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THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ON STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO ASSESSMENT

Written assignment brief

Elaine WALSH

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Abstract

The emotional aspect of assessment should not be ignored. Assessment permeates all aspects of higher education, and is central to students' experiences. While it may not be possible, or even desirable, to remove all stress from assessment, the need to mitigate against confusion and misinterpretation is important. The written assignment brief is a key document in the assessment process, yet it has received little attention. A lack of clarity caused by poorly written or poorly explained assignment instructions means that students may not know what they are required to do. Some will argue that an overly prescriptive assignment brief reduces creativity and effectively results in "spoon-feeding" students. This article argues that an effective assignment brief builds students' confidence and minimises anxiety, which reduces their cognitive load and promotes learning. The findings in this article are drawn from the qualitative stage of a mixed-methods PhD study conducted in the University of Limerick, which explored how written assignment briefs affected students' understanding of the requirements, and students' potential to perform effectively. One key finding was the impact of poor communication on the students' experience of assessment; exacerbating emotions such as anxiety, stress, and panic. Providing students with examples, templates, and detailed assignment briefs were identified as beneficial in reducing negative emotions and cognitive load.

Keywords: assignment brief, emotions, higher education, communication, cognitive load.

Résumé

L'aspect émotionnel inhérent à l'évaluation ne devrait pas être ignoré. L'évaluation imprègne tous les aspects de l'enseignement supérieur et elle est au cœur des expériences des étudiant-es. Même s'il n'est peut-être pas possible, ni même souhaitable, d'éliminer tout stress lié à l'évaluation, il est important d'atténuer la confusion et les erreurs d'interprétation. L'énoncé d'une tâche évaluative est un document clé dans le processus d'évaluation qui pourtant ne reçoit que peu d'attention. Un manque de clarté causé par des instructions mal écrites ou mal expliquées implique

que les étudiant-es peuvent ne pas savoir quoi faire. Certain-es diront qu'un énoncé trop prescriptif réduit la créativité et aboutit à mâcher le travail aux étudiant-es. Cet article soutient qu'un énoncé efficace renforce la confiance des étudiant-es et minimise l'anxiété, ce qui réduit leur charge cognitive et favorise l'apprentissage. Les résultats de cet article proviennent du volet qualitatif d'une recherche de doctorat à méthodes mixtes menée à l'Université de Limerick, qui a exploré la manière dont les énoncés écrits affectent la compréhension des étudiant-es des exigences et leur potentiel à travailler efficacement. L'une des principales conclusions concerne l'impact d'une mauvaise communication sur l'expérience d'évaluation des étudiant-es, exacerbant des émotions telles que l'anxiété, le stress et la panique. Fournir aux étudiant-es des exemples, des modèles et des énoncés écrits détaillés a été identifié comme bénéfique pour réduire les émotions négatives et la charge cognitive.

Mots-clés : énoncé d'une tâche évaluative, émotions, enseignement supérieur, communication, charge cognitive.

1. Introduction

Assessment is an emotional event for students (Boud & Falchikov, 2006), and is hugely influential on students' experiences in higher education. The assessment process determines the ebb and flow of the academic year and directs teaching and learning activities. Hill et al. (2021) argued that emotions are part of the learning process and students should learn to use their emotions as part of their learning. Due to the centrality of assessment and its influence on student experience, the emotional aspect of assessment must be considered.

As Rowntree (1987) observed that "the field of assessment is full of conceptual quagmires and terminological traps," (p. 9) it is important to define some of the assessment terminology used in this article: *assignment brief* and *assignment task*. Gilbert and Maguire (2014c) defined the assignment brief as "the written instructions provided to communicate the requirements and expectations of non-exam assessment tasks" (column 1, para. 2). The assignment task is the specific task that must be done, for example, to write an essay on a particular topic. Hughes' (2009) Assessment Task Design (ATD) framework includes: the purpose of the task (which learning outcomes students will demonstrate); the type of text that students should produce (e.g., essays, debates, reports, posters, etc.); the mode (will it be written, oral, non-verbal, or visual); the medium (will it be face-to-face, hard copy, softcopy); the content or topic; and the students' role and relationship to the audience. As the assignment briefs in this study were designed in accordance with University of Limerick's regulations (2019), Hughes' Assessment Task Design (2009) framework, and Gilbert and Maguire's Assignment Brief Guidelines (2014b), the author uses these definitions in this paper.

With increasing rates of mental health issues in higher education, an awareness of the symbiotic relationship between assessment and emotions is important. Hill et al. (2021) cautioned that "faculty should not divorce the affective realm of learning from the cognitive" (p. 169) in particular, as mental health issues become more prevalent in higher education. As students typically enter higher education at a time when they are developing from adolescents to adulthood, many of the inherent changes can have mental health implications (Auerbach et al., 2018). Recently, at all stages of the education system, attention began to focus on the influence of mental health on students' wellbeing (Hill et al., 2021). New research identified increasing rates of mental health issues, internationally (Auerbach et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2017; Ferguson, 2017). In 2012, the UK newspaper, *the Guardian*, launched a series of articles in response to the increasing prevalence of mental



health issues amongst staff and students. Carter et al. (2017) reported that 20% of the 1.3 million students in Australian universities have mental health issues. In a survey of further education colleges in the UK, the Association of Colleges (2017) reported that 85% of respondents noted an increasing number of students with disclosed mental health issues since 2013. A large-scale UK-based survey (37,500 students) reported that approximately one fifth (21.5%) of students had been diagnosed with a mental health issue (Pereira et al., 2019). This report highlighted depression (10.2%) and anxiety (8.4%) as the two most common diagnoses. With an increase of 18.7% since 2017, 87.7% of these students reported struggling with anxiety. Student responses to a national survey conducted by the American College Health Association (2018) reported 22.1% for anxiety, 18.1% for depression, 11% for panic attacks, and 12.7% being under "tremendous stress." A survey conducted during 2018 and 2019 by the Union of Students in Ireland (funded by the Health Service Executive) showed that of the 3,340 students surveyed, severe anxiety (38.4%), depression (29.9%), and stress (17.2%) were reported (Price et al., 2019). These students said that mental health difficulties often impacted (28.4%) or always impacted their studies (10.9%). While a contributing factor may be the increased acceptance and willingness of people to disclose mental health issues, there is no doubt that rising student debt and financial pressures (Ferguson, 2017) fuel the problem. Additionally, the influence of high-stress environments on the performance of educators affects the well-being of students (Ferguson, 2019). Mental health issues are rising amongst academic staff and PhD students (Shaw & Ward, 2014). COVID-19 has also increased levels of anxiety and stress. Recently, the Minister for Further and Higher Education in Ireland, Simon Harris, acknowledged the "'significant' stress and 'huge workload' imposed by the pandemic" (Miley, 2021, para. 18). The rapid move to online delivery in Irish schools exacerbated technostress for students and their teachers (Murphy et al., 2021). The consequences of the pandemic may take some time to realise.

This article reports on some of the findings from a PhD study (Walsh, 2021) that set out to explore how written assignment briefs affect students' understanding of the requirements, and students' potential to perform effectively. An increasing variety of assignments, resulting in the need for more complex instructions (Gilbert & Maguire, 2014c), and frequent assessment, decreasing the time students and academics have to allocate to individual assignments, has strengthened the need for effective briefs. This is important as, when students encounter a range of different types of assignments, they do not have the time to master any particular type of assignment, and frequent assessment increases the student's cognitive load resulting in heightened levels of anxiety and a poorer experience. Improving the communicative effectiveness of the assignment brief reduces students' cognitive load, giving them more time to spend on the task, which may enhance their experience and academic performance (Gilbert & Maguire, 2014c). There is a dearth of research exploring the effectiveness of the written assignment brief to enhance the communication of assessment and reduce cognitive load.

The importance of communication within the assessment process lies in the need to ensure that students understand "what is required of them" (Gustafson-Pearce, 2009, p. 2587), of which the written assignment brief is an essential component. This is hampered by a lack of detail/poorly explained instructions, unclear criteria, and a lack of explicitness (Gustafson-Pearce, 2009). While acknowledging the existence of lists detailing the information to include in assignment briefs, Gustafson-Pearce (2009) identified the lack of guidance on what to exclude or how to structure the brief. Gilbert and Maguire (2011, slide 5) referred to the brief as the "Cinderella of the assessment cycle stages." The imperative to conduct research focusing on designing the assignment brief is evident in this quote from Gilbert (2012, para. 32):



Assignment brief design has perhaps been a neglected stage in the assignment process but given the call for innovative, authentic and diverse assignment tasks, coupled with the diverse student population and diverse study modes, it should be assigned more attention than it currently attracts.

The researcher of this PhD study hypothesised that enhancing the communicative effectiveness of the assignment brief would narrow the gap between academics' expectations and students' understanding of the assignment, thus enhancing the assessment experience for academics and students. Students would have a clearer sense of the requirements of the assignment and, thus, feel more confident in their ability to do well.

This involved three research questions:

1. What features of an assignment brief were required to communicate the requirements, standards, and instructions?
2. What were the students' and academics' perceptions of the communicative effectiveness of assignment briefs?
3. How could the written brief facilitate the development of academics' and students' understanding of and ability to handle the assignment task?

This PhD study focused on the written assignment brief, as the written mode is a dominant feature of assessment (Gilbert, 2012; Tummons, 2010). As COVID-19 pushed higher education into the online environment and reduced, and in some cases removed, in-class discussion, the importance of written communication increased. This article considers the connection between effective written communication and students' emotions and attitudes to assessment. The findings may be of particular interest to students, academics, and e-Learning/Instructional Design professionals.

2. Literature review

Assessment design is of concern because of the prevalence and importance of assessment in higher education. While it may not be possible, or even desirable, to remove all stress from assessment, the need to mitigate against confusion and misinterpretation is important. The written assignment brief is a document resulting from a decision process, which takes into consideration a complex set of elements. This section explores the connections between emotions, assessments, and the assignment brief. It also discusses the key issues hampering the communication of assignments.

2.1 Influence of emotions on learning

A student's emotional state influences their learning, with negative emotions having an undesirable effect. Researchers indicated that stress influences a student's "learning, attention, perceptions and problem-solving abilities" (O'Connor & Bevil, 1996, p. 246). A high-stress situation negatively affects a student's academic development (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). A stressful learning environment encourages a surface approach to learning (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). The negative consequences of stress (including exhaustion) can impair academic performance (Craddock & Mathias, 2009; Law, 2007),



increase absenteeism and dropout rates (Ferguson, 2017; Law, 2007), and contribute to academic dishonesty (Falchikov, 2005). Even the potential benefits of feedback can be negated, as feedback can often be “obscured by emotional static” (Chanock, 2000, p. 95). While a certain level of stress can increase learning, too much stress is debilitating (Gibbs, 2014).

Although referring to physical spaces, an environment that fosters positive emotional states promotes learning (Graetz, 2006). Emotions shape students' capacity to learn. Pekrun et al. (2017) explored the reciprocal relationship between emotions and achievement. They found that positive emotions (in this case enjoyment and pride) influenced achievement more than cognitive ability or prior accomplishments. A positive emotional state increases attention and cognition, and encourages people “to discover novel lines of thought or action” (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002, p. 172). Students' positive self-efficacy influences their emotions and reduces the likelihood of negative emotional reactions when faced with a difficult task (Zimmerman, 2000). The connection between a student's emotional reaction to a subject and their self-efficacy is evident (Op't Eynde et al., 2007). Students, who believe in their ability to complete a task, take on tasks that are more difficult (Zimmerman, 2000). “This is because positive emotions enhance an individual's belief in their own abilities (self-efficacy) and students with high self-efficacy for learning use more critical thinking to find ways of achieving an end result (Ritchie, 2016)” (from Hill et al., 2021, p. 171). Self-efficacious students perform better and spend more energy on a task (Zimmerman, 2000). As a key process identified by self-regulation researchers, self-efficacy increases self-motivational beliefs, and self-regulated students succeed academically and are more optimistic about their futures (Zimmerman, 2002).

Therefore, it is important to recognize that academics can influence the self-efficacy beliefs and resilience of their students, guiding them through the learning processes they need to achieve for themselves and helping them to “bounce back” and cope with academic stress. (Hill et al., 2021, p. 171)

While a positive emotional state can promote flexibility and creativity (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002, p. 172), anxiety tends “to lead to loss of creativity through the paralysis of fear” (Hopkins et al., 2010, p. 331). If students' emotions influence their capacity to learn, it is important to consider the impact of assessment on their emotional state, and the implications for learning.

2.2 How assessment influences emotions

Boud (1995) argued that “learning is an act which necessarily leaves us vulnerable” (p. 43) and for some students the emotional impact of a poor experience of assessment can decrease their confidence and self-esteem, or even result in them abandoning a particular subject. Carless et al. (2006) claimed that all academics and students have had a negative experience with assessment. When Race (1995) asked participants to recall a negative experience of assessment from their time as a student, participants readily responded (within two minutes). Race (1995) summarized the main points from this data, with responses (11 of 16) directly referring to panic, humiliation, inadequacy, mind going blank, fear, sickness, calamity, foolishness, feeling so tense they might pass out, feeling strung up, feeling exposed, and feelings of ignorance. Boud (1995) pointed out that even academically successful students can easily recall being “hurt by their experiences of assessment, time and time again” (p. 35). In time-restricted written examinations, students experience elevated anxiety or stress levels (Craddock & Mathias, 2009; Kang et al., 1996;



Miller & Parlett, 1974; O'Connor & Bevil, 1996). An assessment system that causes students to feel anxious is linked to a surface approach to learning (Gibbs, 2014; 1992).

In adopting a surface approach, students do not aim to understand the material; instead, they view learning as a series of unconnected facts that must be remembered. These students aim to memorize "the information or procedures, for example rote learning for an examination" (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p. 17), so they can reproduce it (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981) and subsequently forget the information (Falchikov, 2005). Students who adopt a surface approach to learning will be ill-prepared when the level of difficulty increases as they progress through their programme (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991). A surface approach to learning is encouraged by over assessment (Brown & Sambell, 2020a), if students are unsure about what they are supposed to do (Gibbs, 2010b; 2014), or by students' perception of a heavy workload (Lizzio et al., 2002). Modularisation can exacerbate the over assessment of students (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). A report by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2016), *Profile of Assessment Practices in Irish Higher Education*, showed that single-semester (2.6 assessments) modules have nearly the same number of assessments as full-year modules (2.8 assessments). Concurrently managing a number of assignments increases cognitive load and stress levels (Tomas & Jessop, 2019).

Instead, assessment should be used to promote a deep approach to learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Scott et al., 2008). A deep approach is linked to high-quality learning (McCune & Hounsell, 2005; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991), high-quality student performance (Sambell et al., 2013), and higher education values including "independence, autonomy and critical thinking" (Harland et al., 2015, p. 532). Students adopt a deep approach if they are intrinsically motivated, which requires that students "see the relevance and importance of what they are being required to do" (Rust, 2002, p. 150), and are actively engaged (Laurillard, 2012). It is important that instructors set assignment tasks that require students to adopt a deep approach to learning (Ramsden, 2003), as assignments communicate to students how and what they should be learning (Biggs, 2003b; Boud, 1995).

Rather than being a fixed personality trait, deep and surface approaches can vary from task to task (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). This is important because if a student's approach were a fixed trait, any modification to teaching, learning, or assessment would not affect the approach adopted by individual students. A student's approach is influenced by the assignment (Biggs, 2003a; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Boud, 1995; Ramsden, 2003), their perception of the task (Gibbs, 2010b; Ramsden, 1992; 1979), the context of the assignment (Boud, 1995), and the type of assignment (Thomas, 1986, cited in Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991).

The UK National Student Survey¹ (2021) highlighted assessment (and feedback) as one of the weakest areas of higher education in 2020 (72.6); decreasing to 68.59 in 2021. Luckily, Ramsden (2003) argued, "assessment need not be cast as [the] arch-villain in the saga of higher education" (p. 72), but rather, if "handled with infinite care" (p. 72), assessment can improve teaching and learning.

¹ Satisfaction with assessment and feedback decreased in the 2021 UK National Student Survey. However, satisfaction decreased across all aspects of the survey. Overall satisfaction decreased from 82.65 to 75.41.



2.3 How assignment briefs influence students' emotions

A poorly-designed assignment brief increases the cognitive demand of students by diverting their attention from doing the assignment to trying to determine the requirements of the assignment. Feelings of stress, panic, and anxiety could be exacerbated from the additional cognitive load required to understand assignment briefs. A student's approach to learning (whether they adopt a deep or surface approach) is influenced by the students' experience of clear goals and standards (Gibbs, 2010a; 2010b; 2014). If students are unsure about what they are supposed to do, they adopt a surface approach (Gibbs, 2010b; 2014). Providing "clear and explicit explanations" increases the chances that a student will adopt a deep approach (McAlpine, 2004, p. 121). Therefore, if students are to adopt a deep approach to learning, they must know the requirements of the task (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Effective communication is vital, as the impact on student's self-confidence can be seen in this quote from Yorke (2003): "I am a failure' may erroneously come to dominate over something like 'I didn't understand what was expected of me" (p. 489).

If assignments determine the curriculum and influence students' approaches to learning, a key aspect is the individual assignment task (Carless, 2015). Yet students do not understand many academic tasks (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-5). Tasks are important in shaping students' ideas about a subject (Op't Eynde et al., 2007). Students develop the confidence needed to alleviate "anxiety around assessment information, instructions, guidance, and performance" (Boud et al., 2010, p. 2) through engagement with manageable assignment tasks. Dick et al. (2013) claimed that as assessment often causes students to be nervous, assignment tasks must be constructed well, have a professional appearance, and leave students in no doubt about the required performance. Dick et al. (2013) stated that this is achieved by ensuring that assignment briefs include "correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation as well as clearly written and parsimonious directions, resource materials, and questions" (p. 138) and that students should be given all of the information they require to complete the task. Students view the wording of the task as essential, and they should not be left wondering what the academic expects of them (Laurillard, 2002). Yet there is little guidance focusing on how to design effective assignment tasks (Hughes, 2009).

Uncertainty about expectations is one of the main causes of anxiety for first-year students (Yucel et al., 2014). Misinterpreting an aspect of the assignment can negate a potential learning opportunity and have negative consequences. When students have not fully understood the goals of the learning activity, including criteria, standards, and the task, feedback can be ineffective (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Crook et al. (2006) found that students frequently consider feedback as "a perversely belated revelation by staff of things they should have declared at the time of task assignment" (p. 105) resulting in students feeling "short-changed" (p. 107). This can result in feelings of "embarrassment, humiliation and guilt (which are all feelings included in Scheff's (1990) definition of 'shame')" (Higgins, 2000, para. 23). This type of emotional response widens the gap between the student and tutor, and to prevent this situation from reoccurring, the student may disengage with the learning situation and tutor (Higgins, 2000).

Ensuring that assessment instructions are designed and developed appropriately is crucial if students are to have a positive experience of assessment (Brunton et al., 2016). While the rapid shift to alternative assessments due to COVID-19 may have facilitated certain accommodations, a fundamental aspect of assessment remains: "students need to be very clear about what you're really looking for in your assessment" (Brown & Sambell, 2020b, p. 4). Additionally, as self-regulated students must be able to monitor their performance



and identify signs of progress (Zimmerman, 2002), they should know what they are aiming to achieve.

Assessment is an emotional experience, which can heighten feelings of stress and anxiety. These negative feelings can be compounded by miscommunication. Therefore, it is important to discuss the challenges in communicating assignment tasks.

2.4 The challenges in communicating assessment: the written brief

Effective communication is a crucial aspect of assessment, yet there are challenges in communicating assignments, i.e., communicating standards, requirements, and instructions. Every assignment is a form of communication (McAlpine, 2002; Morgan et al., 2004), and effective communication requires that students and academics have the same understanding of the assignment. Some communication models refer to 'noise' or factors that interfere with the transmission of a message between the sender and the receiver, resulting in miscommunication. If a student misinterprets the requirements of an assignment, they will not demonstrate the requisite knowledge, even if they possess it. Logan and Hazel (1999) stated that an invalid assessment fails "to elicit knowledge from students who in fact possess the knowledge" (p. 55). If a negative experience with assessment can affect students for life (Race et al., 2005), misinterpretation of assessment instructions could have a lasting effect.

Communication is further complicated as students often have to adapt to individual modules (Nesi & Gardner, 2006). Variations exist between disciplines, between individual assignments (Lea & Street, 1998; Nesi & Gardner, 2006), within a particular course (Lea & Street, 1998), between individual lectures (Lea & Street, 1998; Nesi & Gardner, 2006; Torrance, 1995), and at different levels within a programme of study. Students also need to navigate the challenges stemming from "the idiosyncrasies of the lecturers who assign written work" (Nesi & Gardner, 2006, p. 102). The language used by academics can be seen by students as being complicated and confusing (see students' comments on complicated language in feedback in Winstone et al., 2017). Miscommunication puts an additional demand on cognitive load and reduces a student's capacity to learn. Communication issues can also arise from an incompatibility between students and their lecturer's intentions (Joughin, 2007), disparities stemming from emphasis on different parts of the assignment (Boud, 1995; Gibbs, 2010b), and changes in academics' expectations as they gain experience, as more experienced academics have higher-level expectations (Williams, 2005). Students often need to infer what is required by interpreting the lecturer's behaviour and are involved in trying to decipher the lecturer's preferences (Ramsden, 2003). In modular programmes, students do not have the time to develop a profile of what different assessors want (O'Donovan et al., 2004). Students and their teachers can have different perceptions of the requirements for success in assignment tasks (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002). While understanding the way to approach an assignment task is one of the keys to success, there is often a gap between academics and students' understanding (Morgan et al., 2004). As Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) stated, "essay questions may seem to you [the academic] to be perfectly clear, but students often find questions ambiguous or even mystifying" (p. 93). If interpretation involves cognitive resources, Gilbert and Maguire (2011, slide 16) argued that:

If a proportion of these [cognitive] resources can be reallocated towards actual task performance, then more can be freed up to invest in targeting the intended academic



literacy development outcomes thus facilitating optimal task performance and greater engagement with relevant graduate attributes.

Another issue is the judgmental tone that is often used in communicating assessment information (Boud, 1995). Although written within the context of heightened stress and anxiety levels caused by COVID-19, Brown and Sambell (2020b) recommended avoiding a tone that is “heavily prescriptive or emphatic as students will be anxious if they can't meet it exactly” (p. 9). As learning is fundamentally a change in one's behaviour, it requires an openness to change – a vulnerability (Boud, 1995). Students need confidence and the ability to cope with this “judgement,” something that they may not have developed at the beginning of their studies (Boud, 1995). A polite tone is particularly important in written communication (Agarwal, 2010). Tone is also considered by Gilbert and Maguire (2014a) in their assignment brief guidelines. These guidelines recommend using encouraging and supportive language that avoids eliciting a negative response from students, so as not to decrease their motivation and engagement with the task. A negative tone “may adversely affect their [the students] processing of the instructions since their processing of information is influenced by their emotional state during reading” (Gilbert & Maguire, 2014a, column 3, para. 2). A student's emotional state may have a significant impact on how they process assignment tasks.

If the goal is to minimise distractions, including miscommunication, reduce negative emotions, and increase student's cognitive capacity, which allows them to expend more energy and effort on the assignment task, then exploring the effectiveness of written assignment briefs is crucial.

3. Methodology

This PhD study was conducted in the University of Limerick (UL), Ireland, and involved participants from all four faculties: Faculty of Education and Health Science (EHS); Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS); Faculty of Science and Engineering (S&E); and Kemmy Business School (KBS). The main research aim was to explore how written assignment briefs affected students' understanding of the requirements, and students' potential to perform effectively.

As a mixed methods study, quantitative and qualitative data (questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups) were gathered across three semesters (spring 2016, autumn 2016, and spring 2017). This study reports on some of the key findings from the interviews and focus groups.

The data were collected sequentially, across three phases. This paper reports on some of the key findings from the third phase. This phase involved interviews with five academics (see [Appendix A](#) for a sample of the academic staff interview questions) and focus groups with 17 students, including one cohort from each of the four faculties (see [Appendix B](#) for a sample of the student focus group questions). The purpose of this phase was to explore the participants' thoughts and opinions of the written assignment brief designed for the assessment specific to their module (see Table 1).

The sample size was determined by the number of participants willing and able to participate during a specific timeframe, i.e., the short period between assignment submission and the end of semester. The students (see Table 1) were mostly in their first



year ($n = 6$), second year ($n = 5$), or third year ($n = 4$), and the fewest number of students were in their fourth year ($n = 2$).

Table 1

Pseudonyms of academic staff and students, students' year of study, and specific assignment, per Faculty

Faculty	Academic staff	Students	Assignment
Education and Health Science	Lecturer A	Evelyn (1), Clare (1), Susan (1), Faye (1)	Poster presentation
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	Lecturer B	Amy (3), Megan (3), Clara (4), Clodagh (3), Mairead (3)	Essay
Science and Engineering	Lecturer C, Laboratory Technician	Tadhg (2), Joel (2), Sybil (2), Adam (2)	Formal reports of laboratory experiments
Kemmy Business School	Lecturer D	Shane (1), Veronica (1), Velma (2), Linda (4)	Weekly tasks (including reflections, inventories, worksheets)

Note. Numbers in parentheses next to students' pseudonyms refer to participants' year of study

As the PhD supervisors and author were members of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), an application for ethical consent was submitted to the AHSS Research Ethics Committee (AHSS REC). Full ethical approval was granted prior to any data collection. In adhering to the requirements of this application, participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. This was achieved by assigning participants a pseudonym and removing any identifying information during the transcription process.

3.1 Data analysis: thematic analysis

The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis, a common approach when analysing data in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) stated that Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework is "the most influential approach, in the social sciences at least" because it is "a clear and usable framework for doing thematic analysis" (p. 3). This method was selected due to its flexibility and the need to identify key features in the data.

The data were transcribed verbatim but as this was not a study of linguistics, non-semantic utterances were removed from all quotes when presenting the data. In transcribing the data, the researcher listened to the audio files three times to ensure accuracy. The interview transcripts were sent to the relevant academic for verification². On confirmation from the participants that the transcripts reflected their thoughts and opinions, I read each transcript and noted any points of interest or impressions. These noticings "may become the initial blocks in the process of coding" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 206). I then re-read and coded one transcript by hand. With these codes in mind, I read and coded the second transcript. This involved adding new codes and consolidating overlapping or similar codes. Any new

² For ethical reasons, I could not send the transcript of the student focus groups to these participants.



codes were added to the list. This procedure was replicated until all of the transcripts were coded. Thematic analysis allows for a combination of bottom-up (data-driven/derived from the data) and top-down (researcher-driven/researcher explored concepts or theories) approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While some themes emerged from the data, I was looking for evidence of theories about the communication of assignment briefs (see [Appendix C](#) for a full list of themes).

4. Results

A key finding from this study was students' negative reactions to poorly-communicated assignments, with emotions including anxiety, stress, and panic. As the researcher believed that the process of doing an assignment should be a positive experience for students, exploring the role of the assignment brief in creating a good learning experience was important. The goal was to provide enough instruction that students could focus on the assignment task and not on figuring out what the task was or being distracted by extraneous tasks. Two characteristics of the assignment brief that reduced stress and anxiety for students were clarity and comprehensiveness.

4.1 Enhancing clarity

Clarity was a key aspect in mitigating negative reactions from students. Lecturers who changed their expectations during the assignment period, were unclear about their expectations, or hid their expectations from students (i.e., did not articulate their expectations in the assignment brief) caused the students to feel confused, frustrated, and uncertain. Overall, clarity of the assignment requirements was important. Certain features of the assignment brief enhanced the clarity of the assignment.

4.1.1 *Acknowledging and accepting diversity*

While the students were not opposed to vague instructions and, in fact, may have found them less stressful, this was only true when the lecturer was open to accepting different approaches to the assignment. The students felt that a lack of instruction "was good, in the sense that it wasn't really stressful" (Megan), but they acknowledged it caused confusion and stress when they subsequently encountered a lecturer who was strict, as "everything just blew up in our faces. 'Cause it was all different" (Megan). Vagueness became an issue for students when the lecturer did not accept different approaches. "It could have been completely wrong as far as they're concerned" (Evelyn). One of the students suggested how the brief could be used to alleviate this stress: acknowledging the potential for diversity of approaches in the brief. "So, even like, a line to say everybody's interpretation will be different and that's ok" (Evelyn). If a lecturer required a specific approach, the students felt that the mandated approach should be detailed in the brief. One student acknowledged that students could interpret the brief in different ways: "But I suppose it's just everyone's got a different interpretation and that's ok" (Evelyn). Some of the students viewed vague instructions as a learning opportunity, which allowed them to select an approach that demonstrated their strengths. Even though some of the students spoke about the benefits of a less prescriptive assignment brief, they added caveats.

All of the groups had a rigid, polarized view that their answer was either right or wrong. Getting the wrong answer, or the perception that their answer was wrong, caused students



to become increasingly stressed and anxious. In comparing their work to that of their peers, when they discovered that they had a different approach, students reported increased anxiety as they assumed their answer was wrong. Unless diversity was acknowledged, this resulted in the impression that the task was unclear, which triggered an unnecessary, negative emotional reaction. "We all went into an absolute panic then because we thought we'd been doing the whole essay wrong... So, it was just unnecessary stress" (Mairead). All of the students reported that they were inclined to assume their approach was wrong, resulting in undue stress and anxiety.

Clare: Which one is right? Which one is wrong?

Susan: Uhuh.

Clare: Are they both right? Are we both wrong? There was that very unclear. She could have said perhaps physical barriers or, like, d'you know? It was just very unclear in that sense and then when you saw what the others had done you were like, ok, we're definitely wrong.

Susan: Uhuh.

Clare: You always think that you're the wrong one.

4.1.2 Clarifying lecturer's expectations within the brief

When reading the brief, one of the students acknowledged that they were concerned with figuring out what the lecturer was expecting; something that was not always evident from the brief. "What are they expecting? [...] What exactly are they looking for? [...] Sometimes it's not that simple, trying to figure out what they're looking for" (Evelyn). One of the lecturers acknowledged that students sought clarification to determine the lecturer's expectations. "Specifically, what am I asking? So, I'd reiterate and go back over things" (Lecturer A).

Lecturer C felt that lecturers emphasised different aspects of the assignment depending on their own priorities. Variations in expectations, or perceived expectations, was important, and was acknowledged by the students and academics. The AHSS group discussed the diversity in lecturers' expectations and noted, "there's generally been not a lot of consensus between the different lecturers about how strict or how lenient they are about their formatting and things like that" (Amy). When lecturers did not communicate their expectations in the brief, students were unsure about which approach to adopt for the assignment.

Amy: Then you don't know what to do when you're not given the information. 'Cause you're like, do I go with the person who is stricter or do I go with the person who's more lenient? And do I follow their referencing or do I go with this person?

This was an important issue for students as it affected their grades.

Amy: Some lecturers aren't too bothered about it and then when you come to a lecturer that is bothered about it, if they don't actually mention that they want it a specific way, you're used to being a bit more relaxed about it and then that can cost you marks and things.

A concern voiced by the students was that some academics had additional expectations that were not articulated in the brief. The students felt that this was unfair.



4.2 Comprehensive assignment briefs enhance clarity

A second theme that emerged across all groups was the need for complete assignment instructions or, at least, easy access to all of the required information. This theme was intertwined with the previous theme, clarity, with the participants conflating comprehensiveness with clarity.

4.2.1 *A preference for comprehensive briefs: outlining the lecturer's expectations*

Even though some of the students felt less instruction was more reflective of the level of guidance they would receive in the workplace or when doing their Final Year Project (FYP), "it's kind of what's expected of you when you go on co-op anyway. Or after college" (Tadhg), overall, the students equated a comprehensive brief with clarity.

Evelyn: It was a lot clearer than previous ones that we had covered. It was quite detailed.

Susan: Yeah, in comparison to other assignments that we have, it's, it was much more clear.

Clodagh: So, yeah, this was probably the first time I have been given an assignment with that much detail. That we knew exactly what was expected of us and all that kind of thing.

Clara: And yeah I definitely agree as well.

Lecturer B also felt that a comprehensive brief provided a level of clarity that was missing from less developed briefs. The Laboratory Technician stated that this type of brief "covers everything they need to know." The S&E group felt that they needed this level of detail to do the experiments and the assignment.

Adam: Which is really good to have because now we know how to do them.

Sybil: Yeah. How to actually do them.

Perception was important in shaping the students' opinions of their lecturers, with students equating a comprehensive brief to an academic who cared about the students' learning and development. The S&E students equated the comprehensiveness of the assignment brief (including the lab manual and videos) as evidence of their lecturer's concern for the students' development, and stated that the quality of teaching in higher education would be greatly enhanced if only other lecturers adopted this approach. They told the researcher that their lecturer's participation in this study was unsurprising, as they said that this lecturer was invested in the students' learning, further evidenced by their provision of detailed assignment documentation (brief, lab manual, supporting videos).

4.2.2 *Providing the appropriate details to allow students to focus on the assignment task*

Briefs that did not contain the information required to complete the assignment diverted students' attention and caused students to feel stressed. "Where are the specifics and all the extras that I need, and that's where you get stressed" (Maired). This included information about the assignment task but also any additional resources required to complete the task.

For the EHS groups, instructions on creating a poster in Microsoft PowerPoint were included in the brief, as additional support (i.e., students were not being marked on their ability to learn how to use PowerPoint). When asked if students would be able to figure out



how to use PowerPoint without these instructions, Lecturer A replied, "some would and some wouldn't." Lecturer A felt that comprehensive instructions removed an element of stress from the assignment, allowed students to focus on the assignment task, and reduced the number of queries from students. "Basically I didn't want them getting all stressed about the mechanics. [...] I think if I didn't put that up, I think I would have probably got a lot of questions (Lecturer A) about how to use the software.

This lecturer wanted the students to focus on the assignment task and not on the mechanics of creating the poster. While the academic participants understood the benefits for students of figuring out how to use the software, they felt that, at times, providing instructions facilitated students in allocating more time to the assignment task. From personal experience in learning how to use software to complete a task, Lecturer A felt that effective instructions allowed them to focus on the relevant task, rather than lose time figuring out how to use the software.

Lecturer A: I understand the merit of seeking and finding out yourself, from a learning point of view, but sometimes you don't need, you just need the instructions. [...]

Interviewer: Ok. So, you can actually, ahem, spend your time and resources on creating a good artefact or ...

Lecturer A: Yes.

Interviewer: ...using the technology...

Lecturer A: Yes.

Interviewer: ...to your benefit. Rather than spending the time figuring out...

Lecturer A: Trying to figure it out. Why would you bother? Someone else knows it. Just give me the instructions.

Interviewer: Yep.

Lecturer A: And just let me do it. You know?

Interviewer: Ok.

Lecturer A: And then I can, as you say, concentrate on getting a good thing up there.

Two KBS students had a negative reaction when commenting on a previous assignment that lacked guidance on how to create and produce a video, as they felt they spent more time figuring out how to use the technology rather than focusing on the assignment topic. "I spent more time trying to figure out how to put it onto a video than the actual content [of the assignment task]" (Shane). These students felt that providing instructions on how to create and produce a video would have allowed them to concentrate on the task. "If they gave a little bit more direction on how to do the video, people would get more out of the content side of things" (Shane).

While there was a concern that including instructions on how to use specific software would restrict creativity, not limiting the range of software tools resulted in unexpected issues. By not specifying a particular tool, the KBS students used a variety of tools including Microsoft PowerPoint, Prezi, and a flip chart. However, this led to submission issues, as "some of them couldn't figure out how to get it off Prezi" (Lecturer D) or figure out how to submit artefacts from the multiple different formats they used to create their assignments. This lecturer felt that there was a need to restrict the possible presentation formats without "shoehorning how they [the students] present their creativity."

Unless one of the aims of the assignment is to discern how to use the relevant software, the need to include instructions was evident. Without this, students diverted time from the assignment task to learning how to use the software (peripheral to the learning being assessed by the assignment). When instructions were provided, students spent less time trying to figure out how to use the software, which reduced their cognitive load and



increased the time available to focus on the task. Students also felt that having these instructions in the brief reduced their levels of stress. While developing these instructions required time, the academics felt this investment was offset by the time saved from fewer queries from students.

4.2.3 Comprehensiveness fosters consistency

A brief that provides clarity around the word limit, was deemed necessary by the students. While the findings showed that it was common for a word limit to be specified in briefs, the students felt that it was sometimes unclear how the word limit was applied and that academics differed in their tolerance of students' adherence to the limit. Students spoke about not knowing if certain elements of the assignment were included in the word limit, e.g., references or endnotes. Students suggested that specifying a word limit must be thorough (i.e., including information on which elements were included/excluded) and should not be altered once the brief was published. When an academic did not strictly enforce the word limit, students ignored it. Even though the KBS students were aware that a word limit existed, they dismissed it because they mainly completed the tasks during class time and could seek confirmation and assurance from the lecturer. Students' adherence to the word limit was dependent on how strictly the academic enforced it. This caused frustration and uncertainty as the students were unsure which lecturer(s) would penalise their grade for breaches of the word limit. Inconsistency and a lack of clarity around the word limit caused feelings of stress and anxiety.

Another area of concern was the submission process. Due to a lack of consistency across modules and subjects, students were uncertain about submission procedures, often resorting to whatever happened in their other modules as a guide. When the submission process differed to the students' prior experience, issues emerged. Some of the students recalled situations when it was not possible to adhere to the submission requirements, as access to the building was restricted or the submission deadline exceeded the opening times of the building. Students felt strongly that submission instructions needed to be specific and comprehensive (e.g., include the exact time, date, and procedure for submission). In particular, students became highly anxious when late submission policy and procedures were not detailed in the brief. Students recommended that complete details should be made available, especially around penalties and submission timeframes and procedures. They called for the consistent application of a late submission policy (including penalties for late submission) across all of their modules. The students were very vocal about wanting clarity around penalties for late submission. They spoke of their confusion around submission deadlines, e.g., what constituted a day? They gave the example of a situation with a 5pm deadline on a Friday. They questioned if the student submitted before 5pm on Saturday, did this constitute two days (i.e., Friday and Saturday) or one day (24 hours)? The present study found that confusion was exacerbated due to a non-standard approach across modules and programmes. Students felt that a consistent, programme/school-wide approach, with agreed deadlines (including a set time of day) and procedures would be beneficial.

4.2.4 Templates, model answers, and samples answers: filling the gap

An aspect of the study that is not explored in this paper was that regardless of how well-designed the brief was, there were aspects of the assignment that were easier to communicate in a different medium (e.g., for the Science and Engineering students, the lecturer found it easier to communicate how to calculate statistics and plot error analysis in video format or diagrammatic format). The students also talked about the need for sample



assignments or examples to demonstrate aspects of the assessment (e.g., the Science and Engineering students found it difficult to pitch the writing style and language, and the Education and Health Science students required sample posters to develop an understanding of the features of a poster presentation in their field). Templates and examples were used to communicate these aspects of the assignment. Students felt that these resources reduced feelings of anxiety.

An interesting finding was the lecturers' perception that introducing items that reduced stress, i.e., templates, possibly reduced learning, or creativity. While the potential for templates to alleviate anxiety was noteworthy, the concern from academics that students would reproduce a template without adapting it and applying it to their topic, was important. Lecturer A felt that while templates reduced assignment-related stress for students and reduced the number of student queries, students "blindly" replicated the templates without giving due consideration to the applicability of the template to their assignment. The students admitted that they often replicated the structure as per the template, even when the templates were generic (e.g., headings) and needed to be adapted to the specific assignment topic. One way to alleviate this issue was to provide an exemplar on an alternative, yet similar, topic. Lecturer C used exemplars in the form of detailed templates and gave an example based on a different experiment. Lecturer B used exemplars of essays based on a different, but similar, topic. Another option included directing students to multiple examples of previous students' work (functioning as exemplars), and students mentioned the value in seeing work from previous students. However, the students also acknowledged the learning opportunities stemming from examples of poor-quality work.

Knowing that all of the information they needed to do the assignment was available from one location enhanced the students' confidence and, therefore, their experiences of the assignment. The students associated a comprehensive brief with clarity and, ultimately, felt that the brief provided the tools they needed to be successful. This shifted the responsibility to the student for their work.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

While these findings indicated that students generally consider assessment to be a stressful event, these feelings were exacerbated when students were uncertain of the expectations and requirements of the assignment. This paper discussed the role of the assignment brief in alleviating confusion and supporting students in focusing on the assignment task. When combined, two characteristics of an effective assignment brief, clarity and comprehensiveness, can enhance the communication of an assignment.

The students in the study felt that a comprehensive assignment brief, which provided all of the information needed to complete the task, increased the clarity of the task and reduced their anxiety about doing the assignment. Obfuscation caused students to experience anxiety, while explicitness and transparency fostered a sense of confidence and security. Ambiguity, causing students to feel uncertain about what they should be doing, what a good answer is, or where to get marks, results in students adopting a surface approach (Gibbs, 2014), causing students to be conservative; thus hiding their strengths and weaknesses (Craddock & Mathias, 2009). When information was missing from the assignment brief, students reported higher levels of stress. Articulating their expectations in the brief, i.e., a comprehensive assignment brief, restricted academics from changing



and/or hiding their expectations. While students were not opposed to some level of ambiguity, they preferred assignment briefs that outlined the lecturer's expectations, especially when the lecturer required a certain approach. Ultimately, when it was acceptable for students to adopt different approaches, they felt this should be acknowledged in the brief. For students to demonstrate high quality work, they must know what they are striving to achieve. Academics must communicate the required standards and their expectations.

With inconsistency causing confusion and undue anxiety for the students, the potential for comprehensive briefs to enhance the clarity of the assessment process was evident. It was not surprising that students found the period before assignment submission stressful. The students spoke about the anxiety and uncertainty caused by variations between academics when handling aspects of the assignment such as word limit, referencing, submission, and late submission. Providing detailed information within the assignment brief about these procedural aspects of the assignment, reduced students' concerns and anxieties, thus freeing up time and energy to focus on the assignment task. The need for consistency in academics' application of the word limit was important for students. Detailing the scope and conditions of a word limit in the brief is an important part of the assignment brief. Negative feelings were exacerbated when students encountered inconsistencies between lecturers during the assignment submission process. Clear and comprehensive information detailing submission is important, including late submission. Detailed guidance would remove this uncertainty such as giving a specific time and date, something that is recommended by the University of Manchester (2019). Detailing procedures for late submission in the module guide was recommended by Bloxham and Boyd (2007). Manchester University's Assessment Framework (2019) also requires the articulation of the policy and procedure for late submission in student/programme handbooks. A consistent policy and procedure detailing the assignment submission process would remove uncertainty and reduce students' anxiety, as, once internalised, students would be confident in the process.

Evidence of students' concern for being right or wrong can be found in the literature (e.g., Harland et al., 2015; Crook et al., 2006), with some students expecting their teacher to tell them how to get a high grade (Carless & Boud, 2018); how to get the "right" answer. It is important to address this in the assignment brief as the students in this study tended to assume that their approach was inferior to that of their peers. There is evidence that this is common amongst other students as Gregory & Morón-García (2009) gave the example of one student who commented that you will "discover you've done it all wrong" (p. 26). Support for this finding is also found in relation to peer assessment, with the expectation that tutors, not students, are qualified to identify a right or wrong answer (Asghar, 2010). In presenting the argument that higher education is more complex than just getting the right answer, of which formative assessment plays an important role, Yorke (2003) listed the examples of medicine, science, and engineering, where getting it wrong could have serious consequences. While a right answer may be applicable in some cases, this dichotomy is not always appropriate. The students suggested that articulating in the brief that there is no one right answer and using exemplars or sample answers to demonstrate different approaches would help foster this concept amongst students.

While at the beginning of the present study the researcher had not considered the use of exemplars, templates, or sample answers in the communication of assessment tasks, it was discovered that students and academics relied on these tools to communicate much of the tacit aspects of the assignment (e.g., the language to use, the depth and level of coverage of topics, the structure of the assignment, writing style, and how to reference on a poster).



The role and importance of exemplars, templates, and sample answers, as concrete examples to augment the assignment brief make them a critical tool in the communication of some assignment tasks. Carless and Chan (2017) also highlighted the benefit of exemplars in communicating the tacit nature of an assignment and helping students to develop an understanding of quality and expectations. Sample answers reduce feelings of anxiety around assignments (Ramsden, 2003) and exemplars help reduce feelings of anxiety about assessment standards and requirements (Yucel et al., 2014). Carless and Chan (2017) also advocated for the use of exemplars on a similar task, in particular, to avoid plagiarism. Supplementing the assignment brief with exemplars/templates/sample answers enhances the communication of assignments and reduces anxiety.

The findings suggest that a negative emotional response diverts student attention and reduces their engagement with the task. Some examples of how stress levels were reduced:

- A comprehensive brief including all of the essential information, e.g., assignment task, word limit, weightings, aim of task, assessment criteria, referencing convention, submission procedures.
- Examples of previous students' work: to show how to include references on a poster. Examples provided a level of contextual information for students.
- Templates: to provide a structure that students felt helped develop their understanding of the assignment and reduced anxiety.
- Step-by-step instructions: to demonstrate how to use software. Providing this level of detail assuaged the students' concerns and provided them with guidance on how to complete the task.

The additional stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on top of the existing concerns around increasing levels of anxiety and stress in higher education, and its impact on students' experiences of higher education, amplified the importance of this research. While the author is not suggesting that assessment can or should be stress-free, the role of the assignment brief in reducing negative emotions and promoting learning is important. A holistic approach to learning combines positive emotions and resilience (Hill et al., 2021). Providing comprehensive assignment briefs gave the students a sense of control, ownership, and responsibility for their role in the assessment process.

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Elaine Walsh

Lecturer in Technical Communication and Instructional Design at University of Limerick, Ireland. With 18 years' experience as an academic in higher education Elaine has expertise in e-learning, instructional design, university teaching, online programme delivery, curriculum design, and assessment design. Their main research areas are communication, instructional design, and assessment design.

