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**The discrepancies between staff and students' perceptions of feedback and assessment practices – analysis of TESTA data from one HE institution**

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**Abstract**

Students' satisfaction with feedback and assessment has historically been low. This is confirmed by the most recent National Student Survey where feedback and assessment still remain the area of least satisfaction. Such projects as Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA) attempt to tackle the issue by providing a channel of communication between staff and students at the programme level. This paper reports on the results of the University of Greenwich version of TESTA and identifies points of tension between staff perceptions of their practice, and students' perceptions of their assessment experience. Using cross-institutional data we identify common themes where the discrepancies between accounts affecting satisfaction rates emerge, *i.e.* quantity and quality of feedback, assessment loading and clarity of goals and standards, and provide our impartial explanation of the sources of those discrepancies.

**Keywords**

TESTA; feedback and assessment; student experience.

**Introduction**

Feedback and assessment is perceived as the aspect of student academic experience that shapes students' learning behaviours and heavily influences their satisfaction with their programme (Gibbs, 1999). It is also the aspect that, in comparison to other areas, has historically been graded low in the National Student Survey (NUS, 2015), and hence considered to be in need of improvement at the University of Greenwich, and across the Higher Education (HE) sector (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004).

In order to implement change one needs to have an understanding of what factors of feedback and assessment practice contribute to dissatisfaction. End of course student questionnaires offer insight into some of the issues, however, these surveys tend to focus on overall student experience, where feedback and assessment is one factor amongst many. To improve that specific area, an in-depth investigation of different aspects of feedback and assessment is needed; Transforming Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) is a project that has the potential to offer that (Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs, 2011).

TESTA extends the NSS questions to areas that are identified in the literature as influencing students' learning and experience (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004)(see Table 1) and examines them at a programme level. The interest into programme level assessment mechanisms has been advocated in the literature as the more appropriate way of looking at the students' experience (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009; Bloxham and Boyd 2007). As Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs (2013, p.74) explain, "...taking a programme approach clarifies the interconnectedness of units of study, emphasising that an undergraduate degree is subject to a curriculum design process where the 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts'".

**Citation**

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The value of the TESTA process lies in its ability to provide a comprehensive picture of assessment practice. While it considers the students' voice through questionnaires and focus groups, it also gives insight into staff perceptions of their practice and conditions they create. Hence it has the potential to expose staff and students' views and to capture any emerging differences.

Using the data generated through the Greenwich version of TESTA (Table 1), this paper focuses on the comparison of staff perceptions of what feedback and assessment looks like on their programme, with students' views on their assessment experience. The aim is to identify the discrepancies between the points of view of these two groups. The identification of the reasons for the discrepancies in opinions can have a powerful effect on better understanding of the two perspectives, and as a result, lead to finding more appropriate solutions to the pressing issues which affect the NSS scores.

### **TESTA@Greenwich**

While the purpose of this paper is to discuss the results of the cross-institutional TESTA implementation, some explanation of TESTA methodology (Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs, 2011, 2014), and more importantly, TESTA@Greenwich methodology used to collect the data, needs to be given. TESTA uses a mixed method approach to gather staff (interviews, programme audit) and student data (questionnaires, focus groups), as outlined in Table 1. After the initial pilot of the TESTA project at the University of Greenwich, as a result of the evaluation and issues encountered, we amended the original process. While the organization of focus groups remained unchanged, we redesigned some of the questions from the original questionnaire, as well as altered the programme audit. In relation to the latter, we extended the breadth of the programme audit analysis to include the analysis of the quality of feedback. This allowed us to provide the programme teams with an extra dimension to the aspects of quantity and quality of feedback that is only measured quantitatively in the original TESTA through student responses to the questionnaire items. To analyse the quality of feedback we apply an amended version of feedback profiling tool developed by Hughes, Smith and Creese (2014) which classifies sentence units into several categories and subcategories (see Table 2). As a result of the analysis the programme teams are presented with their feedback profile, indicating what their feedback comments tend to focus on. The second change to the audit occurred in relation to the calculation of the volume of oral feedback. The original TESTA measure asks the programme teams to provide a number of hours of written feedback per student per programme. This is problematic due to the nature of oral feedback, and the spontaneity with which it is given. This therefore makes the measure unreliable and difficult for the programme teams to provide. Hence at the point of the audit we ask the teams to identify how they deliver feedback and calculate the ratio of written to oral feedback. Those aforementioned amendments essentially make TESTA@Greenwich version of TESTA methodology.

<b>Table 1.</b> The differences between TESTA and TESTA@Greenwich.		
Component	TESTA	@Greenwich modification
Questionnaire	29 questions, 10 scales: Quantity and Quality of Feedback Use of Feedback Deep Approach Surface Approach Learning from exams Quantity of effort Coverage of the syllabus Appropriate Assessment Clear Goals and standards Overall satisfaction	28 questions, 9 scales - omission of surface approach (as it overlaps with deep approach), addition of questions about assessment variety addition of the scale of 'clarity of feedback;
Focus groups	5 questions	
Programme audit	% of examinations (fall into low-medium-high category) variety of assessment methods (falling into low-medium-high category) volume of summative assessment (falling into low-medium-high category) volume of formative assessment (falling into low-medium-high category) volume of oral feedback (in hours) volume of written feedback (in words) timeliness (in days)	Volume of oral feedback substituted with Ratio of written to oral feedback Addition of the quality of feedback analysis

<b>Table 2.</b> Quality of feedback analysis categories, adapted from Hughes, Smith, and Creese (2014).		
Main category	Sub-category	Definition
Praise	Actual praise	Units that provide positive comments about students performance
	Limited praise	One word praise comments such as 'OK', 'good'
	Qualified praise	Praise that contains criticism (for example It's a good piece but....)
Criticism	Factual critique	Misinterpretation of facts
	Critique of approach	Refers to critique of structure or argument
	Correction of errors	Such as grammar, punctuation, referencing
	Written communication	Critique of writing style, academic writing
Advice	Specific	Advice specific to current assignment
	General	Advice about general points about current assignment
	For future	Advice that students can use for future assignments
ipsative	Comments in relation to the improvement from last assignment	
Clarification requests	Units in the forms of questions to the students	
Unclassified	Refers to any feedback that does not fall into the aforementioned categories, usually statements that are descriptive that carry no judgment/ information about students' performance	

### Methodology

The data analysed in this paper were obtained through the TESTA@Greenwich methodology (Table 1) from 21 programmes from across the four faculties (Business, Education and Health, Science and Engineering and Architecture, Computing and Humanities<sup>1</sup>) that have so far undergone TESTA at the University of Greenwich. Such a spread allows us to identify common themes suggesting institution-wide issues that need to be addressed at a higher level.

Staff data come from staff interviews conducted alongside programme audit. While we worked with 21 programmes, some of them shared a programme leader. Hence the total number of interviewees equals 12.

Student data were obtained through questionnaires and focus groups interviews. We managed to collect 849 responses across the participating programmes, which constitutes over 33% of student population on those programmes. The participation in focus groups varied with an average of 5 students per focus groups. Altogether we conducted 21 focus groups, in some cases 3 focus groups per programme covering each year group; however, for 6 programmes only quantitative data were available.

The feedback samples were obtained per programme leader. Hence if a programme leader was in charge of 3 programmes, and the courses overlapped, we used one set of samples<sup>2</sup> and created one feedback profile for the three programmes. We differentiated the number of feedback samples to reflect the assessment loading and student population. The number of samples varied from 20 to 50 and was taken from across the markers, courses, levels and final grades.

The remaining data coming from the programme audit, such as assessment loading and variety were obtained from the university's official systems (Portal), the VLE (Moodle) or programme handbook and analysed for each programme. The data coming from the audit reflects the assessment picture of all 21 programmes that we worked with. The breakdown of each data source is presented in Table 3.

<b>Table 3.</b> A summary of the source and type of data.		
Data source	Data type	Sampling
Staff	Interviews	12 programme leaders
	Samples of feedback	20-50 samples x 12
Students	Questionnaires	849
	Focus groups interviews	21 interviews, on average 5 students per group
Documentation	Programme handbooks	21
	Moodle courses	21
	Information on the University's system	21

<sup>1</sup> In the discussion section Business programmes are referred to as D-M; Education and Health – Q-S; Science and Engineering – A-C and Architecture, Computing and Humanities - N-P

<sup>2</sup> What we refer to as samples are students' past assignments with feedback and a grade; those were primarily summative pieces of work

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We used thematic analysis to identify common themes in differences in staff and students' accounts of their feedback and assessment experience commented on in 21 reports we produced for each participating programme. We used further data from the audit to explain the root of the problem and offer solutions.

The project operated under ethical clearance of the original TESTA project. At this point it is adopted cross institutionally as a tool for preparing for programme review, hence treated as any other course evaluation form delivered by the university. We gained permission from the programme leaders to share their anonymised data to illustrate institutional tendencies.

### *Discrepancies and contradictions in accounts*

The comparison of student and staff data allowed us to identify cross-institutional points of tensions in perceptions which focused around three areas:

- quantity, quality and timeliness of feedback
- assessment loading
- clarity of goals and standards

We report on those tensions below. Each theme is organized into two sections. The first section provides an account of staff understanding of their practice, contrasted with the data from the student population; the second section offers our impartial assessment, as an objective participant, of where the discrepancy in perception originates and what contributes to the tensions.

The data, especially quantitative data we present, reflect the national statistics, *i.e.* the majority of students seem to be satisfied with their feedback and assessment experience. We recognize that there is abundance of good practice at the University of Greenwich. Yet for this paper we want to illustrate using quantitative where the highest dissatisfaction can be noticed, and explore the reasons for this dissatisfaction.

### *Quantity, Quality and timeliness of feedback*

#### Staff and student perceptions

In our conversations with staff and students we defined feedback in as simple terms as comments on, or a discussion about students' work and their progress with their tutor. This encompassed both summative and formative work, which was made clear to both participating groups. By focusing the definition of feedback on tutor as the main agent in feedback, we excluded the instances of peer feedback from the research. While students' perceptions of peer feedback were discussed in the focus groups, those experiences were mostly negative and not considered by the learners to be instances of feedback.

From staff point of view, feedback is returned to the students within the university policy guidelines, *i.e.* 15 working days from the submission date. In many instances staff members emphasized how unrealistic this deadline is and how meeting it requires a lot of cooperation from all the members of the team. The programme leaders agreed that this cooperation and coordination is one of the more difficult tasks, as the quote below illustrates:

'...it is a difficult task, especially if you have a weak link (...) we have a lot of good people, a good team but some lecturers do not stick to the rules and there isn't much I can do. I ask, I email but what else can I do?'

(Programme leader C).

In relation to the quality of feedback, staff members thought of their feedback as exhibiting

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the characteristics of what in the literature is described as good quality feedback by such sources as Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and defined as effective practice in University's Feedback and Assessment policy. Hence they understood quality in terms of providing sufficient information to students about the standard of their work by indicating mistakes they made:

'I always give them a lot of feedback, telling them where they went wrong and some feed forward but no spoonfeeding. I sometimes send them emails with individual feedback'

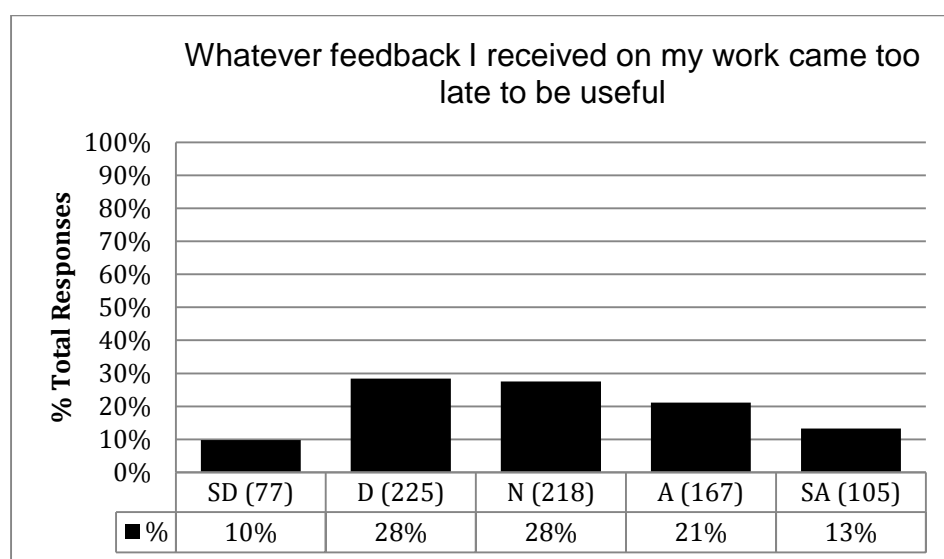
(Programme leader A).

'We actually put a lot of effort into giving them feedback, we comment according to the marking criteria in Turn-it-in but the issue is they don't read it. You can see who read it online and even if it's online they don't bother. They are only interested in the grade. Once they have that, that is it. It is frustrating coz it's a lot of work'

(Programme leader E).

As the quotation above explains, staff members did not have any reservations as to the quality of the feedback they provide, claiming it should justify the students' needs. What they identified as their biggest problem is students' lack of engagement with that feedback.

Students' opinions seemed to be at variance with what the staff members said. Timeliness of feedback appeared to be the most prevalent problem across the faculties. 34% of respondents indicated that feedback came too late to be considered useful (Figure 1<sup>3</sup>).



**Figure 1.** Students' perception of the timeliness of feedback.

This was also confirmed by qualitative data as students often referred to the delays in receiving their feedback:

'The feedback on assignments are not prompt. In year 2 we had to wait 9 weeks to get our grades for an assignment. Again in year 3 lecturers are still marking assignments 5 weeks after the deadline, therefore no grades have been given' (Programme A).

<sup>3</sup> For each figure SD=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neutral; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree

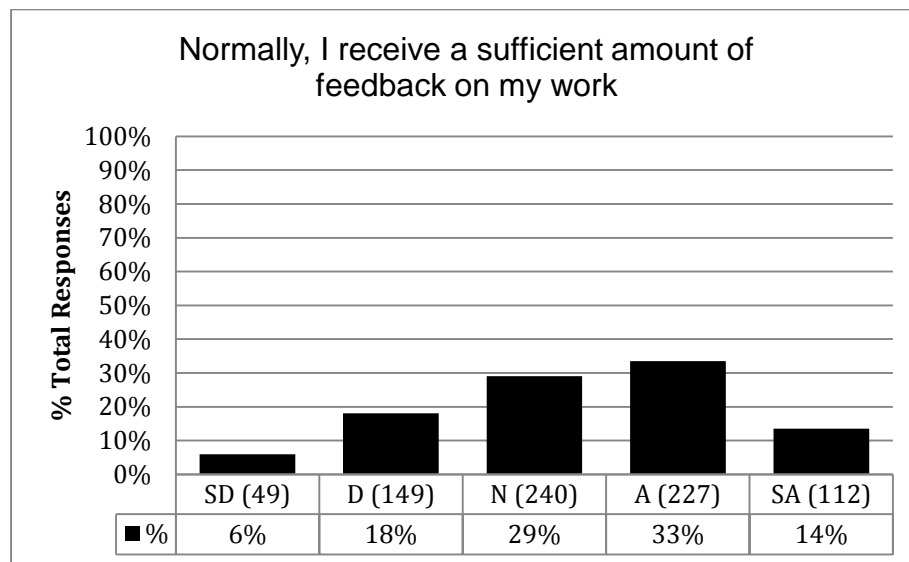


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'I always find the first term a bit of a guessing game - you don't know if you're doing great, or really bad, because all the assessments are at Christmas; so you might be going through a 12 week term, without knowing anything'

(Programme F).

Similar concerns were expressed over the quantity of feedback. Figure 2 below suggests that 24% of respondents claimed that they do not receive sufficient amount of feedback, with 29% refraining from making a definite judgment,



**Figure 2.** Students' perceptions of the quantity of feedback.

This was confirmed by the focus group participants who claimed that feedback is sporadic, blaming staff lack of willingness to engage with students' work as per quotations below:

'Half the time I don't ever really get any feedback or even get it marked'

(Programme C).

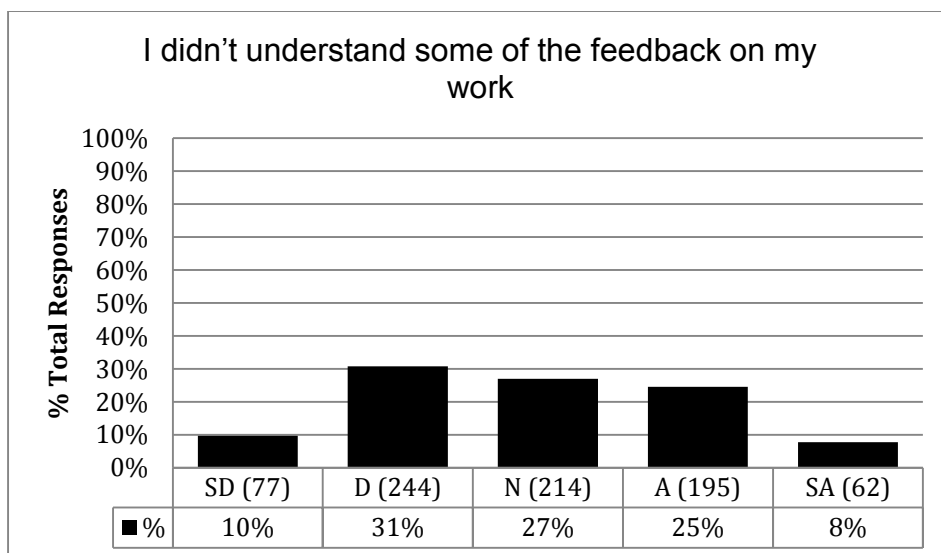
'Often my work would come with a grade but no feedback and lecturers are often reluctant to meet and discuss them. Some work would have good comments and all ticks but wouldn't be a first'

(Programme J).

'(we don't get feedback) Not unless we go and ask for it – you have to request it, some people would be happy to oblige but most wouldn't'

(Programme A).

Further issue contributing to dissatisfaction with feedback in general and quality in particular is lack of clarity. A large portion of 33% claimed that in fact they did not understand the feedback they received (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Students' perceptions of the clarity of feedback.

The issue of lack of understanding seems to relate to the fact that students feel that feedback does not carry enough information to fully comprehend the strengths and weaknesses of their work. This is exemplified by the qualitative data below:

'It doesn't really explain much, it says good, ok but what's good'  
(Programme K).

'There's been a couple of assignments where I've had a fairly mediocre mark, but then I've only had two lines of feedback, and I'm there thinking like, 'Ok, that's great, two points, but what can you expand on to tell me how I can improve that?'  
(Programme R).

'...she just wrote good, good, okay, she didn't say what we could have done to make it better. She just said the stuff we didn't do well on, that was it. I don't know it was half constructive, half just saying that's not good'  
(Programme O).

### **Our findings – oral versus written feedback and quality versus quantity**

The students' frustration with lack of timely feedback is justified since we found numerous cases across the programmes where the submission date was months away from the feedback date. Hence the lack of ability to meet the university guidelines of 15 days was common. On the programmes where the results for timeliness of feedback were higher than the university average, the students appreciated the communication from staff about expected delays. This allowed staff members to manage students' expectations and positively affected their satisfaction with feedback return times.

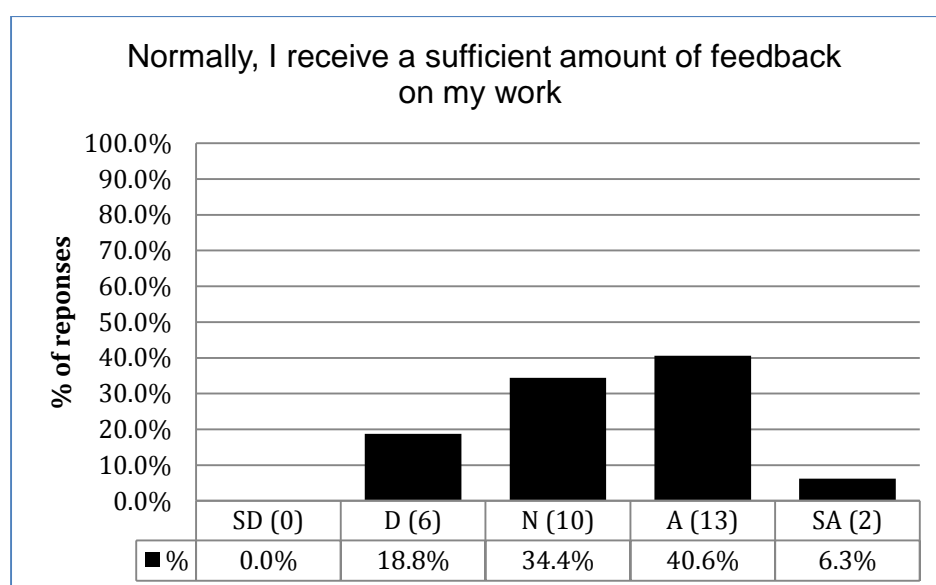
In relation to complaints about the quantity, we found that in fact students do receive feedback. The amount varies across the programmes, however, to claim that staff do not give any commentary to the students work was an over exaggeration. On average students receive 6995 words of feedback per 3-year programme<sup>4</sup>, with the highest amount of 21000

<sup>4</sup> as per TESTA calculations – total number of words from a sample of assignments divided by the number of assignments multiplied by the total number of assessments

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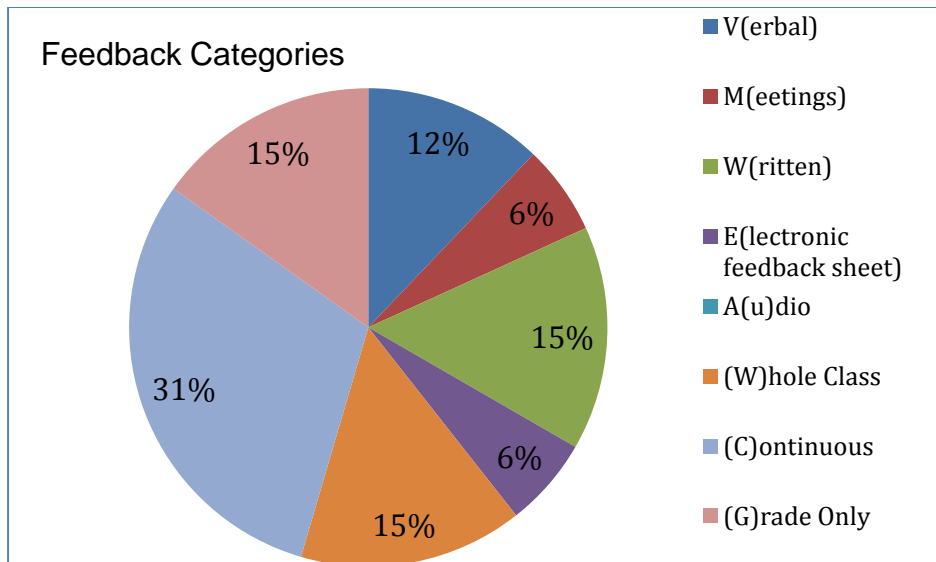
words on one of the programmes. There were cases, however, where written feedback was scarce and the prevalence was given to oral feedback. On average across the programmes 40% of feedback given to students was oral, either during 1:1 sessions, in tutorials or through whole class feedback. On these programmes where the amount of written feedback fell within the 'low' / 'low medium' category according to TESTA methodology (Jessop, El Hakim, Gibbs, 2011), the amount of oral feedback was much higher. Hence it appears that students' lack of recognition of oral feedback as feedback, and staff lack of signposting and communication with the students about what feedback entails, is the factor contributing to low scores.

We will use an example of the programme with the highest volume of written feedback to justify this claim. While we recorded the abundance of feedback (21000 words per student per programme), still a small proportion (19%) claimed that they in fact do not receive sufficient quantity of feedback, as per Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Students' perceptions of the quantity of feedback on a programme with a very high volume of written feedback.

Figure 5 overleaf shows feedback categorization on this programme. Written feedback constitutes only 21% of overall feedback the students receive. The majority comes in verbal form (classified in the figure as verbal, meetings, whole class and continuous) with 15% of assignments for which feedback is not given due to them being professional exams marked by professional body assessors.



**Figure 5.** Feedback categories on the programme with very high volume of feedback.<sup>5</sup>

The samples collected to calculate the overall volume of written feedback were representative of the entire programme. Hence we reiterate the conclusion that it is not so much that students do not get feedback but rather have problems recognizing different forms in which feedback can be delivered to them.

Another issue we found is related to quality of the feedback the students were given. While the volume of feedback was generally 'medium' or 'high' (as categorized by TESTA (Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs, 2011)), for some programmes the feedback did not contain sufficient, valuable information about the students' performance. Figure 6 below provides a university-wide feedback profile. The prevalent category is critical feedback, followed by praise, clarification requests, advice and statements that we decided were unclassified (as explained in Table 2).

<sup>5</sup> Continuous feedback is understood as ongoing feedback that the students get every session, especially in tutorials and small group teaching, that provides them with guidance as to their understanding and performance

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Category of feedback		Total per sample		Average	
Critical feedback	Critique of approach (structure and argument)	470	Total 1511	3.4	Total 11.7
	Correction of errors	456		3.4	
	Factual critique (of content)	433		3.8	
	Written communication	152		2	
Giving praise	Praise	617	Total 729	4.6	Total 4.6
	Qualified praise	56		0.4	
	Limited praise	51		0.3	
	Recognising progress (ipsative)	0		0	
Clarification request		282		2	
Giving advice	Specific (to current assignment)	149	Total 254	1.1	Total 2
	General points (specific to current assignment)	86		0.7	
	For future assignments	19		0.1	
Unclassified statements		89		0.6	

**Figure 6.** Cross-university feedback profile.

We recognized students' opinions about very short uninformative comments and reflected them in the 'limited praise' category (Table 2). Student interviews revealed that even with praise, one word comments do not give them sufficient information about what was in fact good and leads to dissatisfaction. While the prevalent category of criticism is important, students respond to it better when it is counterweighted with advice on how to improve their performance. Where student satisfaction with the quality of feedback was higher than average, it was due to the strong presence of advice category, as the quotations below suggest:

'...that was really helpful because it told us what we needed to improve'  
(Programme S).

'...they normally write us a big personal email saying what was wrong in places, in future what we'd be better off doing'  
(Programme G).

'...[they sent us email] telling us where we went wrong, where in the future...she actually even sent us a check list of where we got marks and where we didn't like where we missed out on marks that we could have had and where we actually got our mark and then general comments about how we wrote our actual essay. That's really helpful because then I know in the future, because it came up in our actual exam because I knew where I could gain marks that I hadn't previously'  
(Programme C).

Hence the element of advice is that aspect of feedback the students seem to value most.

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While the ipsative comments were non-existent in students' feedback, the students did not express concern over this. There was an understanding that the University's policy of anonymous marking is an obstacle to commenting on progress as it's difficult, if not impossible, for the tutors to know whose work they are grading. The students seemed to value fairness over explicit recognition of progress. This was also the explanation provided by the staff as to the lack of ipsative feedback.

*Assessment (over-)loading*

Staff and student perceptions

When examining assessment environments and interviewing the staff members, it generally appeared that the number of assessments is appropriate for the credits the students receive. Typical assessment loading at the University of Greenwich was between 15 and 40 with only 2 programmes falling into the high profile of TESTA classification with a number as high as 55 assessment points. Some programme leaders in initial interviews acknowledged that there might be an issue with the number of times that the students are assessed, however, they justified their practice with the fact that it is HE and students have to work for their qualification and the requirements of outside professional bodies:

'...We can't really change it much because it is what they have to do to get professional accreditation. And it's not that much comparing to what I had to do'

(Programme leader M).

'It's Higher Education, they have to work to get the qualification'

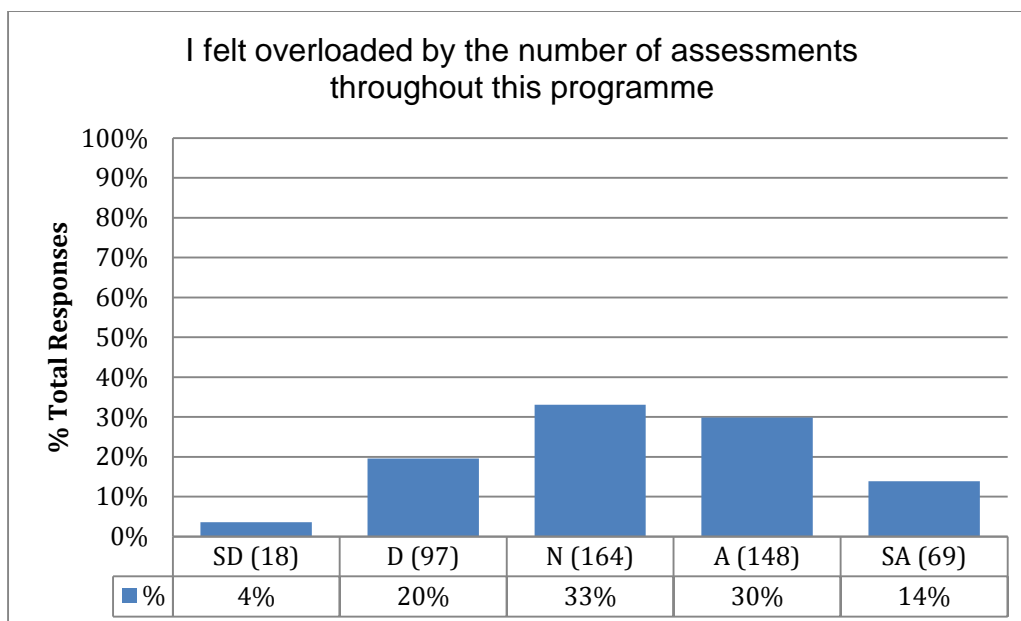
(Programme leader N).

The majority of staff members seemed to suggest that it is in fact students' lack of organizational skills that makes it difficult for them to meet the deadlines, and not an issue with assessment loading:

'We give them dates at the beginning, they know what is coming but they don't think about it in advance and plan in advance'

(Programme leader C).

The students' responses contradicted staff perceptions, as illustrated by Figure 7 below. A large proportion of 44% of students strongly agreeing and agreeing with the statement was one of the highest ones amongst all of the questionnaire responses. Further 33% of students choosing the neutral scale might indicate (from our experience) that there is inconsistency across the programme hence students might not have felt comfortable with the definite scales, yet it still illustrates the point about over-assessment.



**Figure 7.** Students' responses to assessment loading.

This was further confirmed in the focus groups. The students felt that the amount of work they are asked to do over a short period of time leads to their lack of engagement with the material and adopting a surface approach to learning:

'I feel like it's so much work and there's so much material, and so much content that they're trying to cover in the 2 semesters that it's really not even sinking in'  
(Programme M).

'It's too much and what's worse it's all happening at the same time. We end up having 3 assessments in 2 weeks plus coursework'  
(Programme D).

While the complaints of overassessment were expressed across the programmes, it is interesting to mention that one group of students was very self-aware and agreed with one of the staff comments mentioned above about lack of management skills:

'They tell us in advance and to be honest I'm that kind of person that will always wait till the last minute to do something so I end up overwhelmed. It's just the kind of person I am but to be fair to them the dates are given in advance so that you can plan if you want to'  
(Programme R).

This, however, was not a sentiment shared across the programmes where overassessment was mentioned as an issue by the majority of students in focus groups.

### **Our findings - the curse of the portfolio**

Initial examination of the audit data made us inclined to conclude that students are not being overassessed. However, upon closer examination of the assessment category of 'portfolio' we found that the picture presented in official documentation, and during staff interviews, was distorted. We will use one programme to illustrate this point. While the overall number of assessments appeared to be within the 'medium' TESTA category (15-40 assessments per

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programme), upon closer examination of what constitutes a portfolio we found that the results were much closer to the 'high' categorization. Figure 8 presents initial visual representation of classification of assessments, with 19 assessments over a three year period. When considering different components of a 'portfolio' this number increases the overall number of assessment units to 55, justifying students' dissatisfaction with loading, and point toward overloading (Figure 9).

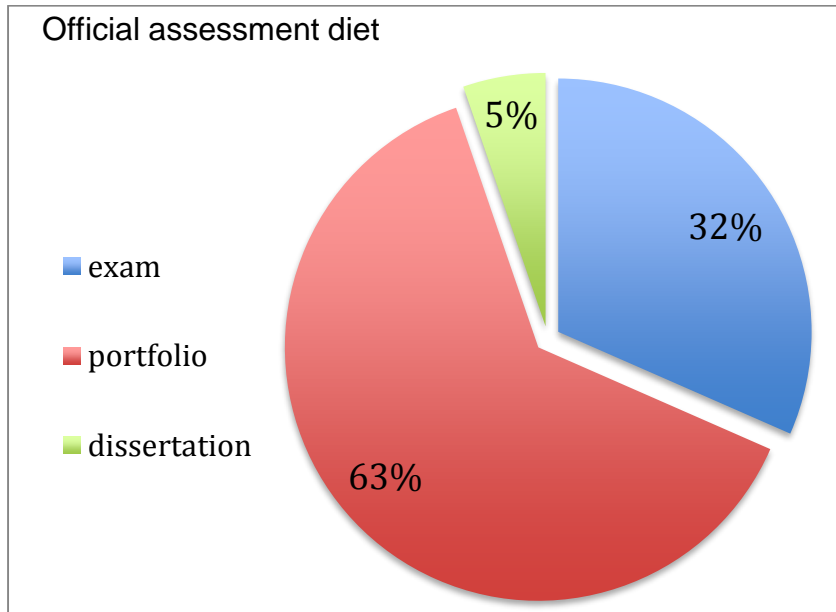


Figure 8. Assessment classification as presented by staff for Programme L.

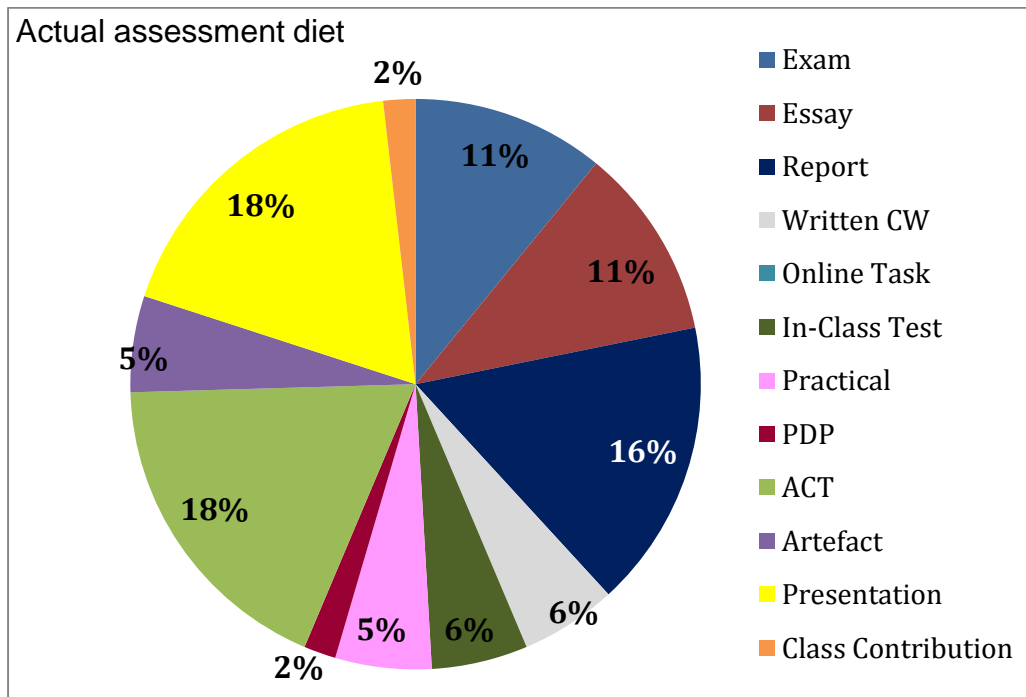


Figure 9. Assessment classification after extracting portfolio components for Programme L.

As Figure 9 shows, some of the portfolio tasks were classified as exams and essays hence required a substantial amount of work from the student. These should have been treated as



separate assessment items and not components of the portfolio.

At the stage of presenting TESTA results to the programme leaders, some of them recognised this as a problem, others would argue that portfolio tasks are not as demanding as 'standalone' assessments and therefore did not consider portfolios to be contributing to overassessment. However, the issue was recognized university-wide and some mechanisms were put in place to prevent multiple, demanding assessments to be put under the umbrella term of a 'portfolio'.

*Unclear goals and standards*

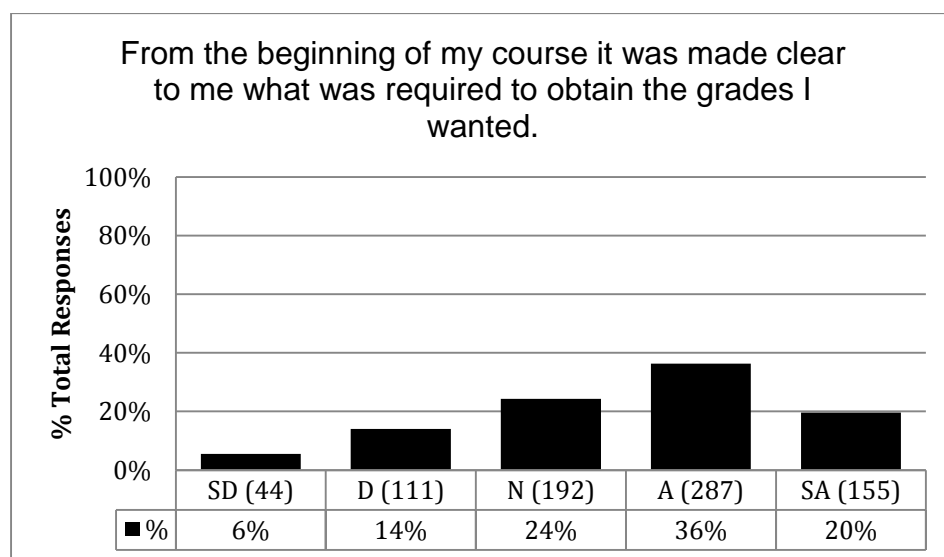
Staff and student perceptions

The final contradiction emerged in relation to clarity of goals and standards, *i.e.* whether students understand the lecturers' expectations in relation to assessments. According to staff, students get sufficient guidance on how to approach each assessment and what to do in order to perform well. The information is provided through two channels, *i.e.* via Moodle page and in their handbook, hence sufficient effort has been put to communicate expectations to the students. The issue is not lack of information but the students lack of effort to engage with it, as the quote below suggests:

'Everything is in the handbook. We make sure we put all the information there but they don't bother reading it'

(Programme Leader L).

20% of the student population claims that in fact they are not aware of the lecturers' requirements (Figure 10.).



**Figure 10.** Students' responses to the clarity of goals and standards.

The issue of expectations dominated a lot of focus group discussions as the students confirmed there is lack of clarity as to the requirements. The quotations below highlight two issues, *i.e.* one related to not knowing what constitutes a good piece of work, the second one related to lack of consistency across the lecturers as to their expectations:

'I still don't know what to do to get a 1<sup>st</sup>'

(Programme A).

## PAZIO: THE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN STAFF AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FEEDBACK AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES – ANALYSIS OF TESTA DATA FROM ONE HE INSTITUTION

'One lecturer will like it done this way, the other one that way but they won't tell you, they just expect you to know'

(Programme Q).

'It's difficult to know what lecturers want in person, everyone wants different things and they-, you get told, do this, and at the end of the term "oh but we told you to do more than just this". But in reality, they didn't. It was very short'

(Programme K).

'...you didn't actually know what you were meant to be doing and everybody went in the complete wrong direction and got 50s and 60s for it'

(Programme C).

### **Our findings – 'Who reads the handbook?'**

While as the staff members explained, the majority of information was provided to the students, we often found that the students did not use the official channels of communication. One of the comments during the focus groups was: 'Who reads the handbook?' (Programme C). Hence greater student satisfaction and clarity as to the expectations was found on programmes that offer active engagement in understanding the criteria during the sessions. Some of the quotations illustrate this point:

'I found, because we had an example of a lab report put up and then an example of where you'd get the grades, as in you'd get so many [points/marks] for, like, accuracy results and then only like 5% for referencing. So you knew where to focus all your energy'

(Programme C).

'...we have marking criteria that kind of outline everything that you're kind of meant to mention in the essay. They go through them as well'

(Programme N).

These findings acknowledging the value of open discussion of assessment criteria in relation to exemplar assessments were also confirmed by other sources in the literature (Handley and Williams, 2009; Handley, Price and Millar, 2008; Bloxham and West, 2007).

In relation to the problem of varying expectations across the lecturers, a minority seems to think that it is the students' responsibility to find out what the standards are. Hence there was a shift in thinking that communication of criteria is not the lecturers' job, but it is a students' duty to actively seek information. This view, however, was not dominant amongst the staff members, yet worth mentioning as possibly contributing to 20% dissatisfaction rate (Figure 10.).

### **Conclusions**

While there were many more themes that emerged from the abundance of TESTA@Greenwich data, the remaining ones were specific to given programmes, hence prevalent for some and absent for others. We wanted to present a cross-institutional picture, which can to some extent, within limitations, be generalizable across the Higher Education sector.

We believe that the majority of tensions we describe result from lack of understanding and lack of communication. The issues with the quantity of feedback result from students' lack of

understanding what feedback is, linked to lack of communication between staff and students about the nature of feedback. Similarly, the issue of quality of feedback is a misunderstanding between what the students expect and what staff think the students need. The issue of overloading is related to lack of open communication between staff members about assessment items across the courses, and between staff and students about the actual workload to enable time management. The final misunderstanding surrounding the clarity of standards again is an issue of communication between staff and students about expectations, which according to students can be effectively achieved through in-class discussion of criteria. Hence establishing a dialogue between staff and students appears to be key in improving feedback and assessment situation. At the University of Greenwich we attempt to establish that dialogue through the institutional implementation of TESTA@Greenwich.

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