Project 9: Diversifying Assessment Project

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	√
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	√
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	What are disabled students' perceptions of the value of more diverse assessment methods for their academic performance and wellbeing?	
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2. Executive summary
The project aimed to find out whether disabled students are helped by "alternate mode of assessment' (AMAs) and/or more diversified methods of assessment both in terms of impact on mental health and on academic attainment; whether the disabled community is disadvantaged by the current structure of exams, and the short and long term changes that must be made to ensure the disabled students are no longer disadvantaged by Cambridge's methods of assessment. Data was gathered through a survey sent to all students registered with the Disability Resource Centre and through email interviews where respondents provided longer format answers. The results demonstrate that disabled students are disproportionately disadvantaged by the current structure of assessment and are enthusiastic about the possibility of more variety and choice in methods of assessment, believing it would be better for their education, their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and analysis, and their employability and ease of transitioning into employment after university.

3. Rationale
The Disabled Students Committee consistently receives feedback from disabled students around assessments. Student feedback to committee in an informal manner before the start of the project indicated that the current structure of assessment - nearly 100% exams with a burden on students to coordinate Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMAs) - has a disproportionate impact on the mental health of disabled students and their academic performance. Furthermore, it indicated that current

adjustments to exam conditions were not sufficient to mitigate this disadvantage, and the current system of applying for AMAs was not sufficiently accessible and added an additional burden to disabled students to negotiate, had time and work costs for staff and Colleges, and stretched the resources of the Disability Resource Centre and Student Operations. The student participants were also asked for suggestions for discipline-specific and 'authentic' assessment tasks that might replace the traditional exams, or the most common alternative, essays.

4. Existing evidence

The lack of diversity in assessment sets Cambridge apart from other UK universities, where not only are diverse methods of assessment, rather than examinations, much more common, but assessment is spread out over a greater period of time. As will be shown later in this report, the results gathered here map onto the data examined by Helen Duncan (Disability Resource Centre) in the course of her research on the disability attainment gap in Cambridge, the impact of reasonable adjustments, and the efficacy of examinations vs dissertations for disabled students academic performance across a range of STEM and Arts/Humanities courses at Cambridge. Duncan's findings indicate that disabled students at Cambridge do substantially worse than their able peers in examinations, but achieve on a par with other students when assessed by other means (e.g. coursework, viva, dissertation). Her research provides a rich evidence-base that supports disabled students anecdotal understanding that examinations privilege a certain group of students and disenfranchise others.

The University has committed to Widening Participation and Access, and to narrowing the attainment gap for disabled students, particularly those with mental health conditions who understandably perform less well than their peers in high stakes, high pressure examinations at the end of each academic year. Changes to assessment practices, at least to offer more choice as alternatives to examinations, will help with both the equity issues that underpin the Widening Participation agenda, and the practical steps needed to narrow the identified attainment gaps.

Further, this project aligns with the work undertaken by the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, to encourage the diversification of assessment across undergraduate courses, in line with the recommendations of the Examinations Review Report (2017) that every student (not just disabled students) should have at least one opportunity per Tripos for a non-exam based assessment task.

5. Generation of evidence for this research project

This project team developed a research protocol in consultation with the project leaders and Helen Duncan (DRC), in order to focus the research on issues that could provide an evidence base for Helen's project as well as the work of the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Examination and Assessment Committee on the University's Assessment and Feedback Project.

We discussed experiences of assessment with the APP PAR team of co-researchers, who are all student representatives in the Disabled Students Campaign, and who therefore have insight into a range of

experiences and assessment practices across the collegiate University, with personal experiences of the processes for applying for Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMAs).

From there, we developed an email 'interview' for distribution online amongst the co-researcher team, as well as survey questions for inclusion in a section in the larger project survey that was dissemination to undergraduate students registered with Cambridge's Disability Resource Centre (DRC). The larger survey received 127 student responses, with the assessment section receiving approximately 73 focused responses (not every student answered every question in the larger survey). This section included 10 questions, with a variety of closed and open questions, which were then thematically analysed by the project team. Respondents to this project came from 19 different disciplines: 13 from Arts/Humanities and 6 from STEM.

6. Project research findings

The student perspectives gathered for this project demonstrate a clear need for change; the majority of our respondents (more than 60%) agreed that examinations in Cambridge have negatively affected their mental health.

For the majority of our respondents (80.56%), the AMA received represented an adjustment to the conditions of the assessment task (e.g. longer time or different venue to the exam), rather than a change to the method/mode of assessment. Indeed, only one student respondent out of 73 had applied for and received an AMA constituting a real change to the method/mode of assessment. As will be seen below, this is not a reflection of lack of demand for changes to the mode of assessment amongst disabled students; rather, it demonstrates the difficulty we face in applying for these. For example, multiple students raised concerns that they were not aware this was a possibility, while others told us that the application process was so difficult, stressful, and time-consuming they would have been forced to intermit whilst waiting on a decision, had they chosen to follow this path.

Our data shows that more than half of respondents would choose non-exam based assessment over exams, were they given the choice by their Faculty. The reasons behind this are clear; as subsequent questions revealed, the majority of disabled students believe that this would have a positive impact on their mental health and, as a result, on their attainment. Reflecting on their experiences, many also argued that they are simply 'handicapped' and 'structurally disadvantaged' by exams as their disabilities are of such a nature that they will never be able to compete on a level playing field with non-disabled peers in this format. The provision of alternatives to exams on all courses was strongly supported as a solution to this problem.

The debate is wide ranging, as to be expected from survey questions with a lot of hypotheticals i.e. the alternative methods of assessment were not laid out, but the idea of them presented. What comes through is that students are very enthusiastic about the possibility and believe it would be better for their education, their ability to show off their knowledge, and their employability and ease of switching into employment from study.

More than 60% of student respondents believe that the provision of more diverse modes of assessment, which can be substituted for or sit alongside exams, would have a positive or very positive impact on their mental health. Only 6% (four respondents) claimed that this would have a negative or very negative impact.

More than 65% of disabled students felt that having the option of more diverse types of assessment would have a positive or very positive impact on their overall performance in their degree. No students believed that the impact would be very negative, while just 9% felt that the impact would be at all negative.

Employability

In the comments to the survey and the interviews, students consistently raised concerns that current methods of assessments *do not* adequately prepare students for the real world. Students believe that Cambridge's focus on exam-based assessment prevents them from gaining usable skills, thus limiting their employability and future confidence in the workplace.

When invited to do so, disabled students listed a variety of modes of assessment which would provide better preparation for the workplace, and the requirements which future employers would expect them to meet:

- *'I think Cambridge assessments focus far too much on academic performance rather than professional skills. Particularly for a vocational degree like mine, I think assessments should focus on the kind of work students will be doing afterwards and their real-life skills, and that there should be multiple equivalent types of assessment that people can choose based on their skills, career path or preferred form of assessment.'*

- *'I want to be a barrister so any kind of debate/oral presentation would be excellent'*

- *'Oral communication skills will be very important in most jobs connected to History (especially routes like teaching or law). We are in fact tested on this on a weekly basis - via supervisions - and it seems ridiculous that we are never given credit for this, and it does not contribute in any way to our grades.'*

Disadvantage and discrimination

Disabled students believe that compulsory exam-based forms of assessment are discriminatory, and structurally disadvantage them. This is due to high stress levels exacerbating existing mental health conditions, and issues of memory/recall in short time periods. Students point out that exams do not provide an accurate reflection of their own abilities:

- *'Memory is a big struggle for me so exam based can be difficult. Also time pressure is very stressful.'*

- *'I'm concerned (especially as it has affected my supervision essays while waiting for medication issues to be resolved) that I'll lose memories during an exam and be unable to communicate what I've worked hard on the rest of the year.'*

- *'Diversifying assessment practices is absolutely essential in order to nurture every student's individual skills. Exams, while they do have their advantages, are outdated, they can be*

overwhelmingly stressful and often do not reflect the amount of potential and work that a student has put into their studies. Continuous assessment such as coursework is far more accurate, showcasing the best of a student's ability, and is less likely to disadvantage students with ongoing mental health conditions or disabilities.'

Current state of AMA

The current option and processes for Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMA) are considered by disabled student respondents as not helpful, not accessible, and therefore not fit for purpose. Few students are aware that an AMA involving changes to the *mode* (as opposed to the *conditions*) of assessment is even a possibility. Such changes are in fact almost impossible to achieve; the process is lengthy, impractical, and unlikely to result in a positive outcome. Thus, students who are structurally disadvantaged by exams are usually left with no alternative:

- *'I am convinced that AMA, allowing me to hand in a portfolio of essays rather than completing exam papers, would be the only way for me to compete with my peers on a level playing field. If I can't get through an exam without being sick/having a panic attack because of long-standing mental health conditions, then I am never going to perform to the best of my ability/ on a par with my able peers. Yet AMA of this sort is so difficult to achieve I've been told I'd have to intermit while my application was in progress, and even then it would be unlikely to be accepted. For family reasons, this is completely impossible for me - meaning that, yet again, Cambridge advantages the able AND economically privileged.'*

- *'It would be amazing if it were easier to access non-exam assessments - I know very little about how to apply to switch from an exam to a non-exam assessment even though if this were possible for me it would hugely help my mental health'*

Course uptake and access

Students have considered switching course simply to gain the option of substituting exams for another form of assessment:

- *'I considered switching into English just to have the option of substituting a portfolio of essays for an exam paper; this is the only way I really feel I would be able to show my abilities. Had I known how heavily exam-based Cambridge Undergraduate courses are, there is no way I would have applied.'*

Qualifying issues/concerns

- Multiple responses emphasised that, although the exam format suits them personally, they agree with the principle of diversifying assessment, and recognise that it would help others.

- Some were concerned about what type of alternative assessment would be introduced

- One answer pointed out that the modes of assessment on their course, although not exam based, nevertheless structurally disadvantaged disabled students - this matches up with the responses from our Q5 (in which a majority of disabled students said that they had not chosen to take up those alternatives to exam-based assessment already on offer at the university). The

student requested that the university *always* offer multiple different options for assessment on any given course in order to demonstrate a real commitment to equality:

- *'I believe that when labs are assessed, there should be more support for student who need it/this taken into account for all the marks given (ie if they couldn't finish due to medical reason then take an average, if there were areas they couldn't do/do as well, take an average, if they have an underlying condition that makes all practical work harder then they should get some sort of accounting of this in the overall grade ie a few % marks added, only consider some reports on practicals that where less of an issue Ie I am legally blind and find the lab very hard to navigate/use small/glass/clear liquid/ make accurate measurements/ make I Frances when analysing specimen Or alternatively, have an oral test at the end of each practical for such students instead, asking them to run through what they have done to ensure they have understood/taken away the key skills/concepts to the best of their ability Please also note that when each class is run by separate demonstrators it is incredibly hard and draining and embarrassing for students to continuously ask for help or adjustments and so will often not take these up, for many, not standing out from their peers or battling anxiety or strong emotions to discuss such personal circumstances can be near impossible and so they will not ask for the help needed.'*

Ideas for 'authentic', creative and diverse assessment

The interview and survey asked students to speculate: "In a profession most closely related to your chosen field of study, what kind of tasks might you be expected to do in your future work? (e.g. a classics graduate may go on to work in archaeology and be asked to prepare a site report, or they may go into a policy role and be asked to prepare policy briefs or write a speech for a politician) . Please identify your course of study and list some 'authentic' tasks you imagine you might do in your future role in this field." The wide range of responses will be collated and reported in CCTL's Assessment & Feedback Project, as indications of the possibilities for diversifying assessment that might be considered by course teams in Faculties/Departments. Some examples include:

- *Theology. Maybe policy research or looking into large projects to make them more efficient. This would be fine because it would be work on something tangible and consequential, making it feel worthwhile.*

- *History - oral communication skills will be very important in most jobs connected to History. We are in fact tested on this on a weekly basis - via supervisions - and it seems ridiculous that we are never given credit for this, and it does not contribute in any way to our grades.*

- *Physics - working with teams, designing an experiment with little to no guidance, presenting a potential research project with the aim of getting the necessary funding, giving talk to members of the public and answering questions they may have, writing a formal report on experiment I conducted*

- *Biochemistry - gathering, collecting, analysing and presenting data. writing reports and presentations.*

- *Music - tasks might include performing, preparing lessons plans for teaching, planning and facilitating rehearsals, writing programme notes, organising concerts*

- *Literature - archival research, synthesising research, reading and evaluating secondary literature, preparing presentations for lectures or seminars, collaborating with colleagues on research and teaching, planning and writing original literature.*

- *Biological Natural Sciences - pipetting data analysis, presentations, applications to funding bodies, writing reports*

- *Philosophy - if an academic career, writing philosophy papers, presenting in seminars, reviewing the work of others - if other plausible career after Philosophy degree, writing factual or policy reports, verbally reporting and communicating arguments on social initiatives*

- *Chemistry - I don't want to be a researcher BUT if I was one - long projects - brief lab reports to communicate progress made on project - paper written at the end of a project - outreach/ education type tasks including talks and powerpoints - pitches / proposals for new research*

- *History and Politics - work in Foreign office, reading and collating information and briefs, interpersonal skills and communications, presenting, public speaking, management, creating policy reports*

- *Archaeology - museum/heritage work, field archaeology, report preparation, paper writing.*

- *Computer Science - going into a software developer position, would have to write programs, maybe write a status report on a project.*

7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes

When taking these results going forward, it is important to consider the difference between AMA and diversified assessment:

- AMA and reasonable modes of adjustment for disabled students can take the form of adjustment to the exam process (e.g. more time or different venues) or as a limited range of different types of assessment (e.g. a viva, an essay). These options are basically only offered to disabled students with medical evidence

- Diversifying assessment means a change in assessment practices away from exams for ALL students. Whilst the data collected for this project was solicited from disabled students only, there was a general understanding amongst respondents that diversified assessment would be:

    - good practice in designing assessment to more effectively evaluate students' learning in ways that align with the courses' learning outcomes

    - more engaging for everyone with 'authentic' tasks that prepare students for future work

    - less stressful than exams for everyone (which is an important consideration given the need to consider students' well being and mental health)

- less workload and time costs for staff to have to work out AMAs/reasonable adjustments with the DRC and Student Operations

- less of a burden on students to have to self-advocate for AMAs

The outcomes of this project will be incorporated into CCTL's Assessment and Feedback Project, reported to the Examinations and Assessment Committee (EAC), and reported at the Diversified Assessment Symposium (March 2020).

8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That AMA processes be made more accessible (it currently requires a great deal of self-advocacy on the part of disabled students who are already overburdened and who need better support in this process)

2. That College prizes for those who achieve Firsts be abolished (this privileges white, male and non-disabled students, ignoring the contextual factors and advantages that allow them to succeed in the current examination-based system)

3. That Departments/Faculties undertake a review of assessment practices, finding opportunities to offer more choice and flexibility of assessment from first year

4. That the University create an action plan for diversifying assessment so that this is not just a recommendation but a strong commitment