B3: Assessment Practices (Disabled/mental health perspective)

1. Background information		
Strand	A: Black British students	
	B: Disability/Mental Health student	X
Topic	Assessment and Feedback	
Specific research question	What are the differences in assessment methods, conditions and instructions provided for students in different courses, and what are examples of good practice with regard to student mental health?	
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1. Executive summary
Assessments are always a source of stress for students, particularly at Cambridge where there is an emphasis on high-stakes exams at the end of every year. For this project we wanted to focus on the key stressors and related key mitigators of assessment practices, that might contribute either negatively or positively to the mental health and wellbeing outcomes of Cambridge students. That is, this project investigated examples of good assessment practices that support students with declared mental health issues to achieve their best academic results.

The recent changes to assessment practices in response to the Covid pandemic also informed our interest in exploring what worked/didn't work for students with mental health conditions.

To investigate the impact of assessment practices on the mental health of students, we drew on and extended previous student-led research on assessment. This included the project on diversifying assessment and reasonable adjustments from Cycle 1 of the APP PAR Project (2020), and a more recent survey on Diversifying Assessment (March 2021) disseminated by Cambridge Student Union (Cambridge SU) and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL), which included elements that focused on mental health.

Rather than revisit similar questions to those posed in the previous studies, which tended to focus on diversifying assessment away from exams, the project team developed questions that focused more generally on the practices around supervision (that is, instructions, advice, marking criteria etc). While |

the previous studies used surveys, we interviewed students from the disciplines represented by the three project team members (English, Geography and Psychology) in order to more deeply explore (and, where possible, compare and contrast) the discipline-specific approaches to assessment. Our findings underscore the importance of communication and consistency of advice about assessment, so that both students and staff (including both Departmental and College staff) have shared understandings of the expectations. We also recommend that support is coordinated by Departments so that there are clear and consistent guides that explain how assessment is marked and linked to the course learning outcomes, and that students are given paper and assessment-specific advice and support.

2. Rationale

Exam arrangements and assessment formats have been a rich source of discussion following the amendments made to last year's exams in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These discussions, performed in both formal and informal channels, raised a number of concerns about assessment practices and experiences from students across the collegiate University that we decided to investigate further in our structured research project.

While the APP PAR Project focuses on awarding gaps experienced by undergraduates with disclosed or declared mental health conditions, we chose to interview both students with formal diagnoses and students with self-declared mental health problems. That is, all students were welcomed to participate, without needing to be formally declared as disabled with a mental health condition. We made this choice in response to the increasingly difficult process that has to be undertaken in order to receive an official diagnosis. The restrictions posed by the pandemic have resulted in reduced access to doctor's service and with increasing waiting times and other obstacles faced in attempts to get a diagnosis, we thought it was particularly important to include individuals who self-identify as having mental health issues, which may be longstanding or recently emerging. After all, they are still impacted by assessment practices whether or not they have received an official diagnosis.

3. Contextual information

Previous research performed by the Cambridge SU and the first cycle of APP PAR in 2019-20 has provided valuable contextual data in relation to assessment format and awarding gaps.

Some of our findings have been informed by the survey on diversifying assessment practices conducted by Cambridge SU and CCTL in early 2021, in parallel with this smaller-scale project focusing on awarding gaps. The report of the Students' Perspectives on Diversifying Assessment at the University of Cambridge (2021) details the findings from this large-scale survey distributed to all current Cambridge undergraduates; the authors agreed to share their raw data with us in order to inform our understanding of student perspectives on assessment practices, pre- and during the temporary shift to online assessment during the pandemic. While the Cambridge SU-led diversifying assessment survey was primarily focused on alternatives to exams, a selection of the questions related to the perspectives of current practices on students with self-reported mental health conditions or concerns (see pages 22-25).

We found it particularly concerning that the majority of responses (including non-disabled students) were negative to the statement:
- '**The results from my end-of-year exams are an accurate representation of my learning, skills and capabilities'** [In the final survey report, it was found that only 34% of students either

strongly agreed or agreed with this statement while 43% respondents answered that they either strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement: combined with the 25% neutral this meant that the majority of students (68%) were either not sure or did not agree that the results from their end-of-year exams were an accurate representation of their learning, skills and capabilities.]

An even larger number of respondents (67%) said that the exams had a negative impact on their mental health. As the Cambridge SU report discusses, a degree of worsened mental health around exams is certainly to be expected, but it is clear that the current end-of-year exam model does have a disproportionately negative impact on students' mental health, even aside from issues arising from the pandemic. End-of-year exams are alarmingly high stakes and, as already established in the earlier responses to the question, a majority of students do not even think they are accurately representative of their skills. These do not seem to be the ideal conditions for assessment and peak performance, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that such a high proportion of students have indicated that there is a negative impact.

In the Cambridge SU survey, students were asked to forecast the impact of more diverse modes of assessment on their mental health, provided that this change was **accompanied by clear instructions and marking expectations**. An overwhelming number of respondents responded positively, with 80% agreeing that this would have a positive or very positive impact on their mental health.

This last finding aligns with and augments our own APP PAR project's interest in the practices around assessment: the instructions provided by Departments, the advice given by supervisors, as well as access to well-designed marking rubrics and understandable information about marking and grading practices. It was strongly felt by the project team that clear information about assessment – whether about exams or about diversified assessment modes - provides benefits to all students and could help students with mental health conditions in particular, by heling them plan and by signposting support mechanisms.

4. Generation of evidence

Our qualitative research primarily involved interviews, as we wanted to expand on the Cambridge SU's survey (distributed at the same time that our project was implemented) with richer discussion of individual student experiences and perspectives.

The project team involved students from Psychology and Behavioural Sciences (PBS), English, and Geography and we recruited five students from the same range of disciplines.
- 2 PBS students (second year and fourth year)
- 2 English students (second year and third year)
- 1 Geography student (second year)

Each semi-structured interview lasted around 10 minutes. The interviews aimed to gather qualitative data relating to student experiences with assessments, the aspects of assessments that have an impact on their mental health, and mediating factors or examples of good practice that helped to nurture mental health. Questions were very direct and included:
- 'Do you know where to look for your assessments?'
- 'Are there any aspects of assessments that you think have an impact on your mental health?'

The interviews were conducted over video call with one researcher and were then transcribed. The transcriptions were coded and organised into key themes by two researchers on the project team.

In addition to the interviews, the project team conducted document analysis of the course guides of the subjects taken by interviewees aimed to verify and further investigate information collected in interviews. The documents were provided by the interview participants. Some interview participants could not find their course guide (an indication of some difficulty students have in locating relevant information), and so other documents they could attain were used (for English - a combination of paper documentation and exam marking criteria documents).

5. Small project research findings

The key findings from our interviews were that students were largely uncertain about the assessment expectations, were concerned about marking and grading practices, and found that the options and available adjustments around assessment limited their academic performance.

Interviews: findings and discussion

Uncertainty
Many students found the uncertainty around when assessments are, how they are marked, when they are told about them and how to prepare for them as key sources of anxiety. As one interviewee summarised:

- *"It feels like a lot of mystery around what the exam actually is and what it actually expects from us"*

Marking Disparity
A number of students identified the disparity in marks awarded to students between colleges as a source of anxiety. Ringing particularly true for students of subjects with more seemingly subjective marking criteria (e.g., English), interviewees speculated that the same piece of work marked by different examiners could easily receive notably different marks, just as different supervisors would give different advice about assessment expectations to students taking the same paper.

A number of interviewees noted that there needed to be some coordinated approach to marking criteria within Departments, that was relevant to courses and specific assessment tasks undertaken by students: it was generally agreed that problems arise when there isn't a marking scheme made available to students and supervisors, or if that marking criteria is both too vague and too ambiguous.

- *"But how do you know if you're doing it right if there's no mark schemes? Absolutely just ridiculous really. And I don't understand. I don't understand how they think that could actually make a student happy or make them feel secure?"*

Formative assessment and grading/marking
Whilst practices appear to vary between departments, an overall trend suggested that students rarely receive regular classifications or marks for their formative assessments. This was not regarded as entirely negative - interviewees recognised the additional stress and pressure regular grading sometimes produces and appreciated individual supervisors' reluctance to award marks on summative assessments. However, many interviewees felt unsure as to how they were performing academically, itself a further source of anxiety.

- *"I think the uncertainty not knowing how something's marked...Yeah, I think it is the uncertainty. That makes it difficult."*

Modes of assessment and adjustments
Some participants noted that the type of assessments that they were able to take due to their health impacted the topics they could cover, potentially leading to students not being able to fulfil their full potential. For instance, some students looked at the types of assessment offered per paper and made decisions about which ones to take based on the assessment task type and workload implications.

- *"I don't think your paper choice should be dictated by the assessment type, your paper choice should be dictated by like, what you enjoyed most. You shouldn't have to feel held back because of what might be negative for your mental health"*

Some unexpected problems arose from changes to the course delivery due to the pandemic, for instance where students missed out on fieldwork or workshops, they also lost the opportunity to develop the skills that would be required for their final dissertation: this was considered particularly concerning by the Psychology (missed data methods programme) and Geography (missed fieldwork) students. It was unclear to students in the project team and respondents to the interview whether the marking of these particular skills would be adjusted for the dissertation, or whether students would be held accountable.

Furthermore, participants were frustrated with the burden of 'proving' that they need assessment adjustments which took up time and energy that students without health conditions do not experience.

- *"And [the burden of proof for exam adjustments] is something that has taken so much of my time and been very stressful and probably negatively impacted my mental health overall."*

- *"Imagine taking an hour out of your week, every week … to deal with other people's questions about something that is like completely unchangeable about your life. Imagine a) the mental burden that takes but b) the time burden like no one has time for that. I think actually, if stuff was just communicated better, and there were just better provisions, that would make quite a lot of difference."*

Good practice
Although students found assessments stressful overall, there were some key features that they mentioned were very helpful and helped to mitigate potential negative effects on mental health. However, these were highly individualised based on subject or department and academic contacts such as supervisors and Directors of Studies.

- *"The course guides we have are really quite thorough … [and] I think they do quite a quite good job in linking our term time work to the final exam"*

- *"Yes, I do [know where to look for assessment information]. All the information is on Moodle. So yes, it's quite easy. "*

- *"One of the best aspects of having like supervisor is the fact that you can, like reach out to them and get more support and contact and get them to look over stuff."*

Document analysis: findings and discussion

Course guides and assessment information

Out of the three disciplines investigated, it was the English students who were identified as least likely to be able to be able to easily find information about the assessment expectations, and instead needed to seek information dispersed across multiple documents. This highlights the creation of additional uncertainty, especially with the increased burden of information finding exercises for students with mental health conditions.

An example of good practice with respect to course guides is from the Geography department, where course guides for each Tripos stage is provided on the Geography Intranet, and even for previous years. It is also given to IA students in printed format as part of the induction to the department. They can be accessed here: https://intranet.geog.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/courseguide/current/ .

The PBS course guide was centralised, with sufficient information provided on things like exam adjustments, department contacts, past papers and other resources. These are all examples of good practice. However, there was a lack of consistency with respect to the descriptions of workload for different papers. Some papers had no information, others provided a summary of the topic, others detailed the number of lectures, whereas few detailed full workload descriptions (which include the number of lectures, supervisions and their associated tasks and general workload statements). This lack of consistency adds to uncertainty for students with mental health conditions, with only some paper descriptions enabling forward planning and understanding of expectations with respect to workload.

It was agreed by the project team and the interviewees that should be clear direction to students at the start of their studies of how they can find their course guide. Information provided should also preferably be centralised all in one document, with a clear contents page for ease of finding information. This is especially important for students with mental health conditions - making it easier to find information related to exam adjustments, workload expectations, and contacts in the department. Of course, providing important information in this way would benefit all students, not just disabled students.

Marking schemes
Another arising theme was the usefulness of mark schemes, as detailed in course documents. The marking scheme for Geography is an example of good practice (see Figure 1):

Figure 1: section of the available Geography marking scheme

This marking scheme is helpful as it clearly breaks down how you can achieve marks into different themes, with detailed and understandable descriptions of each marking band. It then makes a clear link between the marking criteria, and grading class.

On the other hand, the available PBS marking scheme (see Figure 2) is considered an example of poor practice (a section copied below with a red border). For each class there is only a short description of the standard of work needed, which is not very clear and descriptive.

Upper Second (60-69)	Work that shows a good knowledge of the topic and the material covered in lectures; that is presented in an organised way; and clearly argued and focused on the set question.
Lower Second (50-59)	Work that overall shows a reasonable competence in the understanding and presentation of the relevant material. Certain types of uneven work would fall into this class: detailed factually-correct work that did not relate a broad knowledge of the topic to the specific question asked, or work with clear organisation and some insight but with serious omissions of factual knowledge.

Figure 2: section of the available PBS marking /classing scheme

This poor link between marking criteria and class creates additional uncertainty for students with mental health conditions, in this case with how students can achieve marks. This uncertainty is clearly variable by subject, creating disparities in uncertainty levels and clarity of information depending on Tripos, and, the project team feels, is a strong contributor to identified awarding gaps experienced by students with mental health conditions that currently exist in PBS.

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

Uncertainty creates additional pressures for those who are already struggling and face extra challenges. The uncertainty with assessment methods, conditions and instructions creates additional, and sometimes unmanageable stressors, for those who have mental health conditions.

The **burden of medical proof creates** additional work for only some groups of people, with disabled students having to justify themselves and repeatedly seek accommodations which takes time and energy. From our analysis, we find that this is also variable by subject; subjects with clear signposting and information may mean that the burden of fighting for oneself is reduced.

Reduced options of study based on what assessment forms are appropriate for the student are a clear problem, and this links into work done by the diversifying assessment surveys. It seems unfair that a student may be unable to take a paper they would enjoy because the assessment method is not fit for them, as this does not enable a student to reach and explore their full potential. Perhaps having the option to do an extra exam question OR a piece of coursework would be appropriate to mitigate this problem. It also highlights the importance of early communication of deadlines for assessed pieces of work, to enable a student to plan and decide for themselves whether their course combinations are manageable for their personal condition.

The examples of good practice were both structural and personal. Having clear guides and well-designed Moodle pages is excellent practice and eases the pressure that more significantly impacts students with mental health conditions.

Having an understanding and well-informed Director of Studies or supervisor was considered to be extremely important for many participants in this study, who considered that this support kept them afloat through their assessment issues. However, often students with mental health conditions are reluctant to reach out, making any form of support that can reduce overall awarding gaps difficult. This is particularly true as students with mental health conditions may have assessment adjustments that may not seem 'typical' for a healthy student; many teachers are understanding if an essay extension is needed, but it may be more difficult to reach out if a complex side-effect or symptom is interfering with work and wellbeing. It is important therefore acknowledge the value and power of the student-staff relationship in helping students with mental health conditions.

Overall, however, the project findings emphasise the shared responsibility for Departments and Colleges to both publish and share clear guides about assessment expectations and marking schemes, and to help their students interpret these in formative assessment. For disabled students in particularly, making these easily available, relevant and consistent will reduce the additional burdens on them of reaching out for additional support or to request adjustments.

7. RECOMMENDED ACTION

The project team made a number of detailed recommendations on the themes of Communication, Transparency, Support and Coordination/Centralisation in their presentation at the APP PAR Project's final forum in March 2021. These recommendations were synthesised, after discussion across the APP PAR Project team, to the following four action points:

- **College encouragement of supervisors to engage with Faculty/Department assessment expectations of the course:** Empowering supervisors to

be **able** to provide consistent advice about assessment expectations, formative feedback that aligns with summative assessment and course learning objectives, understand process for exam adjustments for disabled students and are confident in encouraging students' peer- and self-evaluation of work.

- **Faculty/Department to regularly review and update assessment information to engage both students and supervisors:** Provision of easily found, accessible, detailed, and up-to-date course information about assessment (modes & conditions, how summative assessments examiners come to a decision about marks/classes, connections between course aims/learning outcomes and academic performance).
- **Faculty/Department workshops/classes for students on assessment expectations:** Integrated lectures/workshops on assessment expectations or exam technique specifically tailored to each subject/paper.
- **Review of process for requesting exam adjustments:** To reduce repetition and burden on students who are struggling with mental health