

Undergraduate Geography Students' Views of Assessments and Academic Results: An Exploratory Study

Sadhana Manik

*School of Education, Social Sciences Cluster, University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Durban, South Africa*

Telephone: +27312603706; Fax: +27325330177; E-mail: manik@ukzn.ac.za

KEYWORDS Academic Results. Marks(Scores). Approach to Learning. Feedback. Self-awareness

ABSTRACT Research on students' views is a relatively new trend in assessment literature, more so locally (in South Africa) than internationally. This article examines university students' views of their summative assessments and academic results, and what they perceive to be influencing their academic results. The study used a qualitative approach and was undertaken in a second-year Geography Education module at a higher education institution in South Africa in 2011. The methodological instrument used was student narratives and there were 24 participants. The findings suggested that students' views of the intellectual demands of their assessments were not related to their views of their academic results. They indicated a preference for assessment methods that offer a host of support mechanisms to improve their performance, particularly when new geographical content was introduced. Students revealed that both their personal and learning environment characteristics influenced their academic performance. Students who perceived themselves as producing poor academic results displayed poor time-summary management in assessments and a fragmented approach to studying. In contrast, students who made significant progress in the assessments as the modules advanced reported on the positive impact of their added effort, consultations with the lecturer, and oral and written feedback. The article concludes by signalling the importance of researching students' views as a catalyst for developing students' assessment awareness. Furthermore, it indicates the need to, firstly, nurture students in achieving time-summary management in assessments, and secondly, explore students' reliance on the need for a scope (detailed outline) for each assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Internationally the literature on assessment in higher education has seen a growth in studies that focus on students as the unit of analysis. In 2004 Broadfoot and Black, noting trends over a 10-year period, in the journal *Assessment in Education*, highlighted a trend towards student perspectives (Moni et al. 2002; Brookhart and Bronowics 2003), aspirations and needs in assessment (Newfield et al. 2003; Johnson 2003) - areas which previously garnered little attention in assessment research. Since then there have been numerous international studies on students' views, the focus of this article, but few located in the context of South African students and none using the methodological approach outlined in this study. This is despite South Africa climbing aboard the global shift to student-centred learning post-apartheid through its introduction of Curriculum 2005 and various curriculum revisions thereafter. Exploring students' views is in harmony with this shift towards actively engaging with students. In fact, Weaver (2006: 380) argues that "until we understand the views and responses of students, education cannot hope to be truly student-centred."

This article aims to contribute to the literature on university students' views and assessment. As alluded to above, existing research studies on university students' views, particularly in respect of perceptions and assessment, show a history of being methodologically skewed towards large-scale quantitative analyses (Ramsden and Entwistle 1981; Entwistle and Ramsden 1983; Ramsden et al. 1997). This comment is enunciated by Lizzio et al. (2002), who noted the limitations in the methodology (for example, sampling and quantitative analyses) used in previous studies on university students in terms of their approaches to learning and learning environments. Later more creative methodologies were used; for example, Weaver (2006) used a mixed-method approach to understand students' perceptions of feedback. The quantitative aspect of her study utilised a questionnaire, while the qualitative aspect drew on focus group discussions with the students. In respect of the sampling used in studies, the primary focus has been concentrated on first-year students (Entwistle and Tait 1990; Ramsden et al. 1997; Thompson et al. 2005). Although admittedly there have been some qualitative studies and a few that focused on second-year students using a

small sample (Eley 1992; Trigwell and Prosser 1991), within the discipline of Geography there have been limited studies on assessment using a small sample (Thompson et al. 2005) - again with numerous studies focusing on first-year Geography students (Maguire et al. 2001; Klein 2003; Thompson et al. 2005).

This article reports on an exploratory study that examined second-year Geography Education students' views of their summative assessments and their academic results, and their perceptions of the influences on their results. There have been few studies which have revealed students' views of their assessment methods and the impact of selected assessment methods on students' approaches to learning, which are outlined below.

Students' Views: Assessment Methods and Approaches to Learning

There is a range of assessment methods currently used in higher education (Struyven et al. 2005), but research studies have analysed a limited number of methods such as essays, tests comprising multiple-choice questions (MCQs) and portfolios. In respect of the essay, Birenbaum and Feldman (1998) noted that it is linked to a positive attitude and reduced level of anxiety among students. They also expressed the view that students who had reduced confidence levels in their academic ability showed a preference for MCQs rather than the essay mode of assessment. Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) report that compared to MCQs, essays motivated students towards a deep approach to learning while the former encouraged a surface approach. Interestingly, Struyven et al. (2005) noted that students did allude to leaving out bulk content, but still performed well in an essay. Nevertheless, approaches to learning are dynamic and students modified their approaches to studying when there was a change in the assessment method (Struyven et al. 2005). Also, length of time attributed to an assessment method appeared to have relevance in terms of students' preferences; for example, Slater's study (1996) revealed that students preferred innovative assessment methods like the portfolio as they learned concepts and information over a period of time while concurrently working on the assessment.

Students' views of their assessments and their approaches to learning are not only dependent on the specific assessment method, assessment feedback also appears to be significant.

Assessment and Feedback

While there has been a plethora of studies on assessment and feedback, the researcher would like to hone in on a few selected discussions that have a bearing on this article. Students have an array of contrasting views on feedback, and studies indicate mixed views on students' responses to the feedback they receive. Yorke (2003: 492), cited in Mentkowski and Associates (2000: 82), who undertook a longitudinal study of learning, revealed the importance of motivation by teachers: "Students responded ... to their teachers' expectations and personal recognition." Also, in the quantitative segment of Weaver's (2006) study, she found that an overwhelmingly large number of students (90% of design students and 91% of business students) felt that positive comments boosted their confidence level. However, most students felt that receiving negative comments did not lead to them to experience despondency. Weaver (2006: 380) also reports that studies by Wojtas (1998) and Fritz et al. (2000) indicated that university students are only interested in their mark and not the feedback, and that "feedback was not effective in improving learning."

Despite diverse views on the role of assessment feedback, students' views of particular assessments have been found to influence their approaches to learning, and this is likely to impact on their academic results in the event of summative assessment.

Students' Approaches to Learning and Their Academic Results

Lizzio et al. (2002) investigated university students' perceptions of the learning environment, their approaches to study and academic outcomes. They drew on Biggs' (1989) '3P' (presage, process and product) model, which conceptually presents the learning process in an interactive environment of the three strands of variables: presage (students' characteristics - prior knowledge, academic ability and personality) coupled with the nature of the learning environment (workload, teaching method, course

structure), process (the approach used by students to learning) and product (academic results). "Presage factors exist prior to learning ... process factors describe the particular teaching and learning mix leading to the product: the outcome" (Freeth and Reeves 2004: 44). The model argues that "personal and situational factors influence a student to adopt a particular approach to learning which mediates or influences the types of outcomes achieved and the presage factors can influence learning outcomes" (Liz-zio et al. 2002: 28-29).

As far back as 2001, Maguire et al. commented that the learning approaches that Geography undergraduates use had not been explored, and they sought to address this gap. They embarked on a large-scale quantitative study which utilised a common approach undertaken in the United Kingdom. This comprises a questionnaire called the 'Approaches to studying inventory' (ASI), which has been reworked into an instrument now called 'Approaches and study skills inventory for students' (ASSIST). They used this instrument so that they could compare their results to those obtained from other studies which used the same instrument. The questionnaire contained three scales of learning: deep, strategic and instrumental, in addition to "reasons for entering higher education, students' preferences for particular learning styles and the influences on their studying" (Maguire et al. 2001: 98). A deep approach to learning encompasses understanding and the ability to relate and apply that knowledge, while a surface/instrumental approach to learning involves memorisation and the mere reproduction of knowledge (Gibbs et al. 1997; Maguire 2001). The strategic approach to learning is based on the students' intention to achieve the best academic results by being organised and applying good 'study methods' and 'time management' (Struyven et al. 2005: 333). Struyven et al. (2005) warn that these approaches must be understood as being dynamic, with students adopting different approaches based on their understanding of the learning context.

Australian higher education uses the Course Experience Questionnaire, which measures a host of variables that relate to students adopting a specific approach to learning. The following "variables are all considered to be affected by class size in the following way: it is perceived that smaller classes will have clearer goals and

standards, a more appropriate workload and assessment, give students more independence and foster a deeper approach to learning on a greater level than large class sizes" (Gibbs et al. 1997: 313-314). He notes that in modules with large enrolment and class sizes, students appeared to do less well because they perceived the assessment to be inappropriate. However, he admits that in Geography "large and small classes are taught just as effectively and Geography received a quality assessment rating of excellent by utilizing a variety of strategies which reduced the negative effects of large class sizes" (Gibbs et al. 1997: 317). Findings indicated an unusual trend of a large class size of 77 Geography students adopting a deeper approach to learning than a small module of 15.

Interestingly, Gibbs et al. (1997) reveals that students responded flexibly to the perceived module demands and did not adopt a fixed approach to learning. There appeared to be a relationship between students' approach to their learning and their perception of the demands of their module, regardless of how flawed their perception may be (Biggs 1993; Maguire 2001). Empirical evidence from a study by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) using questionnaires revealed a correlation between students' perceptions of a heavy workload and a surface approach to learning. The same finding emerged from a later study by Kember and Leung (1998). In a study by Maguire et al. (2001: 104) students indicated less confidence in reading, claiming not to have sufficient time to complete the required readings; hence they suggest "time management and effective reading strategies" be adopted.

The next section embarks on a discussion of the background to the study.

Background: Study, Module and Assessments

This study forms part of a cluster-based¹ assessment project undertaken among Bachelor of Education students. The researcher examined second-year university students views in the discipline of Geography Education of their assessments, and of their academic results in each of their summative assessments, and what they perceived to be the influences on their results. The study was undertaken in two undergraduate second-year modules that the researcher teaches. Ultimately the researcher had multi-

ple goals for the study: firstly, to understand my students and their needs; and secondly, to improve the assessment design for the undergraduate Geography module and to refine the methodology for a future study.

This article is based only on data derived from one module, namely Environmental Risks and Hazards (Natural Hazards). The module duration is 12 weeks in the first semester. There are 28 students registered for the module; which makes it a small class in comparison to other Geography Education content-driven modules, where the average class size in 2011 was 47 students. The module comprises three assessments. The first assessment was an hour-long class test made up of short questions, the last of which was an open-ended question. Students could consult their readings in the course pack to answer this question. The second assessment was an assignment, where students could choose one topic and answer the questions set. The third assessment required students to study two research articles in preparation for an essay question, which would be based on either one. They were told that the essay would be based on only one of the articles. There were class lectures (a double period of 1.5 hours per article) on each article. This was preceded by a group discussion and individual preparation on each article. Both articles were related to key themes in the module. The assessment methods were varied (test comprising short questions, test comprising an essay, and an assignment) to account for student preferences, which may have differed.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to explore students' views of their summative assessments, their academic results and what they perceived to be the influences on their results. The critical questions were:

1. What are students' views of each summative assessment and their results in the Geography module: Natural Risks and Hazards?
2. What are students' perceptions of the influences on their academic results?

Students were asked to compose narratives on each of their assessments, that is, three written assessments. These narratives were constructed in the last week of lectures (June 2011), guided by the idea that self-assessments are

undertaken at the end of a module (Mok et al. 2006). Students were informed of the study in advance and asked to bring their assessment file comprising all of the assessments to the lecture if they intended participating in the study. They were asked to share their views on each of the assessments, their results, and what they perceived the influences on their academic results.

This article is based on 24 responses from students. The response rate was determined by class attendance and students' desire to participate on the day of data collection. Research ethics were adhered to by having students omit writing their names in their submissions, thus ensuring their anonymity. Consent was obtained from students. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured at various stages. In the data collection phase, student narratives were collected by having students drop their responses into a box. Trustworthiness was enhanced by acknowledgment of my position as the researcher and the lecturer for this module. Students knew that the researcher would be analysing their narratives, and this could have influenced what they chose to express. In the analysis phase students' narratives were repeatedly read with the critical questions in mind and coded according to emerging categories.

FINDINGS

Collectively students commented in their narratives on their preferences for particular assessment methods and on their results; however, their preferences did not always lead to them obtaining good results in the preferred assessment method. Their views of the academic results that they obtained indicated general dissatisfaction and disappointment - clearly not the results many were anticipating, particularly in respect of the first assessment. Students' views of each of the assessment methods and their corresponding comments on their results are discussed below. Students' comments are given entirely verbatim, with only minor spelling corrections.

Students' Views of the Test Comprising Short Questions

The first assessment was a test. To recap, it comprised a series of short questions (all except

the last were closed-book questions). Short questions appealed to some students, while others preferred essays. Students' preferences were based on what they perceived the intellectual demands of the assessment to be (easy or difficult) and their personal characteristics. They linked their results to the skills or lack of skills they attributed to themselves. For example, student 4 claimed: *"I love short question(s) but they require straight answers I passed it"*; while student 18 wrote: *"I did extremely bad ... short questions aren't for me because they limit how I express what I think..."* Both students allude to the cognitive demand of filtering information and selecting what to write, and the need to be succinct in responding to short questions. Student 4's use of 'but' also alerts me to the possibility that the student does not feel sufficiently confident about the ability to do this. Similarly, student 22 commented *"and I know that I'm not so good in writing short questions."* What the latter student also reveals is that her strength does not lie in answering short questions. It was apparent from her narrative that she was aware of her weakness, and this led to her lack of confidence in responding to this type of test. Furthermore, short questions may have higher cognitive demands; student 18 explained that short questions place a restriction on the responses that students have to generate: *"I think short questions aren't for me because they limit how I express what I think to what I wrote."*

Students' lack of confidence could also be linked to poor time management, as revealed by student 1: *"I am not very confident with short questions. I feel I need to plan my time better. For example, something for 5 marks [score], I'll write 10 lines instead of 5 points. At the end of the module I now understand this."* This student is also pointing to a general assessment skill which was lacking, namely that an appropriate response to a question should be based on writing sufficiently for the score (mark). The length of a response for a question does not predispose a student to a good grade/score. The student's admission that this realisation only came at the end of the module is somewhat worrying - but is also a positive sign of assessment awareness being achieved.

The first assessment more than the others, appears to be associated with a sense of students' not knowing the geographical content required to respond to the questions. For exam-

ple, Student 10 stated: *"the topic made no sense to me..."*, while student 2 said it was: *"hard to understand the new geographical concepts and terms"*; student 6 said: *"I read and tried to understand"* and student 9: *"the work that was given was new and had a lot of content..."*

Their comments about responding to the questions also indicated their feelings of confusion - not only with the content, but also in trying to ascertain the lecturer's style of phrasing questions and ascertaining what was required of them as a response. This can be seen in the comments below:

Student 5: *"... you must know the content and you can defeat the question."*

Student 15: *"I was having a little bit confusion ... themes of vulnerability how they are different ..."*

Student 12: *"The assessment was easy ... I'm still trying to figure out your questioning style ... Also, understanding of the context is still hard for me."*

The first assessment thus appears to be associated with a level of mystification in terms of perplexity with the content, and at times this has repercussions in students not being able to understand the expectations of the questions. There were instances when the lecturer's technique of constructing the questions led to confusion, as demonstrated below:

Student 16: *"On the first assessment I was a bit confused about what was required of me. Reason - I did not understand the questions of the whole first assessment."*

Student 21: *"... I was still adapting to the way my lecturer set questions."*

Students' Views of the Assignment

More students appeared to have a positive perception of this assessment for various reasons, which included an interest in the topics, being given adequate preparation time, lecturer availability for consultations on the assessment, and submission of draft assignments prior to the final submission. Increased preparation time coupled with time for research on an exciting topic appealed to students:

Student 1: *"Take-away assignment. Sufficient prep time. Lecturer available for consultation at all times. Also asked for drafts to be looked at in class to ensure all learners were on the right track. It was a good topic. Interesting to complete."*

Student 2: "... did give us a second chance to upgrade our marks"

Student 3: "...work very good I think for me and the rest of students because it allows you to do some research from different resources..."

Student 5: "I like the assignment because it allows you to go and search ... there is also a long period to prepare for your work."

For student 5 it thus appears that when a time restriction is allocated to an assessment, it can be viewed as an obstacle to achievement. Also, as Student 23 reported, the assignment "suits or caters for those who hate studying for tests." It appears that the test exerts immediate stress on students, while the assignment produces a reduced stress level due to the above mentioned additional support provided to students. Also, students felt that the breakdown of the assignment topics into sub-questions was of great help in providing them with direction for their responses. One student stated that the class discussions related to the topics were also valuable: "I enjoyed researching the information and putting it together... helped in the class when we were talking about floods", and another commented on the consolidation of learning: "It also allows the student to apply what has been taught in the class, this shows how the learner understood the lesson."

The above comments that related to students applying their knowledge are an indication of students adopting a deep approach to learning for this form of assessment.

Students' Views of the Essay Test

The essay test was the third assessment, and numerous students expressed confidence due to their preference for this method. For example, Student 1 explained: "I enjoyed this test ... I enjoy essays. I like writing to express my understanding." Similarly, students 4, 9 and 18 stated: "I love the essay question", "I mostly prefer this form of assessment", and "I think essay-type questions do it for me" respectively.

This assessment method was also perceived as allowing greater freedom in responses compared to the short questions. For example, student 22 stated: "I write until all the answers in my mind are finished," while student 5 declared: "I enjoy the essay type because you are able to express the entire content of the article by your understanding, it does not limit you such as

short questions ... You can also be able to relate to previous articles." The latter remark reveals the student's deep approach to learning, refraining from compartmentalising each article but looking for synergies among the ideas contained in them.

Two students (numbers 3 and 23) also claimed to prefer options rather than only one question in an assessment. Student 3 stated: "I did not like the way it was set just to have one question to answer and there were no other options. Maybe it would be good if there were two questions and you have to choose one to write about." However, even when there were choices students acknowledged that they sometimes made the wrong ones, without qualifying their reasons for such a decision. For example, student 11 wrote: "I didn't choose the good easy essay," but does not provide a reason for making such a decision.

Common Threads Across the Assessments

A common thread running through all the assessments is that while there were students who revealed that an assessment was not difficult - this did not always translate into a pass for that assessment. This finding requires deeper interrogation. Some students, by their own admission, stated that they didn't perform well in the assignment, despite their positive perceptions of this assessment. For example, student 7 stated: "...this should have been the easy assessment but it was the worst one", and student 12 also declared that "the assessment was easy, but I failed". Student 18 revealed "I liked the questions of this assessment though I didn't do as well as I aimed to", and student 9 similarly commented: "The assessment was good but I did not do as well as I wanted to ... maybe I just needed some practice". In respect of the latter student alluding to requiring 'practice,' it could be that this student is referring to the draft version of the assignment, which he/she may not have submitted for feedback. One student (number 7) could not fathom his/her poor result, indicating a mismatch between his/her perception of the assessment and the result obtained: "I do not know what went wrong, this should have been easy but it the worst one."

Related to this are the high expectations that students had in anticipation of their results, which did not materialise for many students, as can be seen below:

Student 9: *"I did not do as good as I hoped I would."*

Student 10: *"Now this I do not understand, I learnt so much I thought I would have passed. But I thought wrong."*

Student 13: *"I expected to do better for this test but..."*

Student 21: *"It was the first time I got such a mark in Geography ..."*

Student 24: *"I thought I would obtain a better mark ..."*

These comments indicate a level of confidence in their abilities in the assessment - but this does not appear to be matched by their results. When students linked their views to the results they had obtained, there was a clear indication that these students were greatly concerned about their results and about passing the module. For example, student 9 stated in respect of the essay test: *"This was easy but I did bad in it. Got 46% and I'm worried about my DP² because of it."* Similarly, student 24 remarked as follows after receiving the second assessment: *"I was disappointed with my results and the mark I got because it decreased my DP and now I am afraid of the exam."*

It is apparent from the above that students held particular perceptions of and expectations about the various summative assessment methods, but their experiences of these methods in this Geography module, particularly when they received their results, led to disappointment. More students commented about being confused in the first assessment than in the latter assessments. There were a few students who felt that all of the assessment methods were *"no problem"* or *"fine"*, signifying overall confidence. This was because they shared positive views on the overall structure of the assessment programme, such as the fact that it had a variety of assessment methods, which catered for students with different assessment preferences. Student 3, who admitted to failing the first assessment, felt that the assessment programme was *"very good"* when it came to the *"structuring"*, as a variety of summative assessment methods were provided in the module: *"I like the way the assessments were set because if you cannot make it in the short question you are able to make it in the essay or vice versa"*.

The students' narratives also revealed what they considered to be influences on the aca-

demical results that they achieved in the summative assessments, which are discussed below.

Students' Perceptions of Influences on Their Academic Results

The students alluded to a host of reasons that collectively influenced their academic performance in each of the assessments. These presage factors can be categorised as students' personal characteristics and learning environment characteristics.

A frequently cited influence was preparation. There were various facets of assessment preparation that students reported as impacting on their results. In respect of the first assessment, as stated earlier, some students commented that they were unsure at the outset of the module how questions would be phrased for the test. For example, student 6 stated *"the test was not bad nor difficult, it just that at that time I wasn't sure of what to expect ... my preparation."* The nature of assessment 2 (assignment) was viewed in a positive light as it provided additional time for preparation. Student 5 explained: *"...there is also a long period to prepare for your work."* However, even when there was sufficient time for prior preparation, some students remarked that they did not use this time to their benefit. Student 12 acknowledged the impact of not using the opportunities: *"I am the one who should take the blame - I didn't do the draft and I just wrote it and got some marks which were not that bad but if I had done the draft I would have done much better."* At this juncture the student revealed a level of assessment awareness (in failing to utilise the learning opportunities when they were provided, which led to a poorer result) and acknowledgement that his/her performance is a result of his/her own actions.

Students provided evidence of the need to build self-regulation when they commented that the cognitive demands of assessment 3 (the essay test) was not high, but their failure to adequately prepare for it propelled them towards a poor academic result: *"It was not hard, it's just that I did not prepare enough."* Student 9 stated: *"this was easy but I did bad in it ... it was my own fault for not preparing enough for it. I mostly prefer this form of assessment."* Student 8 also reported: *"This test was not difficult, however I messed it up by not remembering the name of the third province ... If I had went over the*

article one more time I feel that I would have done a lot better.” Strangely, a student who realised after assessment 1 that inadequate preparation was the problem did not undertake any extra effort to improve his/her performance: “I didn’t learn as much as I should have ... It was clear that I should have learnt - wouldn’t have a dismal fail!” The student later revealed further insufficient preparation for the third assessment (“I just need to learn more”). However, student 22, who failed the first assessment due to “lack of hardworking” achieved better results in the second and third assessments and commented “I passed ... I realized that if I don’t stand up for myself I will end up repeating the module.” The student revealed that improved academic results were because of the added effort made towards passing the module.

Module workload was another reason that students suggested as influencing their assessment performance. There were students who reported that their conceptual understanding was weak and that the content in this particular module was novel (see discussion for the first assessment). They perceived the workload to be immense because it did not constitute previous knowledge. It required extra effort to become familiar with the concepts and ideas and to internalise these for the test. Student 22 reported for the first assessment being “so lost and most of all I did not understand ... at that time.” It is interesting that student 15 linked her inability to grasp concepts to her perception of her cognitive ability as a learner: “I was having a little bit of confusion ... difficult for us as slow learners.” Indeed, this student’s explanation of her assessment results served to illuminate her negative perception of herself as being ‘slow’.

Her perception could be flawed, as students’ reflections indicate that the lecturer needed to develop this skill to a greater extent in the module. Student said 15 “I did not do very well ... not knowing the article properly.” Unfortunately the student did not provide any significant details with regard to experiences of learning by reading journal articles. However, another student (number 7) commented: “The honest truth is I am battling with academic articles, the language, the use and level of academic writing, I fail to understand it. The open-book question was like a nightmare.”

From the above it is apparent that some students lack the ability to adequately respond to

the question on a scholarly article because they cannot understand the academic language. However, there were some students who were competent in this regard and thrived when they had to engage in research which required the use of scholarly articles: “This type of assessment work is very good I think for me and the rest of other students because it allows you to do some research from different resources’ Indeed, students’ preferences pointed to their differences as learners. What appeared to have strengthened some students’ confidence in understanding scholarly articles were the study groups that they were put into by the lecturer, in order to prepare for the articles. For example, student 12 explained the value of collaborative learning: “study groups ... help us to do even more.” These groupings were engineered by the lecturer at the outset of the module, and students had to take the initiative to sustain them over the duration of the module.

There were students who perceived the lecturer as being responsible for their academic achievements: be they good or bad. Feedback and consultations played a role in attaining good academic results: in providing students with the relevant guidance, and in motivating and giving students confidence. Student 10, who passed the second assessment after failing the first one, revealed that consultation with the lecturer had a positive impact on her: “With the mini-pep talk you gave me I was able to pull it off! It was amazing, I passed and showed what I was capable of!” It is apparent that oral feedback coupled with good results can be a huge morale booster for students. Student 23 stated “I love the comments you write because they guide us on where we went wrong.” The submission of draft copies in the assignment led to improved performance for those that submitted the drafts and who worked on the weak areas pointed out to them in the feedback. As one student reported, it “... gave us a second chance to upgrade our marks.” While student 12 realised that “if I had done the draft I would have done much better.” Student 10, who was of the opinion that feedback made a difference after receiving it on the second assessment, stated his/her need for “more notes with you”.

The lecturer was also perceived as contributing to poor assessment results, due to what students perceived to be unfair marking practices and the lecturer’s decision not to provide a

reduced workload in preparation for test purposes. A few students were of the opinion that the lecturer needed to practice leniency in marking the assessments: *"all else was good except for the marking, of which I think was not lenient. I think the lecturer was too tight and strict."* Student 24 similarly commented about one assessment: *"I think you were too strict in marking the assignment,"* but acknowledged that in respect of the other assessments *"I think you were also fair in your marking and I appreciate that."* One student (number 19, who revealed that she was female) was clearly dissatisfied as she was of the opinion that the lecturer was not devoting sufficient time to marking the assessments properly. Her explanation was that she was "shy" and therefore did not approach the lecturer. She said of the first assessment: *"I am not satisfied, sometime in a line I write 3 point but the lecturer will mark as one point ... all those thing it affect me, it sometimes give me the bad attitude of hating the lecture for not taking her time for marking."* Later on, when commenting on assessment 3 she wrote *"the way the lecturer marked my script it not satisfied me ... 56% was not enough for me the way I wrote, some points were ignored that make me feel angry for the lecturer but it okay I don't wanna fight or complains that hope you will start giving time when you mark."* The student is of the opinion that if she approached the lecturer it would be construed as being confrontational, although she does not allude to any episodes where this occurred to warrant that perception. Her perception of the lecturer influenced her conception of assessment marking.

There were students who held the belief that the lecturer ought to provide them with information on what would appear in the assessment. For example, student 16 stated that the lecturer *"did not concentrate on the article that was going to come out."* Also, student 17, who got 50%, remarked that he/she performed *"very bad"* because of *"not being given a scope and be expected to know all"* the content outlined for that particular assessment. These students are alluding to their desire to adopt less than a surface approach (pure memorisation of the content) to their learning and to be assisted by clues given by the lecturer. Student 5 offers an explanation for the road to success in any assessment, stating *"you must know the content and you can defeat the question."*

Some students reported that their approach to learning influenced their results. By far the most common approach revealed by students appeared to be 'spotting', with students focusing more on one area/aspect in terms of the content to the exclusion of other areas, clearly not even a surface approach to learning. Student 12 explained *"what I did here was that I just only focused on floods which I assumed ... would come out. It's just that I was expecting the article on floods"*. Student 13 (with similar views to students 15 and 16) stated *"instead of focusing on the Cutter article, I focused on the Kumpulainen article which brought me down."* The same student reported that she did not change her approach to learning and spotted for the third assessment: *"I did absolutely poorly and only have myself to blame ... I assumed the Roger Few article would come out and did not focus on the Thomas et al. article"*. Student 14 revealed a failed result for each assessment (*"the marks that I got - actually my mistake"*), acknowledging that spotting was the cause.

The students do not provide a rationale for adopting such an approach to their learning - and it is of concern that this is a repetitive approach without any success for students 13 and 14. Indeed, this fragmented approach to learning is a risk which sometimes pays off, as student 6 revealed: *"I was superb and I was able to score high because I was able to predict the article that was going to be in the test."* The student is elated at the mark that he/she achieved, despite it occurring through a gamble.

DISCUSSION

This section presents a discussion of some of the key findings that emerged in the study.

Assessment Awareness and the Need for Self-regulation

Students were embarking on a self-awareness process whereby they transferred their thinking about the assessments and their academic results into written text. However, this was research driven by the lecturer/researcher and not initiated by the students. In their narratives they evaluated their abilities and commented on their academic performance. Students displayed awareness by sharing their knowledge about their own preferences in assessment, the influ-

ences on their academic results, the learning strategies they were using and their successes and weaknesses in utilising those specific strategies. Mok et al. (2006: 416) reported how self-assessment for teachers can engender life-long learning and assist teachers in developing self-regulation among learners. They thus argue for the need “to develop self-assessment and life-long learning competence”. This has resonance for the students who participated in this study, as they are training to become teachers - but until they engage in unsolicited self-assessments, life-long learning and self-regulation will not be achieved.

Nevertheless, it was evident that self-regulation was both an individual endeavour and a result of feedback from the lecturer. Students commented on how they approached their learning, such as undertaking more preparation and engaging in group work. The feedback from the assessments, in addition to students’ academic results, illuminated for students their strengths and weaknesses and assisted them to identify where they fell short. As Broadfoot and Black (2004) noted, assessment does bring about greater self-awareness. From this awareness, particular students (not all) developed learning paths to assist them to manage their learning better. For example, students wrote about needing to prepare more, realising that not submitting a draft copy of an assessment had negative repercussions, as they did not receive feedback which would have assisted them to enhance the quality of their assessment submissions.

There has been evidence for the positive influence of feedback in improving student learning (Hattie 1987; Black and Wiliam 1998, cited in Gibbs and Simpson 2004). Van den Berg et al. (2006) noted that there is a considerable difference in function between oral and written feedback, with the latter concentrating on making evaluative comments (see Van den Berg 2006: 137, citing Flower et al. 1986), while the former provided students with arguments and suggestions on improvement. While this study did not seek to distinguish between the forms of feedback, students’ views indicated that both written and oral feedback and consultations are essential. Oral informal feedback proved to be beneficial in motivating students, and as Weaver noted (2006) positive comments boost confidence. Hence, informal feedback on an individual basis in a small class context in higher edu-

cation (as this study revealed) is beneficial for students. Students’ views of the influences on their assessment performance highlighted the merits of quality feedback.

Time-Summary Management

Students’ level of confidence was low when they commented on their lack of preference for the short questions test. They alluded to a reduced ability to perform well academically in this particular method of assessment compared to the essay test and assignment. Furthermore, the students’ acknowledgement that the short questions assessment is not difficult, but that they fared poorly, is further evidence of their inability to summarise salient ideas within the stipulated time and record those as responses. This has resonance with Snyder’s (1971) seminal work on what he calls the ‘hidden curriculum.’ He states that courses are an “exercise in time budgeting ...to filter out what was really important ... you couldn’t physically do it all. I found out that if you did a good job of filtering out what was important you could do well enough” (Snyder 1971: 62-63). If students are not able to filter information within the given time constraints in an assessment, they will not achieve success. With regard to the assignment, the time period for completion was a month, and this assessment allowed for submission of a draft. Feedback to students would have improved the quality of their work; hence time-summary management would not be applicable for this method of assessment, but rather to others where time-summary management is critical.

The Essence of Assessment

Students preferred a variety of summative assessment methods, although the first assessment appeared to be stressful for them due to it being a test. The assignment had the greatest appeal to students, who viewed it as offering a host of support mechanisms for them to improve their performance (such as consultations, oral and written feedback, draft copies) and hence reduced their stress. Birenbaum and Feldman (1998) similarly found that an assessment that makes students less anxious, such as an essay, is viewed positively.

Comments about the introduction of new knowledge in a module and needing extra effort to internalise signals that the preferred assess-

ment for introduction of new concepts may need to be an assignment rather than a test, since this will remove the requirement of time-summary management. It will thus allow students added time to read and digest the new information. Slater's study (1996) similarly indicated student preference for an assessment method, where they learned concepts and information over time while engaging in the assessment. In addition, students' submission of a draft and receiving oral and written feedback prior to their final submission has value in reducing student assessment stress and providing motivation. This is in keeping with Weaver (2006), who found that students commented on the need for submitting drafts.

It was interesting to note that while students may have a preference for a particular assessment type, this did not always translate into them doing well in that assessment. This has implications for engaging in research on students' views, and particularly their preferences.

The Ox-Bow Lake Effect and Rejuvenation

Presage factors (Biggs 1989) appeared to influence students' learning and performance. Students enumerated presage factors that they felt had an influence on the product, namely their academic results. Students' presage factors/characteristics included their preferences for different types of assessments, their perceived workload for each of the modules, their views of the lecturer, and their previous learning experiences, such as not being exposed to scholarly articles. Students' inability to cope with the workload can be theorised using concepts solicited from fluvial geomorphology. Hence, perceived workload demands can lead to either an 'ox-bow lake' effect or 'rejuvenation'. The 'ox-bow lake' effect can be explained as follows: during a flood (workload volume), a meander (the student) gets cut off from the river (the class) to form an ox bow lake. The lake eventually dries up and forms a meander scar, due to a lack of supply of water. The student experiences being cut off because he/she feels unable to cope with, for example, the academic language and journal articles. A student expressing feelings of "*being so lost*" and not knowing what to do will eventually lead to that student's failure.

Rejuvenation occurs when the stream load is high and large volumes of sediment are deposited (student's workload volume increases),

choking the stream (student feels overwhelmed). Thus, the stream adopts numerous branching pathways to continue flowing (student uses alternate learning strategies such as group work or greater preparation to assist in coping and enhancing understanding). Such a stream pattern is then called a braided stream. 'Rejuvenation' thus occurred when a student found alternate learning strategies (such as the groups)/more preparation when faced with perceived workload demands. Braided learning is therefore the use of alternate learning strategies/greater preparation to enhance student understanding when they perceive their workload demands as being excessive.

Hence, there is merit in what Freeth and Reeves (2004: 49) say when they declare that exploring students' perspectives is valuable: "there will be a range of competing ... preferences, and time spent exploring expectations ... preferences ... opens opportunities" for a consideration of students' different needs.

Assessment: Defeating the Enemy

Assessment has the power to breed hostility in the lecturer-student relationship. An interesting presage factor (student attitude) emerged from students who believed the marking of assessments were unfair, from the student who was of the opinion that the lecturer should have hinted at the content in the assessment, and from the student who claimed to have a hatred for the lecturer because she perceived the lecturer as not giving sufficient time to marking her work which resulted in a lower than anticipated result. Amin (in press) states that: "there are perplexities related to assessment bedevilling those who teach and those who come to learn in higher education spaces as assessment can produce a complex web of challenges with potential to generate conflict in general and to antagonise the relationship between students and teacher in particular. Crucially, learning can be destabilised if we continue to regard assessment as an objective, neutral and unemotional set of procedures." Amin succinctly draws attention to assessment as contestation, and this conflict can grow as assessments unfold in a module if not addressed by either the student or the lecturer/assessor.

Indeed, some assessment methods were perceived negatively. When student 7 stated "*I am*

batling” and student 15 wrote of “*defeating the question*”, the assessment was viewed as a battle. The student perceived himself/herself as one of many soldiers (students in the class) armed with content, and obtaining good results was perceived to be winning this battle. Draft submissions for an assessment then afforded the advantage of ‘getting to know the enemy’ and using the feedback from the draft submission provided additional ammunition (more content) for soldiers to defeat the enemy. Those students who wrote about their poor results, particularly those who admitted to ‘spotting’ and thereby being content-poor, appeared to have ‘lost’ the battle. They shared their feelings of hopelessness - such as student 15, who stated “*all my effort but unfortunately I couldn’t make it.*” Of course, there were assessment methods that were not viewed by some students in this negative light, and those were oriented towards students’ interests such as the assignment. Thus, even though some students may have performed poorly in this assessment, they enjoyed the assessment task as it offered intrinsic value to them.

Student Learning Malaise

Some students acknowledged that they were not adequately preparing for an assessment and steering towards easier approaches to learning. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) referred to students being ‘selectively negligent’ in choosing what content they think is relevant and reducing their focus. Some students in this study were not only adopting a fragmented approach to learning, namely ‘spotting’ or ‘seeking hints dropped by the lecturer’, but they were repeating the same learning approach in successive assessments despite achieving poor results. This requires greater interrogation. Some students appear to be meandering through the module assessments without great assessment preparation effort, leading me to ponder the learning malaise that is creeping into student learning, where there is reduced assessment preparation effort and a reliance on an assessment scope (detailed outline). Could modularisation, with courses being shorter (Gibbs and Simpson 2004) have led to student stress increasing, with repercussions for student learning and the approaches they adopt?

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore undergraduate students’ views of their assessments and results. It was a qualitative, exploratory study, hence the sample size was small. The study relied heavily on students’ reporting, namely participants in their second year of study within the discipline of Geographic Education. Hence the value of the study must be seen in its ability to illuminate some initial findings that can later be pursued in a larger study on assessment. It should nevertheless be noted that some of the findings correlate to similar findings in other studies. There are some conclusions from this study that are of benefit to both the researcher in knowing and responding to the students’ needs. In respect of the latter, students’ gaining assessment awareness will assist them to make better choices when there are assessment options and in knowing their strengths and weaknesses. Becoming self-regulated learners will propel them towards coping with perceived workload demands and addressing their needs, such as devoting more time to assessment preparation and initiating a study group.

With regard to the lecturer, the study highlighted the significance of students’ views, especially of the various assessment methods, students’ preferences and need for an assessment method that removes time-summary management when they are met with new geographical content (concepts and knowledge) and little previous knowledge and competence in scholarly articles. The study has also led to a heightened awareness of students’ learning strategies and the importance of consultations and written and verbal feedback that can be provided, especially since assessment can breed hostility in the student-lecturer relationship. There is merit in the view that assessment, which is a process factor, should respond to presage factors. Hence there is a need for creative responses to the influences that students perceive to be constraining their assessment learning and performance.

It is quite apparent that the researcher has emerged from this study with more questions than answers. Indeed, it appears essential to advocate for intervention and the need to change students’ learning approaches. If there is a learning malaise creeping into student learning, how can this be addressed effectively? How do I structure and build deep learning approach-

es in a 12-week semester within the new curriculum? Also, students' conception of learning for an assessment, such as a test, is dominated by the need for a scope. Why is the scope suddenly taking centre stage for student learning in assessment preparation? These questions herald the conceptualisation of another study on assessment.

NOTES

1. The Social Sciences cluster is located within the School of Education.
2. Refers to 'Duly performed' which is a pre-requisite which allows a student entry to write the examination at the end of the module.

REFERENCES

- Amin N 2012. Critique and care in higher education assessment: From binary opposition to Möbius Congruity. *Alternations* (in press).
- Biggs JB 1989. Approaches to the enhancement of tertiary teaching. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 8: 7-25.
- Biggs JB 1993. What do inventories of students' learning processes really measure? A theoretical review and classification. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 63: 3-19.
- Birenbaum M, Feldman RA 1998. Relationships between learning patterns and attitudes towards two assessment formats. *Educational Research*, 40(1): 90-97.
- Black P, Wiliam D 1998. Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1): 7-74.
- Broadfoot P, Black P 2004. Redefining assessment: The first ten years of assessment in education. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 11 (1): 7-26.
- Brookhart SM, Bronowicz DL 2003. I don't like writing, it makes my fingers hurt: Students talk about their classroom assessments. *Assessment in Education*, 10(2): 221-242.
- Eley MG 1992. Differential adoption of study approaches within individual students. *Higher Education*, 23: 231-254.
- Entwistle N, Entwistle NJ 1991. Contrasting forms of understanding for degree examinations: The student experience and its implications. *Higher Education*, 22: 205-227.
- Entwistle N, Ramsden P 1983. *Understanding Student Learning*. London: Croom Helm.
- Entwistle N, Tait H 1990. Approaches to learning, evaluations of teaching and preferences for contrasting academic environments. *Higher Education*, 19(2): 169-194.
- Freeth D, Reeves S 2004. Learning to work together: Using the presage, process, product (3P) model to highlight decisions and possibilities. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 18(1): 43-56.
- Fritz C, Morris P, Bjork R 2000. When further learning fails: Stability and change following repeated presentation of text. *British Journal of Psychology*, 91: 493-511.
- Gibbs G, Lucas L, Spouse J 1997. The effects of class size and forms of assessment on nursing students' performance, approaches to study and course perceptions. *Nursing Education Today*, 17: 311-318.
- Gibbs G 2003. Improving student learning through assessment. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(2): 123-132.
- Gibbs G, Simpson C 2004. Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 5: 3-31.
- Hattie JA 1987. Identifying the salient facets of a model of student learning: A synthesis of meta analyses. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11: 187-212.
- Johnson D 2003. Activity theory, mediated action and literacy: Assessing how children make meaning in multiple modes. *Assessment in Education*, 10(1): 103-129.
- Kember D, Leung DYP 1998. Influences upon students' perceptions of workload. *Educational Psychology*, 18: 293-307.
- Klein P 2003. Active learning strategies and assessment in world geography classes. *Journal of Geography*, 102(4): 146-157.
- Lizzio A, Wilson K, Simons R 2002. University students' perceptions of the learning environment and academic outcomes: Implications for theory and practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27: 27-52.
- Maguire S, Evans SE, Dyas L 2001. Approaches to learning: A study of first year geography undergraduates. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 25(1): 95-107.
- Mok MM, Lung CL, Cheng DP, Cheung RH, Ng ML 2006. Self-assessment in higher education: Experience of using a metacognitive approach in five case studies. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(4): 415, 433.
- Moni KB, Kraayenoord C, Baker CD 2002. Students' perceptions of literacy assessment. *Assessment in Education*, (3): 319-342.
- Newfield D, Andrew D, Stein P, Maungedzo R 2003. No number can describe how good it was: Assessment issues in the multi modal classroom. *Assessment in Education*, 10 (1): 61-81.
- Ramsden P, Entwistle NJ 1981. Effects of academic departments on students' approaches to studying. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 51: 368-383.
- Ramsden P, Prosser M, Trigwell K, Martin E 1997. Perceptions of Academic Leadership and the Effectiveness of University Teaching. *Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Brisbane, Australia*, undated.
- Slater TF 1996. Portfolio assessment strategies for grading first year university physics students in the USA. *Physics Education*, 31(5): 329-333.
- Snyder BR 1971. *The Hidden Curriculum*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Struyven K, Dochy F, Janssens S 2005. Students' perceptions about evaluation and assessment: A review. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4): 331-347.
- Thompson G, Pilgrim A, Oliver K 2005. Self-assessment and reflective learning for first year university geography students: A simple guide or simply misguided. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29(3): 403, 420.
- Trigwell K, Prosser M 1991. Improving the quality of student learning: The influence of learning context and students' approaches to learning on learning outcomes. *Higher Education*, 22: 251-266.
- Van den Berg I, Admiraal W, Pilot A 2006. Designing student peer assessment in higher education: Analysis of written and oral feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(2): 135-147.
- Weaver MR 2006. Do students value feedback? Students' perceptions of tutors' written responses. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(3): 379-394.
- Yorke M 2003. Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and the enhancement of pedagogic practice. *Higher Education*, 45: 477-501.