policy, educational, and practical considerations. The Charter itself acknowledges that factors influencing mental health are diverse and that the implementation of its principles ‘is likely to be very different’ for each institution (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p.76). Similarly, this paper does not seek to prescribe universal principles of best practice; instead it explores key tensions in assessment strategy and design that should be critically considered and navigated to inform contextualised judgements regarding student wellbeing.

## **Methodology**

As part of the process of developing the Charter, university staff and students across the UK were invited to participate in ‘roadshow’ events, consisting of a series of focus groups on different topics.<sup>2</sup> Groups were held in Scotland (University of Strathclyde), London (two groups at the University of Arts), the West Midlands (University of Staffordshire), Wales (University of Cardiff), Yorkshire (two groups at the University of Leeds) and Northern

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<sup>2</sup> Information about the research was provided in the invitation, and written informed consent was taken as part of the sign-up process. Ethical approval was given by the University of Derby research ethics committee.

Ireland (two groups at the University of Ulster). Although the focus groups were hosted at these universities, participants were recruited from numerous different local universities.<sup>3</sup>

Data are taken from nine focus groups held with university staff, exploring their perceptions of the relationship between student learning and wellbeing, and six student co-creation panels focused on ‘university culture, environment and mental health.’

Staff focus group size ranged from one or two participants to nine, (average: five), with 33 participants in total. Participants were mainly academic/faculty staff at various levels (from associate lecturer to professor) with some academic-related staff (e.g. student support and counselling and learning development). They were recruited through an Eventbrite sign-up page, which was distributed through multiple national and local university and associated networks to reach as wide a group as possible.

Focus groups were facilitated by an experienced qualitative researcher. Each group lasted for around 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Questions centred around whether participants felt that pedagogy, curriculum and assessment design could have positive and/or negative impacts on student mental health. This included considerations of whether wellbeing should be considered within curriculum design.

Student co-creation panels ranged from 6 to 13 participants, with 65 participants in total. Again, each group lasted for around 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The co-creation panel format was informed by the Student Minds co-production toolkit, and modelled on Student Voice Forums (Piper & Emmanuel, 2019). The panel

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<sup>3</sup> For clarity, and to maintain participant anonymity, we use only the host university’s name to identify data extracts.

activity used a problem-based ‘creative ideation’ strategy, asking students to imagine what the ideal university approach to student mental health and wellbeing would be like in 30 years, and how this would differ from current approaches; this included discussion of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment.

The analysis of staff data was conducted using an inductive data driven thematic approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). Transcripts were initially coded separately by LB, EJ and SW, who then conferred to review and synthesise themes. This analysis was then integrated with coding of the student data conducted by MP, with all the authors collaboratively reviewing the similarities and divergences in student and staff datasets in a series of online meetings. In discussion, it was clear that themes around the impact of assessment on student and staff mental health formed a significant component of both datasets. In particular, five key tensions were identified which need to be considered when designing and implementing assessment strategies within higher education settings.

## **Findings**

Five tensions were identified within the data, namely: challenge versus threat in assessment; traditional versus novel assessment; collaborative versus individual assessment; ideal versus practical assessment; giving feedback versus receiving criticism. Alongside this, there was a strong acknowledgement that many assessment practices had an impact on staff wellbeing as well as student wellbeing, which ran throughout the identified tensions.

### ***Challenge versus threat in assessment***

For educators to appropriately assess learning outcomes and award qualifications, assessment strategies need to contain an element of challenge, learning, and growth (QAA, 2018).

Inherently, challenge contains the potential for failure; this underpins both the intrinsic and



extrinsic value in attaining a qualification. However our data showed that this potential for failure was often perceived as a threat to self-concept or self-worth that had an impact on mental health outcomes. For some students, university assessment was a ‘first point of failure’ (Staff/Strathclyde), following a successful educational career before university:

They are so used to doing well in school and then they come in and they don't get a good grade, but it's all relative. What does that grade actually mean? It's not a final exam, perhaps. It's to let you know where you're sitting and what you need to focus on, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't impact them and change how they feel about themselves.

(Staff/Strathclyde)

Staff in focus group discussions were very clear that they understood the affective impact of this perceived failure on students, who sometimes took a lower-than-expected grade very personally.

They would get their grade and they'd say, "I am not good enough," rather than, "This piece of work wasn't good enough." (Staff/Strathclyde)

Nevertheless, this recognition that not every assignment or exam would be easy and that students would not always achieve a top grade was seen by higher education staff as part of the learning process itself.

We need a little bit of stress sometimes, good stress... [students] need to know that, actually, it's not what they think it is – "Now, what am I going to do, to build myself up to do the next thing?" Because life is not always 100%. I know that sounds awful, but I do think that we all have those knockbacks, don't we? I think it's what makes you stronger.

(Staff/Staffordshire)

Such recognition was balanced with an awareness that sometimes universities could work harder to help students to gain the skills needed to meet assessment challenges.

Student panels also reflected the tension between assessment challenge and threat. Panels accepted and acknowledged the value of challenging formal assessment, advocating ‘the recognition of university as being a challenge, and normalising some of the stress that comes along with that’ (Student/Leeds) as a necessary part of the learning process. What was problematized, however, were assessment practices that threatened student wellbeing by creating stress and anxiety, perfectionism, and competition without clear benefits to learning.

Students felt that high-stakes assessment practices particularly threatened wellbeing by heightening consciousness and anxiety of failure. Students seemingly ‘know so many people that fail’ (Student/Ulster), with this expectation built into pedagogical practices: ‘there’s always this assumption that you go to uni and some people will just fail’ (Student/Strathclyde). Students perceived that ‘failure in one exam’ or ‘a bad grade on one of your essays can really make a massive difference’ (Student/Strathclyde) to future course and career aspirations. For one student, ‘doing badly in one exam [felt like] ... the end of the world ... [it] was terrifying’ (Student/Strathclyde). The perceived financial, emotional and existential threat of assessment failure led to an unhealthy emphasis on exam results as a marker of wider individual self-worth, identity and ‘your life in a piece of paper’ (Student/Leeds). Panels highlighted that this pressure can lead students to ‘just focus on exams’ (Student/Strathclyde) and disengage from protective wellbeing-enhancing opportunities of university (e.g. social connection, extracurricular activities).

Sometimes, ‘students can set the target too high for themselves’ (Student/Strathclyde); unrealistic expectations encouraged the ‘idea you’ve got to get 98% all the time’, with students ‘not allowing yourself to accept that you’re not always going to be the best’ (Student/Ulster). This created a ‘dangerous culture’ lowering the threshold for perceived failure, where students feel distressed ‘by anything less than full marks’ even if it is

still a first-class grade and/or a formative assessment (Student/Strathclyde). In this outcome-orientated culture, personal educational efforts, achievements, and future aspirations can become valued relative to the assessment results of others, exacerbating perceptions of failure and ‘inferiority feelings’ that threaten student wellbeing (Student/Strathclyde). The unnecessary threat of competition in criterion-referenced assessment was perceived to be exacerbated by numeric result gradations over binary ‘pass or fail’.

### ***Traditional versus novel assessment***

Staff recognised that all types of university assessment had the potential to generate a certain amount of stress, given the necessity of educational challenge. From the perspective of academics, it was important to ensure that the assessment was aligned to the intended learning outcomes, and deliverable for the student cohort. Examinations were commonly used to assess students, despite the recognition that they were a source of anxiety and stress. The shortcomings of these traditional forms of assessment were acknowledged; examinations were seen as a wholly artificial situation that could cause students unnecessary stress:

... it’s unlikely to be a situation that they’re going to encounter once they leave university.

When was the last time any of us in this room sat down and wrote something for three hours in a room that was absolutely silent with somebody pacing up and down checking that we didn’t accidentally look in the direction of someone else’s desk? (Staff/Cardiff)

However, there was also an acknowledgement that, although examinations were potentially stressful, they were also familiar and expected. Students knew how to prepare for them and what was required of them, meaning that examinations were potentially preferred in comparison with other less traditional forms of assessment.

I have a module I teach which is no-exam just because of the nature of the module. I get lots of complaints from students saying ‘couldn’t we have an exam instead?’ [...] It’s

unfamiliarity. They're used to exams, even though they might not like them. [...] So when I ask them, "Could you do a podcast?" it's new, it's unfamiliar to them. They panic, they don't like it. (Staff/Cardiff)

Presentation-based assessment and group work-based assessment were also acknowledged as sources of anxiety, but ones which staff felt it was important to encourage students to engage with regardless. For some staff, this question of whether an assessment may be bad for student mental health and wellbeing in the short-term, but beneficial in the longer-term, related to their experiences in the workplace:

I didn't have to do a single presentation throughout my whole degree, somehow. I don't know why. Then, in my first job, I had to present to stakeholders. I was a wreck. So, as much as it is scary, that is what I would have benefited from. (Staff/Leeds 2)

Several focus groups discussed the purpose of the university experience in relation to the employability agenda. Assessment was not just seen as a test of knowledge, but as part of a process of moving from the 'rote-learning' model of school assessment to the independence of adult life:

It's the whole experience, it's not just the learning, it's the whole experience of growing as a person and coming out at the end, to be employable. (Staff/Staffordshire)

Providing students with more choice over assessment may increase ownership and a sense of individuality, but staff noted that consideration was needed to allow individuals to become independent learners while ensuring that they were supported sufficiently. To encourage students to become more independent, they needed to be given the space to develop their own strategies for completing assessments. While some students could find this independence gave greater control and ownership of their work, less confident students experience it as stressful.

Student panels perceived monothetic traditional assessment such as exams and essay assignments to be largely inappropriate for individual student needs, consequently increasing stress within a high-stakes assessment environment. Traditional exams, especially multiple-choice question exams, were perceived to be pedagogically ineffective and inhibitive by providing an inaccurate and unfair reflection of content understanding, and therefore unnecessarily stressful. The environment and timing of traditional assessment was perceived to be especially anxiety-inducing. Traditional linear closed-book and time-restricted exam conditions ‘puts a lot of pressure on people’ (Student/Leeds). Bunching of assessment was also problematic; having ‘so many assessment deadlines [mean] that you need to adopt a really strategic approach’, preventing ‘meaningful opportunities’ for educational engagement (Student/Strathclyde).

Student panels advocated greater variety and flexibility around assessment types, to cater for individual pedagogical and mental health needs. Panels proposed that students should be able to ‘pick if they want exams’ (Student/ULster) or ‘choose your own style of assessment’ (Student/UAL) ‘because people do learn differently’ (Student/ULster). They advocated ‘more meaningful opportunities to design your own assessment, or choose your own topics or be assessed in a way appropriate to you’ (Student/Strathclyde).

Suggestions for diversification included increased practical assessment, Open Book assessment, and varied innovative practices, such as ‘a poster’, ‘a video, a podcast, a website, a work-related document, like a policy brief’ (Student/Leeds). Open Book assessment, in particular, was perceived to be more suitable for a digital ‘society that is more concerned about finding information than retaining information’ (Student/Leeds). More individualised, innovative, and authentic assessment types were perceived to support integrative ‘holistic learning’ and ‘transitional skills’ to ‘apply knowledge in the real-world context’

(Student/Strathclyde). However, echoing staff discussions, the Ulster student panel did describe how unfamiliarity with new assessment types can increase stress and anxiety around performance expectations and grading criteria.

Students who enjoyed independent working advocated 'more self-directed, independent, and active learning' (Student/Strathclyde). Student panels lamented the predominance of didactic information-transfer style lectures and monothetic assessment types that deprive students of independent choice and control over their learning, and which can be pedagogically and mentally disengaging. 'They tell you what to do ... [and] there's no opportunity to have your own initiative on anything' (Student/Strathclyde). Alternatively, some students wanted more clear and structured guidance 'to understand exactly what they're asking ... something that breaks down the assessment a wee bit easier' (Student/Ulster) with assessment-specific support on 'presentation skills, essay writing and referencing' (Student/Leeds). Indeed several panels advocated more 'bigger picture planning' (Student/Ulster) around assessment time, type and strategy in order to scaffold and 'build all that practice and skills' (Student/Cardiff) to support academic transitions.

### ***Collaborative versus individual assessment***

Traditionally, individual assessment is the model used in higher education but collaborative or social learning, involving students working together in a group, has become increasingly widespread (Hassanien, 2006). Staff focus groups identified that this led to further challenges around student wellbeing.

The group work is a really good example. You've got some students that really, really benefit from that. Then, you've got others who, perhaps, suffer with really severe anxiety, for whom that is their absolute worst nightmare. (Staff/Leeds 1)

Staff acknowledged some benefits of group work in developing key employability skills, for example, to prepare students for team working exercises within graduate assessment centres (Staff/Leeds 2). Collaborative assessment was seen to foster social connectedness and integration amongst students (Staff/Staffordshire). The majority of staff discussion focused upon the difficulties experienced during group work and the threats to wellbeing, such as the potential for cultural differences, personality clashes and arguments ‘if another member of the group is not pulling their weight or end up taking on too much’ (Staff/ UAL 1).

We sometimes find that groupwork ups the pressure, because if they’re in incompatible groups or there are issues going on, somebody’s not attending, it puts more strain on others. (Staff/Ulster 2)

Where students were able to form their own groupings, several participants indicated that, particularly in the first year, students may ‘gravitate to all the people that they have a social connection with’ (Staff/Leeds), potentially leading to the formation of cliques and feelings of isolation. Dealing with tensions and differences could provide a valuable learning experience to students, demonstrating that ‘they might have to work with people that they may not like or would be different to them’ (Staff /Leeds 1) but such an experience could also lead to students being unwilling to adopt roles within a team in future.

Students with anxiety were identified as a specific group who may struggle with group work, although in some cases it was felt that such forms of assessment were possible, if significant and resource-heavy scaffolding was put in place:

We constantly get students requesting to not do group work. And, I think, some of it absolutely genuinely is, like, they absolutely couldn’t do it under any circumstances. But I think some of it is that they probably could, they just need to be gradually eased into it and maybe working in a very small group with one other person. (Staff/Leeds)

Other potential solutions to reduce issues with social or collaborative assessment included: introducing a change in terminology so that “group” working became “team” working given that ‘teams support each other, whereas groups have a tendency to feed off each other’ (Staff/Leeds 2); prompting all participants to contribute and fixing groups for a set period, so relationships can develop (Staff/Staffordshire); encouraging students to reflect upon their own personality types (Staff/Strathclyde) and tutors proactively monitoring potential issues (Staff/UAL 1).

Students panels similarly proposed ‘alternative forms of assessment’ (Student/Leeds) such as group assessment, where:

what was being assessed was not your ability to do the questions, but the ability to work as a group, to convince other people of your answers, discuss it, and then see how many people would change their answer ... which is far more work-context  
(Student/Strathclyde)

Panels identified working in groups on interdisciplinary projects as a particularly rewarding ‘life skill’ which is instrumental to ‘working with somebody who does a different job to you’ within contemporary employment (Student/Strathclyde). Group assessment was perceived to ameliorate harmful competition ‘because the group is working together to get the best grade’ and ‘build that sense of community’ by facilitating peer interaction and involvement (Student/Strathclyde). Nevertheless, managing the dynamics of group work can be stress-inducing for students, ‘especially if you have mental health issues, you don’t want to talk to people ... it’s easier to read something than to communicate with others’ (Student/ Ulster).



### *Ideal versus practical assessment*

A tension explicitly identified within several staff groups was the desire to support all students to reach their individual potential within assessments, whilst acknowledging potential academic and practical barriers. One of these barriers to good practice was the strong sense that staff terms and conditions, alongside their quality of life, were declining:

I've seen the stress levels with the staff go up and I've seen the way the environment is going down. And it's not just that university. There are loads and loads of other universities are like that. (Staff/Leeds 2).

This awareness of working conditions affecting assessment was coupled with an awareness that under the Equality Act 2010, universities have a legal duty to make “reasonable adjustments” for students with protected characteristics (including a “mental impairment” (sections 92(6) and 6(1)(a)). In an ideal world, these adjustments would be built into the assessment design rather than applied on an ad-hoc and responsive basis.

Although ideally adjustments should reduce stress, they can have the potential to increase the demands on students, or reduce their acquisition of coping resources. Adjustments need to enable students with mental health issues to be able to fully demonstrate their academic ability, otherwise adaptations have the potential to create stigma or perceptions of unfairness:

We face accusations of we're making easier for students who have mental health issues and we're lowering standards and all that sort of stuff. And that's really unreasonable because that's not what we're trying to do, we're trying to level up the playing field. (Staff/Cardiff)

One example of an adjustment given was allowing certain students to give an individual, rather than a group, presentation (Staff/Ulster 1); another included providing a choice of

assessment topics and formats, although it was suggested that the perceived uncertainty had ultimately created greater levels of stress for some students (Staff/Ulster 2). More generally, participants were mindful that some forms of adjustment may not prepare students for their likely experience in working environments and that therefore scaffolding was required to develop students' own coping mechanisms (Staff/Staffordshire; Staff/Ulster). An alternative approach suggested to reduce reliance on reasonable adjustments would be to ensure the initial design of assessments was as inclusive as possible (Staff/Cardiff).

With regard to practical barriers, it was acknowledged that resourcing issues could impact on what it was possible to offer students:

From an institutional perspective, it's getting harder and harder to manage facilitation of all of that, given the diversity of students that are coming. We're struggling to get enough invigilators and enough rooms, at HE level but also at FE level, because you maybe have twelve students and they need six different room setups for the one assessment, [...] and then everybody needs them at the same time because everybody's exam period is similar.  
(Staff/Ulster 2)

Such issues could impact on whether proposed reasonable adjustments or support programmes were actually operationalised successfully, e.g. if specific computer software was provided without appropriate training (Staff/Ulster 2).

It was suggested that the use of extenuating/mitigating circumstances policies could potentially alleviate issues by permitting personal circumstances which have impacted on a students' work to be taken into account when determining their final grades. However, getting students to submit the relevant paperwork could be difficult:

It's also super hard for someone who is depressed, they can barely get dressed, let alone fill in reports on email. So, that's really hard. (Staff/UAL 2)

Staff indicated that considering such extenuating circumstances in isolation could be counterproductive as this may not allow for an understanding of the overall impact of a student's long-term condition, or preclude wider questions about fitness for study. The impact on staff resources and wellbeing of having to implement a range of reasonable adjustments was also recognised.

Student panels acknowledged that implementing individualised choices and adjustments around assessment types to incorporate individual needs 'is not always practical' (Student/Ulster). With regards to choosing assessment type, some students raised concerns about standardised and fair marking across different assessment conditions. 'How would you then level up our marks [if] ... we have the same essay, but yours would be in a two-hour time condition and I can have a week?' (Student/Ulster); 'in practice, it's really difficult' (Student/Leeds).

### ***Giving feedback versus receiving criticism***

The provision of appropriate feedback on assessments has been widely identified as a hallmark of good pedagogic practice, although its focus and purpose may vary (Mulliner and Tucker, 2015; Boud and Molloy, 2013). Staff referred to the need for feedback to be timely, constructive, clear and sufficiently detailed to provide a valuable formative tool for learning. At the same time (reflecting the 'ideal versus practical' tension above) several participants noted that, given student numbers, wider pressures on time and other resources could militate against its use in this way:

If you've got 130 students and you're supposed to be returning work within 2 weeks, how much time can you realistically take over each piece to give them the level of feedback that would actually be useful to them, rather than saying things that are fairly general.

(Staff/Ulster 2)

Inconsistencies in staff approach were also identified, particularly in terms of the length and quality of feedback given, prompting suggestions from several groups around clear and appropriate assessment criterion and marking rubrics.

Several groups also identified that students did not fully engage with the feedback that was provided, focusing instead on the grade being awarded.

We see a lot of them fixated on the grades but at the expense of the feedback. (Staff/Leeds 1)

This appeared to be a wide-spread issue, although one participant (Staff/Ulster 2) indicated that in a minority of cases this linked to struggles to engage due to mental health issues. Several participants raised concerns about students feeling a sense of entitlement to good grades, or complaining about their marks, linked to their payment of tuition fees.

For students who do engage with feedback, tension occurs between feedback as a learning tool and a threat to mental health and wellbeing. Participants referred to students taking feedback personally and experiencing a sense of failure. Staff agreed that feedback could trigger a significant affective reaction:

They can take it very personally and then see that as being that they've failed, they're not going to do well. (Staff/UAL 1)

Such reactions could lead to students becoming upset or defensive, and could lead to a negative response to future assessments (Staff/UAL 1) thus impeding feedback's effectiveness as a learning tool. Where students read their grade before the accompanying feedback, it could also lead to a failure to engage with the feedback itself.

Several potential solutions were raised to combat this tension. These included: providing feedback earlier than the grade awarded; ensuring students had a clear

understanding of the role of feedback; managing student expectations; holding one-to-one discussions; clearly ‘badging’ feedback given in other forms (e.g. verbally) (Staff/Ulster 2).

Providing feedback was also identified as a factor influencing staff wellbeing; focus groups highlighted that assessment pressures increase as student numbers increase. Bunching of assessment during the summer period, with limited time to mark examinations and attend examination boards was seen as a problem for staff as well as a source of anxiety for students:

The thing where I feel more powerless is around how the curriculum is delivered: clashing deadlines or bottlenecks of when they really feel the pressure. It's like, "That's something that we are technically in control of." We have developed this curriculum, but that's an area where I don't feel like I can have as much influence. (Staff/Leeds 1)

Student panels also saw pressures on academic staff, which exacerbated student stresses. Poor pedagogical practices (such as delaying the provision of feedback and marks), poor interpersonal and pastoral relationships, and ‘deliberate bias[ed] marking’, were identified and perceived as ‘a big trigger’ for student mental health issues (Student/UAL).

Panels implied that existing feedback practices are often ineffective as a formative learning tool because ‘the quality of feedback and what you do with it is not really very well explained at the moment’ (Student/Leeds).

We sometimes feel like people can take feedback personally, the way it's portrayed. Sometimes, it's not portrayed in a way where you struggle to take that on-board because, sometimes, it's not constructive, it's just criticism ... and I think that affects people's mental health (Student/Leeds).

Students advocated additional ‘support understanding how to use feedback constructively to make your work better’ (Student/Leeds). Identifying the receipt of assessment results as an

emotional threat, panels advocated ‘more psychological preparation for how to react to different results’ (Student/Strathclyde) with closer links with ‘academic services [...] counselling help and wellbeing services that the students can access off the back of receiving their feedback’ (Student/Leeds).

## **Discussion**

Assessment lies at the heart of higher education (QAA, 2018) and, as such, any whole university approach to student wellbeing must incorporate a consideration of how assessment design and practices impact on wellbeing and, conversely, how wellbeing impacts upon assessment itself (Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019; Houghton and Anderson, 2017).

The tensions identified in this paper each reflect ways in which assessment design and practice intersect with student wellbeing. The initial theme of challenge versus threat is arguably the most over-arching, as it focuses upon the balancing act required to ensure assessment is sufficiently rigorous and challenging to support student growth and meet internal and external benchmarks, whilst acknowledging that this may have negative implications for student wellbeing. However, appraisals of challenge and threat will always be subjective, and therefore so will be the appropriate scope, difficulty and frequency of assessment for individual students.

This tension also intersects with others, for example, by highlighting the difficulties of high-stakes, traditional examination formats and the practical and pedagogic difficulties of novel alternatives. Some types of assessment, such as exams, can generate feelings of anxiety as they are time pressured and test content is unknown. However, introduction of new assessment can adversely impact on student wellbeing, for example, student unfamiliarity

with agentic and authentic self-assessment practices can result in increased stress or disengagement among some students (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020). Considering how to evaluate what is 'stressful' about assessment needs to take these complications into account.

The notion of challenge versus threat is also exemplified when exploring the tension between collaborative and individual assessment. Social and oral assessment are intrinsic to socio-constructivist pedagogical approaches and the authentic needs of various employment contexts and may also ameliorate student isolation. However, the perceived threat of public failure may manifest in presentation anxiety which can threaten student wellbeing, particularly for those who already experience social anxiety. Prior literature has suggested specific curricula support may develop presentation self-efficacy and performance (Tsang, 2020; Nash, Crimmins & Oprescu, 2015). However, this may be difficult to design and operationalise in practice.

This issue of practicality in assessment is key as helping students to achieve their full as time and resources are finite within university settings and staff need to work within practical limits. Where these are disregarded, the impact upon staff wellbeing could be significant (Henderson, Ryan and Phillips, 2019). Supporting the specific needs of students by making reasonable adjustments to assessments is necessary, both legally and ethically. However, while individualising assessment might add choice and recognise individual needs, it can increase visibility of these needs and increase the strain on staff and resources as well as making assessment quality assurance more difficult.

The final tension identified, that of giving feedback versus receiving criticism, also demonstrates the difficult balance to be struck between the ideal of personalised, detailed feedback and the practical pressures which large student numbers and high intensity marking

place upon staff and resources. Once again, the tension of challenge versus threat is illustrated in the need to ensure critique is absorbed and reflected upon to facilitate learning whilst acknowledging the ways in which students may internalise and react to this in negative ways, potentially impacting upon their wellbeing.

This paper makes a significant contribution to literature around assessment design in relation to student wellbeing, particularly relevant at a time when there is sizeable concern around this issue. Student mental health and wellbeing have previously been seen as pastoral issues, separate from the core business of the university. However, the findings in this paper demonstrate that the intersections and interactions between assessment design, delivery, familiarity, and feedback and student wellbeing need to be explicitly acknowledged and explored within assessment strategy as part of a whole university approach (Hughes & Spanner, 2019).

The concept of a balancing act is particularly salient, given significant differentials in assessment aims and objectives within and across universities, disciplines and context. This paper demonstrates that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ solution to the difficulties inherent in supporting student wellbeing and assessing learning. It emphasises that staff and students ‘have valuable knowledge through experience and individual context’ (Piper & Emmanuel, 2019, p.16), and seeks to use the notions of tensions to ensure that resulting strategies can be grounded in the specific challenges and support needs of the diverse university community.

The nationally-collected data-set, with diverse staff and student voices, is a particular strength of this paper. However, these staff and students were self-selecting, potentially leading to a sample that had particularly strong views on the effect of mental health and wellbeing on learning. Using staff and student datasets allows for interesting commonalities



and comparisons to be drawn. For example, the shared critique of examinations is tempered in staff responses by awareness of the difficulties involved in designing inclusive assessment and catering for individual adjustments in terms of practical resources and their own wellbeing. For students, there is more emphasis on the potential wellbeing benefits of differentiated assessment and the provision of greater choice and flexibility.

## **Conclusion**

There is unlikely to be one ‘ideal’ resolution to any of the tensions which arise between assessment and student wellbeing. The diversity that exists within the student population, and in the disciplines and institutions of higher education, mean that any attempt at resolution will require a sustained and detailed critique of assessment design and practices within individual contexts, with the student voice forming an integral part of this dialogue (Piper & Emmanuel, 2019), to identify the appropriate balancing act to be struck. This paper provides a data-driven exploration of key tensions which forms the basis for such a critique, allowing for a proactive and reflective discussion of assessment as part of the whole university approach to wellbeing; as such, it has implications for practice across the higher education sector.

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