

# TESTA Audit of a History Degree

(University B)

DRAFT

## 1. Context

The purpose is to map students' experience of assessment through data from programme teams and students, providing a coherent picture of the 'culture' of assessment within the degree. This evidence is intended to enable programme teams to develop and pilot interventions to improve student learning.

## 2. Methodology

There are three main components of data collection, all of which have been ethically cleared and conform to normal ethical guidelines for research. These are:

- *Programme audit* which maps features of assessment using documentary evidence and a Q&A session with the programme leader.
- *Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ)* is a 28 question survey based on various assessment and study behaviour scales, developed by Professor Graham Gibbs
- *Focus groups* with students providing a rich picture of final year student experience of assessment across the programme.

## 3. Evidence to Intervention Process

The researchers have triangulated and analysed the three sets of data. The findings will enable programme teams to identify potential areas to pilot interventions. Interventions will be negotiated through quality processes at faculty and university level, testing the potential of QA regulatory processes to facilitate programme changes in a relatively short period of time. The TESTA project has a senior management layer of participants to facilitate the interaction between pilot interventions and QA processes and to lend management support to the process.

In 2010/11, each programme will implement various agreed interventions, and the efficacy of these will be evaluated using the same methodology as before. The evaluations are scheduled for first semester 2011/12.

## 4. Findings

Findings are reported by (a) programme audit, (b) AEQ, and (c) focus group data. The purpose of this summary is to provide a rich picture of how students' perceive their assessment experience over the whole degree programme.

The summary provides the evidence base for programme teams to devise appropriate and targeted interventions, which the team will evaluate using the same methodology in 2010/11.

#### 4a. Programme Audit data

The following table provides an overview of the History Programme from the perspective of (a) the validated documents, and (b) a conversation with the programme leader. It characterises the typical single honours student experience over the three-year period.

Figure 1: An overview of History from programme audit data

<b>Programme Audits: Comparative Overview at a glance</b>			
	<b>History University B</b>	<b>Average on 8 programmes</b>	<b>Range over 8 programmes</b>
<b>Total Assessments</b>	40	47	32 – 80
<b>Summative</b>	39	37	26 – 52
<b>Formative</b>	1	11	0 – 41
<b>Variety</b>	7	13	7 – 17
<b>Exam %</b>	5%	15.2%	3% - 34%
<b>Timeliness</b>	22 days	20.4 days	17 – 28 days
<b>Oral feedback</b>	4hrs 50 mins	6 hrs 40 mins	37 mins to 30 hours
<b>Written</b>	5,920 words	7,153 words	2,976 - 15,412 words

In characterising assessment environments on 9 programmes at three other universities, Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet (2008, 2009) categorise features of assessment as 'High', 'Medium' and 'Low' (see Figure 2). Figure 3 maps the BA (Hons) History against these criteria on the basis of audit evidence, using grey shading.

Figure 2: Definitions of 'High', 'Medium' and 'Low' for each characteristic of assessment environments

	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>% marks from examinations</b>	below 40%	between 40 and 70%	more than 70%
<b>Variety of assessment methods</b>	1-3 different methods	4-6 methods	6+ methods
<b>Volume of summative assessment</b>	mark allocated less than 15 times	15-40 times	more than 40 times
<b>Volume of formative only assessment</b>	less than 15 times	15-40 times	more than 40 times

<b>Volume of (formal) oral feedback</b>	less than 15 hours	15-40 hours	more than 40 hours
<b>Volume of written feedback</b>	less than 3000 words	3000-6000 words	more than 6000 words
<b>Timeliness: average days after submission before feedback</b>	more than 14 days	8-14 days	1-7days

Figure 3: 'High', 'Medium' and 'Low' characteristics on the History

	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>% marks from examinations</b>	below 40%	between 40 and 70%	more than 70%
<b>Variety of assessment methods</b>	1-3 different methods	4-6 methods	6+ methods
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### **Comments**

Data from the programme audit indicates that students experience the following:

- Average total volumes of assessment, most of which is coursework
- A high repetition of assessment types
- Minimal formative-only assessment.
- Average volumes of written feedback, delivered relatively slowly, with low volumes of oral feedback.

#### 4b. Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ)

The AEQ consists of 28 questions which are grouped into ten scales to measure student responses in relation to their assessment diet. These scales are:

<i>Quantity of effort</i>	The way the assessment worked you had to put the hours in regularly every week.
<i>Coverage syllabus</i>	The way the assessment worked on this course you had to study every topic.
<i>Quantity &amp; quality of f'back</i>	I received hardly any feedback on my work (Negative scoring).
<i>Use of feedback</i>	I paid careful attention to feedback on my work and tried to understand what it was saying.
<i>Appropriate assess</i>	To do well on this course all you really needed was a good memory (Negative scoring)
<i>Clear goals &amp; stds</i>	The teachers made it clear from the start what they expected from students
<i>Surface Approach</i>	I find I have to concentrate on memorising a good deal of what we have to learn.
<i>Deep Approach</i>	I usually set out to understand thoroughly the meaning of what I am asked to read.
<i>Learning from the exam</i>	I learn new things while preparing for the exams.
<i>Satisfaction</i>	Overall I am satisfied with the teaching on this course.

Figure 4 compares the mean scores and the range of scores across seven programmes, with the mean scores for the BA (Hons) History. The statistically significant above/below the mean scores on the programme are shaded in grey.

Figure 4: AEQ mean and range data

<b>Scales</b>	Quantity of effort	Coverage of Syllabus	Quantity & quality of f'back	Use of feedback	Appropriate Assessment	Clear goals and standards	Surface Approach	Deep Approach	Learning from exams	Overall satisfaction
Mean	3.61	2.88	3.15	3.69	3.71	3.34	3.26	3.8	2.89	3.92
Range	3.41-4.00	2.30-3.15	2.77-3.94	3.24-4.38	3.29-4.17	2.69-3.79	2.79-3.88	3.74-4.03	2.41-3.39	3.63-4.39
History	3.52	2.30	3.38	3.72	3.90	3.74	3.27	4.03	2.72	4.39

## Comments

- The high summative – low formative assessment regime and low formal oral feedback usually results in low scores for *clarity of goals and standards*. Yet History students are surprisingly clear about goals and standards, suggesting that some other process may be supplementing feedback processes. Their confidence about goals and standards may also be linked to less variety and more repetition of similar assessed tasks.
- Students' *coverage of syllabus* score was very low, indicating that they feel that they can be selective about what they study. This may relate to low scores on the *quantity of effort* scale, indicating unevenly spread effort, and it may also be related to low scores on *learning from exams*.
- Students have high *quality and quantity of feedback* scores which is good, yet contradictory to expectations, given relatively slow returns and average volume written feedback.
- Students view the assessment as *appropriate*, eliciting more than just memory and formulaic knowledge.
- Given relatively low levels of oral feedback and slow feedback, which in the past have predicted high surface approach and low deep approach scores, students are taking a *deep approach* to learning and were the most *overall satisfied* students in the sample of 7 programmes.

### 4c. Focus Group data

The project team conducted two focus groups with final year BA (Hons) History students in December 2009. Students were given information sheets about the project, and signed informed consent forms to participate. Researchers recorded focus groups which were then professionally transcribed. Transcripts of the focus groups have been analysed using the qualitative software programme, atlas ti, using a coding system developed from the scales in the AEQ. Students were asked to talk about five broad areas relating to their assessment, including variety, feedback, their study behaviour, criteria and their overall impression of assessment. The areas students spoke most about were about clear goals and standards; marker variation; and quantity of effort.

Figure 5: Code Frequencies

<b>Focus Group: Code Frequencies</b>		
Codes	Number of segments	Rank
Clear Goals and Standards	42	1
Marker variation	35	2
Quantity of Effort	24	3
Surface Approach	17	4
Oral feedback	16	5
Use of feedback	14	6
Coverage of syllabus	14	6
Distribution of effort	13	8
Formative only	8	9
Learning from exams	8	9

## **A. Clear Goals and Standards**

### ***Repeated, dialogic, informal, immediate feedback helps clarify standards***

- Personally I prefer to speak to them face to face. I think stuff gets lost in translation through e-mail or writing. I prefer someone to tell me, even if it's pretty blunt, saying 'You did this, this and this'. I think I expect to speak to someone. The best feedback I've had is when I've gone and spoken to them and they've said 'Here, here, here, brilliant. Here, here, here, crap. Sort it out'. Right.
- The tutor said 'Come and pick your work up and I'll explain it' and when I came he actually explained it and it was really good because he explained where words were pulled down and it was brilliant because I could take it to my next essay.
- I think getting both oral and written feedback is good so you can go over it and then have a question and answer type session.
- What I liked is that she gave me the feedback straightway. I did my presentation and then she did it. Some people, four weeks later, will give you feedback on your presentation and I can barely remember what mood I was in, what I was doing,
- At the end of our presentations last year one of our lecturers did what I thought was the best way of doing it. You did your presentations, did your class exercise and then got sent out the room and the whole class said 'I like this, I like that' etc., and that was a good way also of getting feedback from the lecturer because he/she said to you 'Oh I like this about that' so you were able to say, OK, you like this and again you've ended up tailoring your presentation or whatever, but you were kind of the feedback process, which I think was probably the best feedback I've got, being sat in class for 12 weeks listening to the lecturer's comments on other people's work so that you have really understood what they're looking for.

### ***Students feel marking in the band 39% to 72% is not sufficiently discriminating***

- I remember once I got 64% and I was happy with it but someone did an absolutely crap presentation and they got four points lower. It was like 'How do they do it?' They stop at 70%. They get to 74% and it's out of 100% and you get someone whose essay was fantastic get 72% and you think 'If it's fantastic, why is it a low first?' At 72% if it's a good essay and you can't find a fault with it, then why isn't it 78 or 80%? How can you compare some essays which are amazing and some which are really crap in thirteen marks?' How can you do that?
- But I had a load of essays and it was one of those things that was really rushed and I just thought 'This is awful'. It was either 59 or 60% or something like that. And my other one, that I thought I'd done really well on and knew was written better and I put a good argument across and put everything in, I got like a couple of marks higher and I thought 'That's ridiculous'.
- I think my average mark is about 64% and I've written an essay that I knew was piss balls basically. It was just one of those things I just got out and I still got a 58/59%, which is only five points less.
- I just think it gets to the point where no-one wants to fail anyone. But if the presentation is crap or the essay is crap, then it doesn't deserve a grade.

### ***Students write for the marker not the criteria***

- I think every lecturer looks for something different, so when you're writing an essay for one person, even though it's the same topic you might write it in a different way because different people like different things. They're more interested in different things, different styles. Obviously in the first year you get to know and you get the lecturers whose style you like and I do definitely write essays differently for different people.

- I think generally it's good and obviously I pick who I like and the marking style and that suits me well. I think the only problem is that they need to be more consistent, so that if you want to do a module but don't really understand the marking style, then they have to stick to a certain criteria.
- I know that after my first module with each of them I know I tailor mine and they're almost polar opposites. One wants readability, because he thinks everyone should be able to read it. Even if you read his books it's all about if everybody can read it and enjoy it then that's the right way. Whereas the other wants a very strict historical language and you can only get that from the feedback and know exactly that it's pure accuracy - he has to have it done in a very certain way.
- But for History they need to stick to it and all the lecturers need to agree that it's the same, rather than having one, but then everyone having their own criteria anyway.

### ***Written criteria are perceived as having limited value***

- It's like the criteria for me is just common sense. I don't feel I need to read it because if you give a good, balanced argument, that's the whole point of an essay. I've been told that since I was ten.
- The criteria, to be honest, I think is pretty useless. I looked at it in my first year once when I did my first essay and I kind of thought it had that in it anyway. Not amazing, but...
- If the university wants to improve itself then they need to give specific criteria, as opposed to on Minerva (Blackboard VLE) if you want to get 72% you need a well structured, well balanced, well argued... .
- Perhaps it would be of more use if we actually got sat down and went through it. Spent half an hour. OK, it would be boring, but if somebody went through it once. I don't remember being told 'If you want to get a First this is what you need to include and this is how you do it'. I think that would be of help. So I guess that wouldn't be feedback, just general direction.

### ***Students ask to clarify goals and standards sooner rather than later***

- I think feedback is really important in the first year because that's when we're learning and we have to write essays and I wish they'd picked up on a little bit more basic stuff because a lot of the time they let things slip by saying 'It's just a first year essay' and I know when I got to second year they were saying 'Actually this could have been better'.
- But instead they're telling us as we go along. And it's like 'No, tell me everything in the first year'.
- Interviewer: How do you come to know what good is?  
Student: Trial and error. Give it a go and hope for the best.

## **B. Marker variation**

### ***Perceptions of markers influence module choice, and reduce trust***

- I pick the modules this year that to be honest I've absolutely no interest in, but I'm doing it because I know they're high markers, rather than people who are low markers. Otherwise I'm going to get low grades. So I'm picking it on lecturers and it should be based on how well you're enjoying the modules that you're doing. It shouldn't be based on the difference in a mark.
- The way people assess work here isn't fair because I think there is a severe difference in the level of scrutiny placed by certain people on a document compared with others. I know for a fact that if I handed in one essay to somebody it would be a

First and if I handed it to another person it would be a 2.1. And that shouldn't be the case.

- I don't mind that people are stricter. I just wish it was uniform. It's not fair that one is stricter and that there's one who is very generous. It should be uniform across the board.
- I watched one presentation which should have failed and she gave them like 56% or something and I would have failed it. I'm not a harsh person, but when you know as a student that that wasn't good enough and then you see that they've got a good grade, because I know for a fact that if the proper lecturer had watched it that day they wouldn't have passed. It was kind of like 'mmmm'.
- I think you know some specific viewpoints of your lecturer and if you're aware of that you wouldn't argue against them because I've done an essay and one of the lecturers hasn't agreed with what I've said ...and I haven't got a very good grade

### ***Students want consensus marking, agreement, and greater uniformity***

- I think they should train as a group and when they mark an essay they all should agree that should be worth something.
- I think there should be a general consensus amongst every single lecturer. I think they should all agree how things should be marked. I think there should be a general consensus on how you should do a footnote.
- I was just going to say that generally tutors have different ways of marking.
- You get some people who you just get an e-mail saying the grade and 'Well done' and then you have to go and collect it and they'll just give you your essay back with some writing on. They'll read through what they've said, they won't explain it. And some people want to give you feedback but there's just no point because it's just too late. They give it after you've handed everything in for that module, so then they say 'You should really look at this or that, or you really do it like this'.
- The problem is that every lecturer has a different idea and every lecturer wants to mark differently.
- But the biggest problem I have is referencing. Every lecturer wants a different set of referencing and each lecturer is like 'No, that's wrong'.
- I'd say another major discrepancy and I don't know whether you found this, is with the footnotes. I've had to change the way I do footnotes at least four times, so now I have to do it according to which tutor wants what.

### ***The level of individual assessment guidance lecturers give is hugely varied***

- I've been told different things. I've been told that tutors won't read through drafts and yet there are different tutors who will read through drafts and I don't like that. I think it should be uniform across the board because some will give you help and others won't and I don't see why that's fair.
- It's a bit unfair really because I've only just realised that other people have been handing in drafts. But I haven't. I feel a bit disadvantaged.
- You obviously get the nice lecturers who want to help you and will do anything to help, but you get other ones who can't really be bothered, so if you go and ask for help you feel like you're a burden on them and they don't really want to help you.
- I find I can go to someone and they'll give me so much help, they'll sit down and look at my books, do everything and be really helpful. And then some are just 'No, it's self-directed' but then they'll help someone else that I know and it's biased.
- I think anyway that the tutors have different opinions on if they feel like they're helping you too much, because they obviously don't want to cross that invisible line if you like, where they're actually help you write it.



- I know last year I had him for three modules and I went up to him every time with an outline and said 'Am I missing stuff?' and he would go 'I can't help you'.
- I handed in an essay to one lecturer who I thought would really help me and he just sent me a blunt e mail back saying 'Can't open the file. See you soon'. Not like 'drop it in my pigeonhole' or 'send it to me again' or 'just come in and talk about it. Give me the general gist'. Just 'Can't open it, see you soon, cheerio, adios'.
- I think it depends a lot on how early. Obviously if you go to them the day before they're not going to be willing to look at a whole essay, but it is annoying.
- The helpful few are giving you feedback all the time, not just inviting you to the office for ten minutes to discuss two pieces of work that you've written that your whole module is based on. I'd rather have more help spread out than one ten minute session going biff, baff, bom, bye bye, because I'll probably never see that lecturer again if I don't do his / her module.

### **C. Quantity of Effort**

#### ***Establishing and valuing good working habits early on helps students***

- I got annoyed by the fact that the first year wasn't going to count towards your grade
- Student 1: I'm glad the first year doesn't count because I didn't do so good.  
Student 2: But I think that puts people in bad habits personally
- I don't want to say it like ... I think it should be lower weighted, absolutely, because it's your first year, but I think not to have any of it count, seems to me like it's a waste of effort
- I don't think they put enough pressure on the second year. Had someone said to me in the second year, or had kicked me up the bum and said 'This is second year - this is going to be marked', I probably would have done more work. I've kind of left it to the third year to really actually think 'Oh no, I'm getting a degree'. I think if they'd said maybe in the second year 'You've got to work'.
- This is something I wanted to bring up because in the first year, I think it was in the third week, we had a timed essay in class for the module that everybody did, which was a really good way of getting everybody started and getting everyone to practise, whereas this year the summer is like four months' long and then we don't have anything do we until week 7 or 8 and by that time I'm panicking because I don't know how to write an essay.

#### ***Frequency, consistency and practice makes perfect***

- I think that's one of the biggest things anyway. I know probably everyone is going to hate me for saying this, but I know I've got a friend at Cambridge who does an essay per module per week. Now obviously you can only do eight weeks, then eight weeks, then eight weeks, but he's such a better essay writer because he's constantly writing. And we don't. Especially in the first year when you really don't have anything to do. The amount of times formulative assignments could have been or essays that maybe were only 1500 words, smaller essays than a big essay. Lots of little ones.
- The more you write the better you become at it. The more you speak, the better you become at it. And that only comes through practice and in the end if we've only written 40 pieces over three years that's not a lot, considering if you take maybe two years of A level and we're doing it as part of four subjects, I guarantee you probably did a lot more. I think that's important. I don't think you need to have an essay every week, but I do think that the ability to hand stuff to a lecturer, have your writing put forward, will improve. It is the only way that it can be improved.
- I find to consistently work is just the best option, whether you've got an essay in week

5, 10 or 13, semi-spaced out, or whether you've got six in in week 10, you'd have to keep working anyway. I'm not someone who does them the night before anyway, so I kind of think if you're worried that you've got bunched deadlines, buy a year planner and set it out, think about it.

***Formative tasks with feedback, leading into summative ones, are worth it***

- Interviewer: What do you understand by formative assessment?  
Student: I don't mind them when they're useful. Like our bibliographic stuff was useful because it got us started on our essay and although it was a little bit annoying you could see how it was useful, whereas on one module, I don't know, we seem to be doing the same amount of learning but with a lot more effort, for something that wasn't even marked
- But if every week you've had some kind of formative assessment on something that's not being marked, and it's taken you ages to do, it's adding on to the pile of stuff you've got to do for your third year. It's just like too much work
- In all fairness we were meant to have done this all three years in terms of everybody sets reading for their seminar. You have a lecture, then a seminar, and everybody is supposed to do a certain amount of reading and then we are supposed to talk it through. The problem is that the ones who, because nobody did the reading, the lecturer will start to bring the reading into class and that's when it all starts to fall down, because obviously it's wasted class time. The amount of times we sit in a class and read a document, it's pointless.
- The only thing I would like perhaps is a little bit more in the way of getting us into the year at the very, very beginning. It might not help everybody, but I think it would help people like me, who feel they need a bit more confidence. Also some kind of formative assessment at the very beginning, as long as the tutors ask us what kind of formative assessment would be useful, and not give us a rubbish one that isn't going to be any use to us.

***Distribution of tasks impacts on how students work through the year***

- I've only had three deadlines before Christmas. And then we have deadline, deadline, deadline, deadline.
- You can't leave it until the last minute. It's really hard because everybody has already got the books. Our library is good and our electronic sources are really good, but actual physical books - there's usually one copy and you've got 20, 40, 50 people all trying to write on a similar topic.
- Whereas I think I'm getting quite good time management skills now from having to cope with all the other essays and everything else that we have to do and on top of that we've got our seminar work and stuff to do.
- It's spaced out in between, or they try to space it out in between. It tends to become a bit of a clump, which is understandable... then if you do leave it to the end you're going to have a massive clump. So I can see why they're doing it, but to be honest, for me, assessment dates don't really mean much because I'll always get it there on time, but it shouldn't matter that they're all on the same day. If you know that you can do it. People complain and say 'I've got three due in in a day' and it's like 'Well just get it done beforehand'.

## Audit issues

- High variety
- Medium written feedback
- Low timeliness
- Low oral feedback
- Low formative
- Low exams

## AEQ issues

- High clear goals and stds
- High deep approach
- High satisfaction
- Low coverage of syllabus
- Low exams

## FG issues

- Clear goals and standards
- Marker variation
- Quantity of effort
- Surface Approach