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# Supporting students to improve their essay writing through assessment criteria focused workshops

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## Overview

Students from diverse backgrounds and with differing abilities need help in writing academic essays. This paper reports on the efficacy of a workshop programme specifically designed to help students understand what we have described as core assessment criteria. The programme, which is part of a HEFCE funded FDTL4 psychology project ([www.assessmentplus.net](http://www.assessmentplus.net)), was delivered at three institutions in the UK. At two of the institutions, workshops were offered as an optional support system for first year psychology students. At the third, the programme was embedded into the delivery of a third year module on health psychology. In addition, some of the workshop activities were incorporated in a generic study and academic skills programme offered to all students (undergraduate and postgraduate) from any discipline as well as in a workshop delivered within a postgraduate business course. Student evaluations of the workshop programme were positive and measures of their performance in exams and in essays indicated some beneficial effects of attending workshops. The picture that emerges from this research is that of students actively trying to make sense of the essay writing task.

## Theoretical background

Research has shown that students do not have the same understandings of assessment criteria as their tutors (Pain & Mowl, 1996; Merry, Orsmond & Reiling, 1998, 2000; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Elander, 2003). The work described here draws theoretically on the work of O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2001; Price & Rust, 1999; Price, Rust & O'Donovan, 2003; Rust, 2002, who have led the field in making assessment criteria explicit to their students. However our work is substantially different in its focus on what we have called 'core criteria' which we link to taking a deep approach to studying and complex learning (Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, Reddy & Stevens, 2004).

The overall Assessment Plus research is a multi-faceted investigation exploring ways in which using core assessment criteria can support student learning, mainly but not exclusively, in the subject of psychology. The area we focus on here is a workshop programme built on identifying core assessment criteria. The workshop programme was designed with an awareness of the need to be inclusive, to pay heed to diversity and to enhance not only retention but success for our students. It was foregrounded in some relevant findings from an interview study with psychology lecturers (Norton, Robinson, Reddy, Elander & Harrington, 2004) and comments from focus groups with psychology students.

## The interview study with psychology lecturers

One to one interviews were carried out with 22 psychology lecturers from two institutions. Of many themes that emerged from these interviews two were of particular relevance when designing the workshop programme. The first theme was that staff were generally doubtful about whether students understood the assessment criteria. Seventeen of the lecturers felt that most students did not even read the criteria but eight of them thought students have problems with the terminology of the assessment criteria and applying the criteria in their own work. There was also a consensus that students tended to improve as they went through their degree and became more practised in the art of essay writing:

*"I think in some respects they must [understand the criteria] because their essays improve... they must perhaps have picked up what we mean."*

Part of the rationale for the workshop programme was, therefore, to help students to 'pick up what we mean' more quickly in the aims of inclusivity. At the same time we were acutely aware of the need to avoid a strategic approach that focusing on assessment criteria can potentially have (Norton, 2004).

The second theme was a wide variability in how lecturers made use of assessment criteria in marking. When asked to describe what they believed made a 'good essay' there was no clear cut consensus:

*"Evidence of having read around the core texts, some sort of independent research, mentioning studies or theories that haven't been mentioned in the course..."*

*"I'm heavily influenced by the quality of written English; I suspect a good essay is a well-written essay."*

*"If a student can arrange material and find the problems and use the material to explain why they're problems, and I don't mean the first-year text book."*

This variability is a particular concern for students and was one of the issues talked about in the focus groups.

## The focus groups study with psychology students:

These were carried out at two institutions by two different researchers. At institution C three focus groups consisting of first, second and third years were facilitated by the project manager. At institution B the focus groups were carried out by the research assistant, supplemented by some one to one interviews. They consisted of students from all undergraduate years and a postgraduate student. Those issues which relate specifically to workshop provision were:

1. Students' understanding of the importance of assessment criteria – this was very shaky in some cases.
2. Actively trying to make sense of the assessment task by paying attention to feedback – one second year focus group at institution C formed a self help group to compare comments on feedback on their psychology projects.
3. Difficulties in interpreting tutors' comments – many students commented on this and expressed frustration.
4. Variability between tutors – students were keenly aware of differences between lecturers, but at least one focus group in institution C had a sophisticated and mature understanding of the complexities involved in marking their work
5. Views on workshops – where students had attended these, they were seen to be a helpful resource

## Conclusions

Overall, what emerges from reading all the transcripts is a general picture of students who on the whole are trying valiantly to do their best in what sometimes appears to be an elaborate guessing game. This is consistent with Higgins, Hartley and Skelton's (2002) view of the student as a 'conscientious consumer' rather than one who is motivated only by marks and does not take account of feedback comments. Another theme that came clearly out of the focus groups overall, is how students tend to come up with their own ideas of what works and then generalise from just one experience. One of the principles

underlying all workshops is the sharing of experiences and why this can be useful in a workshop environment.

These themes confirm what we had suspected anecdotally and through our own lecturing experience that students need more guidance and support in writing psychology essays and this is particularly important in our three institutions where widening participation is an important and valued feature of what we are achieving. The Assessment Plus workshop programme was designed to help students to find their way more readily through the assessment maze by spending time on exploring each of the six core assessment criteria.

## Description of the Assessment Plus workshop programme

This programme is available to download and adapt for readers' own needs at [www.assessmentplus.net](http://www.assessmentplus.net), however a brief description is presented here. The full version of the programme consisted of five workshops:

- Workshop 1. 'What are assessment criteria?'
- Workshop 2. 'Addressing the question and structure.'
- Workshop 3. 'Showing understanding and developing an argument.'
- Workshop 4. 'Use of evidence and evaluation.'
- Workshop 5. 'Applying the criteria to your own work.'

The full version was delivered on an optional basis to first year psychology students at institution A where the sessions were run once a week in the lunch hour, by a senior psychology lecturer with an interest in essay writing, for five weeks at the beginning of semester two. A total of 33 students attended though numbers at each workshop ranged from 14 to 20. At institution B the same programme was run during weeks seven to 11 of semester one for first year students as an optional follow-up to six compulsory seminars. These were led by a number of postgraduate psychology students. About 40 first years attended to begin with but attendance declined in the last two weeks of delivery.

At Institution C the programme was adapted for use for two very different student groups. The first of these was a cohort of 111 third year health psychology students as part of their taught course, the aim of which was to increase students' understanding of the subject by focusing on the assessment criteria. The workshops were renamed 'study groups' and were run by four postgraduate psychology students who had been trained by the course leader who designed the study group activities. The main strategy was to help students by reviewing material that had been covered in lectures and looking at how it could be used to construct essay-style examination answers. The sessions covered essay writing, academic argument, critical evaluation, integration and revision, all in the context of health psychology theory and research. 80% of the students attended one or more study group sessions but only 19% attended all four.

In the second application, two versions were delivered by the study skills expert who adapted some of the workshop materials. In the first, generic, version a two hour workshop was run as part of the open-door (drop-in) study and academic skills programme and included material from the Assessment Plus workshops. In addition, the study skills expert also integrated an activity of her own called 'The paragraph as dialogue'. 18 students attended at least part of this workshop, including students from all undergraduate years and postgraduate; subjects included business-related courses, politics, maths, dietetics and arts. In the second version which was devised for delivery within the MBA (strategic management) programme, two workshops were run by the study skills expert with a colleague who was the learning support strategist for business. Each workshop lasted one and a half hours. Seventeen students attended the first workshop and 15 students attended the second workshop; all were postgraduates. Various activities from the Assessment Plus programme were integrated together with more subject specific exercises.

## Evaluation of the workshop programme.

A number of different methods of evaluation were carried out in this research to capture as fully as possible the richness and variation in student and staff responses. Thus psychology students were asked at institution A to evaluate each workshop separately as well as an overall programme evaluation. The drop-in students and MBA students at institution C were also asked about specific workshop objectives. These provided qualitative and quantitative data. In institutions B and C staff and students were invited to comment on the overall programme. A summary of the main findings will now be presented.

Objectives related to:	Range of positive evaluations
<i>Workshop 1 (N = 20) 'The key to improving your grades'</i>	
Understanding the role of assessment criteria	85% – 100%
Understanding what makes a good psychology essay	75% – 80%
<i>Workshop 2 (N = 20) 'Where to begin'</i>	
Addressing the question	60% – 95%
Structuring the answer	70% – 100%
<i>Workshop 3 (N = 17) 'How to show you know what you're talking about'</i>	
Developing understanding	77% – 100%
Developing argument	88% – 94%
<i>Workshop 4 (N = 14) 'Looking for the evidence'</i>	
Use of evidence	71% – 93%
Evaluation	29% – 50%

Table 1. Summary of positive responses to workshop objectives delivered at institution A

## Individual workshop evaluation

The first four workshops were evaluated separately using objectives for each session and are briefly summarised in table 1 on the previous page.

As can be seen here, the students' responses were mainly positive for all the objectives with the exception of those related to evaluation. Close inspection of these responses showed that students felt unsure not only about how to evaluate the quality of their sources but also of the information contained within those sources. This is a clear indicator that more effort and attention needs to be devoted to this area in any future workshops with an emphasis on giving students hands on practice and feedback.

Students were also asked several open-ended questions to which their responses have been grouped into broad themes:

- Usefulness of discussion and working in a group – “Knowing what the tutors look for in your essays when marking. Participation with other students. Discussing ideas. Handouts for future reference.”
- Understanding the importance of assessment criteria – “Learning order of importance for psychology marking assessment.”
- Understanding how to structure an essay – “Getting an introduction and conclusion to an essay, which shows good and bad points. It can help me structure my next essay better.”
- Provision of examples and handouts – “Looking through examples given. I have never had opportunity to look through other essays to see different styles and techniques...”
- Examples/specimen essays – “Being able to see other text and understand their understanding of the subject they are writing about.”
- Argument strategies – “Discussion about arguments for and against looking at several books and journals to access real data.” “The part where we were told how to dissect what we are reading.” “Ensure I have a balance of pros and cons of essay.” “To be able to evaluate both sides of an argument and also how to present an argument or critical account.”
- Referencing – “I am very weak in referencing, so this has helped immensely.”  
*“It will help me reference more appropriately.” “To back up evidence used plus reference.” “Have always fallen down in referencing – so this has greatly helped.” “I will be able to use evidence better in my essays plus I have a better understanding of plagiarism.”*
- Reassurance – “Re-assurance that I am definitely on right lines here”
- Workshops should be longer – “More time, slow workshop down more, focus on essay techniques rather than content of examples.”

- Greater understanding of what is required – “It will help me essay writing because it gives a better understanding of what the tutor is looking for.”
- Writing appropriately – “It will enable me to flush out my preconceived notions of essay writing and develop university level skills.” “Deciding what style I might wish to use and how to lessen any ‘risk’ attached to it.” “Structuring my essay but most importantly, make sure I understand what the question title is asking.”

Such evaluations give us useful clues as to where particular difficulties lie and in what ways future workshops need to be adapted to better support our students, particularly in the first year when some of them may feel unsure and vulnerable.

At institution C, the generic and MBA workshops were evaluated individually but the questions were different as can be seen in table 2. The less positive responses to the item about strategies echoes the findings with the first year psychology students at institution A where they felt confident about understanding the criteria but less sure about how to turn this knowledge into actual writing strategies. This suggests students need and want practice at essay writing before they are assessed.

Again students were also asked a series of open-ended questions, of which some illuminating responses have been selected.

Item	Generic (N = 12)	MBA (N = 17)	MBA (N = 15)
I understand the difference between writing to address an essay title and writing everything I know about a topic	58%	88%	80%
I understand the importance of structure and argument when responding to the essay title	92%	94%	93%
I have a clear idea of strategies I can use to stay focussed on the essay title	75%	53%	20%

Table 2. Summary of positive responses to workshop objectives delivered at institution C

### Which were the most helpful aspects of this workshop?

*“The actual workshop ‘worked’ examples and our own applications/views; then the comparison with other members within the group to see other sides of the argument/other examples” (Generic workshop)*

*“Showing lecturers’ ranking on assessment criteria. Showing use of various sources” (MBA workshop 1)*

*“Helped clear up my mind as it was getting very confusing as every teacher had their own demands and I was not knowing how to respond exactly.” (MBA workshop 2)*

## How could the workshop be improved?

*"I feel there wasn't enough time to explore different strategies to help me to write better essays" (Generic workshop)*

*"Present some example and explain what is good or bad of the essay" (MBA workshop 1)*

*"If it is given at the beginning of the course and re-visited at regular intervals during the course" (MBA workshop 2)*

## How will what you have learned help you with your essay writing?

*"As a 'former' get-to-the-subject type of person, this workshop will assist me in breaking down the relevant parts of a question, brainstorming and formulating a well-structured essay" (Generic workshop)*

*"I will be able to do structures, will enjoy more about my study" (Generic workshop)*

*"I will use drop in sessions, as I am convinced they are useful now" (MBA workshop 1)*

*"To use these techniques when writing, to improve quality of the paper. To avoid mistakes that commonly happen because of not knowing the tips and style of proper writing" (MBA workshop 2)*

The interesting point about these evaluations shows that even postgraduate students feel unsure about writing academically. Many of their concerns and comments are similar to those of the first year psychology students.

## End of programme student evaluations

Another form of evaluation carried out with the psychology-based workshops was an overall end of programme evaluation which gave quantitative as well as qualitative responses. The quantitative results are presented in table 3 opposite.

What is interesting to pick out of this table is that while most of the items received very positive responses, there were some that students clearly felt more uncertain about. For example, the items about generalisability of what had been learned to writing outside university were low across all three institutions (the previous item was negatively scored therefore low percentages here indicated most students thought they *were* useful outside university). The contradiction between these two items may be an artefact of the phrasing. The other item where scores were less positive was the item about most of what was learned was new where only 45% of the first year students thought this was the case. Perhaps workshops then serve the purpose of reinforcement and reassurance. Looking at the comparison across the institutions, it is not surprising that the responses from the third year health psychology students were generally lower than the first year

Item	Institution A First year psychology (N=11)	Institution B First year psychology (N=11)	Institution C Third year psychology (N=50)
Helped me to understand assessment criteria	100	100	61
Helped me to prepare for exams	N/A	N/A	63
Helped me to understand what makes a good essay	91	91	75
Did not confuse me about what makes a good essay	73	73	77
Helped me to understand my subject	73	64	48
Helped me to prepare for the module assessment	91	27	N/A
Will help me write better essays	100	82	55
Will help me to achieve a better grade in future essays	100	82	45
Will help me to make better use of feedback from tutors	100	60	36
Helped me to study more effectively	64	70	30
*Were useful only for university writing	27	36	27
Were useful for writing outside university	45	55	16
The discussion about assessment criteria was useful (workshop 1)	100	100	77
The specimen essays were useful	N/A	N/A	80
The exercise to mark the essays based on criteria was useful	N/A	N/A	68
Exercise on answering questions was useful (workshop 2)	100	82	N/A
Exercise on structuring was useful (workshop 2)	90	82	N/A
Exercise on showing understanding was useful (workshop 3)	100	73	N/A
Exercise on spotting plagiarism was useful (workshop 3)	100	82	N/A
Exercise on developing argument was useful (workshop 3)	91	100	N/A
Exercise on using evidence was useful (workshop 4)	89	75	N/A
Exercise on citation errors was useful (workshop 4)	100	50	N/A
Exercise on detecting bias was useful (workshop 4)	89	38	N/A
Exercise with essay feedback checklist was useful (workshop 5)	91	57	N/A
Helped me to understand how to 'critically evaluate'	100	82	N/A
Helped me to understand how to 'use evidence'	100	82	N/A
Helped me to understand how to 'develop an argument'	82	100	N/A
Helped me to understand how to 'structure'	91	91	N/A
Helped me to understand how to 'address the question'	100	91	N/A
Helped me to understand how to 'demonstrate understanding'	91	82	N/A
Helped me to understand how to use language	100	73	N/A
Helped me to identify strengths and weaknesses	91	55	N/A
Helped me feel more confident about writing	100	55	N/A
*Made me feel anxious about writing	55	27	N/A
Most of what was learned was new	45	45	N/A

\*Items that are negatively scored where low percentage indicates a higher positive response

Table 3 Comparison of the three institutions on percentages of positive responses

students, but it was disappointing that few of them thought it would help them study the subject more effectively or help them write better essays. This may of course be a reflection of the fact that this course was assessed by examination essays, not coursework essays. The large differences between responses from the first year students in institutions A and B may have come about due to differences in delivery – at institution A by a senior psychology lecturer, at institution B by several postgraduate psychology students.

Open-ended questions to the health psychology students and to the first year psychology students at institution B gave a wealth of data that is summarised below; again a selection of illustrative responses is presented.

### First thoughts on hearing about the workshops:

*“Slightly surprised, a little apprehensive. Curious to see how useful they would be. Thought that they were a good idea” [health psychology]*

*“Good what there is added learning time but worried I might miss out on something if I can’t go to some of them” [health psychology]*

*“Thought it would be a good chance to learn about assessment criteria “ [psychology first year]*

### What was good about the study groups?

*“A sense of belonging, heading towards a clear goal, ideas from other students and their approaches, all quality” [health psychology]*

*“Specimen essays, though I think more of specimen essays would have been very useful” [health psychology]*

*“The first study group, we were all provided with the assessment criteria for exams and essays; this reminded us and encouraged us that we can perform better in exams” [health psychology]*

*“Gave insight to psychology and aspects of psychology” [psychology first year]*

*“Helped me to start writing at uni level” [psychology first year]*

### What would you say to a student who was considering these workshops?

*“Go. They may not be 100% useful, but the one that you miss will probably be the one that was most useful” [health psychology]*

*“Highly recommend especially for getting a better understanding how to structure and argue in essays” [health psychology]*

*“They are useful to your understanding of the field” [health psychology]*

*“A lot of group discussion involved, can only really understand if you participate” [health psychology]*

*“It’s good and it will help you to develop skills and understand what is expected of you.” [psychology first year]*

*“Makes transition to university life from sixth form” [psychology first year]*

*“Why not make the most of any help your uni are going to give you.” [psychology first year]*

*“Go along as some areas of psychology writing are different to say a normal English essay” [psychology first year]*

*“They are especially helpful for students who haven’t studied (sic) psychology before.” [psychology first year]*

Taken together, what emerges from both first and third years was a general feeling that the workshops were useful, but sometimes hampered by lack of participation from other students and sometimes by poor organisation. Some of the comments from the first years indicated an appreciation of any support to help them adjust to the demands of university. Comments from staff involved in delivering the workshops added a further perspective:

*“I thought the rationale behind the content of the study groups was excellent and the format ‘user friendly’.” [health psychology postgraduate tutor]*

*“They felt the need for more, instead of the action learning groups, when they were meant to revise as a group-but without a seminar leader. They wanted a leader in these groups. They really enjoyed the essay task, they found it very helpful and useful.” [health psychology postgraduate tutor]*

*“For the core few that attended regularly they were overall very pleased with the workshops – as these were students who were very concerned/anxious with taking degree level psychology and how to go about writing in psychology. Typically these students had either taken a few years out, or had never done A-level/year 0 psychology. I found that the students who only attended one or two sessions did not see the benefits, but perhaps it was because the majority of these students had come straight from A-level/year 0 and had previously studied psychology.” [First year psychology postgraduate tutor]*

### Conclusions

Student evaluations are vital; they give us understanding about their perceptions of what we offer and their difficulties. Starting from where the learner is has to be one of the hallmarks of good teaching. However, evaluations only give us one side of the story; they do not tell us whether or not attending the workshops had any measurable effect on students’ performance in their written work, which leads us to our final analyses.

## Performance

Performance measures were only available from institutions A (coursework essays) and C (exam marks).

### Institution A

Seventeen students had essay scores for both before and after the workshops so a Wilcoxon signed ranks test was carried out to see if there was any improvement on the second essay. This showed a modest but significant improvement,  $Z = 1.73$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $N = 17$ . Of course it is hard to prove that this was due to the effect of the workshops, particularly since a spearman correlation showed no significant relationship between the number of essay workshops attended and the second essay score, ( $r = 0.11$ ,  $N = 17$ , NS) so the students who had not attended workshops were also subjected to the same analysis. Out of 190 students who had submitted both essays, a Wilcoxon signed ranks test also showed a much larger significant improvement,  $Z = 4.63$ ,  $p < 0.00001$ . On first glance then it might not appear that the workshops had any particular effect but a closer analysis paints a more accurate picture.

Students	Essay 1		Essay 2	
	Mean	Std dev	Mean	Std dev
Workshop attenders (N = 17)	60.5	9.6	62.9	11.5
Non-attenders (N = 190)	54.2	9.1	57.6	9.8

Table 4. Comparison of essay performance between workshop attenders and non-attenders

Firstly, a comparison of the means as shown in table 4 shows that the students who attended the workshops were scoring better on essay one than students who did not attend, so these students were not only better at writing essays but also had less room for improvement. A Mann Whitney U test gives us a Z score of 2.67 which is significant for a two tailed test at  $p < 0.01$ . The question then is, do the attenders maintain this superior essay performance in their second essay? A further Mann Whitney test confirms they do;  $Z = 2.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Secondly, when comparison of the percentages for groups who improved, worsened or stayed the same was made as shown in Figure 1 opposite, it can be seen that while the improvements were almost exactly the same, this was not the case for the percentage who did worse second time around; 54% of the non workshop attenders as opposed to only 18% of the workshop attenders.

### Conclusions

The evidence then seems to suggest that workshops tend to attract better performing and perhaps more conscientious students but also they maintain the superior performance

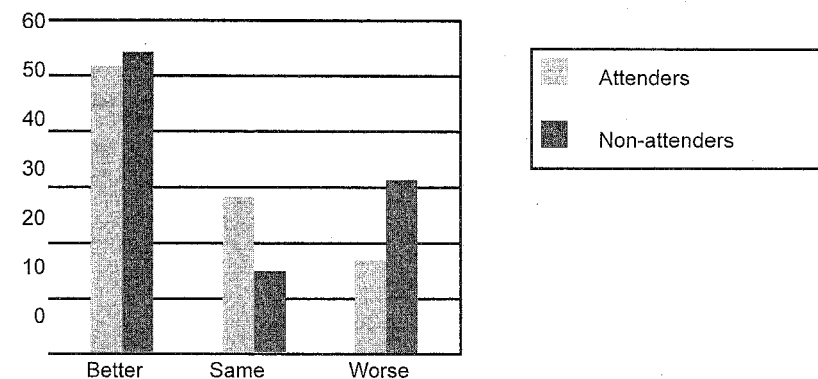


Figure 1 Bar chart showing percentage comparison of change from essay 1 to essay 2

overall. Furthermore, fewer proportionately do worse on their second essays as compared to their non-attending peers.

### Institution C

As explained above, the workshops were called study groups and the performance measures were different at this institution as the students concerned were third year health psychology students who were assessed by examination only. In order to see if attending the study groups had had any effect, the mean examination performance scores (ranging from 0 to 70%, with a mean grade of 51%) were correlated with the number of study groups attended which revealed a significant relationship ( $r = 0.254$ ,  $N = 111$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Table 5, below, and figure 2, overleaf, illustrates that generally, students who attended more study groups achieved higher grades in the examination and students who attended two or four groups obtained higher than average exam scores (Lusher, 2004).

Number of study groups attended	N	Mean examination grade (%)	Standard deviation
0	22	46.6	20.0
1	20	45.3	20.1
2	18	52.9	4.6
3	30	50.1	18.7
4	21	59.9	5.3
Total	111	50.9	16.5

Table 5. A comparison of the number of study groups attended and examination performance (from Lusher, 2004).

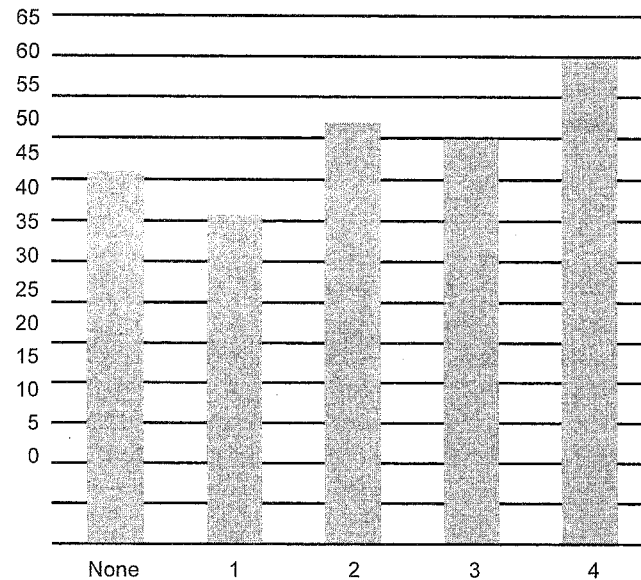


Figure 2 showing exam performance against number of study groups attended (adapted from Lusher 2004)

## Conclusions

Here it can be seen that attending workshops does appear to have a direct beneficial relationship on the overall mean examination percentage mark obtained, with students attending all four gaining the most benefit. Of course correlation does not imply causation and it might be that the more able students attended the workshops (as the data from institution A would indicate) but this was tested out using a multiple regression analysis where it was found that performance did not independently predict attendance.

## Implications for inclusivity and diversity

In this research, we have shown that there are a number of issues that are important when considering how we can best support students who come to university from different backgrounds and with different abilities.

Our main findings suggest that staff and students have different perceptions of the assessment process. Staff tend to believe that students tend not to bother with assessment criteria nor do they pay attention to the feedback they are given. The focus groups and workshop comments in our research show a different picture with students acting more like 'conscientious consumers', the term coined by Higgins et al (2002). The problem seems to be that students feel unclear about expectations of university writing; they comment on the variability between tutors and the difficulty of interpreting feedback which is often quite general and vague. Many of the more positive comments about the

workshops showed their appreciation of clarification and reassurance. At the same time there was a strong request for more tutor guidance and more hands-on practice at developing their essay writing strategies, such as how to actually go about evaluating evidence from other sources. Another main finding was that it tended to be the better, more conscientious students who attended voluntary workshops so maybe lecturers should consider incorporating them into the subject curriculum.

The implications of this research are that students need to have much more directive guidance and support in what traditionally may have been regarded as outside the remit of a university lecturer's job. Academic literacy is fundamental to most university courses and widening participation means we need to offer more practical and supportive opportunities for students to develop and practice the necessary writing skills.

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# Transparent opacity: assessment in the inclusive academy

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In this paper we identify and critique the techno-rationalism inherent in aspects of contemporary assessment discourse and research. Locating assessment as a social practice, we argue that non-traditional students are not automatically empowered by the current focus on transparency which, particularly in relation to the widening participation agenda, has promised, but not delivered, equitable assessment.

Techno-rationalism characterises assessment as a procedure or a technique that can be objective and unbiased. Techno-rationalism arguably is the dominant paradigm in today's HE assessment literature (Filer 2000). Broadfoot and Black (2004 p19) believe that this 'extreme rationalism' reached a high point in the last ten years. Our difficulty with a techno-rationalist approach is that within it, assessment becomes socially decontextualised (Broadfoot and Black 2004). By acknowledging social context, we work from the perspective that assessment is 'an art as much as a science' (ibid p8). Assessment is 'a human encounter' (Rowntree 1987 p4) and imbued with culture, values and attitudes (Lillis 2001, Higgins 2000). Power relationships underpin this social context and permeate the practice of assessment (Layder 1997, Higgins 2000). The current emphasis on assessment as a technology has drawn focus away from the power relations inherent in the act of assessment (Allen 1998, Filer 2000, Delanshere 2001). Very little research explores how lecturers actually make judgements and how these judgements are affected by social context (Yorke et al 2000, Wolf 2000). A key technology of a techno-rationalist approach is the concept of transparency.

## Transparency as a powerful idea in education

Transparency has come to have a significant hold in the academy, identified by Strathern (2000a) as the 'tyranny of transparency'. We argue that transparency is a discourse regime of power (Foucault 1994). It is impossible to be against transparency. Being transparent and open to examination has become normalised (Foucault 1995). It is one of the few ideas, albeit for different reasons, that is held both by those who position themselves primarily as committed lecturers and those with a managerialist perspective.

## Why lecturers like it

For many academics transparency is seen as the antithesis of the inequitable hidden curriculum, an idea associated with the reproduction of structural inequalities aided by