

Student assessment in higher education: embargo or empowerment?

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Abstract

Purpose – This study recruited students who struggled to meet institutional deadlines for summative assessments. Increasing the number of diverse and non-traditional students in higher education (HE) institutions presents challenges in learning and teaching in online, conventional and hybrid contexts, impacting on student academic success. The purpose of this paper is to expand our understanding of student perceptions of the factors involved in academic achievement.

Design/methodology/approach – Using qualitative methods and in-depth semi-structured interviews, 14 participants were interviewed. Using Freire's concept of empowerment, and Bordieu's concept of habitus, the authors explore student perceptions of assessment.

Findings – Results presented thematically indicate that student perceptions of the purpose of the assessment and academic qualification are at odds with institutional habitus. Several embargoes impacting on academic achievement were revealed.

Research limitations/implications – Shifting organisational patterns and modes of production within HE institutions have influenced the student experience of academic writing and assessment. Findings highlight the factors that impact on academic success in HE institutions for non-traditional students in particular. Social class and educational background (habitus) are not factors taken into account when students are assessed. This impacts on capacity to achieve academic success.

Practical implications – The paper includes implications for curriculum designers, and self-reflective practitioners on issues related to academic success for non-traditional students.

Social implications – The study uses two case studies from two countries, Scotland and Brazil, both countries have invested heavily to address the twenty-first century learning agenda. Issues of widening access have increased student diversity, however, embargoes on academic achievement remain powerful factors that require further discussion and study.

Originality/value – This paper fulfils an identified need to study how issues of widening access can be mitigated, in particular for non-traditional students.

Keywords Employability, Assessment, Pedagogy, Qualitative research methods, Widening access

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Processes of democratising higher education (HE) and widening access, are considered key drivers of employment and economic success (Costa, 2013; Riddell *et al.*, 2013), that have had an impact on teaching, learning and assessment (Osborne, 2003; Biggs and Tang, 2011) and student retention and progression (Thomas, 2002). This study explores student experience of institutional assessment practices in the contexts of widening access and marketisation in Scotland and Brazil, and it is part of an ongoing series of research on student experiences of assessment (McPhee and Söderström, 2012; McPhee and D'Esposito, 2015; D'Esposito and McPhee, 2016). Despite clear social, economic and cultural differences, both countries are committed to widening access to HE. Evaluation studies focussing on assessment often compare and contrast modes of learning, and student success using summative grades scores as determinants of academic achievement. Normally excluded from these types of study, are the experiences of non-traditional students. A total of 14 students from two



institutions[1] took part in the interviews conducted towards the end of the term, when students had experience of assessment. The aim was the generation of rich data that documents the non-traditional student experience of academic writing, pedagogy and assessment in HE, and how it relates to employment within the context of widening access and marketisation. A semi-structured reflexive interview schedule gathered rich qualitative data, which was subject to thematic analysis, informed by themes from the literature.

The theoretical constructs

Places of learning can be understood as both instruments of social control (Illich, 1971) that lead to alienation (Freire, 2005), and potential places of empowerment. Empowerment refers to the possibility of accessing spaces that provide moments of discussion, reflection and actions with transformative potential that require active participation. It concerns the opportunity of the individual to transform situations as individuals capable of resisting the barriers placed upon them (Souza *et al.*, 2014, pp. 156-159). As Freire (1971, p. 4) states, education is a means for transformation of the individual that allows the development of thinking which contributes to their empowerment and engagement in civil society (p. 9) but it can also be an expression of alienation, and the instrument for further alienation (p. 3).

Based on Freire's (1971) concept of empowerment, we explore the consequences 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 assessment. We use Bourdieu's (1990) concept of "cultural and social capital" and "habitus" to explore the impact of widening access, neo-liberalism, marketisation of HE and pedagogy on how non-traditional students perceive institutional assessment practices.

Widening access and non-traditional students

Scotland and Brazil have recently begun processes of democratising education and widening access in attempts to influence social mobility. However, research has shown that over the last 50 years not only has there been little class mobility in education (Raftery and Hout, 1993; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Clancy, 1988, 1995, 2001; Archer *et al.*, 2002; Lynch, 2006) but also that this is unlikely to happen even in prosperous countries (Lynch, 2006).

Universities recruit students from a wide and diverse social and economic background to a lesser or greater degree. These students often termed "non-traditional students" in HE may have little or no family history of HE experiences, and many will include socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities (Zinkiewicz and Trapp, 2004, p. 5; Taylor and House, 2010, p. 46).

While this is to be welcomed in both Scotland and Brazil, older students with less recent or little experience of further education, can struggle with academic pressure of meeting standards required to pass assessments, particularly written assessments. As Taylor and House (2010, pp. 48-49) point out:

There has been much effort on encouraging non-traditional students to enter HEI. However, attracting students from low income backgrounds is not enough; support is often required as it is likely that such students are more likely to need to work longer hours in paid employment to supplement their student loan.

This indicates that there are several obstacles to be overcome by both full- and part-time students in learning and understanding the rules, practices and habits within academia. These rules include time management, reading and structuring assignments, understanding what tutors want and what advice and support can be offered (Bowl, 2001). As many non-traditional students will have to work long hours to support themselves financially, or have responsibilities for looking after children and have family and community expectations, they may experience difficulty in coping with institutional rules and practices.

Marketisation, neo-liberalism and pedagogy

Changes in HE have occurred globally and an increasing number of universities operate using business models that attract an increasingly diverse group of students. The corporatisation and marketisation of the universities has its origins in neo-liberalism, which offers a market view of who should provide education, that is, the state or the individual (Tooley, 1996, 2000). The rationalisation is that it provides students with choice. As Lynch (2006, p. 4) states:

The neo-liberal model is also indifferent to the fact that the state is an ineliminable agent in matters of justice. It ignores the reality that only the state can guarantee to individual persons the right to education. If the state absolves itself of the responsibility to educate, rights become more contingent – contingent on the ability to pay.

Increasingly marketisation is typified by student loans and tuition fees, degree programmes are transformed into investment projects (Rhodes and Slaughter, 2004) and universities into service providers and consumer-oriented corporate networks (Rutherford, 2005; Lynch, 2006). Education becomes a service to be delivered to those who can afford to buy it (Giroux, 2002), commodified as a product (Barnett, 2011) to be purchased by the student consumer.

Defining the student consumer as autonomous, rational, market-oriented and self-interested has profound implications for the operation of education as a social practice, creating a culture of insecurity that induces anxiety, competition and indifference to the vulnerable (Lynch, 2006) and transforming an academic relationship between teacher and student into a transaction (Furedi, 2011).

According to the principles of marketization, if the customer is always right, the university is potentially at the mercy of the student consumer. Therefore, marketisation disciplines academic life via consumer pressure on HE:

The culture of complaint has encouraged the emergence of a form of “defensive education” that is devoted to minimising sources of disputes that have the potential to lead to complaint and litigation. (Furedi, 2011, p. 3)

In the context of marketisation, the university now provides opportunities to enhance “employability” rather than transformative educational experiences (Chertkovskaya *et al.*, 2013). According to Harvey (2000, p. 3), the challenges facing HE are about responsiveness to the needs of students rather than “downgrading” HE to training for employment. Such “New Realities” involve asking and searching questions about the relationship between HE and employment and the purpose of HE (Harvey, 2000). A degree may once have been a passport into graduate employment: it was indicative of a level of knowledge and intellectual ability. However, because of organisational changes and increased numbers of graduates, this is no longer the case (Harvey, 2000, p. 7).

Mourshed *et al.*'s (2012) study on education and employment, for example, revealed that only 42 per cent of employers believe that their recent hires were adequately prepared by the HEIs for an entry-level position, while 45 per cent of students interviewed considered themselves prepared for a position in their chosen career field. To demonstrate the mismatch between what the university offers and what employers considered essential in new graduates, over 72 per cent of HEI believed that their graduates were adequately prepared for the workplace.

Assessment practices

Assessment is a value laden activity underpinned by debates about academic standards, as well as a measure of quality and achievement (Boud, 2000). In HEIs, the assessment practices are underpinned by the challenges to meet not only definitions of quality assurance, but also professional and discipline requirements, intended to aid graduate employment and employability.

Assessment practices can construe the learner as a passive subject, subjected to the practices of the institutions to confirm learning has taken place. In understanding the dominant practices of assessment, Boud and Falchikov (2007, p. 4) helpfully indicate that:

[...]assessment would be less of a problem if we could be assured that what occurs under the guise of assessment appropriately influenced student learning [...] commonly, assessment focuses little on the processes of learning and on how students will learn after the point of assessment.

These assessment practices conform to the needs of bureaucratic procedures over which students have no say and little control, and remain underpinned by institutional habitus ideals. Coping with the demands of the institution remain challenging for many students, particularly those students who have to cope with additional factors that act as barriers to academic success.

Cultural capital and institutional habitus

For Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied; objectified and 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 deeply ingrained structural practices, used by Bourdieu to refer to the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). It is created through social, rather than individual processes leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus "is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period" (Navarro, 2006, p. 16). It is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by dialectic between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). As Thomas (2002, p. 430) points out:

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".

Central to Bourdieu's notion of habitus are that classes and groups tend to reproduce their privilege and their lack of it. In this sense, the affluent secure access to educational and career opportunities more easily than the less affluent. Bourdieu attributes this to their dominance of "cultural capital", which legitimises the maintenance of the status and power of the controlling classes. The culture language habits and practices of dominant classes enable them to subjugate other social classes.

Bourdieu (1984) echoing Illich (1971) and Freire (1971) considers the education system as the primary institution through which class order is maintained. Hence, the education system is socially and culturally biased. Thus, in this context, "institutional habitus" describes the practices of assessment that remain firmly rooted in serving the needs of the quality requirements of institutions, favouring "traditional" students who may have fewer barriers in achieving academic success than "non-traditional" students.

Thomas (2002) uses the Bourdieuan concept of "institutional habitus" to identify the factors that promoted student success among lower socio-economic groups despite having limited social and cultural capital:

The responsibility for change is, therefore, laid squarely at the feet of the HE sector and institutions in particular; it is not acceptable to continue to blame new student cohorts, because unless the institutional habitus is changed they will continue to be discriminated against. (Thomas, 2002, p. 440).

Despite the severe financial and social burdens on non-traditional students (in this case referring to students who do not enter university within two years of leaving further education and school), such students persevered and were successful. Thomas (2002) highlights that the relationships between students and teaching staff seem to be fundamental to develop attitudes towards learning and coping with academic difficulties.

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 social and structural factors and institutional practices related to teaching, learning and assessment. To date, there has been little research investigating the student experience of learning and assessment in the context of “open” access to HE.

Methods

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling identifying students who had struggled to meet institutional deadlines for assessment. All participants had received formative and summative feedback via the virtual learning environment (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 phenomenological student experiences of the nature and function of assessment.

The instruments

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed, driven by the themes highlighted on a review of the literature on traditional and non-traditional students, widening access and marketisation to explore student perceptions of the purpose of assessment. The aim was to gather information about the students’ age, employability, the programme studied, the highest educational qualification, area of residence and when they last studied full time. It also contained open questions about assessment, essay questions, the writing process, subject specialist knowledge, the support provided to complete tasks and experiences of receiving formative and summative feedback.

The semi-structured interview focussing on these aspects allowed for flexibility in the participants’ responses, and enabling us to capture students’ accounts on their experiences and understandings of academic writing, assessment and feedback, while keeping respondents focussed. In all, 14 students from the two different subject units across the two institutions took part in the interviews conducted towards the end of the term, when students had already had some initial experience on assessment feedback.

The method of structured thematic analysis using inductive and deductive processes was used (Neale, 2016) and after a coding structure was compiled, all the transcripts were read and analysed using this coding structure. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004, p. 106):

In the literature, unit of analysis refers to a great variety of objects of study, for example, a person, a program, an organization, a classroom or a clinic.

Therefore, the participants’ experiences and understandings of assessment in aiding learning and employment are the “units” of analysis.

The broader context: the Scottish and the Brazilian HE systems

The HE system in Scotland is slightly different to the system in other parts of the UK. In Scotland, many students move into HE at the age of 17 (rather than 18 in other parts of the UK).

The Scottish HE system favours a four-year undergraduate degree programme. Students in Scotland have their tuition fees paid by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland.

In Brazil, to address issues of social mobility, Federal and State institutions have created access policies, that allow Afro or native Brazilian descendants and students whose family income is up to one and a half times the national minimum wage access to study in HE. The Brazilian HE system like Scotland has a four-year undergraduate degree programme. Federal and State institutions require no tuition fees. Students joining private institutions can apply for a financing (*Fundo de Financiamento Estudantil* – Student Financing Fund) and/or a scholarship programme (*Programa Universidade para Todos* – Programme all at University).

The context and participants

Since 1999, the University of the West of Scotland has offered online flexible postgraduate programmes in social sciences. The Faculdade Cultura Inglesa, São Paulo, Brazil, has since 2014, provided flexible courses in a teaching English graduate programme. 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 midterm essay and a 3,500 end of module essay while the Brazilian uses a midterm 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 (www.turnitin.com/en_us/features/grademark).

The authors both self-reflective practitioners are engaged in processes of continuous programme evaluation as part of a larger scale research study, discuss in this study student perceptions of assessment. Often excluded from population comparison studies are the grade scores and perceptions of students who struggle to meet institutional requirements, such as assessment deadlines, and progression criterion.

Table I refers to the postgraduate students in Scotland and it indicates that the participants' age ranged from 23 to 50; five were full-time on-campus students and two studied using a blended mix of both off- and on-campus learning. Four had dependent children. Six engaged in paid employment to supplement income to allow them to study. One did not work, being registered disabled as profoundly deaf. All Scottish students access HE in this institution with funding from government that pays fees directly to the institution. Not included is financial living support, although help with accommodation is offered to students with children.

Table II refers to the graduate students in Brazil and it indicates that the participants' age ranged from 19 to 48, all were employed full time, except for one registered disabled student who did not work. Three students accessed a state student financing fund to allow them to study full time. None had dependent children.

Results from Scotland

Participants were asked about the function of assessment. Ms J2 indicates that assessment is a test of knowledge, referring to the “core material”, that is, the minimum

Name	Age	Sex	Study mode	Hours (week) employed	Highest qualification	Children
Mr JJM	41	M	F/T	16	2:1 Hons Chemical Engineering	0
Ms J2	39	F	F/T	04	2:1 Hons Social Science	4
Ms D	33	F	P/T	00 – disabled	2:1 Hons 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 I.
Postgraduate students
in Scotland

reading made available in the VLE which is 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 J2)

Ms J1 reveals that assessment of academic ability is a source of 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. (Ms J1)

For Mr JJM assessment is a test of critical ability, insisting that his beliefs about his specialist subject are irrelevant if he attempts to demonstrate objectivity:

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)

Mr JJM an engineering graduate, with a natural science background, is unsure of his ability in completing essays in the humanities with the required level of critical analysis. His former degree taught him absolute laws that rely on scientific training with the assessment often presented as an equation. He explains his formula for completing the written assessment, based on number of words, rather than concentrating or focussing on the content:

It's almost like splitting into equal paragraphs so roughly for a 3,000 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 [...] (Mr JJM)

Ms M agrees that the VLE is helpful, however, the amount of 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 M)

Support

Three sources of support were revealed in the data: peer, staff 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)

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	Specialisation – 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	Specialisation – 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 II.
Graduate students
in Brazil

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 often locates the source of academic failure with the student, and this is where learning support interventions are directed. However, accessing formal institutional 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: families (including young children), work and often 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 reveal that participants consider assessment necessary to document learning and understanding and somewhat useful in gaining employment. However, several barriers to academic success were revealed. That all but one of the participants worked over ten hours per week (one worked 40 hours) and five had responsibilities to look after dependent children had an impact on ability to engage academically. While institution support was offered, participants created informal support networks that were also perceived as sources of competition, impacting on self-esteem.

Results from Brazil

Participants considered the term assessment as broad and difficult to define. After some reflection, Ms G 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 understood that 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 a relevant challenge to gauge 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 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)

It is interesting to note that access to the library requires travelling to campus, and this is a struggle for participants who work to support their learning. The VLE Moodle was considered useful as it could be accessed at any time with requiring travel or time. Ms F, for example, believes that accessing the VLE develops independence:

[...] (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

Impact of institutional and disciplinary ownership of the rules, conventions and practices of academic writing were sources of much stress. However, finding time to meet with the tutor could minimise 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)

The main support received was from the teacher who, according to participants, was available, promptly replied providing feedback on the content and text organisation:

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 e-mail 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 (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)

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)

The institutional support offered to students often requires them to be on campus, to meet attendance requirements or meet with their tutor. While virtual contact via the VLE and e-mail was useful, results indicate that finding time and in some cases, resources to travel to campus was difficult for many participants who work long hours.

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, while noting his experiences as positive infer a link though with a limited professional gain:

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 [...] I think I profit more from this course than the previous one I took. (Mr A)

Discussion

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

In Scotland, participants indicate that problems in meeting deadlines and achieving academic success, particularly for non-traditional students, are perceived as deficits with the student. Making inability to cope with institutional habitus a factor over which the student is responsible ignores and downplays the effects of institutional habitus on students in relation to assessment engagement and performance. In Scotland, five of the participants had dependent children and had to work to pay for housing and study. Working had a significant impact on their ability to meet the demands of the situation, and the choice was to struggle financially, cut back on work, or pay for children to be looked after, to meet the demands of the institution. Some created informal support networks to resist and cope with the demand of the institution. Sources of support could also be perceived negatively, impacting on self-esteem and ability to cope. While participants described several key benefits, seeking peer support was not

always helpful. Differences of opinion could be perceived as challenges to self-esteem and academic ability. The participants indicate that learning was a source of empowerment and oppression. One participant described the experience as alienating, and that his only consistent experience was one of perceiving himself as a failure internalising inability to cope as a personal failure, impacting on the learning experience. Several participants were the first in their family to enter HE, which impacted on how they coped with institutional habitus.

In Brazil, it was difficult for participants to define assessment but it was clear to them, it is a way to evaluate and check their progress, learning, understanding and knowledge construction, intending to foster autonomy. The participants had to rely on the tutor to mitigate the institutional habitus in relation to assessment construction and completion. While students tended to utilise the VLE as a place to seek support and guidance, for others face-to-face tutor support was required. While none of the participants had to support dependent children, only one of the participants did not work in excess of 40 hours per week and was not responsible for paying the tuition fee. Results indicate that similar to Scotland, participants considered inability to cope with intuitional demands on their time as a personal deficit.

In both cohorts, there was not a clear impression that assessment practices were useful in making them employable. However, it should be noted that Mourshed *et al.* (2012) highlighted differences in perception between students and institutions in relation to how and in what way HE prepares them for the workplace.

Results reveal some similarities in student perceptions of assessment. In both countries, it is a source of stress for students as it checks their learning and understanding, tests their critical ability what they must to do achieve academic success. As previously mentioned, the learner assumes a passive position being subjected to the practices of the institutions to confirm learning has occurred.

While university habitus has a tendency to locate the source of academic failure with the student, the Brazilian participants reported that assessing students was also a way for teachers to gather information about the teaching-learning process, providing opportunities to rethink teaching practices. It is important to highlight that the Brazilian participants were in a teacher's formation course and were consistently expected to analyse the learning-teaching environment from various perspectives.

Participants indicated in both Scotland and Brazil several embargos impacting on their learning experiences. While participants resist several embargos, institutional habitus could be perceived as fixed and unyielding.

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 in the context of the marketisation of HE, presents both opportunities and challenges to staff, institutions and students.

Despite 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 reproduces 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 (2005) 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) 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. (p. 54)

The intersections between Bourdieu and Freire are useful in describing transformative pedagogies to reveal tension between institutional habitus in relation to the student academic experience of assessments. Widening access has increased student diversity, however, institutional assessment practices remain unyielding in both institutions used in this study.

We reintroduce the term “embargo” to describe barriers, both real and imagined, and both experienced and 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.

The review of the literature raises deep philosophical questions about the perhaps unintended consequences of marketisation in HE and the student consumers who study within them. Academic teaching, learning and assessment are uniquely human activities and are subject to the social-political contexts in which they occur. This study contributes to debates about what universities are for, and how widening access in the context of marketisation impacts on staff and students. The data raises important questions about the relationships between assessment practices, widening access and diversity in student populations, institutional habitus and pedagogy.

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.

Note

1. Both institutions recruit non-traditional students into their programmes that are higher than the national average in Scotland and Brazil.

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Further reading

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