

**‘It’s overwhelming, looking at a brief...’:
Exploring non-traditional first year students’
experience of engaging with assignment briefs
as part of summative assessment practices**

**By
John Knight**

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University’s requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Education*

June 2024

**Buckinghamshire New University
Coventry University**

COPYRIGHT

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with its author under the terms of the United Kingdom Copyright Acts. No quotation from the thesis and no information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the experiences of non-traditional first year students in their engagement with assignment briefs as part of summative assessment practices. It aims to situate their experiences in the context of a range of literature, including studies related directly to assignment brief design, but also the wider practices of higher education assessment, cognitive accounts for the learning process and challenges faced by non-traditional students in their transition to higher education, viewed through the lens of a theoretical framework based on the academic literacies framework (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006) and drawing on Gee' (2011) concept of Discourse and Bakhtinian (1981) notions of dialogism.

The study uses an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Smith and Nizza, 2022) to explore the lived experience of four first-year Social Work students and one Business student from diverse backgrounds in their engagement with assignment briefs as part of their initial experiences of assessment in higher education. A round of semi-structured interviews was conducted with all participants in their first year of study. A subsequent interview with one of the participants in their third year provides a useful further perspective. Analysis of a selection of some of the assignment briefs with which the students engage provides an additional context for the analysis of their experiences.

Findings point to high levels of student anxiety about assessment processes and the usefulness of clear, consistent and concise but comprehensive assignment briefs which include well-pitched and progressive scaffolding as a basis for confident engagement with assessed work and feelings of confidence in relation to future work. Of particular relevance is the importance of the role of the assignment brief in providing a basis for students' developing understanding of academic and disciplinary norms. It is suggested that poorly communicated information and misaligned assessed tasks not only impede students' engagement with assessment, but also impact negatively on the development of key academic and disciplinary literacies and may also result in the internalisation of negative feelings about their preparedness and suitability for higher study.

Conclusions are drawn in relation to the clarity of task specifications and assignment briefs in affording effective engagement with assessment and fostering positive student identities.

Contents

List of figures.....	vii
List of tables.....	viii
Acknowledgements.....	ix
Author's declaration.....	x
Foreword: the origins of this study.....	xi
1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Institutional context.....	7
1.2 Programme context: Social Work.....	8
1.2.1 Demographics and attainment.....	9
1.2.2 Institutional assessment practices.....	10
1.2.3 Assessment practices in Social Work.....	11
1.3 Programme context: Business.....	12
1.3.1 Demographics and attainment.....	13
1.3.2 Assessment practices in Business.....	14
1.4 Research aim and questions.....	15
1.5 Theoretical framework.....	16
1.5.1 Assessment as Discourse.....	17
1.5.2 The academic literacies model.....	19
1.5.3 An epistemology and ideology for academic literacies.....	21
2 Literature Review.....	25
2.1 Conceptualising assessment.....	26
2.1.1 Summative assessment: 'Assessment <i>of</i> learning'.....	27
2.1.2 Formative assessment: 'Assessment <i>for</i> Learning'.....	33
2.1.3 Conformative assessment: 'Assessment <i>as</i> learning'.....	40

2.2	Assignment briefs.....	42
2.2.1	Defining terms.....	45
2.2.2	Assignment briefs in the literature	46
2.2.3	Anatomising the assignment brief.....	50
2.2.4	Discourse-related aspects of assignment briefs	53
2.2.5	Cognitive processing of the assignment brief	68
2.2.6	Practicalities: task requirements	74
2.3	Reconceptualising transition.....	75
2.3.1	Transition as induction.....	78
2.3.2	Transition as development	79
2.3.3	Transition as becoming.....	80
3	Methodology.....	83
3.1	An emergent research design	83
3.2	Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	87
3.3	Rationale	88
3.3.1	The phenomenological basis for IPA.....	89
3.3.2	IPA and idiography	97
3.4	Thinking reflectively and reflexively about the philosophy of research.....	98
3.5	Method.....	101
3.5.1	Data collection	101
3.5.2	Data analysis	107
3.5.3	Compiling tables of personal experiential themes	114
3.5.4	Developing group experiential themes (GETs)	114
3.6	Analysing assignment briefs.....	116
4	Results and analysis	120
4.1	Analysis of selected assignment briefs	120

4.1.1	The ‘Lifespan’ assignment brief	120
4.1.2	The ‘Context of Social Work’ assignment brief.....	136
4.1.3	The ‘People Management’ assignment brief.....	150
4.2	Analysis of participant interviews	167
4.2.1	Participants’ feelings about their previous educational experiences	167
4.2.2	Group Experiential Themes (GETs)	172
4.2.3	Feelings about themselves and looking forward.....	236
4.2.4	Where are they now?	245
5	Discussion.....	247
5.1	Valuing comprehensiveness and clarity.....	248
5.2	Experiencing the brief as a barrier	253
5.3	Dissemination can provide a basis for confident engagement with assessment.	258
5.4	Striving for independence	262
5.5	Building on success and existing knowledge promotes confidence	266
5.6	Conclusion	268
6	Conclusion.....	277
6.1	The research aim and research questions	278
6.2	Methodology	278
6.3	Returning to the research questions	279
6.4	Original contribution to knowledge	287
6.5	Limitations of the study	289
6.6	Recommendations for policy and practice	293
6.7	Recommendations for future research.....	296
	References	300
	Appendix 1	333
	Institutional assignment brief template, 2021-22.....	333

Appendix 2	338
Assignment brief literature search	338
Appendix 3	339
Research Ethics Panel Application form	339
Appendix 4	357
Gatekeepers' permission letters.....	357
Appendix 5	359
Recruitment poster	359
Appendix 6	360
Participant information sheet.....	360
Appendix 7	363
Consent form	363
Appendix 8	367
Interview schedule: indicative questions	367
Appendix 9	369
Interview schedule: second round	369
Appendix 10	372
Group Experiential Themes (GET).....	372
GET 1: Valuing comprehension and clarity: knowing what to do.....	372
GET 2: Experiencing the brief as a barrier	374
GET 3: Well-judged dissemination provides a basis for effective engagement	375
GET 4: Striving for independence	377
GET 5: Building on success and existing knowledge promotes confidence	381

List of figures

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of Gilbert and Maguire's assignment brief design guidelines (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).....	47
Figure 2: Hughes's (2009) Assessment Task Design Framework.....	49
Figure 1: Extract from researcher's reflexive diary, written during the analysis of Bridget's second interview.....	96
Figure 4: Examples of transcribed text with non-verbal events indicated.....	108
Figure 5: Coded researcher comments in transcript extract from Clare's transcript	112
Figure 6: Extract of Bridget's second interview	112
Figure 7: Using formatted headings and navigation features in Word to interpret and organise initial experiential statements (Mary)	115
Figure 8: Developing the GET, using cut up extracts from each participants' personal experiential themes tables..	118
Figure 9: Extract from research diary, relating to Mary's engagement with the Context of Social Work essay	178
Figure 10: Task specification for Change and Organisations assignment (Business, Level 6)	184
Figure 11: Extract from researcher diary, considering Bridget's changing attitudes to her assignment briefs	207
Figure 12: Extract from researcher diary, considering Bridget's desire for independence	187

List of tables

Table 1: Demographic mix of BNU full-time undergraduate population, 2021-22, excluding partner institutions (rounded to nearest whole number).....	8
Table 2: Demographic mix of BSc Social Work, Levels 4-6 (source: institutional data, 2020-21).....	9
Table 3: Assessment regime of the first year BSc Social Work programme.....	12
Table 1: Demographic mix of undergraduate Business courses, Levels 4-6 (source: institutional data, 2020-21).....	13
Table 2: Assessment regime of the first year BA Business Management (2021)	14
Table 6: Features identified in the four assignment brief frameworks, linked to challenges to students	52
Table 7: Summary of participant characteristics	105
Table 8: Summary of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) by participant	118
Table 3: Applying Hughes's 2009 ATD Framework to an assessed task (rhetorical purpose (Thomas et al., 2019) shown in brackets).....	127
Table 4: Applying Hughes (2009) ATD Framework to Option One sub-tasks in the Context of Social Work assignment (rhetorical purpose (Thomas et al., 2019) shown in brackets and linked to relevant cognitive dimensions of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001)).....	143
Table 5: Applying Hughes (2009) ATD Framework to 'portfolio' task in the Introduction to People Management assignment (rhetorical purpose (Thomas et al., 2019) shown in brackets and linked to relevant cognitive and knowledge dimensions of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001)).....	158
Table 6: Summary of Group Experiential Themes by participant.....	174
Table 7: Applying Hughes's 2009 ATD Framework to the Change and Organisations assessed task (rhetorical purpose (Thomas et al., 2019) shown in brackets and linked to relevant cognitive and knowledge dimensions of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001))	184

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Buckinghamshire New University for providing me with the opportunity to undertake this doctoral research. Thanks, too, are due to my supervisory team, Dr Ceri Sims and Dr Maurice Gledhill, who have provided much appreciated wise advice and guidance and, importantly, a supportive framework in which I have been able to complete this arduous journey. Laura Bray in the RED team has also been a source of much welcomed and patient support.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my friend, colleague and co-conspirator Dr Rebecca Rochon, who began this journey with me some years ago, and, who, in typical fashion, finished before me. Your friendship, patience, pragmatic good sense and critical insight have been much valued, as ever.

Thanks, too, to Dr Elaine Walsh, a fellow traveller in the field of assessment communication, met in the process of conducting this research and with whom I have been fortunate enough to collaborate on further research and staff development activities. I look forward to working together in the future.

This is also an opportunity to thank the students who agreed to take part in this study. It was a privilege to work with you; I hope that I have done justice to your commitment and courage in sharing your experiences.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this study to my daughter, who reminds me on a daily basis of what is truly important: it is for good reason that your middle name is Hope...

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University.
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated.
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.
5. Where elements of this work have been published or submitted for publication prior to submission, this is identified and references given at the end of the thesis.
6. This thesis has been prepared in accordance with Coventry University and Buckinghamshire New University regulations.

I confirm that if the submission is based upon work that has been sponsored or supported by an agency or organisation that I have fulfilled any right of review or other obligations required by such contract or agreement

John Knight

Foreword: the origins of this study

The seeds for this study were first planted during the period in which I worked as a learning developer, working at a post-1992 university with students of all levels and from the full range of courses supporting the development of what might best be framed as their academic literacies, although which is often referred to somewhat reductively as their academic skills. This role involved a range of activities, from giving classes and lectures to team teaching with subject-expert colleagues to embed academic literacies within disciplines. It also involved a substantial amount of working on a one-to-one basis with students supporting their engagement with their assessed work. It was during this activity in particular that I was able to observe the challenges that some students faced, not only in engaging effectively with their assessed tasks, but also in interpreting the information about the task shared with them by their tutors in the form of assignment briefs and related documentation.

At that time, there was a wide variety of practices in evidence in terms of how assessment requirements were shared with students across the institution. Different approaches were used in different faculties, departments, programmes and even within modules.

Sometimes a separate document in the form of an assignment brief was made available to students, sometimes they were merely directed to the relevant page in a module handbook. Some briefs shared common features and structures; others varied widely from assignment to assignment. As well as the briefs themselves, students were also sometimes presented with additional documentation intended to support their engagement with the assessed tasks. At times, too, it was clear that the way that assignment information was shared with students was problematic; some briefs contained incomplete and at times excessive or contradictory instructions or used complex terminology and language. Sometimes, too, there was a mismatch between the form or genre of the assignment (referred to in this study as an assignment 'text type', e.g., essay, report, reflective commentary, etc.) and the required format, stated purpose or audience of the task.

What became clear to me during this period was that the way in which the requirements and expectation of assessed tasks was communicated to students could have a profound

impact upon their ability to engage with them at their optimal level. This seemed particularly the case with, although was not restricted to, students from 'non-traditional' widening participation backgrounds and new students, who were already facing challenges in coming to terms with the new ways of doing things required of them by higher education. Of particular concern was the realisation that as well as impeding their ability to complete the assessed task successfully, issues with the communication of the task and its requirements seemed to have a negative impact upon the students and their developing sense of themselves as learners and their sense of belonging to the educational community of the university.

Prior to working at the university and following completion of my Master's degree, I had worked as a researcher developer on an educational software development project (Edwards *et al.*, 2002), during which time I became interested in Donald Norman's work on affordances (Norman, 1988) and how they relate to real world and user-interface design. In Norman's use of the term, the concept of affordance refers to the actual and perceived 'action possibilities' of an object, i.e., the characteristics of an object that determine how we might conceive of using it. Norman uses doors and the frequent problems people have in navigating them as an illustrative example. A door with a flat plate on it at the appropriate height *affords* pushing, while a door with a readily graspable handle *affords* pulling. Confusion, and much pulling when we should be pushing and much pushing when we should be pulling, arises when the affordances of the door are misaligned with its function, e.g., a door requiring a push to open it nevertheless has a handle that suggests it should be pulled. Situations such as this are sometimes mitigated by the addition of a written instruction, i.e., 'PUSH' or 'PULL', but where the design of the door is appropriate and its affordances in alignment with how it should be used, no such instructions should be necessary: 'when simple things need pictures, labels and or instructions, the design has failed' (Norman, 1988, p. 9). It was not unusual to find myself faced with an anxious and tearful student trying to reconcile not only the demands of a complex assignment brief, but also the advice in the accompanying 3-page document intended, doubtless with the best of intentions, to support their engagement with the assessed task. At such times, I wondered both what might constitute the affordances of effective assignment brief design (what 'handles' might the brief require in order to allow the students to use it effectively) and

whether or not it might be possible to produce a brief that was sufficiently clear and explicit to avoid the need for an instruction manual...

Investigations into issues of assignment brief design led me to the work of Gilbert and Maguire at Oxford Brookes University (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a; Gilbert, 2012; Maguire and Gilbert, 2015) and a later recognition of the potential value for the use of cognitive theory to explain the challenges faced by students in interpreting their assignment briefs. Working with colleagues, I conducted some small-scale research (Rochon and Knight, 2013; Knight, Rochon and Lee-Price, 2014) which focused on the challenges faced by widening participation students new to higher education in making sense of their assessed work. Of particular interest in our findings was the suggestion that for students who lack academic confidence, there was a tendency for them to locate problems that might otherwise be associated with the way that assessment tasks were communicated to them in themselves, with consequent negative impact on their confidence and growing identities as learners in higher education. It was this experience and the desire to do better by our students which inspired me to begin my journey to achieving a professional doctorate.

In 2015, I changed my professional role and moved away from learning development to become an academic developer, engaged in curriculum and staff development. This provide me with an opportunity to utilise my experiences and some of the findings of what little research there existed on the role of assignment briefs as part of my enhancement activities. I invited Gilbert and Maguire to present at our Staff Development Conference in 2016. I have also since used their guidelines on assignment brief design (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014) to inform the development of an institutional assignment brief template and associated guidance, which is now an established part of assessment practices in the institution. Work on the professional doctorate also resulted in a further opinion paper upon my experiences of assessment, although this time from the 'fence' as both a learner and an academic, coming to terms with the experience of being assessed 'against' rather than 'assessing' (Rochon and Knight, 2015). This experience underlined even more keenly the challenges that issues in the communication of assignment expectations can cause even the most experienced of students.

1 Introduction

The aim of this research study is to explore the experiences of first-year students in their engagement with summative coursework assessment. I will focus on how the communication of the expectations and requirements of the assessed tasks they are required to complete enables or acts as a barrier to their successful engagement with the task and their ability to perform at their optimal level. Typically, those expectations and requirements are communicated to students in writing in the form of an assignment brief, which may be a discrete document or a statement in module or programme documentation. Following the move to online and hybrid teaching and learning solutions resulting from the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid pivot to online delivery (Nordmann *et al.*, 2020), written instructions for assessed tasks have perhaps become more important (Brown and Sambell, 2020; Roy, Beer and Lawson, 2020). Even now, as we return to in-person teaching and begin the process of supporting students in their return to a new kind of normality, assignment briefs are almost uniformly communicated to students in written form (Walsh, 2021a), whether in hard copy or electronically, and it is on this basis that I make an assumption that the brief is a written document, whether made available in hard copy or virtually.

In 2006, Boud suggested that, 'Assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education' (Boud, 2006). To this we might also add a further quotation, also attributed to Boud (1995, p. 35):

Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment. Assessment acts as a mechanism to control students that is far more pervasive and insidious than most staff would be prepared to acknowledge.'

It is not the intention of this thesis to expose 'poor' assessment, although it will explore student anxiety resulting from their engagement with it. Rather, I proceed on the basis of good faith and the assumption, based on the experience of many years of working with both colleagues and students, that assessment, as with other learning and teaching practices by committed, hard-working and time-poor teachers in higher education (Tight,

2010; Darabi, Macaskill and Reidy, 2017), is conducted with the best interests of equally time-poor and hardworking students (Universities UK, 2005; Callender, 2008) in mind and in a manner intended to facilitate student performance at the highest level. I would, however, further modify Boud's statement in order to emphasise its importance for the purpose of this study. Students are not only constrained to deal with the assessment practices they are confronted with if they wish to graduate; they are also unable to escape the way in which their assessed tasks are communicated to them if they wish to engage successfully with those tasks and so succeed as learners and future graduates.

Assessment, as Boud suggests, always does 'double duty' (Boud, 2000). It has both a formative function which drives learning, and also provides a means of summative measurement and a route to certification, thus providing a valuable route to the improvement of the life chances and opportunities available to those who undertake it. It is perhaps in relation to the latter that the role of the assignment brief is most significant in that issues in the communication of assignment expectations and requirements can present a barrier to students in their engagement with assessment to the best of their abilities, excluding them from the opportunities it affords. Indeed, I would argue that a problematisation of the assignment brief and a consideration of the way in which it is disseminated to students can best be framed as an issue of inclusivity. For assessment to be truly inclusive, students must after all be able to engage with their assessed work to their fullest ability. Task specifications must be 'models of clarity' (Sadler, 2015, p. 12). It is both 'illogical and counterproductive' (Sadler, 2016, p. 1084) for students not to know what is expected of them in their responses to their assessed work. It is also profoundly unjust.

I began this dissertation with an outline of the origins of my research in my professional practice as a learning developer, working alongside students in their engagement with their assessed work. During this period, I noticed that students from diverse backgrounds faced particular challenges in their engagement with assessed work, not least of all because of issues with the manner in which assessment expectations and requirements were communicated to them in the form of assignment briefs. My aim in conducting this study is to explore this issue and attempt further to make sense of this aspect of the student experience of assessment as part of their journey into higher education. In doing

so, I am to contribute to existing literature in the area in relation to assessment communication and the specification of tasks and also the wider literature on assessment.

Understanding of the purpose of assessed tasks, how they should be communicated are strongly linked to student learning and success in assessment (Sadler, 2007, 2014, 2016; McDowell, 2008). De Silva Joyce *et al.* (2014) suggest that confusion arising from a lack of clarity in assessed tasks imposes a further burden on students rather than affording purposeful learning. Gilbert (2012) expresses concerns that lack of clarity in assignment briefs can result in students directing their cognitive resources toward working out what the task is rather than toward its completion, unnecessarily complicating an already complex activity. Clarity of expectations and accessible, explicit language in the definition of assessed tasks and associated criteria have also been associated with reduced anxiety about assessment (Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Walsh, 2021b) and the ability for students to make effective use of feedback (Ferguson, 2011; Carless and Boud, 2018a).

There is some indication that the specification of assessed tasks is an aspect of assessment practices that is problematic in studies not focused on the experiences of non-traditional students. In Winning's (2005) survey-based study of a total of 85 third and fifth-year dentistry students in Adelaide and Dublin, participants rated clear requirements and expectations as important characteristics for positive assessment outcomes, with negative experiences associated with perceived lack of clarity, which led to stress and anxiety. Winning concludes that positive experiences associated with clarity of expectations and objectives and having clear 'instructions, guidelines and objectives' and relevance of task may have a motivating effect. In their questionnaire-based survey of 960 Biomedicine students, Hodgson *et al.* (2022) found that more than 70% of students across year levels made strongly negative comments about the quality of assignment instructions, with more guidance on assessed tasks required. This was linked to vagueness in terms of instructions and being left alone to work it out, with some students reporting lack of alignment with course content as an exacerbating factor. Hounsell (2008) also found students were particularly concerned about the adequacy of guidance with regard to assignment expectations, the criteria against which they were to be assessed and the lack of opportunities for practising and rehearsing unfamiliar tasks. Placing the onus on students to seek help, coupled with a lack of clear expectations relating to contacting

staff for guidance and support left some students feeling under supported and unsure about whether they were allowed to ask for help (Hounsell *et al.*, 2008).

There is also strong evidence in the literature that students who do not conform to traditional conceptions (e.g., full-time, residential, coming from A-levels) have different experiences of assessment processes and higher levels of anxiety that may have an impact on their ability to make the transition into higher education and succeed as students. Students from such diverse backgrounds may have more 'fragile' identities as learners (Crozier & Reay, 2008, p. 20), in comparison to their more confident middle-class counterparts from more traditional educational backgrounds. They also may feel that they do not 'belong' socially or in the cultural environment of their new educational contexts (Stuart, Lido, & Morgan, 2011). Indeed, they may feel that they are impostors, 'in over their heads' (Marshall, 2016). They may also feel academically under-prepared. Hockings (2010) draws attention to the challenges of students who have taken more vocational routes into education. This can result in feelings of inadequacy or unpreparedness, or at least the perception that teaching staff consider their vocational and non-traditional routes into university as inferior to more conventional routes via A-levels (Bateson *et al.*, 2016). This may have a significant impact upon their ability to succeed and complete their courses (Feldman & McCullough, 2014).

Gill (2019) found that students from vocational education and training backgrounds were more anxious about unfamiliar assessment procedures, with particular concerns about exams. Other areas of concern identified by Gill related to the specifics of assignments in terms of expected styles, referencing and word limits, and a sense that higher education had more stringent standards along with expectations of the need to be more independent. In parallel with Gill's findings, Collier and Morgan (2008) reported differences between traditional and non-traditional students in anxieties about the specifics of how assessed work should be completed in a US context, not only in relation to issues around appropriate language use but also expectations around presentation (line spacing, font, etc.). Students entering university via Access routes have also been linked to higher attrition rates (Brimble, 2015). Dilnot, Macmillan and Wyness (2022) state that 40% of students in the least privileged quintile of socio-economic status enter higher education with BTECs compared to less than 10% in the most privileged and that

students with BTECs were also twice as likely to drop out (11.4% compared to 6%) as similar average students with just A-levels and 1.7 times more likely to repeat the first year. They were also 1.4 times more likely to graduate below 2.1 than A-level students of similar profile.

Educational background is not the only factor that may impact on students' engagement with assessment. Attainment and attrition figures for BME students continue to identify disparities in the higher education experiences of this group of students compared to their white counterparts. It seems likely that aspects of assessment practices play at least a partial role in this (Cureton *et al.*, 2017). Overall, BAME students continue to be more likely to withdraw from higher education and those who remain on their courses are markedly less likely to perform as well as white students. Recent figures suggest that there is a 13% gap between the likelihood of White and BME students receiving a First of 2.1 degree classification (UUK and NUS, 2019). There is a growing body of research into possible causes and solutions for the attainment gap that indicate the disparity arises from aspects of the cultural and institutional environment of higher education as well as broader societal factors (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; UUK and NUS, 2019). Singh (2011) in a wide ranging review of the experiences of BME students in higher education identifies a broad range of environmental factors that conspire against this group, including curriculum content and design, learning teaching and assessment practices and indirect and direct racism. Stevenson (2012, p. 4) suggests 'structural, organisational, attitudinal, cultural and financial' reasons behind the disparity and points to universities' failure to 'integrate [BME] students effectively and develop a sense of belonging' (p.15).

Aspects of the academic environment relating to assessment are also frequently identified as having a major impact (Hockings, 2010; Roberts, 2011; Liz Thomas, 2012; Richardson, 2015). Stevenson (2012) highlights the significance of assessment, citing issues with a lack of preparedness of unfamiliar forms of assessment and not having assessment requirements properly explained. Significantly in relation to the focus of this research project, Stevenson also cites cases of students identifying the manner in which essay titles or exam questions were phrased as a barrier to those less familiar with particular styles of academic discourse. The findings of the *Disparities in Student Achievement* (DiSA) project (Cureton *et al.*, 2017) (see section 2.2.4.6 below) would also

strongly suggest that clarity of assignment briefs is a key aspect of the higher education environment with serious implications for the attainment of BME students, and indeed others from non-traditional backgrounds.

Social class, too, has been seen to be of relevance. Students from lower socio-economic groups may lack the cultural capital of their middle class counterparts and lack the latter's sense of entitlement to be at university (Crozier & Reay, 2008) resulting in a feeling of not belonging (Thomas, 2012). Quinn found that working-class students, rather than feeling able to engage usefully in higher education, felt instead that their backgrounds and perspectives were 'marginalised and ignored' (Quinn, 2010, p. 126). Reay also found that working-class women returning to education faced difficulties in completing their courses despite a 'passionate commitment to learning' (Reay, 2003, p. 315). Lehman's (2009) account from a Canadian context seems reflective of UK experiences in identifying the class-specific challenges faced by working class students in higher levels of uncertainty, course choices and fears of inadequacy arising from their perceived status as cultural outsiders. In their study of mature women transitioning from FD to L6 study, Penketh and Goddard (2008) highlight anxiety and concern about assessment as a major theme in their participants, particularly when managing the demands of work, study and completing written assignments, leading to thoughts of panic and leaving the course.

Naturally, students from non-traditional backgrounds may belong simultaneously to more than one of these groups (Dilnot, Macmillan and Wyness, 2022). A growing area of interest in the literature can be seen in the experiences of what have been described as 'commuter students' (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018), who, rather than travelling away to attend university as a residential experience, stay in their own or their parental homes while studying. Commuter students are likely to belong to other non-traditional and under-represented groups in higher education (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) and choose to attend higher education in this fashion for a multitude of reasons, not least of all financial, but also because of existing personal or professional commitments and/or cultural values. Students from certain ethnic minority groups (notably British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi) are more than six times likely than their white counterparts to live in their parental home while they study. Students from socially disadvantaged groups are also more likely to study locally (OfS, 2020).

This picture of the challenges faced by non-traditional students in engaging with assessment and their wider studies is of particular relevance in the context of this study as the university in which I work and in which the research was conducted has a particularly diverse student body. Indeed, initially when engaging with this dissertation I agonised over how I should refer to such students. ‘Non-traditional’, ‘widening participation’ and ‘students from under-represented groups’ are labels frequently (and perhaps not unproblematically) applied to students who do not conform to the traditional conception of white, middle class young people, fresh from A-Levels, as they enter higher education, yet these are very much ‘traditional’ and proportionately highly ‘represented’ in my institution. In a very real sense, they are just *our* students. The following section provides brief contextual information about the institution and the programmes in which the study is based.

1.1 Institutional context

Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) is a small, publicly funded university in Buckinghamshire in the southeast of England with strong links to professional practice and local industry. It offers a range of courses, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, but does not have research degree awarding powers. It is a new university, having been granted its title in 2007, although has its origins in a long and proud history as an educational institution serving its community in various forms since 1891 (BNU, 2022). Its main campus is in High Wycombe town centre and it has two satellite campuses, located in urban centres in Uxbridge (Greater London) and Aylesbury. It offers courses in Business, which accounts for around 40% of its student body, Nursing and Social Care (26%), Social Sciences (9%), Design, Creative and Performing Arts (5%); it also offers courses in sport related subjects, Education, Computing, Psychology and Law (HESA, 2022a).

Excluding the substantial number of students in partner institutions, BNU institutional data records 5814 students studying on Foundation Year and undergraduate courses in the year 21/22, of which around 22% were part-time. The university is ethnically diverse (see Table 1, below) and has a high proportion of commuter students (Donnelly and

Gamsu, 2018). HESA data for first year students studying for their first degree in 20/21 (including those at partner institutions) records 37% of students living in their own residence (whether owned or rented) and 14% in their parental/guardian home (HESA, 2022c). A considerable proportion of BNU students are from Buckinghamshire (7%) and adjoining or near adjoining counties (42% in total). 36% come from Greater London. Around 5% of students are non-UK domiciled, with the majority of these from the EU or other European countries (HESA, 2022b).

Table 8: Demographic mix of BNU full-time undergraduate population, 2021-22, excluding partner institutions (rounded to nearest whole number)

	Info refused	other	Mixed	Asian	Black	White
Undergraduate population, including Foundation Year	2%	2%	5%	17 %	25%	49%

1.2 Programme context: Social Work

One of the programmes which provides the context for this exploration of the experiences of first-year students in their engagement with coursework assessment is the BSc in Social Work, which is delivered over the course of three years on a full-time basis. This programme was selected as it is in many ways representative of the University’s educational offer. It is professionally oriented, and its students are diverse in terms of ethnicity and educational background. Students on the programme also tend to be based locally, travelling into the university from their own or their parental homes.

The programme is mapped against the Social Work subject benchmark statement (QAA, 2016) and aligned to the required knowledge and skills defined by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2018) and Knowledge and Skills Statements for Social Workers (DoH, 2015; DoE, 2018). Numbers of students have been falling over recent years, from 108 on the course as a whole in 2018/19 to 80 in the year 2021/22. There were 37 students in the first year for the year

2021-22. It was this group which formed the population for the sample of students included in this study.

1.2.1 Demographics and attainment

The BSc Social work has a diverse cohort (see Table 2, below), broadly representative of the institution as a whole in terms of demographic mix.

Table 9: Demographic mix of BSc Social Work, Levels 4-6 (source: institutional data, 2020-21)

BSc Social Work	Info refused	other	Mixed	Asian	Black	White
Levels 4-6	2%	3%	3%	10%	27%	55%
Level 4	4%	7%	7%	11%	30%	41%

The following figures are taken from institutional data. Unless otherwise indicated, they refer to averages taken across the years 2016-21. BSc Social Work students are predominantly female (91%) and 100% UK nationals. Around three quarters of students on the course are classed as mature (i.e., over 21 years of age at the point of entry). There are high proportions of students from non-traditional academic backgrounds, with 28% from BTEC/Level 3 qualifications and 18% from A/AS Levels. Just over half (53%) enter from a range of other routes, particularly Access to HE courses. Students coming from A/AS Levels are more likely to receive good degrees (68%) compared to those with BTEC/Level 3 qualifications (60%). Just over half students from other educational backgrounds received a good degree. There was a pronounced gap in attainment of good degrees between White (68%), Asian (64%) and Mixed students (67%) and their Black (39%) counterparts during the period. However, there is an indication that the attainment gap may be decreasing, with most recent figures (2020-21) indicating broadly similar outcomes for Black (60%) and White (56%) students¹.

¹ These latter figures may be less reliable due to the impact of COVID-19 and consequent changes to assessment procedures.

Over the period 2016-21, just over half students (52%) on the programme as a whole came from areas in quintiles 4 and 5 on the index of multiple deprivation (IMD). White students are more likely to be within these quintiles (78%) compared to Asian (30%) and Black students (37%). POLAR4 (participation in higher education by local area) data for the period shows around 52% of students on the programme come from areas in quintiles 4 and 5, with 35% from quintile 5. Asian students are most likely to be in quintiles 4 (22%) and 5 (33%). White students also tend to be in these quintiles, with 12% in quintile 4 and 41% in quintile 5. Black students are less likely to be in quintile 5 (29%) and quintile 4 (21%).

1.2.2 Institutional assessment practices

The university has an outcomes-based approach to curriculum development and assessment in which Biggs's (2014) constructive alignment plays a central role in policy, quality assurance processes and teaching and assessment practices. At the time of this study, the credit framework was based around 15-credit and 30-credit modules, delivered over the course of two semesters, although the university is currently in the process of moving to a three-term, 20-credit based approach. Student workload relating to assessment is determined according to institutional policy, based on an assumption that students should normally be expected to spend around 25% of their notional learning hours on assessment related activity (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007) with an expectation that 15-credit modules will be assessed by one to two assignments, with a preference for one. Assessment size is guided by a tariff-based approach based broadly on sectoral norms (e.g., Fielding, 2008). Word counts for written assignments in 15-credit modules usually total between 2000 to 3000 words, with a recommendation that this be considered progressively across programme levels. Level 5 assignments will typically total 2500 words and Level 6 will tend towards 3000 words. Equivalent tariffs are also used for other 'quantifiable' assessment methods, such as exams and presentations. Other assessment

strategies are based around the hours it is expected students will spend on them on the basis of staff judgement, subject to the 25% expectation mentioned above.

1.2.3 Assessment practices in Social Work

Rai and Lillis (2013) identify three forms of writing with which Social Work students are most likely to be required to engage. The first two of which are written assignments (typically academic essays, reflective writing, exams and writing based on simulated practice) and portfolio writing, in which students evidence their achievement of professional competences. These take place within the two domains of academic study (within the university as part of formal academic engagement with the course) and practice (typically within social work agencies during practice placements), respectively. The third relates to the writing students engage with as part of their engagement with professional practice: case notes, reports, written communications, etc. This latter form of professional writing tends not to be assessed directly and, indeed, may constitute a neglected aspect of authentic learning and assessment in Social Work courses in general (Lillis, 2017). It is not directly assessed in the BSc in Social Work programme in this study.

Essays (with varying purposes (Thomas et al., 2019)) and portfolios can be considered signature assessments in Social Work (Crisp and Lister, 2005). This is reflected in the assessment regime on the first year of the programme featured in this study (see Table 3, below). Assessment on the programme is strongly based around student production of written texts, with essays forming the predominant assessment method. Opportunities for reflective writing are included as part of portfolio-based assignments, which tend to be centred around the development of professional competences.

Table 10: Assessment regime of the first year BSc Social Work programme

Module	Credits	Assessment by text type	Words
Lifespan development	15	Essay	2000
Society and Social Work	15	Essay	2000
The context of Social Work	15	Essay	2500
Preparation for practice	30	Essay (reflective)	1500
		Portfolio	3000
Ethics and values	15	Essay (case-based)	2500
Social policy and Social Work	15	Essay	2500
Developing Social Work skills for practice	15	Portfolio	3000
Advanced skills for professional development (Level 4)	0	Attendance-based	N/a

1.3 Programme context: Business

This programme was selected as, like Social Work, it is in also highly representative of the University's educational offer. 'Business' in its broadest sense also constitutes a substantial proportion of the university's courses. Like Social Work, the course is professionally oriented, though lacks the specific requirements for achievement of externally defined professional standards. Its students are also highly diverse in terms of ethnicity and educational background. Again, like Social Work, students on the programme also tend to be based locally, travelling into the university from their own or their parental homes.

1.3.1 Demographics and attainment

There are a range of Business programmes, including: Business and Human Resource management, Business Economics, and Business Management. Taken as a cluster, these course also have diverse cohorts (see Table 11, below), with a higher proportion of students from BME backgrounds than white students (in the academic year 2021-22, white students constituted just over 50% of the entire undergraduate student body).

Table 11: Demographic mix of undergraduate Business courses, Levels 4-6 (source: institutional data, 2020-21)

Undergraduate Business courses	Info refused	other	Mixed	Asian	Black	White
Levels 4-6	1%	3%	8%	42%	16%	29%
Level 4	0	3%	7%	38%	24%	28%

The following figures are taken from institutional data. Unless otherwise indicated they refer to figures taken from a snapshot of available data in November 2021 for all fulltime students on undergraduate Business courses. (levels 4 – 6, including Foundation Year). Business students more likely to be male (55%) than female (45%) and just over half of them are eligible for UK fees (55%), with 15% from the EU and 29% attending as overseas students. Just under 60% of students on these courses are classified as mature (i.e., over 21 years of age at point of entry). As with Social Work, there are high proportions of students from non-traditional academic backgrounds, with 18% from BTEC/Level 3 qualifications and 23% from A/AS Levels. Somewhat over half (57%) enter from a range of other routes, particularly Access to HE courses.

Over the period, 2016-21, Business students coming from A/AS Levels were more likely to receive good degrees (68%) compared to those with BTEC/Level 3 qualifications (40%). Only around 23% of students from other routes, including Access to HE courses, received good degrees. There is a significant gap in attainment of good degrees between White (50%), Asian (37%) and Black students (21%). Around two-thirds of Mixed students received good degrees, although are represented in relatively small numbers.

Over the same period and according to available data, just under a quarter (23%) of students on Business courses came from areas in quintiles 4 and 5 on the index of multiple deprivations (IMD). Around 32% of white students, 14 % Asian students and 16% Black students come from these areas. POLAR4 (participation in higher education by local area) data for the period is relatively limited (around 37% students are not accounted for) but shows around 34% students from quintiles 4 and 5. Of these, 32% are Asian, 25% are Black and 23% are White.

1.3.2 Assessment practices in Business

The traditional model for assessing learning in Business disciplines is via written or aural examination and coursework, including project based work, aimed at investigating knowledge acquisition and its application to problem solving situations (Brown and Rich, 2021). BNU has a commitment to coursework-based assessment with relatively few examinations and an active commitment to avoiding unseen exams in the first year which is reflected in its Business courses. In keeping with the professionally oriented ethos of the university, there is a focus on authentic assessment across the full range of Business related programmes, providing opportunities for students to rehearse and develop valuable communication forms of relevance to the world of work, with a particular focus on reports and presentations (e.g., BNU, 2016, 2018). Opportunities for developing team working and communication skills via group work are particularly valued and there is a focus on enterprise and work-related learning opportunities, e.g., in the first year, students engage in a ‘The Apprentice’ (BBC1, 2024) style activity within the Graduate Challenge module and the final year dissertation has options for a work-based consultancy project.

An indicative assessment regime for the first year of a BNU Business programme is given below, based on the BA Business Management (BNU, 2021a) (see Table 12).

Table 12: Assessment regime of the first year BA Business Management (2021)

Module	Credits	Assessment by text type	Words
	15	Report	500

Global Business Environment		Portfolio of short reports	3 x 500
The Graduate Challenge	15	Report	500
		Reflective report	1500
Introduction to People Management	15	Research Portfolio	2000
Principles of Marketing	15	Report	1500
		Group presentation + report	10-minutes + 1000
Financial Decision Making	15	Report	2500
Organisational Behaviour	15	Report	2500
Career Viewpoint	15	Report	1500
		Report + CV	1500
Data Insights for Business Decisions	15	Group presentation	15-minutes
		Group presentation	15-minutes

1.4 Research aim and questions

The aim of this research is to explore students' lived experience of how assignment requirements and expectations are communicated to them in assignment briefs and related dissemination activities and how this affects their ability to engage effectively with their assessed work and develop confidence in themselves as learners. In achieving this aim, I intend to answer the following questions:

- What aspects of the assignment briefs, related documentation and dissemination activities afford or impede effective engagement with assessed tasks and how are these experienced by students?
- How does engagement with the brief contribute to students' confidence in their identities as learners as part of their transition into higher education

It is hoped that on the basis of the answers to these questions that I might be able to suggest practices that might result in improved confidence, engagement and learning for students in their engagement with assessment.

1.5 Theoretical framework

The following section outlines the theoretical framework which underlies my approach to this research study.

The focus of this research occupies a point at the intersection of a number of broad and complex domains of knowledge. It is focused on an students' experience of assignment briefs and related activities as an aspect of their experience of assessment. It is interested particularly in the experiences of students new to higher education, so issues around transition and the development of identity and belonging and broader conceptions of social justice are also of relevance. The nature of the higher education sector following the widening of participation in the last decades and the particular nature of the institution in which the study is based means that an exploration of these phenomena also requires an understanding of the challenges faced by students from what have historically been considered 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The concept of academic literacies (e.g., Lea and Street, 1998, 2006) provides a useful frame within which to contextualise and examine these challenges. In this context, the term 'literacy' is understood in its broadest sense beyond the acts of reading and writing and entails the rather wider conception of the ways of thinking and doing that students must engage with in their engagement with advanced study as a social and cultural practice. This section presents an overview of academic literacies and establishes the theoretical framework within which the study is situated.

The term academic literacies derives from work conducted in the field of critical linguistics (Baynham, 1995), in the 1980s and 1990s, coined the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 2011). NLS viewed the ability to read and write (literacy in its singular form) not simply as a cognitive phenomenon, but rather as a social and cultural practice, a way of participating in social and cultural groups, in Discourses, rather than a purely 'mental achievement' (Gee, 2010). In order to understand it fully, therefore, literacy must be

studied not in isolation but in its full range of social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006).

In their overview of the field of academic literacies, Lillis and Tuck (2016) make a link between the emergence of academic literacies in the 1990s as a way of thinking about student writing and the profound changes occurring in the higher education system, beginning in the previous decade. The increased presence of students in higher education from different backgrounds to those who had traditionally attended university problematized previously unquestioned academic practices (Lillis and Tuck, 2016), making visible the gap between the values, language and literacy practices valued within disciplinary Discourses and those of students (Lillis, 2019). This questioned assumptions about the straightforward nature of academic writing and 'academic literacy'. The use of the singular form here is deliberate and has an ideological basis (Lillis and Scott, 2015).

1.5.1 Assessment as Discourse

This research study takes a view of the business of communicating and being as practiced within higher education, as a Discourse, as defined by Gee (2003b, 2011). Gee's work strongly influences the academic literacies model (Lea and Street, 2006) that I use as a basis for exploring students' experience of assessment. Discourse is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon, which, therefore, is inherently complex. Gee defines Discourses² are 'ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes' (Gee, 1989, pp. 6–7). Discourses are ideological; they are part of the 'armoury of concepts, conventions and practices that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal or... the end point of a normal developmental progression' (Gee, 2011, p. 65) and are thus related to the distribution of social power and social goods in society and the preservation of the control of power by certain dominant Discourses. Discourses are exclusionary in that they define themselves in opposition to other Discourses and privilege and protect the values and practices they enshrine.

² I follow Gee's use of capitalisation to distinguish between the term *Discourse* used in this sense as opposed to a means of simply describing discourse as an act of communication.

Dominant Discourses thus act as effective gatekeepers to social power and goods. The concept of Discourse provides a useful frame for understanding how students acquire genre knowledge (Tardy, 2009) as part of their developing academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998). It also provides a powerful account for how the acquisition of Discourse and performance within Discourse communities are strongly linked to individuals' sense of identity and their relation to the world around them (Gee, 2011).

An individual's primary Discourse is the one into which they are apprenticed and socialized as members of families in sociocultural settings. This provides their initial, (possibly) enduring sense of self and sets the foundations for:

...our culturally specific vernacular language (our 'everyday' language), the language in which we speak and act as 'everyday' (non-specialised) [people, and our culturally specific vernacular identity (Gee, 2011, p. 173)

Secondary Discourses are those of the institutions, other communities and social groups with which individuals interact in the world, such as school, religious communities and other groups. In situations where the practices of secondary Discourses are particularly valued, families may incorporate them into their primary Discourses in order to facilitate children's later entry into the valued secondary Discourse. Parents read books with their children, encourage them to observe religious practices, reward academic success, etc. As individuals grow up, the concept of primary Discourse is expanded to reflect the inclusion of other secondary Discourses in which they participate as part of their interactions and experiences within their communities and environments. Gee refers to this as the 'lifeworld Discourse' (Gee, 2011), which forms the basis for an individual's adult identity, of who they are and what they are, the product of their primary Discourses and the many, sometimes conflicting, socially and historically defined secondary Discourses they have acquired.

In Gee's terms (2011), disciplinary communities in higher education with their epistemologies, values, specialist languages, text types and usages are secondary Discourses. In order to participate within the disciplinary community, it is necessary to acquire its Discourse. Where there is a marked disparity between the students' lifeworld Discourse and the Discourse of the institution, the disciplinary community and even the individual teacher, the student is placed in a particularly difficult position. Acquiring the

Discourse of particular disciplines, is seen as a challenge for all students, but may be particularly so for those from non-traditional backgrounds because of the gap between their primary linguistic practices and those privileged within the Discourse of the institution and discipline (Burke, 2020). Students from more privileged socio-economic groups for whom going to university is an expectation and who may have been pre-socialised and oriented towards the values and practices of higher education may thus face less of a challenge than those who have not (Thomas, 2002; Leese, 2010; Ashwin, 2014). Gee (2003b) frames assessment in terms of the challenges of acquiring secondary Discourse in a context of social inequity. Students from diverse backgrounds who may have lacked previous opportunities to engage with the privileged practices of secondary Discourse communities face particular challenges.

1.5.2 The academic literacies model

Lea and Street (2006) outline three models with which to conceptualise student writing and literacy development in academic contexts:

1. Study skills
2. Academic socialization
3. Academic literacies

The study skills model views writing and literacy as ‘autonomous’ (Street, 2003), transferable, cognitive skills which, once learned, students can transfer from one academic context to another. Student writing is seen as ‘technical and instrumental’ (Lea and Street, 1998). Academic socialisation, on the other hand, acknowledges the differences between disciplinary and subject-based discourses. Students are thus required to assimilate the particular practices of the disciplinary context in which they are working in order to function effectively within that context. This is a monologic and normative view of literacies. It is monologic because it is oriented towards maintenance and reproduction of disciplinary Discourses (Lillis, 2003). That is, it is one-sided and the disciplinary Discourse is uncontested. It is normative (Lillis and Scott, 2015) because it presupposes the stability of the disciplinary Discourse into which students can be readily inducted once the academic conventions that are specific to it are taught and learnt.

Students become members of the discourse community by learning to write and think like members of the discourse community.

The third model of academic literacies by contrast views student writing and learning at the level of epistemology and identity (Lea and Street, 1998) and frames them as social practices which entail the 'relationships of power, authority, meaning making and identity' (Lea and Street, 2006, p. 369) not situated solely within disciplinary communities but within wider institutional, social and political contexts, such as government, business, sectoral quality assurance bodies, etc.) In Foucauldian terms, it is an 'oppositional discourse' (Foucault, 2002), challenging and questioning established power structures and opening up space for resistance and change.

Lillis (1999, 2001) coined the concept of the 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 2001, p. 53) to describe the confusion experienced by student writers in their attempt to determine the expectations of their individual tutors, wider disciplines and institutions, pointedly remarking that such practice is ideologically inscribed as it 'works against those least familiar with the conventions surrounding academic writing' (Lillis, 2001, p. 76). Students new to the university environment and, perhaps particularly, those from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds are therefore particularly disadvantaged (Lillis, 1999). Where the business of academic writing and other academic texts, such as assignment briefs, are viewed as unproblematic, simply 'common sense', then students who are not already party to the privileged practices they enshrine are necessarily excluded or, importantly, viewed as problematic or having a deficit (French, 2013). French (2013) suggests persuasively that academic practices (from Gee's (2011) perspective, the disciplinary and institutional Discourse) can be seen as a form of Foucauldian 'disciplinary power' to which everyone is subject and expected to conform and yet which is also tacit, ill-defined and opaque.

1.5.3 An epistemology and ideology for academic literacies

Lillis and Scott identify the epistemological (literacy is a social practice) and ideological (there is a transformative intent) basis for academic literacies as a valid research approach (Lillis and Scott, 2015). The concern with transformation is best understood in its contrast to the dominant normative orientation (Lillis, 2019) in which the codes, conventions and practices of the discipline are taken as given and uncontested (Lea and Street, 1998) (i.e., literacy in its singular form). A conceptualisation of academic literacies as a practice related to students' social and culture identities, not purely a set of cognitive skills (Gee, 2011), has the potential for transformation because it acknowledges and exposes the power relations that determine the meaning and use of language in social contexts. It is transformative because it allows for a dialogic rather than unidirectional relationship between the learner and their context in which the context itself may necessarily adapt to the needs of the learner; that is, rather than being fixed and stable, the disciplinary Discourse has the potential to value and accommodate new ways of thinking and doing (Gale and Parker, 2014a). New entrants to the Discourse community need to develop their ability to function effectively within the community, acquiring new language and social practices, but do so in a way that also acknowledges their existing Discourse and values. This aspect is key to understanding transformation in the academic literacies sense. That is, it is transformative in that it provides opportunities for seeing the world differently, questioning the normalising effect of power in the Foucauldian sense and providing for the possibility of both 'living within the system but thinking outside it' (Badenhorst *et al.*, 2015, p. 98).

Lillis (1997) discusses the way in which ideology becomes normalised as 'common sense' and thus appears not to represent what is in actuality the interests and values of a particular social group. Academic conventions viewed from this perspective can be seen as privileging practices, representative of the dominant Discourses of the powerful (Gee, 2011). This has implications for students in terms of what they can say, how they can say it and who they can 'be' in their writing. Is it appropriate, for example, for students to use the first-person pronoun or less formal vocabulary in their writing when not doing so may

in some way deny their lifeworld Discourse and identity, such that their work does not sound like 'their work' to them?

Aiken (2021) characterises this conflict as a balancing act, a 'tilting point' and draws upon the Bakhtinian concept of centripetal versus centrifugal forces³ within society, which provides a useful metaphor for the contrast between monologic and dialogic discourses. Centripetal forces act to pull language towards unity, standardisation and a single discourse, which sees language as 'ideologically saturated... as a world view...' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271). Centrifugal forces, however, push outwards towards diversity, creativity and decentralisation. In academic literacies terms, centripetal forces can be seen to relate to the unidirectional, normative nature of dominant Discourses within higher education and the practices that are oriented towards their reproduction (Lillis, 2003b; Lillis and Scott, 2007). In the Foucauldian sense, they are the mechanisms by which power seeks to normalise and via which individuals are able to resist and act upon it with their own power. Linguistically, these can be characterised as discourse practices that students must learn into order to participate and be allowed entry into their disciplinary communities. They are not fixed, but rather ideologically defined social practices subject to Lee and Street's (2006, p. 369) 'relationships of power, authority, meaning making and identity'. By contrast, centrifugal forces relate more to a student writer's personal identity, resources and alternative Discourses (Lillis, 2014) and open up the possibility of a dialogic, transformative approach that allows for different voices, new ways of making meaning, of being and doing.

This balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces reflects Bakhtin's notion of utterance as struggle (Bakhtin, 1981). All writers draw upon socially constructed resources but disparities in the availability of such resources means that engaging in and with written communication is never equal and always informed by power. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of struggle is useful because it acknowledges that students are using a language that is not their own, but with which they must necessarily make meaning as

³ In Physics, centripetal forces act towards the centre, e.g. gravity, while centrifugal forces act outwards away from the centre.

part of their becoming as students in their fields (Thesen, 2013; Aiken, 2021). They must find ways of acting upon the language with their own power:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language... but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (p.294) (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293–294)

The challenge for students to do this, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, however, is considerable. Disciplinary language is, in Bakhtinian terms 'authoritative discourse' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342), distanced and privileged. This is emphasised within institutional practices of communicating assignments to students in assignment briefs, which bear the trappings of the institution in the form of its corporate logo and point to its regulatory mechanisms for preserving quality, rigor and the policing of academic integrity. It is little wonder that students experience anxiety when engaging in summative assessment. Armed with what prior knowledge they have and only a developing and partial understanding of the Disciplinary discourse they must find ways of appropriating and respeaking the language and investing it with their own meaning, while doing so according to rules and assumptions privileged within the authoritative discourse, which may be at best be only partially visible and acknowledged and at worst arcane and opaque (Lillis, 2001).

Assessment practices that too proscriptionally require students to adopt centripetal approaches run the risk of promoting instrumental approaches that 'write out their own thinking, ideas and values' (Aiken, 2021, p. 3) and reduce the opportunity for genuine meaning making and what Bakhtin would term 'internally-persuasive discourse' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342), via which language is respoken in the writer's own words and accents. Students may have learnt the disciplinary Discourse, but at the expense of developing meaningful disciplinary understanding in which they, too, are present. This has clear implications for teaching and assessment, suggesting the benefit of activities that involve an interrogation and problematisation of 'common sense' (Lillis, 2003b, p. 194) ways of doing and thinking within the disciplinary Discourse and allow for the exploration of the

power differentials and privileges inherent in disciplinary practices in a way that values, rather than subsumes, students' lifeworld Discourses.

As students engage with the sociocultural practices within their disciplines, they learn not only their subjects but also how to be members of these social and cultural communities and to experience themselves differently (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In essence, it is a process of identity formation through lived experience, constructed by the individual on the basis of their existing sense of themselves and the possibilities and constrictions afforded by the social and cultural context of the disciplinary environment (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014). Esteban-Guitart and Moll's concept of identity as a distributed and culturally mediated concept has clear analogies with Gee's notions of lifeworld Discourse and secondary disciplinary Discourses. Individuals' experiences, families, communities are funds of knowledge and identity which they appropriate for the purposes of defining themselves. In an analogue with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), Esteban-Guitart and Moll see educational environments as 'zones of proximal identity development' (Polman, 2010) in which learners redefine their sense of themselves, building on their existing 'funds of identity' to acquire new knowledge and identities, echoing Foucault's notion of the ways in which identity is always in process and related to context (Foucault, 1982). In the same way, therefore, that teachers build on existing knowledge to scaffold learning, approaches which value and draw upon learners' funds of identity may serve to optimise the formation of positive new identities. From an academic literacies' perspective, this views students' acquisition of disciplinary norms and language not as a unidirectional process of socialisation, but one in which there is a genuine possibility of transformation. The student does not deny or divorce themselves from their existing Discourse, rather they build on it in order to construct new identities as students and future professionals which entail both their lifeworld Discourse and the secondary disciplinary and professional Discourse. Equally, such a view acknowledges the culturally determined nature of the educational and disciplinary context and the notion that this too is at least capable of transformation (Gale, 2012; Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014; Gale and Parker, 2014a), however slow and reluctant it might be to do so (Smith, Greenfields and Rochon, 2022).

2 Literature Review

This research study derives from my engagement with students in the process of interpreting and responding to assignments and teachers involved in the setting and communicating of assignment expectations and requirements over a number of years of working both as a student-facing learning developer and predominantly staff-facing academic developer in a small professionally oriented new university in the southeast of England. The process of conducting this literature review has allowed me to develop my understanding of the challenges for both students and teachers in these aspects of the assessment process, confirming some of the understanding I have developed over years of practice, but also providing an opportunity to interrogate and question my assumptions and conceptions of the complex business of conducting assessment in higher education. Drawing on my professional experience has allowed me to access resources that would otherwise have been invisible using conventional literature search methods, not least of all Gilbert and Maguire's work on assignment brief design (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014) that provided a basis for this journey.

To establish a full picture view of how assignment briefs have been discussed in the literature I adopted a combination of methodical review typically associated with systematic reviews and also narrative approaches (Green, Johnson and Adams, 2006; Ferrari, 2015) (see Appendix 2). This provided an opportunity systematically to survey a body of literature to determine coverage of assignment brief related research and also for the researcher to draw upon their extensive professional experience of assessment practices in higher education to inform and provide the basis for a more narrative exploration (Bryman, 2012). Methodical searches were conducted using search strings such as "assignment brief" with variations including, "assessed task" and "assessment expectations" using a range of available databases likely to contain results relating to higher education, including: ABI/INFORM, DOAJ, Emerald, Ingenta, Taylor and Francis Online and Wiley Online. Where the multiple meanings of assignment and assessment produced large numbers of inappropriate results, the modifying string "+ higher education" was added. Searches were limited to results since the year 2000 and, where such features were available, focused on titles OR

abstracts. Titles were used as an initial filter and remaining abstracts were surveyed for suitability. Six articles were identified, of which three ((Richards and Pilcher, 2014; Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Walsh, 2021b) were highly relevant and three were partially relevant ((Kaur, Noman and Awang-Hashim, 2018; Marder *et al.*, 2019; Fernández Ruiz *et al.*, 2022)). Further searches using reverse and forward snowballing techniques (Sayers, 2008; Wohlin, 2014) were conducted using reference lists of articles and resources identified based on professional knowledge and experience. Access was sometimes an issue as some journals were not part of the collections subscribed to by my institutional library. Often, though, it was possible to obtain pre-publication versions via Research Gate and institutional repositories. Books were sourced from my own collection or via the university library. Some older works were also purchased second-hand via eBay and Amazon.

This review of literature begins with a discussion of summative and formative assessment, with which to provide a context for the following engagement with assignment briefs and related dissemination practices. It concludes with a problematisation and reconceptualization of the idea of transition.

2.1 Conceptualising assessment

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that assessment plays an important role in defining what and how students engage with learning. ‘Assessment frames learning’ (Gibbs, 2019, p. 22), it is ‘one of the main drivers to activate student effort and control study behaviour’ (Jessop and Tomas, 2017a, p. 996) and is increasingly seen as an opportunity to promote and enhance learning (e.g., Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013; Carless, 2015). Indeed, harnessing the ‘backwash effect’ of assessment (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 197) by aligning assessment tasks to expected outcomes and learning provides the basis for constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996, 2003, 2014), a concept which informs learning, teaching and assessment practices at a number of levels in contemporary higher education.

Assessment is a complex process with multiple purposes. A common means of describing two important functions is as assessment *of* learning (summative assessment (Rowntree,

1987; Boud, 2007; Taras and Davies, 2013)) and assessment *for* learning (formative assessment (Sadler, 1989; Mcdowell, Sambell and Davison, 2009; Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013)). Assessment of learning is typically associated with measurement and certification functions (Medland, 2016), yet also provides some opportunities for learning (Carless, 2007), particularly if there are opportunities for students to apply learning from one summative activity to another within or across modules within their programmes (Meer and Chapman, 2014). Formative assessment, while its focus may be on learning, is nevertheless linked to summative assessment as a means of preparing students for engagement in summative activities (Yorke, 2003). The complexity of assessment is that it always about more than one thing at a time (Carless, 2007). As Boud (2000) suggests, assessment always does ‘double duty’. It is about measurement, and it is about learning. It is about assessing and providing opportunities for learning subject content and skills and is also always about itself. Ideally, while engaging in assessment, students also learn about assessment in a way that enables them to engage more effectively in future activities (Price *et al.*, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2013); a key requirement for effective assessment practices is that they should prepare students for confident engagement with future assessments (Boud, 2000).

2.1.1 Summative assessment: ‘Assessment of learning’

Medland (2016, p. 86) describes assessment of learning as belonging to a ‘testing culture’ in which the focus is on certification, measurement of outcomes and marking. In this form of assessment, the power differentials between staff and student are particularly visible (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999). Gulikers *et al.* (2006) suggest that there has been a shift away from a culture of summative testing to one of ‘assessment’ in the broader sense, with an emphasis on authenticity and learning. However, changes in the wider sector including an increased focus on accountability, metrics and graduate outcomes related to employment may conspire against such a shift. There is a tension between well-intentioned learning-focused assessment practices ‘on the ground’ and the need for institutions to focus on demonstrable summative metrics in public and, of course, provide opportunities for students to succeed in their professional aspirations. The summative

function of assessment as means of assessing the performance of students to facilitate academic progression and provide certification is arguably one of the most important activities that educators perform (Kvale, 2007; Craddock and Mathias, 2009). This is perhaps particularly the case in a higher education environment in which metrics associated with attainment and progression have become increasingly important as a measure of the teaching excellence of individual educators, programmes, departments and institutions (Gunn, 2018).

Kvale (2007) points to the centrality of the measurement and certification function in higher education, which has historically privileged those already equipped to benefit from higher learning by educational opportunity and social class at the expense of those who lack such opportunities. That is, in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1977), summative assessment serves to 'legitimize and rationalise the unequal distribution of power and resources in society' (Leathwood, 2005, p. 310). In more contemporary mass higher education, Kvale suggests, students internalise the mechanisms of control (teacher-defined examinations and assessments) which define what is important to be learnt and valued with disciplines and thus define themselves as either able or less able in achieving the grades necessary for access to educational and occupational privileges. Assessment is thus conceived as threat and is linked to high levels of anxiety and negative emotions, particularly for those at the 'lower end of the grade curve' (Kvale, 2007, p. 65). As Yorke suggests (2003), this may well lead some students to reflect adversely on their abilities and lose confidence to the extent they consider themselves 'failures' (Yorke, 2003, p. 489).

Summative assessment is of central importance to students; if they wish to graduate, their engagement with summative assessment is 'inescapable' (Boud, 1995, p. 35). If students are to be required to engage in summative assessment processes, then, it is therefore important that the means with which students are assessed summatively are appropriately fit for purpose, fair and transparent as a minimal requirement (Sadler, 2016). Summative assessment tasks that are properly aligned to the learning they purport to assess are a key component in this (Biggs, 2014). A move away from traditional exams and essays to more authentic means of assessment via coursework designed to reflect learning of relevance to the world outside the classroom may also make for more

meaningful summative assessment opportunities (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007), particularly in programmes of study directed towards employment and the achievement of professional standards (Crisp and Lister, 2005; Rust, 2005; Dinning and Brown, 2016).

Yet, neither clear specification, appropriate alignment, nor authenticity of tasks alone are sufficient to provide just and equitable opportunities for all students to perform at their optimal abilities. This is of particular importance in an educational environment in which the student body is as diverse and heterogenous as in contemporary mass higher education in the UK (Butcher *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, viewed from an academic literacies perspective (Lea and Street, 2006), the notions of clarity and constructive alignment are inherently problematic. Teachers' assumptions about students' previous educational experiences and their understanding of academic and disciplinary language and conventions may unwittingly act to exclude students who have not yet acquired the necessary Discourse (Bateson *et al.*, 2016). The language in which tasks are specified itself may represent a barrier to students who are not already party to the meanings with which it is invested in the particular educational and disciplinary context (Williams, 2005; Richards and Pilcher, 2014; Butcher *et al.*, 2017). Constructive alignment may provide a basis for defining and assessing the quality of tasks 'on paper' (Prøitz, 2010; Prøitz *et al.*, 2017), but even clear, well-formed learning outcomes require sophisticated understanding of their context in order to be meaningful to students (Hussey and Smith, 2002, 2003, 2008; Scott, 2011) and may promote reductive and strategic approaches to evidencing what students perceive they require (Erikson and Erikson, 2019). Without opportunities to explore and unpack the deceptively simple statements contained within outcomes, they may simply be a further aspect of the 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 2001, p. 53; Stooke and Hibbert, 2017). Equally, the innovative nature of authentic tasks, however valid as a means of assessing professionally oriented learning may, by their very difference to traditional approaches, creates a further barrier as students lack experience of engaging with them (Jessop and Tomas, 2017a).

It is a common claim that students have become more strategic in their engagement with summative assessment and its perceived demands (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005; Gibbs, 2019). This is frequently framed in terms of negative impact this has on the quality of student learning, with a tendency towards the adoption of surface approaches to learning

(Marton and Saljö, 1976) aimed at delivering what they perceive to be expected of them (Al-Kadri *et al.*, 2012; Harland *et al.*, 2015; Hodgson and Garvey, 2020). Yet, if assessment can be harnessed to drive positive approaches to learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011), then the obverse is also true. Student approaches to learning as identified by Marton and Saljö (1976, 2005) are not fixed, but rather determined by the learning and assessment environment and what learners perceive to be expected of them. It is 'quite easy to induce a surface approach... However, when attempting to induce a deep approach the difficulties seen quite profound' (Marton and Saljö, 2005, p. 53). Where Marton and Saljö did find an indication of the conditions that might promote deeper approaches it was in relation to the student interest in the subject matter (intrinsic motivation), absence of threat (extrinsic motivation) and absence of anxiety. We might assume that students' interest in their subjects is high, but this will depend upon their perceptions of the relevance of the task in which they are engaged (Marton and Saljö, 2005; Ramsden, 2005). The threat of being assessed and anxiety about whether or not they are delivering what is required during summative assessment activity will depend upon a range of factors, but where it is present it is not surprising that students might adopt strategic approaches (Ramsden, 2005; Al-Kadri *et al.*, 2012).

Ashwin (2009) suggests that there is a correlation between students' identity and their inclination to be strategic in their engagement with higher education. Students from more privileged backgrounds with positive experiences of education may experience 'effortless fit' (Ashwin, 2009, p. 85) between themselves and their institutional contexts which means there is no need for them consciously to plan their engagement or where they are going. Student lacking the academic capital of their more privileged counterparts may necessarily adopt strategic approaches as a means of making sense of the unfamiliar demands, conventions and assumed expectations of their new higher education contexts. Lack of clarity about assessment expectations in clear comprehensive assignment briefs and related assessment criteria can result in both anxiety and the adoption of subsequent surface approaches of engagement as students seek clues as to what is required of them (Walsh, 2021b). If what is valued in their work and how their work will be assessed is not clear elsewhere or is otherwise inaccessible to them, it is unsurprising that students should seek Howell-Richardson's 'golden key' (Howell-Richardson, 2015) to unlocking the

'secret' to an assignment and expect their teacher to provide the information they require. Indeed, in environments strongly oriented towards summative assessment, it seems likely that such attitudes may be at least implicitly encouraged.

It can be tempting to view assessment of learning as a 'necessary evil' (Taras, 2008), but this denies both the importance of summative assessment in providing opportunities for students to gain certification and improve their life chances and career opportunities (Gill, 2019, 2020) and the learning opportunities that summative assessment provides (Yorke, 2003; Taras, 2008). Summative assessment also fulfils a necessary gatekeeping function in disciplines leading to professional careers, such as Social Work, ensuring that successful graduates have demonstrated minimal requirements for professional competence, knowledge and values and are 'fit to practice' (Crisp and Lister, 2005). The issue is not that summative assessment is inappropriate, but that it places the student in a passive role, in which assessment happens to them, rather than in which they are actively involved (Boud, 2007).

Without opportunities to engage actively with and learn about assessment processes via formative activities, student learning through summative assessment is essentially experiential. That is, they learn about it by doing it. The nature of mass higher education (often delivered via modular programmes which can lead to assessment deadlines falling simultaneously (Hounsell *et al.*, 2008)) and, indeed, the complexity of engaging with assessment itself, rather conspire against this as an effective form of learning.

Programmes with heavy summative assessment workloads may result in students adopting instrumental and performative approaches via which they strategically deliver what is required to pass their assignments as a means of managing the burden of completing multiple assignments (Gibbs, 2019), which rather works against the acquisition of Disciplinary discourse in a meaningful sense (Jessop and Tomas, 2017a). On the other hand, programmes with relatively limited summative regimes otherwise might allow for more time on task (Gibbs, 2010, 2019) but will also provide similarly limited scope for students to acquire understanding and experience of the privileged text types and communication forms within their contexts (Dodd, Ellis and Singh, 2020) if they lack appropriate formative assessment opportunities for engaging with disciplinary Discourse. The proliferation of text types driven by authentic approaches to assessment (Gillett and

Hammond, 2009; Dismore, 2017) may also provide limited opportunities for students to develop expertise in key assignment types (Jessop and Tomas, 2017a).

Learning by experience can be a powerful approach, but students do not learn by experience alone. Kolb's influential model for experiential learning places experience within an active process of reflection, planning and active hypothesis formation (Kolb, 1984). Simply relying on student engagement with summative assessment as a means of developing their understanding of assessment text types and how to engage effectively with assessment process is insufficient:

Experience is what you have to halt, check, negate, in order to get knowledge... experiential learning is derived from life experience. It does not just happen. Learning requires reflection (Aitchison and Graham, 1989, p. 17)

The opportunities for experiencing assessment in summative activities are too few and far between and neither encourage students to make links between and apply learning from one context to another nor to reflect on their learning from their experiences. Modular systems in which assessment typically takes place at the end of the unit of learning may further limit opportunities for students to apply learning from one assignment to others in subsequent modules (Yorke, 2003), which may in any case be assessed via different text types with different purposes (Hughes, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2019). Integrated approaches to assessment in which outcomes from a number of modules are assessed in synoptic assignments may help students to bring things together in meaningful ways (Harvey, Tree and Rand-Weaver, 2018), but these are not widely adopted across the sector. Invitational approaches to feedback which encourage students to engage in dialogue with their work may also provide useful opportunities for reflection and learning, not only on content matter, but also the process of 'doing' assessment itself (Hattie and Timperley, 2011; Hattie and Clarke, 2019). Yet, in summative contexts, students may focus on grades rather than feedback (Sadler, 1989) and the process of decoding and engaging with feedback is itself complex and difficult (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

The complexity of engaging with assessment represents a barrier to learning solely through experience if it is not combined with guidance, instruction and opportunities for meaningful reflection and learning, particularly for students new to the assessment

practices of higher education. Beaumont, Doherty and Shannon (2011) draw attention to the intense nature of how students in compulsory education settings are prepared and guided in relation to assessed tasks. In higher education contexts, however, in which contact time is much reduced in comparison and there is a greater emphasis on independent learning, such opportunities may be less available (Beaumont, Moscrop and Canning, 2016; Scriver, Olesen and Clifford, 2021). Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006) suggest that the cognitive load imposed by complex and unfamiliar tasks may prevent students from learning from them because so much of their cognitive resource is taken up with processing and dealing with the task that there is insufficient remaining to allow for schema formation that might form the basis for more confident and cognitively efficient processing of future tasks. This is likely to be exacerbated if the task itself is not effectively designed and clearly communicated (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a; Gilbert, 2012). This would suggest the usefulness of explicit teaching about how to engage with key assessed tasks, particularly for those that are felt to be key text types within a discipline, for example via worked example approaches (Kalyuga, Chandler and Sweller, 2001) and progressive approaches to scaffolding (Balloo *et al.*, 2018).

2.1.2 Formative assessment: ‘Assessment for Learning’

Sadler’s (1989) seminal article provides a useful starting point for an engagement with formative assessment. Not only does it provide a clear rationale for use of formative approaches as a necessary condition for learning through engagement with assessment, it also provides the basis for much of how formative assessment is conceptualised and understood in contemporary higher education practices (e.g., Carless (2007, 2015), O’Donovan, Price and Rust (2008), Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery (2013), Advance HE (2019)). Drawing a clear distinction between summative and formative assessment, Sadler links the former strongly with the measurement of student achievement by the teacher, a process in which the student is passive and the focus on the mark received may obscure their access to and use of otherwise formative feedback. Indeed, this is reflective of the selecting and ranking function of summative assessment as a means of legitimising and rationalising the ‘unequal distribution of power and resources in society’

(Leathwood, 2005, p. 310). It is, ultimately, the grade that determines access to certification, so success and failure. In a context in which this is the prevailing view, assessment is something that is 'done' to students and feedback is reduced to the status of interference and noise. This is somewhat reflected elsewhere in the literature. Rust, for example, notes that students are more likely to take note of feedback when work is returned to them with feedback alone before the mark is released (Rust, 2011). Sadler's view of formative assessment, however, is one in which students play an active role and is centred around enabling students to form judgements of their own work. In short, that they should be able to provide feedback to themselves. For Clark (2012), formative assessment is therefore potentially a transformative process, rooted in an understanding of the assessment process as a social practice and the unequal power relations that determine the nature of discourse. That is, student engagement with formative assessment and the internalisation of privileged tacit knowledge empowers them to participate in the assessment process as an oppositional discourse (Foucault, 2002), as active participants rather than passive recipients.

Sadler (1989) defines effective formative assessment as providing students with the knowledge and skills to be able to assess their own performance. That is, its focus is on developing their ability judge the quality of what they are doing and to regulate their performance while doing it. This relies on three core requirements; in order to regulate and improve their engagement with assessment, the student should:

- a) Possess a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for
- b) Compare the actual (or current) level of performance
- c) Engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap

(Sadler, 1989, p. 121)

What Sadler is describing in these three statements is the development of students' evaluative judgement:

Evaluative judgment is the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of self and others (Tai et al., 2018)

This involves an understanding of what constitutes quality (the standard against which judgements are made) and the ability to apply it. It is strongly linked with concepts of self-

efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and self-regulation (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Clark, 2012) and teaching and learning practices that foster the development of both explicit and tacit knowledge of students' disciplines and the processes of assessment itself (Sadler, 1989, 2010; O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2008; Carless, 2015). I will explore these areas in more depth, but before doing so, it will be useful to explore the concept of self-regulation and why it is fundamental to effective formative assessment activities.

2.1.2.1 Developing students' ability to self-regulate through formative assessment

Sadler (1989) states that the indispensable requirement for students to make improvements to their work as a result of formative assessment is that should hold 'a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher' (Sadler, 1989, p. 121) and be able to apply this to their work while they are producing it. Clearly, teacher input in the form of feedback is of relevance and can be useful, but the goal is for students to be able to self-monitor. It involves complex learning and internalisation of multiple dimensions of knowledge and skill beyond the simple memorisation and acquisition of facts, concepts and content. Self-regulation is 'a set of effortful, cognitively demanding strategies' (Garcia and Pintrich, 1991, p. 10) via which students are able to regulate aspects of their thinking, motivation and behaviour during learning and engagement with assessment (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Clark (2012) identifies the fundamental objective of formative assessment as equipping students with metacognitive strategies for self-regulation so that they maintain motivation, improve attainment and develop skills for life-long learning. This depends upon a learning environment which promotes strong feelings of self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the course of action to produce given attainments' (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Collective efficacy is a 'group's shared beliefs in its conjoint capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment' (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). Environments which promote the latter, for example, via collaborative learning, develop positive inter-dependence, which would argue strongly for socially oriented approaches to formative assessment involving discussion and interaction

between students and their teachers (Clark, 2012). There are clear links here with Vygotskian notions of the social dimension to learning via interactions with more knowledgeable others and the shared negotiation of meaning and sense making (Vygotsky, 1978). This also seems likely to have a useful function in developing a sense of community and belonging in the student group. For example, O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019) suggest that this kind of social interaction may be particularly useful for students from diverse and low socio-economic backgrounds as it provides a means of developing bridging and bonding social capital, promoting a sense of belonging and providing opportunities for overcoming barriers and developing understanding of disciplinary and institutional norms.

Equally, environments which situate students as active participants in their learning rather than passive recipients are more likely to promote feelings of confidence and capability and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Garcia and Pintrich (1991) hold that a student's belief that they are capable of achieving their goals is more likely to lead to effective self-regulation, which in turn may lead to greater intrinsic motivation. This suggests a key role for teachers in developing learning environments in which students are provided with opportunities to actively participate in relevant formative assessment activities. Active engagement by students is important because learning assessment expectations and ways of improving performance must be internalised. Teachers have a useful role in scaffolding the development of such knowledge and ability, but it must be acquired and practiced via a process of negotiation between teacher and students and students themselves as part of their individual and collaborative engagement with formative activities (Clark, 2012). Again, there are strong links to Vygotskian conceptions of learning. Active engagement with dialogue and social interaction provides opportunities for students to accomplish more together than they would by themselves, i.e., to operate in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), building on and extending their existing knowledge in the development of both self and collective efficacy (Putney and Broughton, 2011) and improving performance (Yorke, 2003).

2.1.2.2 Developing evaluative judgment through engagement with formative assessment

Carless (2007, 2015) cites the development of evaluative judgment as a key element in his concept of learning oriented assessment, which also includes the necessity for appropriately aligned authentic tasks and timely and forward-looking feedback from both teachers and other students. These elements are necessarily related and inter-dependent. There is an emphasis on formative assessment in Carless's work, but also an attempt to activate summative assessment activities as learning opportunities. This is of particular value as staff views on assessment can tend towards its summative, measurement function and the necessity of the summative function can otherwise 'drown' formative approaches (Carless, 2007, p. 13). The key challenge for engaging students with formative assessment is that the knowledge that informs teachers' ability to assess and give feedback on student work depends upon both explicit and implicit tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) which they have developed over years of professional and pedagogical practice, which Sadler characterises as 'guild knowledge' (Sadler, 1989, p. 127). Students must acquire this knowledge in the form of active, scaffolded opportunities for practice and experience if they are to engage meaningfully with the assessment and regulation of their own work. It cannot be transmitted, it must be developed and constructed by the students themselves, for example via structured collaborative engagement (Clark, 2012). There is a risk in approaches that too heavily rely on teacher definitions of what should be done and to what level (Howell-Richardson and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2016). Students may become dependent on the teacher's judgement of what they know rather than developing their own ability to regulate their own performance (Boud, 1995). This may lead to 'learned dependence' and performative cue-seeking behaviour via which the student aims to deliver what the teacher seems to expect (Yorke, 2003).

Active approaches aimed at developing students' sense of efficacy and ability to self-regulate are important in promoting the belief that they can achieve, but students also require the requisite knowledge and skills in order to do so (Putney and Broughton, 2011) and developing student understanding of the standards and criteria against their work is assessed is complex. In contexts in which learning outcomes are assessed qualitatively,

i.e., based on judgment, rather than whether answers might be either sharply right or wrong, assessment criteria are necessarily 'fuzzy' and abstract with no absolute meaning outside of their context (Sadler, 1989; O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004a). Multiple criteria might apply to a given piece of work and assessors must also select those that are relevant to their particular purpose. The use of identified, explicit criteria communicated to students for the purposes of the formative assessment activity may present a way around this and is suggested to have benefits. This may particularly be the case when the criteria are concrete, task-specific and graduated (i.e., they capture a range of performance levels) (Andrade, 2019), but this is not unproblematic. Rust, Price and O'Donovan (2004b), for example, highlight the difficulty in both articulating criteria and standards with precision and in student understanding of them. The inherent complexity of defining and communicating disciplinary knowledge resists articulation in concise, precise statements and the language used to express them is subject to differences in interpretation.

Rust, Price and O'Donovan (2004b) also highlight the importance of the tacit knowledge as well as explicit knowledge which underlies the assessment process. Tacit knowledge resists articulation by its very nature, but can be transmitted via social processes, modelling and experience. For example, the use of activities in which students mark exemplars using given assessment criteria combined with opportunities for peer and teacher discussion has been shown to have a positive impact on future work (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004b). Such activities provide valuable opportunities for students to develop assessment literacy (Price *et al.*, 2012), i.e., their understanding of the purposes of assessment as part of the context for their learning and how to apply this to their work (Smith *et al.*, 2013). They also provide opportunities for the development and internalisation of complex disciplinary knowledge; assessment criteria in the form of rubrics, for example, do not simply provide a measure of student learning, they also enshrine disciplinary values and knowledge (Tai *et al.*, 2018). Importantly, such 'acquisition friendly' (Gee, 2003a) activities may also provide students with opportunities for developing their understanding of and appropriating the 'authoritative discourse' (Bakhtin, 1981) of their disciplinary Discourse.

Tai *et al.* (2018) identify a range of formative practices that can provide opportunities to develop evaluative judgement. These include self-assessment, peer assessment and review, teacher feedback, use of rubrics (assessment criteria) and use of exemplars (Tai *et al.*, 2018). Their effectiveness in promoting effective learning and development of students' ability to evaluate their own work and that of others, however, is dependent upon the manner in which the activities are implemented. Of particular importance is the separation of grading and marking and the avoidance of using of self and peer assessment to contribute to summative grades from the formative process (Panadero and Alonso-Tapia, 2017). Not only does this obscure the formative nature of any feedback which might accompany the mark, it may also contribute to negative perceptions about being asked to engage in an activity that students may feel is rightly the teacher's responsibility (Carnell, 2016). Carnell (2016) also suggests there may be affective issues, with some students feeling unhappy about receiving what they perceive to be negative feedback from their peers, or exposing their own perceived weaknesses, which may be exacerbated if the process also results in a mark or grade being awarded as well as qualitative feedback.

The use of criteria is naturally central to feedback practices. Feedback that focuses on how the work meets (or does not meet) the criteria with suggestions for future improvements is a positive, enabling feature (Tai *et al.*, 2018). However, students do not always know what to do to respond to feedback effectively (HEA, 2012a). Carless and Boud (2018b) argue convincingly for the explicit development of students' feedback literacies, the cognitive and affective abilities to engage effectively with feedback, which may drive more effective application of feedback to future work, but this is best achieved through approaches to assessment that afford opportunities for reflective formative engagement which may not be best served in summative practices. Carless and Boud do not mention reflection explicitly in their discussion, but it is implicit in the approaches they suggest may be useful in promoting feedback literacy, which depends up the students' abilities to self-regulate (e.g., Clark, 2012), not only in their engagement with assessed tasks, but in the processing of their feedback and its application.

2.1.3 Conformative assessment: ‘Assessment as learning’

The approaches to formative assessment discussed in the previous section can be characterised as active, requiring students to engage with, interrogate and discuss aspects of the assessment process in order to develop their abilities to self-evaluate and self-regulate. Indeed, for Clark, formative assessment is potentially transformative, providing opportunities for students engage with and interrogate the very social practice of assessment itself (Clark, 2012). By way of contrast, in situations where assessment procedures, processes and practices are over specified and how to achieve a given grade or award is increasingly transparent, especially when combined with more detailed assistance provided by teachers, then learners will naturally conform unquestioningly to the prevailing norms implicit in those practices. Learners may be more likely to succeed, but at the expense of the quality of learning achieved (Torrance, 2007). They will also be objectified and rendered ‘non-agentic’ (Nieminen, 2022, p. 5) in the process of assessment, which is ‘done to them’, rather than involving them as active, agentic participants. Such approaches might therefore result in learner dependency on their teachers, rather than greater autonomy and empowerment and a tendency toward instrumental and performative approaches. Torrance characterises this as ‘assessment as learning’:

...where assessment procedures and practices come completely to dominate the learning experience, and ‘criteria’ compliance comes to replace ‘learning’.
(Torrance, 2007, p. 282)

It relates to both the over-specification of assessment criteria and guidance and, of particular relevance to this study, the specification of tasks (Sadler, 2007, 2014). Sadler’s thoughts on task specification will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but in short, they need both to be ‘models of clarity’ (Sadler, 2014, p. 12) and yet avoid ‘recipe-like instructions or formulas’ (Sadler, 2014 p. 5).

Torrance’s original 2007 study was on the vocational learning sector, but in 2012, he engages in a critique of formative assessment practices in higher education that have focused on the improvement of ‘test scores and examination grades’ at the expense of

'learning and the quality of and diversity of learning outcomes' (Torrance, 2012, p. 328). This seems of continued relevance in a higher education context in which increasingly institutions are measured and held accountable on the basis of the metrics of student achievement and in a broader politico-socio-economic context in which the certification function of higher education is held to be paramount (e.g., Gunn, 2018; Rochon and Knight, 2019). Somewhat mischievously, Torrance suggests that this involves a corruption of formative assessment into 'conformative' assessment, in which explicitness and transparency in assessment practices conspire to promote dependency and instrumentalism, rather than independence of thought, criticality and understanding.

The notion of 'conformative' assessment is a powerful one when considered from an academic literacies' perspective. While doubtless provided with the best intentions, the provision of excessive guidance and overly specified criteria, perhaps particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds, typify normative and unidirectional approaches (Lillis and Scott, 2015) that leave little space for the student to assert their own voice. In Bakhtinian terms, such approaches are likely to be strongly centripetal in nature, 'pulling' students towards conformity and adherence to disciplinary, institutional and programmatic (even module tutor) conventions and preferences. On a certain level, the approach affords engagement, but it does so in a way that does little to alter the existing power relations within the environment. There is little room for transformation, for the centrifugal move towards diversity and creativity of response, because there is little space for the students' own thoughts, feelings and voice.

The key to understanding the difference between formative and 'conformative' (Torrance, 2007) assessment is in an understanding of the concept of 'scaffolding', which Sadler (2007) sees as being misunderstood or misappropriated. Rather than temporary adaptive measures in support of learning, there is a risk that scaffolding might be so elaborate and detailed that the learner cannot help but achieve. This is not to say that we do not want learners to achieve, but to question *what* it is they have achieved in such circumstances... In the Vygotskian (1978) and Brunerian (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Shvarts and Bakker, 2019) sense, scaffolding necessarily involves a degree of stretch and active learner engagement, it provides a supportive bridging function that enables a learner to navigate their Zone of Proximal Development as a means of achieving actual

independent development so that the support can be removed, or adapted to enable further learning. Where such support is overly specified and detailed, i.e., it is too transparent, then there is a risk of promoting achievement over learning and dependence over autonomy. If there is insufficient stretch involved in achieving the required level of work, then it is, perhaps, difficult to say that any learning has taken place. This is not 'scaffolding', it is 'telling' (Sadler, 2013, 2014) someone what to do... This seems the very opposite of the concept of formative assessment as outlined above, which rather empathises the active role of the student in developing and internalising an understanding of relevant disciplinary knowledge, skills and values via acquisition friendly engagement with the assessment process as part of the development of their evaluative judgement and self-regulation skills.

2.2 Assignment briefs

The assignment brief can be seen as an example of Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone', used to describe those 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths...' (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). The notion of contact zone is also used by Howell-Richardson and Ganobcsik-Williams (2016) as a metaphor with which to explore the power relations between academic and disciplinary communities (Discourse communities) and non-traditional students in the development of academic writing. Such zones can potentially provide spaces for meaningful dialogue and the negotiation of new ways of disciplinary thinking and doing that value both incumbent and incoming participants (Harris, 1995). However, the unequal power relations between teachers and students that underlie the socially and culturally determined literacies that characterise disciplinary practices and language rather conspire against such transformative possibilities. I have mentioned already (see section 1.5.3 above) the way in which assignment briefs can be said to represent this power imbalance. Briefs exert control over students by specifying deadlines and parameters for completing the assessed task, they invoke aspects of institutional policy and regulations, e.g., by referring to academic integrity expectations and regulations for dealing with late submissions and requests for extensions. They refer to quality processes that may seem obscure and opaque to

students (Gustafson-Pearce, 2009a) but nevertheless provide glimpses of the machinery of summative assessment in the form of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Naturally, too, as formal documents, briefs are expressed in formal language and, importantly, the language of the disciplinary Discourse. At BNU, briefs also display the institutional logo, they are literally badged with power, reinforcing the authoritative nature of the text and the weight of institutional and disciplinary power behind it in the Bakhtinian sense.

The QAA's most recent advice and guidance document on assessment (QAA, 2018b) includes as a guiding principle the following statement which is of relevance to this study:

Assessment is explicit and transparent and accessible to all involved in the assessment process (including clear information with regard to the purpose and requirements of assessed tasks and standards expected)

This much seems common sense. And yet, the literature devoted directly to the communication of purpose, requirements and expectations of assessed tasks to students indicates that this is not a simple goal to achieve (Williams, 2005; Hughes, 2009; Gilbert, 2012; Howell-Richardson, 2012; Richards and Pilcher, 2014; Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Walsh, 2021a, 2021b). Key to this may be the recognition that just as for students working on assignments with an incomplete understanding of the implicit disciplinary characteristics and purpose of different assessment types, academic staff are working in an unfamiliar text type when they compose assignment briefs. They are also coming to the process with years of inhabiting their own disciplinary and professional Discourse communities and thus may have different conceptions about what information in the brief can be tacitly assumed and what should be made explicit and unpacked (Williams, 2005; Collier and Morgan, 2008; Richards and Pilcher, 2014). Their own knowledge of rhetorical forms and practices within their disciplines may also be largely tacit (embodied, functional, but not 'visible' to them (Polanyi, 2009)) which they have had few opportunities to unpack and explore (McGrath, Negretti and Nicholls, 2019).

There is a growing recognition of the importance and usefulness of developing students' assessment literacy, their understanding of the purpose and processes of different kinds of assessment and feedback and how it relates to them as learners (HEA, 2012b; Price *et*

al., 2012), but it is clear that staff themselves may also lack knowledge in this area (Taras and Davies, 2013; Brunton *et al.*, 2016; Medland, 2016; Koh *et al.*, 2018). Staff may also feel anxiety about their own confidence in assessing students effectively (Harland *et al.*, 2015) and fall back upon approaches to assessment they themselves experienced as part of their own educational backgrounds (Biggs and Tang, 2011), which form traditional or 'signature' approaches within their disciplines (Hughes, 2009) or which conform to their own conceptualisations of the purpose of teaching and assessment (Fletcher *et al.*, 2012). Fernandez Ruiz *et al.* (2022) find a tendency towards more traditional approaches to assessment in their survey of staff attitudes to assessment design, with teachers often limiting assessment choices to a pre-determined set of existing text types with which they are familiar. This might also be compounded by the limited time available to teachers to attend to issues around assignment design (Hounsell *et al.*, 2008) as well as perceptions about what is expected and permitted within their institutional context (Fernández Ruiz *et al.*, 2022).

Writing clear, explicit instructional text is challenging (Gilbert, 2012; Gilbert and Maguire, 2014). A well-formed, clearly expressed and useful assignment brief is a complex document, drawing on knowledge and skills of genre, language and presentation of which teachers may not be explicitly aware and in which they have received little or no training. Certainly, a review of the content of staff development courses leading to Fellowship of the HEA does not identify the framing of assessed tasks as significant other than perhaps broadly within the concept of constructive alignment (Kandlbinder and Peseta, 2009). And yet, I would argue, it is fundamental. Students are less likely to perform well in their assessed work if the expectations and requirements of that work and how it is assessed are poorly communicated to them (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2008; H Nesi and Gardner, 2012; Sadler, 2016). There is evidence to suggest that staff development resources available to colleagues across the sector are highlighting the importance of assignment brief design practices (e.g., University of Greenwich (2022) and the University of Ulster (2018)), but these seem in no way universally promoted. Some of this guidance is also framed in terms of its usefulness in inclusive practices for disabled students (for example, the University of the Arts (2019)) rather than the general population. Staff-focused developmental approaches, such as those practised by the Centre for Academic Writing

at Coventry University (Howell-Richardson, 2015) and the assignment brief consultancy service at Oxford Brookes University (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a; Gilbert, 2012) are clearly useful, but there is little in the literature to suggest that such practices are widespread.

2.2.1 Defining terms

The language of assessment is complex. The same and similar terms are used with different meanings by different authors (as noted with some irritation by Sadler (2007)). In order to avoid confusion here, I follow Gilbert and Maguire's (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014) usage of the terms *assignment brief*, *assessment expectations* and *assessment requirements*. An assignment brief is 'the written instructions provided to communicate the requirements and expectations of non-exam assessment tasks' (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014, p.4). This may take the form of a discrete document (or documents) or may be included as a statement in module or course documentation. *Assessment expectations* are those aspects of the task involving the application of knowledge and skills, e.g., the use of a given theory or analytical technique. *Assessment requirements* relate to other features of the task otherwise outside the expectations, such as word count (or equivalent), presentational requirements and deadlines.

As a term with which to refer to different kinds of assignments, Gilbert and Maguire's use the term *text type* to describe a set of assignment types which have the same or very similar features of language, discourse and layout. Nesi and Gardner (2012) identify a range of different genres and genre families in use in higher education via their analysis of the British Academic Written English corpus (BAWE), based on Swales' (1990) and Hyland's (Hyland, 2002) definitions of the term *genre*. However, my aim here is not to classify the range of assignment types students might encounter, I simply need a way of referring to them and 'text type' will suffice. Essays, research reports and presentations are useful illustrative examples.

At the same time, it is also acknowledged that text type is not a stable concept and may have different conventions within different disciplines; it is also useful to distinguish between text type and *purpose*. I follow Thomas et al.'s (2019) use of the term purpose as

the ‘overt communicative purpose’ of an assignment (Coffin et al., 2003, p. 14). Thomas *et al.* (2019) refer to this as the *rhetorical purpose*. The same broad text type may have different purposes both within and across disciplines. For example, essays may require students to describe, analyse, reflect, persuade, etc., each of which could be said to constitute its ‘purpose’. A text type might also entail a range of purposes dependent on the outcomes associated with it. Gilbert and Maguire do not define *task*, but I follow Walsh (2021b, p. 2) in identifying it simply as ‘the task that must be done’, for example, writing an essay, preparing a presentation, etc.

2.2.2 Assignment briefs in the literature

Sadler has written a number of important articles on task specification and related issues (Sadler, 2014, 2016) and provides a useful context for a consideration of this topic. Gilbert and Maguire’s (2014) publication on assignment brief design, however, remains the most visible attempt to present explicit guidance to teachers on how to design effective assignment briefs (Figure 2 below, provides a visualisation of their approach). Howell-Richardson also developed guidance as part of the *Disparities in Student Achievement*

(DiSA) project (Cousin and Cuerton, 2012a; Howell-Richardson, 2015), although this seems to have had less exposure in the sector.

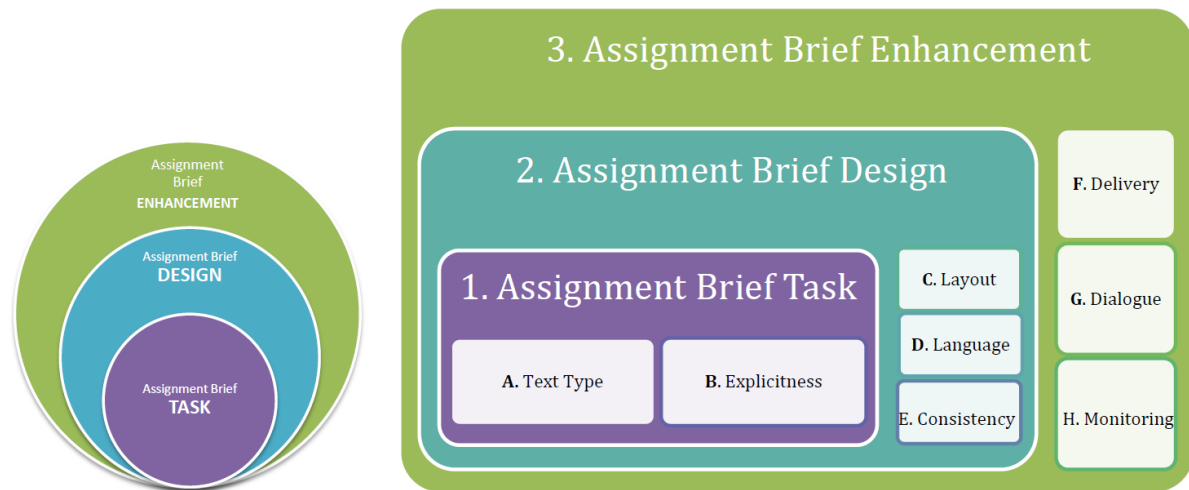


Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of Gilbert and Maguire's assignment brief design guidelines (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014)

Although actively promoting their guidelines at conferences (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a; Maguire and Gilbert, 2015), including at my own institution as a result of my engagement with this research study (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014), Gilbert and Maguire have published only one report (Gilbert, 2012) arising from the research and development activities that resulted in the guidelines, which focuses predominantly upon the importance of properly identifying text type in assignment briefs. Howell-Richardson's (2015) guidance situates the design of assessment firmly within an academic literacies context, seeing student engagement in assessment as a developmental process embedded within 'the literacy practices and epistemology of the subject disciplines' (Howell-Richardson, 2015, p. 1). Other research on the challenges faced by students in their engagement with assignment briefs (or aspects of them) with the intention of developing staff practice in this area can also be found, particularly from post-apartheid South Africa (Williams, 2005a) and Australia (Hughes, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2019). I have located only two other researchers whose focus is explicitly and specifically on assignment briefs. Walsh, writing in an Irish higher education context not dissimilar from my own (staff development in a professionally-oriented university), makes a convincing case for comprehensiveness and

concision in assignment briefs (Walsh, 2021a) and the negative emotional and cognitive impact of poor communication on students experience of assessment (Walsh, 2021b). Gustafson-Pearce (2009) has also published a brief paper on the assignment brief exploring the impact of applying information architecture principles on the communication of assessment expectations and requirements in the context of a Graphics Communication module within the School of Engineering and Design at Brunel University, UK. Gustafson-Pearce's findings suggest the usefulness of sequencing, layout and presentation (e.g., use of sans serif fonts, bold type, underlining, font size, etc.) in ensuring students understand what is required of them and enabling effective engagement with their assessed tasks. They also suggest the usefulness of including assessment weightings for different task elements and the provision of a checklist of prompts to promote students' self-assessment of their task responses.

Hughes (2009) developed her assessment task design (ATD) framework in response to the lack of guidance on assessment design she identified in the literature to guide her work with colleagues on developing assessment practices (see Figure, below). Her approach focuses on the need to clearly identify purpose (what learning outcomes will students be expected to demonstrate), text type (what genre of text will students be expected to use to demonstrate those outcomes), subject matter (the subject/disciplinary context of the assessed task), the roles and relationships of the student and audience (what is the student's role in the task and who is their audience?). Using systemic functional linguistics as a theoretical basis for the ATD, Hughes situates her work firmly in relation to an academic literacies account for the production of text by students (in assignments) and staff (in assignment briefs). Key to Hughes's ATD is that it promotes staff reflection on aspects of assessment practice that may otherwise remain unexamined and unchallenged. This creates a space for socially and culturally oriented staff-student engagement around the multiplicity of literacies students are required to develop within their disciplines. This provides a basis for ideological discussion and questioning of privileged disciplinary norms and their role in determining group membership and the distribution of power within the social order (Lillis and Scott, 2015; Lillis and Tuck, 2016).

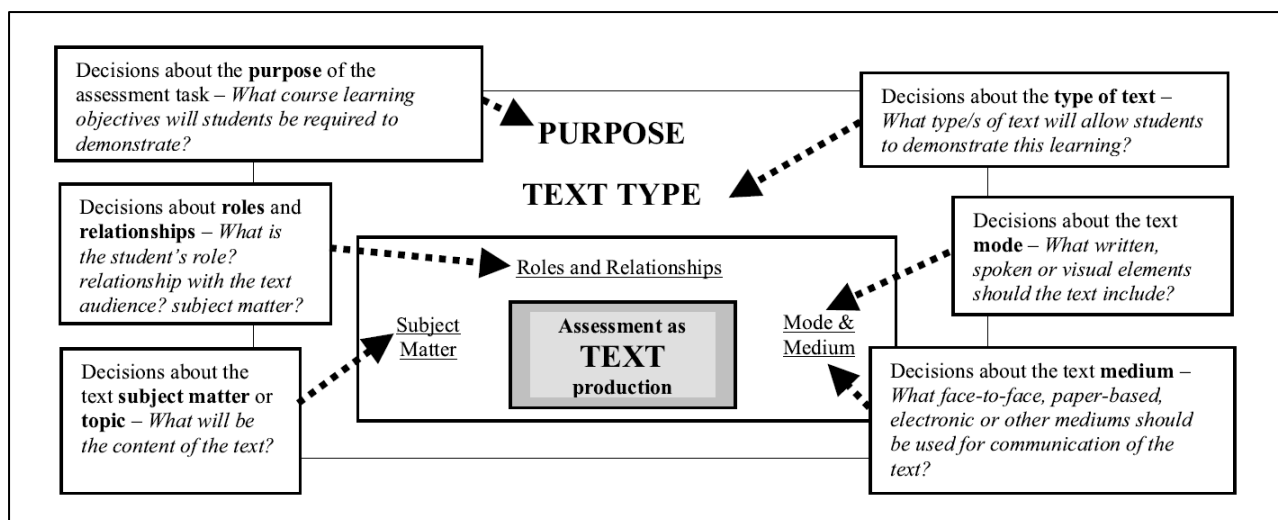


Figure 2: Hughes (2009) Assessment Task Design Framework

Thomas *et al.*'s (2019) assessment in higher education framework (AHEF) is based around the assumption that assessment is more effective when its aims and expectations are communicated explicitly. Their proposition is that although this seems 'common sense', there is a substantial 'invisible dimension' (Coffin *et al.*, 2003, p. 3) to assessment that, unless it is explicitly unpacked and engaged with, problematises student engagement with their assessed work and learning. Although they do not explicitly reference academic literacies literature in their discussion, it is nevertheless clear that the notion of assessment as a social practice is key to their project. There are a range of aspects to the design of effective assessed tasks that cannot simply be understood and which are by no means stable and fixed. These aspects are rhetorical purpose (*purpose* (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014)) and assessment format (*text type* (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014)). Also of relevance are assessment mode (does the assessed task require a written, oral or other response) and group arrangements (should the task be completed individually or collaboratively). These latter elements are of clear significance to the effective communication of assessment expectations to students but may also point to aspects of conventional disciplinary assessment practice that may not align with the kind of communication forms and working practices required in professional life. In the subject areas that Thomas *et al.* explored (English, Law and Education) there was a preponderance of individual written tasks. This may, they suggest, result in inequity in educational environments in which diverse student populations may favour non-written modes of communication, which reflects Lillis's identification of the privileging of essayist

literacies as a barrier to learning for students from 'non-traditional' groups (Lillis, 2001). The emphasis on writing may also fail to provide opportunities for the development and assessment of useful professional skills in oral communication of obvious relevance, for example, for student teachers. A further example of particular relevance to this study, can be found in Social Work, which is a heavily essay-oriented discipline in terms of conventional assessment practices (Crisp and Lister, 2005), but which has not historically provided opportunities for students to engage in alternative assessment forms reflective of the kinds of writing typical in its professional context (e.g., case notes) (Rai and Lillis, 2013; Lillis, 2017). A focus on 'heroically individualised practice' (Thomas *et al.*, 2019, p. 16) in assessed tasks may also lack alignment with the collaborative nature of practice in a great many professional fields, not least of all Social Work and its strong culture of multi-disciplinary working (Miller, 2018).

2.2.3 Anatomising the assignment brief

Table 13, below, outlines the main features of assignment briefs as identified in the four frameworks identified in the literature. I have organised these into three main groups: Discourse dependent, cognitive processing dependent and practicalities.

Discourse dependent features relate to the substantive content of the assignment brief, including the task (along with its purpose, learning outcomes and the specification of the role of the student in the task and its audience in accordance with Hughes' ATD framework (Hughes, 2009a)); language choice in the task specification and instructions; and assessment criteria. I have also included dissemination activities in this section on the basis that they provide powerful opportunities for engaging students with the assignment brief as Discourse, as a product of the ways of speaking, thinking and doing in the disciplinary and institutional context (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004b; Carless, 2007; Hughes, 2009; Cureton *et al.*, 2017). In Sadler's terms, it is these aspects of the brief which provide students with the information on which to base their 'goal knowledge' of what is required of them and the nature of their response (Sadler, 2007, 2014). Hughes' (2009a) ATD framework provides a useful basis for ensuring that students are provided with the necessary information on which to achieve this. From an academic literacies' perspective, it is in these Discourse related aspects of the brief where the

particular challenges facing students from non-traditional backgrounds might be considered to be most profound and the power relations inherent with the assessment process most evident.

Cognitive processing elements relate to the presentation of the assignment brief in a manner that is supportive of students' ability to process and interpret the brief in order to access the task. These include issues of layout, sequencing, consistency of format and achieving a balance between comprehensiveness and concision (Walsh, 2021a).

The final section relates to practicalities in terms of the mode of the task (is it a written task, oral, visual, performative, etc.), whether it involves group or individual work and its submission (format and procedure). I have arranged this in this way to reflect how I intend to discuss them in this section of the dissertation; it also broadly corresponds to the recommended sequencing of assignment brief components advised by Gilbert and Maguire (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014): Task, learning outcomes, task requirements, assessment criteria, submission details and deadlines.

It is acknowledged that such separation is necessarily artificial. There are elements of the brief that belong perhaps exclusively to the cognitive domain, e.g., the choice of font, layout and sequence and consistency of presentation. However, aspects of what have been described as 'practicalities', too, are suffused with relevance from a Discourse perspective. Word count, for example, has clear implications for the scope and form a student's response to a task might take and thus informs goal knowledge. Referencing style is a clear aspect of disciplinary convention; psychologists favour APA, law may insist on OSCOLA, and ways of using references to support arguments will differ from discipline to discipline in terms of whether direct quotations or paraphrase are preferred. What constitutes appropriate source material and the amount or reading that it is appropriate and expected for students to draw upon is also subject to disciplinary, programme or even individual tutor preferences.

Table 13: Features identified in the four assignment brief frameworks, linked to challenges to students

Challenge to students	Assignment brief features	Gilbert and Maguire (2014)	Howell-Richardson (2015)	Hughes (2009)	Thomas <i>et al</i> (2019)
Discourse dependent	Purpose	x	x	x	x
	Text type	x	x	x	x
	Role of student and specification of audience	x	x	x	
	Clarity of language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task verbs • Instructions 	x	x		
	Task requirements	x	x		
	Assessment criteria	x	x		
	Dissemination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery • Dialogue • Exemplars 	x			
Cognitive processing	Presentation of brief <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout • Sequence • Consistency • Length and complexity 	x	x		
Practicalities	Mode and medium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task mode • Submission format 	x	x	x	x
	Group/individual arrangements				x
	Requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referencing style • Academic integrity • Word count • Presentation • Submission 	x	x		

2.2.4 Discourse-related aspects of assignment briefs

I have termed these aspects of assignment briefs ‘Discourse-related’ because it is in these elements that the disparities between the secondary disciplinary Discourse and the lifeworld Discourses of students (Gee, 2011) are most evident and which may, if they are not examined, unpacked and contested, act as exclusionary factors (Hughes, 2009; Howell-Richardson and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2016).

Sadler’s concept of goal knowledge (Sadler, 2014) provides a useful frame in which to situate the discussion of these aspects of the brief as it is in these areas in particular that the information and cues students require to formulate their responses to assessed tasks can be found. Goal knowledge is the student’s idea of ‘what a final work should look like’ (Sadler, 2014, p. 4); it is a complex combination of understanding both the end (the final work) and the means, the process and structure by which the end is achieved. It also involves the student’s knowledge and ability to operationalise ‘response genre’, which seems closely aligned to what Thomas *et al.* (2019) refer to as ‘rhetorical purpose’ and the text type. That is, for a response to be acceptable, it must achieve that purpose and do so within the format and structure of the relevant text type. Sadler suggests that task specifications must therefore be ‘models of clarity’ in order to ensure that students have the information they require to respond appropriately, but this in itself is insufficient:

Unambiguously stated assessment task specifications do not directly determine the character of a particular student’s final structure of response. Systems and rules may help, but the shape of their response’s final form is the student’s own and has to be invented (Sadler, 2014)

This is significant because it acknowledges both the importance of accuracy and clarity in the assignment briefs (or other task specifications) as a prerequisite for effective engagement with task, but also points to the need to students to have internalized models on which to base their responses. Such models cannot simply be ‘told’ to students but must instead be acquired through active discursive engagement with relevant activities, exposure to a variety of examples and opportunities for practical experience (Sadler, 2014a). Of particular importance, too, is the idea that there is an expectation for students to deliver their

personal vision of what constitutes an appropriate response. This is not a conformance vision of what students do when producing responses to assessed tasks. The response must address the response genre, the rhetorical purpose of the task and in an appropriate form, but there is no single right answer. It is not an act of ventriloquism, but rather a creative and individual act, via which the student speaks with their own voice. From an academic literacies perspective this points usefully to the tension between Bakhtin's centripetal and centrifugal forces. To be successful, the student must balance both, acting within the parameters of disciplinary Discourse, but at the same time acting upon the language of their discipline with their own power to develop and present their own response.

The aspects of the brief included within this section that have been loosely termed 'Discourse-related' are closely allied to Sadler's concept of goal knowledge and response genre. Indeed, arguably these aspects of the brief serve to contribute to the 'clarity' of task specification that is so vital. Hughes (2009) Assessment Task Design (ATD) Framework is of particular relevance as it provides a basis for ensuring that these key components are included in the statement of assessment tasks (see Figure above). Fundamental to the effective specification of a task within the ATD Framework are: the purpose (this is strongly linked to the learning outcomes associated with the task and its 'rhetorical purpose' (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) and the text type (is it an essay, report, etc.), and aspects such as the roles and relationships between the student, the work and their audience, subject matter and the mode of the required response (written, oral, performative, etc.) These key components will be explored in more detail in the sections below.

2.2.4.1 Purpose

The purpose of an assessed task must be clear in order to afford effective engagement by all students (Sadler, 2016). However, what constitutes the purpose is not unproblematic. Thomas *et al.*'s (2019) study explores the communication of assessment aims in practice, building upon earlier research by de Silva Joyce *et al.* (2014) to explore students' experience of how assessments were communicated to them in as part of undergraduate programmes in Education, English and Law. Thomas *et al.* (2019) promote the importance of what they term *rhetorical purpose*, which they define as 'the overt communicative purpose of the assessment' (2019, p. 3), expanding Coffin *et al.*'s original definition (2003, p. 3) to include

the range of modes in which students may respond to assessed tasks (text, oral, visual, audio, etc.). This is important because the same assignment text type may have different rhetorical purposes in different contexts both across and within disciplinary contexts. It might be expected that essays in Law and English use essays differently, but within English, in which the essay was the sole text type used, it was used for a range of distinct purposes, e.g., analysis, persuasion, reflection, response to scenarios, etc., while still being an 'essay'. Given this complexity, it also follows that if the purpose of an assignment is not made visible in the assignment brief because it is assumed and understood to be self-evident, students unfamiliar with disciplinary norms and Discourse may be disadvantaged (Hughes, 2009; Howell-Richardson, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2019).

In a constructively aligned and outcomes-based assessment environment such as in UK higher education, the verbs which are used to both define learning outcomes and assessment expectations are of particular importance. These verbs are typically drawn from lists derived from Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). They signpost both expectations in terms of the learning students are expected to demonstrate and the manner in which they are expected to demonstrate it in their task responses (Thomas *et al.*, 2019). They are a central aspect of the way in which the purpose of an assignment is communicated. Certainly, Gilbert and Maguire (2014) explicitly recommend their inclusion near to the statement of the task in the brief for this purpose. The very nature of learning outcomes, however, may conspire against unproblematised assumptions about their clarity and may suggest that their inclusion in the brief is open to question.

Sadler (2016) points to issues inherent in the statement of learning outcomes. Necessarily, they use abstract terminology to frame abstract concepts such as higher order thinking skills and competencies, e.g., 'critical understanding', 'critically evaluate', 'originality' (QAA, 2014b), which defy unambiguous interpretation. This is further complicated because the same verbs may signal different purposes in different contexts, resulting in students misinterpreting assessment aims (de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014). There is a risk too in readily assuming learning outcomes 'mean' something in their own right, without acknowledging the complex process by which they are invested with meaning (Ma, 2017). Scott (2011) and Hussey and Smith (2002, 2008) point to the importance of the contextual hinterland that informs the meaning of learning outcomes and which provides a basis for staff

understanding of what they mean. Furthermore, learning outcomes as they are typically used in UK higher education tend to be 'partial' in that the level to which students are required to evidence them is generally understood rather than explicitly stated. It is unlikely that either the context or the level will be understood in the same way by students.

It is notable in Gustafson-Pearce's (2009) discussion of improvements to an assignment brief that removal of the outcomes was seen to enhance its communicative effectiveness on the grounds that they were 'confusing and vague' (Gustafson-Pearce, 2009, p. 2585). Gustafson-Pearce does not include the outcomes in their paper, so it is not possible to determine how well-formed and clear they were. If an assessed task has been appropriately aligned to its associated learning outcomes, it should, by definition, require students to demonstrate them; they should be 'trapped' into engaging with the task appropriately (Biggs, 2003), which may suggest that they could usefully be omitted, particularly if the purpose of the assignment is otherwise clearly communicated. The concept of constructive alignment is so central to my own professional practice and values that it seems unthinkable that they should not be included, but I acknowledge that this may be an area for further research and investigation. Whether learning outcomes are as relevant to students as they are to their teachers and to curriculum developers is at least open to question.

2.2.4.2 Text type

Clear, explicit identification of text type is a pre-requisite for effective and confident student engagement with an assessed task (de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014; Walsh, 2021b, 2021a) but this is not unchallenging for teachers to achieve. It is also important that the text type and purpose are appropriately aligned (Gilbert, 2012). Omitting the text type in the assignment brief or specifying a type inappropriate for the purpose of the task denies students the possibility of drawing on existing schematic knowledge in their engagement and may further complicate the process of task completion. Responding to a task which would be better suited to a report format is made unnecessarily complicated if the student is required instead to frame their response in the form of an essay. Thomas *et al.*'s (2019) analysis reveals strong disciplinary preferences for particular assignment text types. Importantly, too, the same text type (e.g., the essay) may be used for different purposes not only across but *within* disciplines. Traditional formats such as essays, for example, vary markedly in terms of

their purpose and expectations (de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014; Thomas *et al.*, 2019). Teachers may not themselves be aware of this, which may lead to unquestioned assumptions and practices which would otherwise benefit from explicit and critical engagement (Bearman *et al.*, 2016).

In terms of this study, this seems of particular relevance. For example, Social Work is an epistemologically diverse discipline, in which students may move between highly academic engagement with social policy and theory and the development and application of skills in practice and be expected to write essays for different purposes within those contexts (Crisp and Lister, 2005; Young and Burgess, 2005). Equally, contexts which make use of diverse text types, such as Education (Thomas *et al.*, 2019), make further demands on students in terms of expecting them to produce work in a range of communication forms with which they may be unfamiliar, particularly at the early stages of their time on a course. Business, too, with its concentration on project-based course work and authentic, professionally related assessment practices, is likely to entail diverse text types (Gilbert, 2012) including, but extending beyond, the format of the Business report.

Further support for explicit identification of text type and purpose can be found in the relationship between assessment and disciplinary learning. In completing assessed work, students are engaging in practices that are valued and privileged within their particular disciplinary and Discourse contexts, that is, they are learning to write, act and think like historians, scientists, Social Workers, etc. (Bearman *et al.*, 2017). Where assessed tasks are usefully aligned to such disciplinary values and practices, the benefits are evident. Formative approaches to assessment aimed at developing students' evaluative judgement (see section 2.1.2.2 above) become more meaningful when embedded within disciplinary contexts because that they involve students in opportunities for critical engagement with and internalisation of disciplinary values.

The range of assessment text types that students encounter in their studies can be considerable (Gillett and Hammond, 2009). Jessop and Thomas (2017a), for example, identify between 8 to 15 varieties of assessment as a mid-range indication of the diversity of approaches encountered in their study of 73 predominantly Humanities-based programmes. While traditional forms of assessment in the form of essays and exams predominated, the

implications of such a range of tasks and the relatively limited opportunities that students have to develop expertise and understanding in their engagement with them suggests the benefits of a programme-based approach (Jessop and Tomas, 2017a; Dodd, Ellis and Singh, 2020). On this basis, Thomas *et al.*'s (2019) proposal for the judicious use of a range along with the development of a shared explicit understanding of assessment aims and expectations associated with them would therefore seem sensible.

This is of particular relevance in cases where innovative approaches are used, for example as part of authentic assessment practices (Gulikers, Bostiaens and Kirschner, 2004; Baartman, Gulikers and Dijkstra, 2013; Dismore, 2017). Compared to traditional modes of assessment, students may prefer authentic tasks which relate to real world contexts and provide opportunities for the development and assessment of knowledge and competences of relevance beyond the educational context (Struyven, Dochy and Janssens, 2005). However, while students may have well-developed schemas for traditional assessment text types, this is less likely to be the case in more innovative formats. Schemas are representations of knowledge organised and stored in learner's long-term memories that are called upon when the learner engages in the processing of new information and problem-solving activities (Paas, Renkl and Sweller, 2003). This reduces cognitive load and provides, for example, an existing framework for the writer to work within. Without access to such internalised representations, the writer is forced instead to construct their text from scratch (Sharples, 1996).

Consistency of expectation for ways of completing different text types may help students to complete them appropriately and develop appropriate schemas for their completion. This can be supported by including appropriate levels of scaffolding within assessment instructions, particularly for new students (Oldham and Dhillon, 2012; de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014; Howell-Richardson, 2015). Scaffolding of this kind can be challenging to get right and needs to be pitched appropriately if it is to allow students to move from proximal to actual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Judgement and a programmatic view of assessment (Howell-Richardson, 2015) are also required to ensure that scaffolding is used progressively to develop autonomy and confidence in students engagement with assessment (Balloo *et al.*, 2018). The cognitive demands of processing supportive information as well as the complexities of the assessed task itself may also conspire against the formation of effective

schemas on which to base engagement with future tasks (Chandler and Sweller, 1991; Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003) (see section 2.2.5.1, below). There is a risk, too, in well-intentioned provision of scaffolding that the assignment brief can become overly complex and voluminous, which may result in feelings of overwhelmedness (Walsh, 2021a). Over-specification of task expectations and requirements may also leave little room for students to engage constructively and confidently with learning as part of their engagement with their assessed work:

Instruction always runs the risk of swamping the pupil's own vital, though narrow, experience under masses of communicated material (Dewey, 1910, p. 225)

While acknowledging non-traditional students anxieties and desire for explicitness in terms of the expectations of their new educational environments and assessment practices (Collier and Morgan, 2008), excessive guidance and over-specification of assessment expectations may also result in promoting students' sense that there is a single correct answer or way of responding to assessed tasks. Howell-Richardson describes this as students' perception that there is a 'golden key' in the assignment brief that provides the basis for successful completion of the assignment (Cureton *et al.*, 2017). Walsh (2021b) suggests it may be useful to articulate in the brief that there is 'no one right answer' (Walsh, 2021b, p. 17) in order to counter this and welcome students individual responses. The use of a range of exemplars demonstrating different approaches and perspectives may also be useful.

Teacher-driven formative approaches that provide opportunities for the mediation of student engagement with disciplinary practices and literacies and the identification and correction of student misconceptions (Howell-Richardson and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2016) may have a clear benefit in terms of familiarising students with unfamiliar text types as part of a process of academic socialisation (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006). The development of contextual knowledge of this kind that provides students with the 'rules' of engagement can promote confidence (Oldham and Dhillon, 2012). However, such unidirectional approaches, while doubtless having a useful normative function (Lillis and Scott, 2015) can leave little room for students to develop their own relationship to and understanding of disciplinary text types and the knowledge and values they enshrine (Cureton *et al.*, 2017).

Discussion-based, exploratory approaches which provide opportunities for the co-construction of understanding via student-student and staff-student interaction (Putney and Broughton, 2011; Balloo *et al.*, 2018) may provide a means of allowing students to develop awareness of the text types they are required to engage with while at the same time negotiating their understanding at a level appropriate to their particular needs and existing knowledge. The use of exemplars, such as recommended by Carless (2007, 2015) may also provide a useful context for such activities, provided that they involve active student engagement and discussion (Tai *et al.*, 2018). I discuss the use of exemplars further in the section on dissemination, see section 2.2.4.6, below.

2.2.4.3 Role of student and specification of audience

Ganobcsik-Williams (2015) suggests that the brief provides an opportunity for students to decide how they might bring their own voice into the assignment as they negotiate their own ideas and approach on the basis of the expectations and requirements communicated to them. In order for them to do so, however, the assessed task must itself allow for such opportunities and students must feel that their individual voice will be valued (Aiken, 2021). Traditional assessment forms, such as essays and exams, make this problematic because the role of the student and the audience for whom they are writing the assignment is rarely made clear. Indeed, it is common in academic skills guidance for students to remove themselves from their writing by adopting third person and passive forms of expression, with the aim of performing dispassionate academic objectivity (e.g., Martin, 2018; University of Hull, 2022).

Gee (2011) points to a particular challenge in the fictionalised nature of essay-based communication. The reader is an ideal, a 'rational mind formed by the rational body of knowledge of which the essay is a part' (Gee, 2011, p. 92). At the same time, the author is equally 'fictional' since the process requires an 'effacement of individual and idiosyncratic identity' (Gee, 2011, p. 92). In a sense, what Gee is referring to here is the essay as a performance. The writer is performing the act of writing, or engaging with ideas, as required by the context, i.e., what they understand what the teacher wants as a representative of the disciplinary and professional community. The very real problem faced by the writer is that the rules that determine the success of this performance are either not visible, may be

substantially different to their own internal values and identity or, if stated, may be contradictory and opaque. In Gee's example, this artificiality presented a real barrier for students from ethnic communities with different world views and values to those enshrined within the educational context. As Hughes (2009) suggests, the issue is not necessarily that students will not know what is required of them in essay based tasks in which the author and audience are implicit, most of them will. Rather it is because if these aspects remain unexamined and unchallenged, they risk becoming a further aspect of the 'taken-for-grantedness' (Hughes, 2009, p. 557) of traditional approaches to assessment and the 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 1999, 2001) that may lead to performative, strategic approaches (Jessop and Tomas, 2017a).

The use of authentic assessment approaches that provide opportunities for students to engage in activities reflective of professional practices may present a means of clarifying issues of role and audience in assignments (McDowell, Sambell and Davison, 2009; Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013; Dismore, 2017). In contrast to the artificial and performative traditional essay, authentic approaches are likely to have an audience beyond that of the teacher and thus be both more communicatively and educationally purposive, resulting in positive learning outcomes and greater engagement in learning (Trowler, 2010). Authentic tasks provide students with opportunities to connect to the world outside of the lecture theatre and classroom and consider their learning from different perspectives by meeting the needs of audiences other than their teachers via the framing of their responses and how they communicate them (Avery *et al.*, 2001). Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery (2013) provide a useful example in which a traditional essay is replaced by the creation of an information leaflet on a complex topic for a lay audience along with a rationale for choices in content.

Authentic approaches are widely associated with the development of employability skills and knowledge of relevance to the real world and students' professional aspirations (Dinning and Brown, 2016; Tibby and Norton, 2019), particularly when combined with opportunities for reflective engagement (Miller and Konstantinou, 2022). However, the development of innovative authentic approaches to assessment can be challenging. Using authentic assessment to drive deeper learning relies on effective alignment of teaching with assessed tasks which provide meaningful opportunities for the demonstration of relevant

competences as well as student perceptions of their authenticity and usefulness (Gulikers, Bostiaens and Kirschner, 2004; Gulikers *et al.*, 2006). It can also have implications for staff time and effort somewhat in excess of traditional approaches (Thurab-Nkholi, Williams and Mason-Roberts, 2018). In an environment in which staff time is constrained and there is an emphasis on the metrics of student attainment, it may be that staff opt for 'safer' traditional approaches which privilege the measurable over the valuable (Rochon and Knight, 2019). A further complicating factor in more innovative approaches to assessment of relevance to disciplinary and professional practices is that they may be at odds with institutional or established departmental expectations for how assessment is carried out (Anderson and Hounsell, 2007; Meyer *et al.*, 2010).

The concept of authentic assessment is not uncontested and has implications not only for the role of the student in relation to their completion of assessed tasks, but also in the wider sense of their relationship to assessment and, indeed, their learning as a whole. McArthur (2021; McArthur *et al.*, 2021) has problematised assumptions about the nature of authentic assessment in terms of a conflation between the 'real world' and the 'world of work'.

McArthur cautions against the perceived notion that higher education should 'provide what employers want', proposing instead a focus on the 'authenticity of the student as a person' (McArthur, 2021, p. 20) and a conceptualisation of the 'real world' as one that, while entailing the world of work, is determined by broader social forces and characterised by social injustice. This is perhaps of particular relevance in a higher education system in which the drive to link students' completion of university with employment is seen as increasingly important, underlined, for example, by recent proposals by the Office for Students further to link conceptions of quality in higher education institutions to graduate outcomes (i.e., post-graduation employment) in the revised Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (OfS, 2022b).

The notion of 'whole, social person' (McArthur, 2021, p. 13; McArthur *et al.*, 2021) approaches to assessment is useful for the purposes of this study because it provides for a genuine consideration of the role of the student in relation to their engagement with assignment brief and assessment in the broader sense. Rather than unpicking the expectations and requirements of an assessed task in the brief as part of their performative engagement with the assessment process, such a view provides a genuine basis for the student to 'bring his or her voice into the assignment by negotiating his or her own ideas'

(Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015, p. 5). Assignment briefs should usefully make clear the type of writerly identity that a student is expected to adopt (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015), but the task itself can also provide opportunities for them to explore their own identity as developing members of their disciplinary communities, bringing themselves and their lifeworld Discourse into the equation rather than simply finding the 'golden key' to the assignment (Cureton *et al.*, 2017, p. 3) and delivering what they perceive to be expected (Ashwin, 2014; McArthur, 2021). Aiken (2021) suggests a number of strategies to achieve this, including allowing flexibility of response in terms of what a student 'may' wish to include rather than what they 'must' and allowing for a discursive and critical engagement with discipline-based conventions that allows for challenge and critique of prevailing views and consensus rather than slavish adherence. A further strategy might be to include opportunities for 'empathy writing' as a means of developing their sense of authorial voice and position, rather than 'ventriloquising' to match perceived expectations (Aiken, 2021).

2.2.4.4 Language choice

The origin of the wry statement that Britain and America are 'two nations divided by a common language' is somewhat obscure⁴. However, it serves to illustrate a challenge at the heart of any attempt to achieve clarity in the communication of assessment expectations and requirements. Clear, explicit and accessible language may promote feelings of belonging for those students unfamiliar with academic language, help to reduce anxiety about assessed tasks and promote effective engagement with the assessed task (Devlin *et al.*, 2012), but clarity of language is problematic. Judicious language choice in assignment briefs (Howell-Richardson, 2015) and clear, consistent language use across a programme may help students interpret and complete their assessed tasks more effectively (Devlin and O'Shea, 2012; de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014), but there is a disparity between the primary Discourses of the students and the dominant secondary Discourse of the disciplinary and institutional communities which they must also acquire if they are to be successful (Gee, 2003b, 2011). Quite apart from the new language that students must learn in the form of disciplinary terminology, the 'shared' language such as task verbs used in learning outcomes and

⁴ It is variously attributed to George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Winston Churchill.

assignment specifications with otherwise everyday meanings may also signify different concepts within the different Discourse communities (Williams, 2005; Collier and Morgan, 2008; Richards and Pilcher, 2014, 2018).

Williams (2005a) explores the challenges around teacher assumptions and student interpretations of verb use in assessed tasks in a post-Apartheid South African higher education context. The downfall of apartheid in 1991 and the democratic election of the first post-apartheid government under Nelson Mandela in 1994 meant that black and coloured students were able to access higher education in higher numbers (Sehoole and Adeyemo, 2016). Inequities in educational provision under the previous regime, complicated by eleven official languages, exacerbated the challenges faced by students in their entry into the discourse practices of the university and their disciplines. In a manner that serves to illustrate Bakhtin's (1981) assertions of the way meaning in language is determined by power, Williams finds disparities not only between teacher and student understanding of key assessment task verbs (e.g., account, define, discuss, explain, predict, etc.) but also between teachers. Student understanding of the verbs was oriented towards common sense or culturally informed interpretations of their meaning based on their primary discourses. This led to responses which were at odds with the interpretations of the teachers in the study, particularly those who were more senior and thus more fully ensconced within the academic Discourse of their discipline.

Williams's research reveals issues faced by all students in negotiating academic discourse, but especially those whose primary Discourse has developed within social and educational contexts far removed from the practices and assumptions in the secondary Discourse community (i.e., higher education) they are entering. The challenges for such students have been identified elsewhere. Collier and Morgan (2008), for example, also point to instances of confusion between everyday language use and language as used in assessment contexts as experienced by non-traditional students in the US context. Butcher *et al.* (2017) also identified a lack of confidence in widening participation students on an Open University Access programme in their engagement with the language of assessment. Attempts by teaching staff to de-mystify complex assignments and language also heightened student confusion and anxiety about the assessment process (Butcher *et al.*, 2017).

While careful language choice on behalf of the teacher can mitigate some of these challenges for students (Howell-Richardson, 2015), it is clear that opportunities for discussion and developing shared understandings of key language and terms are required in order to provide an inclusive environment for learning (Butcher *et al.*, 2010a, 2017). Williams advises apprenticed, scaffolded participation in the Secondary Discourse embedded within disciplinary contexts and the avoidance of a deficit model approach as a means of promoting equitable opportunities for learning, drawing upon Gee's suggestion for 'embodied experiences' (2003b, p. 38) in the form of active formative assessment practices with explicit and learning oriented feedback (Williams, 2005a). Richards and Pilcher (2014) adopt a socially constructed strategy to developing a shared understanding of the language of assessment via their 'anti-glossary' approach based on staff-student discussion.

2.2.4.5 Assessment criteria

The QAA has as one its guiding principles for effective summative assessment the expectation that:

All assessment activities have clearly articulated assessment criteria, weightings and level descriptors that are understood by all students and staff involved in the assessment process. (QAA, 2018c)

This is expected practice in contemporary approaches to assessment in higher education. Constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003, 2014) entails the definition of intended outcomes and how they will be assessed as a prerequisite for the effective design of learning and teaching. Typically, criteria are presented in the form of rubrics (Dawson, 2017), articulating the standards expected in a given assignment or across a certain level of study, where common criteria are used (Jonsson, 2014). They may be associated explicitly with marks and weightings for specific aspects of an assignment (Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Dawson, 2017) and may also be linked to specific exemplars of student work as a means of defining level and standards (Sadler, 2014b). Both Gilbert and Maguire (2014) and Howell-Richardson (2015) see the provision of clear, accessible and consistently worded assessment criteria as a part of the effective communication of assessment expectations and requirements.

Yet, historically, traditional assessment practices have not always demonstrated meaningful alignment with stated criteria (QAA, 2003; Boud and Falchikov, 2005; Gibbs, 2019). It must

also be acknowledged that the clear articulation of assessment criteria is not unproblematic (Sadler, 2005, 2014b). The complexity of higher learning resists attempts to articulate explicit standards against which student work can be reliably measured in concise, clear language; the tacit knowledge that staff draw upon in their interpretation of assessment criteria in the formation of assessment judgments is difficult to transmit in explicit terms (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003; O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004b). Real world marking and feedback processes of teaching staff throw into doubt conceptions of the role of assessment criteria as the basis for objectivity and reliability in assessment processes (Bloxham, 2009) and suggest a contradiction between policy and the realities of professional judgement (Bloxham, Boyd and Orr, 2011).

There is evidence to suggest that students value the availability of assessment criteria and see them as useful in terms of providing clarity of expectations and reducing anxiety about assessments (Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Kite and Phongsavan, 2017). The provision of clear, accessible rubrics may also promote student conceptions of trust (Carless, 2009) in the transparency and fairness of assessment processes and improve performance (Reddy and Andrade, 2010). For students to make effective use of criteria in such ways, however, they must as Sadler (1989) suggests hold an internal representation of them and develop the ability to apply them to their own work. However, criteria can be difficult to understand, particularly for new students who lack the experience and context within which to situate them (Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Jonsson, 2014). Where rubrics are simply shared and not explained or students do not have opportunities to engage with them and apply them, opportunities for them to have a positive impact on student learning and the development of disciplinary knowledge and value may not be fully exploited (Tai *et al.*, 2018).

Opportunities for students to apply criteria to appropriately selected exemplars has been shown to be useful in developing students' evaluative judgement which they can then apply to their own work (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003; O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004b; Carless, 2007, 2015). This might be particularly effective when combined with interactions with staff which model and explain how they form their judgements when applying criteria (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Howell-Richardson, 2015). Peer and self-assessment activities in which students apply criteria to their own work have also been shown to be effective in developing students self-regulatory abilities and evaluative judgement (Carnell, 2016; Tai *et*

al., 2018; Andrade, 2019). Engaging students with the co-construction of their own criteria or in the re-speaking of existing criteria in their own words is also of clear benefit (Carless, 2015) in providing opportunities for the internalisation of criteria for use as part of self-regulation and evaluation.

The key issue within the context of this study is that although it is a requirement of good practice for assessment criteria to be shared with students (QAA, 2018b) alongside or as part of their assignment briefs (Howell-Richardson, 2015; Walsh, 2021a), unless students are given opportunities to examine and unpack them in active, formative, discussion-based activities, they can simply be another aspect of the ‘institutional practice of mystery’ (Lillis, 2001, p. 53) with which they have to contend.

2.2.4.6 Disseminating the brief

Gilbert and Maguire (2014) and Howell-Richardson (2012) include in their guidance some recommendations for disseminating the brief and providing opportunities for students to engage with it formatively outside of the process of completing the assessed task. This stage of the assessment process represents a valuable opportunity for engaging students with those aspects of the assignment brief which, as has been discussed above, may resist clear articulation. It is accepted that briefs should, in so far as it is possible, be ‘models of clarity’ (Sadler, 2015, p. 12), but only so much of the often tacit meaning involved in statements of purpose and text type and the language in which they are communicated can be made explicit and clear. Assessment is necessarily embedded in the literacies of disciplinary Discourse communities (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006). It is in the process of dissemination that staff and students have an opportunity together to examine and challenge what otherwise might remain implicit and inaccessible (Hughes, 2009).

In this section, I wish to focus particularly on work arising from the *Disparities in Student Attainment* (DiSA) project (Cousin and Cuerton, 2012). The DiSA project was aimed at addressing the attainment gap between BME students and their white counterparts. Of relevance to this study was its promotion of assignment dissemination strategies involving guidance and development opportunities for staff on how to improve the quality of assignment briefs and on activities with which to develop students’ ability to interpret and unpack assignment requirements via structured group discussions and interactions with

their tutors (Howell-Richardson, 2015). Key to the usefulness of the approach seems to have been the opportunities for dialogue around the assignment briefs, which benefitted both students and staff. Results published by Cureton et al. (2017) strongly suggest that this has had a positive impact both on student attainment and on reducing the numbers of students failing to submit assignments. Although all students were seen to benefit from the approach, quantitative data from the project indicates that it seems to have impacted most significantly on students from BAME backgrounds when compared to their white counterparts, particularly for grades at 60% and above. Qualitative data from the initiative suggests that students responded positively to the assessment unpacking activities, reporting that they felt their autonomy as learners was being encouraged and developed and that they felt more confident in themselves and their ability to succeed. They also valued the opportunities it provided for useful discussion about assessment requirements with staff. Data from staff involved in the initiative revealed that they noticed a surprising increase in engagement from students in relation to assessed work and a marked decrease in the number of students coming to them on a one-to-one basis for guidance on understanding assessment tasks. Staff were also surprised at the mismatch between their assumptions about the clarity and accessibility of their assignment briefs and how the briefs were received by students.

Use of exemplars to model unfamiliar text types and provide opportunities for students to develop evaluative judgement, internalise assessment criteria for the purposes of self-regulation and unpack implicit and tacit knowledge have been seen to be effective in previous sections and may provide useful activities to include as part of dissemination processes (Carless, 2007, 2015; Carless and Chan, 2017).

2.2.5 Cognitive processing of the assignment brief

Subsumed within a social model of academic literacies is the notion of the development of literacy as a process of academic socialisation, in which the unpacking of the language of academic Discourse is seen as a part of students' necessary development as members of the disciplinary community (Lea and Street, 2006). Students must become academically literate in the ways of doing and thinking of their institutional and disciplinary contexts in order to function effectively within them (Hughes, 2009). It is this purpose that informs the

development of Gilbert and Maguire’s assignment brief guidelines as a staff development resource (2014) and, indeed, the development of the other frameworks in Table 13, above. Namely, to provide teachers with a framework with which to ensure that they communicate assessment requirements clearly and effectively to their students. This also informed my own initial consideration of the role of the assignment brief in students’ engagement with their assessed work (Knight, Rochon and Lee-Price, 2014). For students to engage with their assessed work at their optimal level, they must after all first learn how to ‘do’ assignment briefs. Ensuring clarity around purpose, text type, student role and audience, assessment criteria, etc., and providing opportunities for discussion of these between staff and students via which to examine and unpack them are therefore of clear benefit.

On a different level, corresponding more closely to the *study skills model* (Lea and Street, 2006) in the academic literacies framework, which sees academic literacy as primarily a cognitive skill, there also issues of presentation which are of relevance. These more mechanical aspects of assignment briefs can be seen in the section of Table 13 that I have labelled ‘cognitive processing dependent’. They pertain particularly to how the surface features of the brief serve its communicative purpose by providing for more cognitively efficient processing of its content. This includes issues such as readability (Howell-Richardson, 2015; Roy, Beer and Lawson, 2020) and overall document design (layout, structure, use of white space, etc.) (Schriver, 1997; Hartley, 1998). Gilbert and Maguire (2014b) suggest a rationale for attention to the visual and structural design and presentation of assignment briefs that explicitly draws upon theories of information processing, particularly cognitive load theory (e.g., van Merriënboer and Sweller, 2005). No evidence base is provided for this within the guidelines themselves and it is not referred to in their published research (Gilbert, 2012), although it does feature in their conference presentations (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a; Maguire and Gilbert, 2015). I will briefly consider these components of the assignment brief from this perspective.

2.2.5.1 A brief overview of cognitive load theory

Cognitive load theory was initially outlined by John Sweller in the late 1980s (Sweller, 1988) and refined to provide a more definitive statement of its general principles in the late 1990s (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998) and more recently (Sweller, van Merriënboer and

Paas, 2019). It is an applied theory with the stated aim of using an understanding of 'human cognitive architecture' (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998) as the basis for enhancing instructional design strategies, particularly in relation to the design of instructional messages and short instructional units, such as written materials (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 2019). As such it may provide a useful basis for how aspects of the presentation and structure of tasks may contribute to or impeded learners' ability to engage with them to their fullest abilities. Along with other aspects of cognitive and neuroscience (e.g., Weinstein, Sumeracki and Caviglioli, 2019), cognitive load theory is becoming increasingly accepted as a basis for pedagogy. Ofsted (2022), for example, explicitly refer to cognitive load theory as the basis for aspects of their Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019).

Cognitive load theory is concerned with the manner in which 'cognitive resources are focused and use during learning and problem solving' (Chandler and Sweller, 1991, p. 294). It involves an understanding of the relationship between working memory, which is described as the 'cognitive structure in which conscious processing occurs' (Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, 2006, p. 77) and long-term memory, in which knowledge is stored in the form of *schemas*, 'cognitive constructs which organise the elements of information according to manner in which they will be dealt with' (Sweller, 1994, p. 296). Schemas may both alter new information so that it fits with existing knowledge as represented in the schema and also be altered themselves to accommodate new learning. Indeed, within cognitive load theory, the process of learning can be characterised as the acquisition of and/or reconstruction of schemas, i.e., the alteration of the long-term memory (Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, 2006).

Working memory is finite and limited in duration (Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, 2006; Ginns and Leppink, 2019). Different kinds of cognitive load have an impact upon on the learner's ability to construct and store schemas as they engage with learning. These are:

- Intrinsic cognitive load
- Extraneous cognitive load
- Germane cognitive load

Intrinsic cognitive load is dependent on the inherent intellectual complexity of the learning task (Chandler and Sweller, 1991; Sweller and Chandler, 1991; Sweller, 1994). It depends on

two factors: element interactivity and the learner's prior knowledge. An element is whatever needs to be learnt, or has been learnt (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998). Elements are interactive if they are logically related and must be processed simultaneously in order to be understood. High levels of element interactivity are associated with greater complexity and therefore higher levels of intrinsic cognitive load. Equally, higher levels of existing knowledge in the form of relevant schemas reduce intrinsic cognitive load because the learner is required to use less working memory to process these aspects of the task. Extraneous cognitive load is determined by the way the information is structured and presented or the nature of the activities required of the learner (Chandler and Sweller, 1996; Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998). This is significant, because a means of presentation that imposes a heavy extraneous cognitive load will necessarily require the learner to make more use of working memory in understanding the task rather than completing it. Germane cognitive load relates to effort the learner directs towards the construction of schemas and automation, and thus learning (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998). Because working memory capacity is limited, learning should be designed to maximise germane cognitive load while reducing extraneous cognitive load in order to promote schema formation and alteration of the long-term memory.

There are effects which illustrate the interplay between extraneous and germane cognitive load that seem of particular relevance to this study: the *split attention* effect (Chandler and Sweller, 1996), the *redundancy* effect (Chandler and Sweller, 1991) and the *expert reversal* effect (Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003). Requiring a learner to split their attention between different sources of information when engaging with a task imposes a higher extraneous load than if the information was combined in a single source because they are required to devote working memory to integrating the multiple sources (Chandler and Sweller, 1996). The redundancy effect occurs when the learner is required to process both essential and unnecessary or redundant information in their engagement with the task because they have been integrated in its presentation. The redundant information is part of the task so the learner must process it, thus increasing extraneous load (Chandler and Sweller, 1991). Similarly, while supporting material that is intended to scaffold the learner's engagement with the task may be useful to novice learners, expert learners may experience higher extraneous load and thus engage less successfully with the task because of the higher

extraneous load imposed by the necessity to process the (for them) redundant information (Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003). The relevance of these effects becomes clear if the ‘task’ as discussed in this paragraph is understood as learning how to engage successfully with the assignment brief as part of their developing academic literacy.

2.2.5.2 Applying cognitive load to assignment brief design

Assignment briefs are complex documents with contain multiple elements. In cognitive terms, they can be seen as possessing high levels of element interactivity (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998) which, as a consequence, impose a high intrinsic cognitive load (Chandler and Sweller, 1991; Sweller, 1994). In the context of the assignment brief, element interactivity relates to the interrelated nature of the different components which must all be considered if the student is to make effective use of the brief as a basis for their interpretation of the assessed task, e.g., the learning outcomes associated with the task, the task itself, the expected text type of the response, the means by which that response should be framed (e.g., with reference to a particular theory or drawing upon particular sources) and how it will be assessed. Where the brief also includes supporting material to scaffold their engagement with the assessed task this may add a further complicating factor. This process must also take place within certain practical parameters which need to be factored into the student’s understanding of the task as a whole (the form in which it must be submitted and by when, how important it is in terms of the weighting of marks, presentational requirements, etc.). In short, interpretation of assignment briefs is by nature a cognitively challenging process.

By proposing a standard approach to the presentation of assignment briefs in which their constituent components are consistently and logically sequenced, Gilbert and Maguire (2014b) are providing a basis by which students can manage aspects of the cognitive load associated with their interpretation. Certainly, use of a consistent template would provide a basis for the development of schemas for how assignment expectations and requirements are communicated, particularly if the template directs teachers to identify appropriate text types and formats for student responses to the assessed task (de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014). Walsh (2021a) also argues for a consistent approach, thus allowing students to internalise aspects of the assessment process as they progress through their programmes. From a

cognitive point of view, this seems likely to promote students to develop appropriate schemas for briefs. By necessity, there may be many elements in a brief, but provided they are used and sequenced consistently students can readily learn what and where they are in the overall structure of the brief and manage their attention accordingly to focus on relevant sections as and when they are required (Eiriksdottir and Catrambone, 2011). Developing a schema for the brief is significant, because existing knowledge stored in the long-term memory as schemas can be called upon to support processing in the working memory with no added cognitive burden (Paas and van Merriënboer, 2020). Having internalised a structure for assignment briefs, the student should then be able to process future briefs more readily (assuming a consistent approach has taken to their design), which may reduce anxieties about this aspect of the assessment process (Walsh, 2021b).

Presenting all required information in a single document may also help to avoid the extraneous cognitive load of attempting to combine instructions, advice and relevant content from different sources (Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998). Decisions about what information needs to be included in the brief and how relevant it is to students is also important (Gustafson-Pearce, 2009). It is usual for teachers to scaffold student learning in teaching and assessment practices (Anderson and Hounsell, 2007) and this can usefully form part of assignment briefs (Balloo *et al.*, 2018; University of Ulster, 2018). Doing so, however, does present the need for a balance between comprehensiveness and conciseness (Walsh, 2021a); too much information makes for longer briefs which are more cognitively difficult to process; too little and the student lacks a sufficient foundation on which to base their response to the assessed task. In her study in an Irish higher education context, Walsh (2021a) found students both wanted briefs that were both concise (1-2 pages) but also comprehensive. The brief was a principal means by which students determined their teachers' expectations about assignments and insufficient information caused students anxiety about their ability to meet them (Walsh, 2021b). Walsh also identifies student awareness of their changing needs as they progress through their courses, with less detail in briefs required as they develop confidence and understanding. This seems entirely in keeping with the cognitive basis for ensuring that information is properly germane to the assessed task (Chandler and Sweller, 1991) and that scaffolding is both treated progressively, i.e., it is withdrawn proportionately as students develop confidence in and

knowledge of expectations as they progress through their courses, and presented in a way that allows 'expert' students to bypass it rather than having to engage with it (Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003). A section on the brief dedicated to this function may serve this purpose, while allowing for students to select how (and whether) to engage with it (Rop *et al.*, 2018).

2.2.6 Practicalities: task requirements

Gilbert and Maguire (2014b) use task requirements to describe the aspects of the brief that must be adhered to, but are not part of the task *per se*. These include word count, referencing style and presentational issues (e.g., font, line spacing, use of headings, etc.) These practical aspects of the brief are relatively unproblematic in terms of opportunities for student misinterpretation, yet here, too, there are aspects which can cause difficulty if they are not made explicit (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b). Lack of clarity on word count, for example, in terms of what aspects of the assignment should be included (figures, appendices, references, etc.) and inadequate or ambiguous submission instructions can cause anxiety among students for whom otherwise accepted and assumed programme-based or institutional practices might be unfamiliar (Walsh, 2021b). Howell-Richardson (Howell-Richardson, 2015) also suggests that clarity around word count and submission processes are a key element for ensuring accessibility in assignment briefs. A further key issue is whether the word-limit provides sufficient space for most students to be reasonably expected to be able to complete the task and, conversely, whether it may be possible to evidence learning outcomes within shorter, more focused assignments, thus reducing the burden of assessment for all involved (Race, Brown and Smith, 2005).

Collier and Morgan (2008) in their exploration of the mismatch between student and staff perceptions of assessment in a US context, found further differences between traditional and non-traditional students in anxieties about the specifics of how assessed work should be completed. This extended beyond issues around appropriate language use and dealing with discipline specific terminology to include anxieties about expectations around presentation (line spacing, font, etc.). In one instance, a student from a non-traditional background mistook the presentational requirements of an assignment because of a misunderstanding of the instruction to 'write about some field experience' (Collier and Morgan, 2008, p. 440), which they took literally to mean 'write by hand'. More broadly, Collier and Morgan

associate this aspect of the assessment process as part of the overall requirement for students to successfully enact the role of students according to the expectations of their teachers. This requires the acquisition of both explicit (as stated in course documentation) and implicit (otherwise taken for granted) knowledge. Students from non-traditional backgrounds were felt to be disadvantaged because they lacked the cultural capital of more traditional students who come to university already more finely tuned to the expectations of institutional Discourse or equipped with the confidence and skills to adopt effective problem-solving strategies for meeting those expectations. Anxieties about practicalities of assignment submissions in terms of what is counted in word limits, and expectations about font use and line spacing become more understandable when viewed as an aspect of the same drive towards non-traditional students' strategic seeking of explicit advice and guidance suggested by Ashwin (2009). They have to be strategic and desire explicitness in order to provide a basis for their strategic engagement because they have neither the existing Discourse knowledge and awareness nor the confidence and sense of entitlement of their traditional counterparts.

2.3 Reconceptualising transition

In the section on assignment briefs, I have suggested that students new to higher education and particularly those from what might be described as 'non-traditional' backgrounds might face particular challenges in their assessed work. I framed this within an academic literacies view of the challenges of acquiring and working with new Discourses and the role of the assignment brief in affording or presenting a barrier to students' effective engagement with assessment. I also acknowledged the importance of an awareness of the cognitive challenges associated with the interpretation of assessment expectations in assignment briefs as an aspect of effective academic communication.

Students' acquisition of what Gee (Gee, 2003a, 2011) would call academic Discourse, of developing literacy in the broadest sense as a basis for successful engagement in university and ultimate success in learning and achieving the qualifications required for entry into professional life plays a key role in what is typically conceptualised as *transition*. In this section, I will explore the concept of transition to higher education and suggest an

understanding of the term beyond the typical framing of the challenges of moving between educational contexts or as a bounded period of time in which students are particularly vulnerable. Instead, my conceptualisation of transition is as a complex process of development, change and identity shift resulting from the process of participation in higher education, in which relationships between individuals and their social contexts are inextricably linked (O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens, 2016).

This process can be complicated by aspects of the socially exclusive practices within higher education (Thomas, 2002; Glogowska, Young and Lockyer, 2007; Young, Glogowska and Lockyer, 2007; Crosling, Heagney and Thomas, 2009). Certain groups of students may also be particularly disadvantaged (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2008; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2017; Gill, 2020; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Smith, Greenfields and Rochon, 2022). And yet, I would argue that there are powerful opportunities for learning and growth within this process for both individuals and institutions in which assessment processes, including how assignments are delivered and disseminated to students, can play a key role. Gale and Parker's definition of transition as the 'capability to navigate change' (Gale and Parker, 2014a, p. 737) is a useful one because it acknowledges the possibility of change not only in students but in institutions and their practices.

The term 'transition' is widely used in the literature of higher education, although there are multiple definitions of what it means (Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2006; Colley, 2010; Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010; Gale and Parker, 2014a; Gravett, Kinchin and Winstone, 2020; Gravett, 2021). Indeed, while the focus of this study is on the higher education context, as well as asking what 'transition' means, it may well be appropriate to consider *which* transition we are referring to, as there are many an individual undergoes throughout the life course of their education (Crafter and Maunder, 2012; O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens, 2016). Changing patterns in how students access and enter university studies also require an understanding of transition that accommodates those who do not conform to traditional ideas of first-year entry and in-person attendance (Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2009; Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2013; Kahu *et al.*, 2015). There are also substantial shifts in the academic expectations to which students are required to adjust as they progress from level to level within higher education, the not unproblematic nature of

which can be seen in phenomena such as the ‘sophomore slump’, a US term which refers to the loss of motivation and engagement experienced by students as they encounter the heightened demands of the second year of study (Webb and Cotton, 2018). Equally, for students for whom the traditional conception of university as a full-time residential experience in which their sole focus is on their studies does not apply (Haggis, 2006; Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2017), transition is a daily activity (Quinn, 2010) as they move between different aspects of their lives: from home to university (Thomas and Jones, 2017), from workplace to classroom (Callender, 2008).

Tinto’s (1975, 1987) student integration model which focused on reasons for student drop out and failure to complete their studies has provided widely used framework for understanding the challenges of students in their transition to higher education (Braxton, Milem and Sullivan, 2000). Writing in a US context, Tinto identified the importance of academic and social acculturation as part of this process, involving a separation of students from their existing cultures as they take on the values and practices of the new academic culture (Tinto, 1988). Tinto certainly urges institutions to adapt to the needs of new students in the provision of services and opportunities that will afford their social and academic integration (Tinto, 1988, 2011) particularly in relation to the initial stages of their time at university, which is framed as a time of particular vulnerability, but the model is strongly underpinned by the expectation that ultimately, it is the student who must adapt, such that drop out may result from:

The inability of students to separate themselves from past associations and/or to make the transition to new ones (Tinto, 1988, p. 449)

Indeed, this process of separation has been characterised as a kind of ‘divorce’ from previous relationships and ‘cultural suicide’ (Tierney, 1999, p. 86) for those whose home culture and background is markedly different to that of the culture of their new institutions. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2006) problematise Tinto’s integrative model of transition (Tinto, 1975, 1988), which can be seen as placing the onus on students to adapt and integrate. They argue instead for an adaptive model based around student-centred approaches, which acknowledges the need for higher education institutions to adapt, accommodate and value the diverse cultural capital of their students. Further critiques of Tinto’s integration model point to his original focus on university as a residential experience in which students are

literally separated from their home lives (Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004). For many students in higher education today this is no longer relevant. A much higher proportion of students continue to live in their communities and in their parental home while studying, and/or their own homes locally and commute to university (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). For students engaging with university studies in this manner, Tinto's 'hegemonic' (Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2006, p. 588) account of transition as founded upon students' separation from their existing social and cultural norms is simply not compatible.

2.3.1 Transition as induction

Gale and Parker (2014a) provide a useful typology of transition, grouping different accounts under three main categories. While doing so, they acknowledge that there is no absolute distinction between them and that views of transition in one category may entail characteristics of the others. Tinto's student integration model (Tinto, 1975, 1988), for example, while heavily oriented towards induction, also entails aspects of developmental accounts:

1. Transition as induction
2. Transition as development
3. Transition as becoming

Transition as induction views the process of transition metaphorically as a 'pathway' or 'journey', involving an essentially linear period of adjustment from one educational and institutional context to another in which the student familiarises themselves with and learns to navigate institutional norms and procedures. Such views of transition prioritise the importance of the first year experience as critical in informing student success, or failure at university (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010), particularly for those from diverse backgrounds (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Ginty and Boland, 2016) for whom it is characterised as 'a complex and often difficult period' (Krause and Coates, 2008, p. 449).

Central to this account of transition is the notion of induction. This is significant because it presupposes that the institutional structures, cultures, conventions and expectations are static and unproblematic. The university provides support in the form of induction and

orientation processes, as well as extra-curricular activities to afford social interaction and engagement, but ultimately it is the responsibility of the student to adjust to university culture in general and their disciplines in particular (Beasley and Pearson, 1999). Pallas's (2004, p. 168) understanding of 'pathway' as a metaphor for transition is useful here as it is seen as an attribute of the 'social system', or institutional context, through which the student charts a well-defined and institutionally managed path.

2.3.2 Transition as development

Transition as development sees transition in different terms. Rather than an institutionally determined pathway, the student instead describes a 'trajectory', an 'attribute of the individual' (Pallas, 2004, p. 168) as they develop new identities as students in higher education (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) and, ultimately, as members of a new profession. Gale and Parker (2014a) thus see *transition as development* as a linear process of individual transformation, as the student separates themselves from their previous identities and develops new identities through interaction with their new contexts. As such, this way of thinking about transition also places considerable emphasis on the experiences of students in their first year at university. Transitional programmes that derive from an understanding of *transition as development* will tend therefore to include mentoring processes by which new students are paired with more well-established students who have already 'learned the ropes', such as peer-assisted learning schemes (Longfellow *et al.*, 2008; Sriver, Olesen and Clifford, 2021) and by courses which entail work placements, via which they develop their identities as professionals (McSweeney, 2014). There are clear analogies in this approach to conceptualising transition with Wenger's (1998) notion of Communities of Practice, via which new, 'peripheral participants' master the valued practices of their new community by engagement with those practices and with 'full participants', or 'old-timers'.

Gale and Parker (2014a) critique *transition as development* by underlining the socially exclusive nature of higher education which presents substantial challenges to students from diverse backgrounds, which somewhat problematises the Communities of Practice model. Wenger's (1998) account involves a reciprocal process of change, via which the participation of new members of the community results in shifts in the practices of the community itself. However, while this may be theoretically feasible, research has drawn attention to the

barriers that may be inherent in current higher education practices and the difficulties that higher education institutions may have in changing in response to students (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2016; Smith, Greenfields and Rochon, 2022). In response to the considerable changes in higher education over the last decades there have been changes both in individual institutional practices (Waterfield and West, 2006; O'Neill, 2010; Berry and Loke, 2011; Balloo *et al.*, 2018) and on a statutory basis, via legislation, such as the (UK Government, 2010) bodies such as the now defunct *Office for Fair Access* (OFFA, 2018) and its replacement, *the Office for Students* (OfS, 2018) in response to the growing numbers of higher education students from increasingly diverse backgrounds. The growing importance of metrics in the reporting of attainment and retention rates for diverse groups, such as the Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF) (OfS, 2022a) has also placed responsibility on higher education institutions to ensure that their policies and practices are meeting the needs of their students in quantifiable terms. However, evidence such as the ongoing attainment gap between black and minority ethnic students and their white counterparts (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Equality Challenge Unit, 2016; McDuff *et al.*, 2018; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020) suggests forcefully that the higher education sector as a whole continues to struggle to implement such change effectively.

2.3.3 Transition as becoming

Transition as becoming challenges the understanding of *transition as induction* and as *development* in favour of a more dynamic and fluid conception of the term (Quinn, 2010). Indeed, it can be said to reject the notion of transition as a time bound concept (Gale and Parker, 2014b) and views it as part of a perpetual whole life experience, characterised by fluctuation and fragmented movements in which students navigate multiple narratives and identities. The essence here is the lived, subjective experience of the student. In this account, transition is not a point or period in time, nor is it a linear progression or 'universally experienced and normalised' phenomenon (Gale and Parker, 2014a, p. 744). It is a process by which students negotiate not simply the development of a singular new identity as might be understood in a *transition as development* account, but rather the back and forth between multiple identities (Quinn, 2010; Crafter and Maunder, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Trowler, 2015).

A view of transition in this sense moves away from an approach that has been described as 'pathologising' students as requiring deficit models of support (Butcher *et al.*, 2017) or of therapeutic mentoring (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) in order to achieve a smooth transition according to normative expectations (Biesta, 2009). Instead, it rather points to a more dynamic and transformative conceptualisation of transition in which there is a responsibility for the institution to adapt in order to accommodate the diverse realities of students' lives:

Higher education must have structures and processes, that cannot be denied, but ultimately it needs greater openness and flexibility. It should mirror the flux of our being, rather than trying to subjugate it with rigidity (Quinn, 2010, p. 127)

Such a view would create opportunities for universities to become sites of contestation and multiple interpretations rather than sites of assimilation (Tierney, 1999) in which issues of disparity and conflict are engaged with rather than smoothed out and silenced (Bletsas and Michell, 2014). In this way, higher education might become a space in which not just new kinds of student are welcomed and valued, but also their knowledge and ways of knowing, so that they can contribute from the basis of 'who they are and what they know' (Gale, 2012, p. 253; Smith, Greenfields and Rochon, 2022).

There are evident parallels between Gale and Parker's typology (2014a, 2014b) and the ways of thinking about student literacy in the academic literacies model (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006). Transition as induction and development offer a unidirectional and normative view of the process by which individuals engage with higher education, with an expectation that they will unquestioningly acquire the dominant Discourse, 'writing out' (Aiken, 2021) their existing identities as they adopt new identities as students within the expected norms of their new institutions and disciplines. Gale and Parker's concept of transition of becoming, on the other hand, seems entirely compatible with the transformative idea of academic literacies (Lillis and Scott, 2015), in which there is an opportunity for a third space which accommodates and values both the lifeworld Discourses of students and the dominant Discourse. As the principal means with which the worlds of students and their teachers come together, assessment may represent a space in which this can take place.

Approaches that acknowledge the balancing act between centripetal and centrifugal forces articulated by Thesen (2013) and Aiken (2021) may provide new opportunities for meaning

making and the negotiation of identity. Examples of such approaches include the dialogic engagement with assignment briefs between students and teachers as developed as part of the *DiSA* project (Howell-Richardson, 2012; Cureton *et al.*, 2017) and assessment practices that value and provide space for students to draw upon their own identities and lifeworlds in their engagement with their disciplines and learning, e.g., via the use of emergent learning outcomes (Hussey and Smith, 2003, 2008) and negotiated assessments (Kleiman, 2007; Evans, 2016; Monsen, Cook and Hannant, 2017).

3 Methodology

This section will outline the approach taken to the research design of this project, providing a rationale for the methodology adopted and description of the analytical process.

As will be seen, however, the study as described here has moved away somewhat from the design submitted in the original ethics application, included here in one of its later iterations (see Appendix 3 below). Time and pragmatic considerations led to less data being collected than originally planned before initial submission, with fewer participants being interviewed fewer times than originally hoped. These changes are articulated and discussed in section **Error! Reference source not found.** Making changes, below.

Further changes, too, have arisen from a desire to enhance my interpretation of participants' experiences. The original study had aimed to focus solely on students' experience of engaging with assignment briefs, rather than on the briefs themselves. However, it has been felt subsequently that it would be useful also to include analyses of some of the briefs they discussed in their interviews. This provides a useful objective referent against which to consider participants' thoughts and feeling about the business of engaging with their assignment briefs (Wengraf, 2001) and, I feel, enhances my understanding of their experiences. My focus continues to be on the student experience, for which my chose methodology (interpretative phenomenological analysis is ideally suited, but in order to do, it is useful, too, to include aspects of the context in which they found themselves at the time. Part of that context relates to institutional and disciplinary assessment practices, e.g., as outlined in Sections 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 above. It also clearly relates to the briefs themselves that the participants interpreted and used to guide their engagement with their assessed work.

3.1 An emergent research design

It will first be useful to engage reflectively with the necessary departure from the research design as originally planned (see Appendix 3, p.339) and the research as actually conducted.

A pilot interview had been conducted in June 2018 prior to my entering into abeyance in the latter half of 2018, but analysis was not completed until September 2021 following my return to studies. This pilot analysis usefully informed the development of the interview schedule developed for the new round of participants, who were recruited during the autumn term and timings for interviews set for the period November to January (2021-22). Analysis of this first round of interviews took place in the period following collection, a process further complicated by my interim promotion to a learning and teaching leadership position within the institution and the need to support and manage aspects of an institutional curriculum refreshment project which was underway at this time. At this point, plans for a further round of interviews were effectively shelved. The original plan had been to recruit 6 participants and to interview each at least once and ideally twice, allowing for further exploration and analysis on a more longitudinal basis. At the time, I was aware that this was potentially a larger number of interviews than might otherwise be recommended for a professional doctorate research project (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), but proceeded on the understanding that if this proved to be unsustainable then the original proposal could be amended and adapted accordingly.

There were significant difficulties in recruiting the originally planned 6 participants from Social Work. Five participants came forward, but one of these (the only male) chose to withdraw before an interview could be arranged, leaving four. As a result, I sought an amendment to my ethics application to expand my population of possible participants to include first year Business students, another populous and diverse cohort. Despite repeated recruitment activities, however, only one participant came forward, making a total of five. I felt I had no other alternative than to proceed with the number I had, despite concerns that, even for an IPA study, that this was at the smaller end of what might be considered appropriate. Nevertheless, I had to be pragmatic and felt that depth of analysis, rather than the number of participants was the key factor. As it was, following the analysis of the five participants' interviews, it was clear that there was a considerable amount of data – taken together, the five had yielded 396 experiential statements at the initial stage of analysis. I felt that the original round of interviews had yielded such rich data and complexity of analysis that there was sufficient material for exploration within the relatively limited scope of the professional doctorate. There was a pragmatic element in this decision in terms of the

need to ensure that the amount of data was manageable and could be processed and engaged with to an appropriate level within the required timeframe as I was keenly aware of my impending submission deadline. However, beyond pragmatics, there was also a sense that sample size was not necessarily as significant as it might be. I knew that the sample was small and that there would be anxieties about this, but I also felt that it was sufficient as the basis for an initial, exploratory study, that the results of even this small study might nevertheless be of interest and use in highlighting areas for future exploration beyond the scope of this study.

As a case-based idiographic methodology, IPA is not as preoccupied with the concept of saturation, where data tends towards repetition or ceases to provide new directions for exploration (Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey, 2016), as other qualitative methodologies. Indeed, the very concept of 'saturation' is rather at odds with an interpretative methodology, suggesting that there is meaning inherent in the data that can be uncovered and confirmed, rather than constructed via interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2021). It has also been suggested that continued concerns around sample size may derive from ongoing anxieties around the primacy of quantitative research and the need for generalisable results as a means of promoting the validity and worth of qualitative approaches (Galasiński, 2021).

Nevertheless, following the initial analysis of the first round of interviews, it was decided to attempt a second round in order to provide a longitudinal aspect to the study, providing insight into the later experiences of the participants as well as their initial encounters with higher education assessment as first years. The proposed second round coincided broadly with the participants' third year of study. Regrettably, two of the Social Work participants had by this time withdrawn from the course. Ruth chose to leave following her first year, apparently having reconsidered her career aspirations. Clare withdrew following her second year, having encountered a range of challenging personal issues and failing to submit to one of her modules. Happily, I understand that she has since committed to re-joining the course and is in the process of completing the module. The remaining two participants, Mary and Sara, failed to respond to repeated attempts to make contact via their personal email addresses (the sole formal contact details that they had shared with me). As a result, it was not possible to re-interview them. Bridget, however, did respond and agreed to a second

interview. Pressures on the schedules of both the researcher and the participant, however, meant that it was not possible to arrange the interview until January 2024. Bridget's interview was conducted, transcribed and subjected to analysis and the results deriving from it were integrated in the overall analysis of the entirety of the interview data collected as part of the study.

It is acknowledged that the absence of a second interview with either or both of the remaining Social Work participants is a real loss to the study as Bridget's second interview provided hugely valuable insights into her developing identity as a student and future Business professional and her attitudes to assignment briefs and the wider assessment process. The more longitudinal perspective provided by the second interview towards the end of the students' time at university would have been welcomed, particularly given the study's interest in the role of participants' engagement with assessment as part of their transition and identity-formation as students and future professionals (Christie *et al.*, 2016). However, the snapshot provided by the initial round of interviews at a particular moment in the participants' first year, having engaged with their first assignments continues to be useful and it is hoped that this study with even its relatively limited data set nevertheless provides a basis for useful insights into the student experience of engaging with how their assessed tasks are communicated to them.

3.2 Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

This research study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as its methodology for exploring the experiences of its participants, specifically as defined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and Smith and Nizza (2022). IPA is a relatively new form of qualitative research (Smith, 2011) and is still undergoing clarification of its terms and analytical procedures. Notable among these changes has been the use of the term *experiential statements* (Smith and Nizza, 2022) to describe what had previously been termed *emergent themes* (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). I intend to adopt this new terminology as it seems a useful distinction. It both strongly signals the centrality of the participants' *experience* of phenomena as the fundamental unit of analysis (Eatough and Smith, 2014) in IPA and also, more implicitly, points to the interpretative act of the researcher in making sense of participants' experiences. These experiential statements do not 'emerge' from the data, rather they are indeed *statements*, made *by* the researcher as part of the collaborative process of sense making between participant and researcher (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Indeed, it is this constructivist essence to IPA which made it particularly relevant to my project in that it reflected my own underlying beliefs and values about learning, which are heavily informed by the concept of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978).

IPA lends itself particularly well to studies which focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for people who share an experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). It is commonly used in psychology, particularly in relation to studies involving the experience of physical and psychological health conditions; Smith (2011), for example, identified 293 research papers using IPA in the period from 1996-2008, 24% of which focussed on the experience of illness. Increasingly, IPA has also been used in educational contexts, an area to which it is arguably well-suited (Noon, 2018). While some education-based IPA studies have focused on HE students' experiences of transition (Jensen and Jetten, 2015) and other aspects of the university experience, e.g., perceptions of tuition fees (Galvin *et al.*, 2015), I have been unable to locate any research

using IPA which focuses on the experience of students in their understanding of assessment expectations and the impact of the manner in which they are communicated. As such there seems an opportunity to bring a unique perspective to this area and thus add a further dimension to our understanding of the needs and challenges faced by our diverse range of students in their engagement with assessment. The relatively unbroken ground of research into this aspect of the student experience of assessment also makes a good case for IPA as a methodology perhaps particularly suited to initial, exploratory engagements with a phenomenon via the study of a small homogenous sample. That is, the results deriving from the intensely analytical and case-based nature of an IPA study might usefully provide a basis for further investigation via other methodologies and approaches with larger samples, where the focus might be on arriving at more readily generalisable findings, such as those that may be achievable via thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

3.3 Rationale

In this section, I will discuss my rationale for using IPA. There are a range of qualitative methodologies available and in the absence of a single definitive ‘hallowed’ (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 38) approach, the question of which to adopt is perhaps better framed as an issue of determining fit to the purpose of the project (Willig, 2013). Certainly, too, within the context of professional doctoral study, there were considerations of alignment with my own existing knowledge, experience and role and my intentions in carrying out the study as well as how that existing knowledge might usefully be drawn upon within the research process. Not least of all, too, in relation to the professional context in which the study was conducted, were pragmatic considerations, e.g., relating to availability of time, access to participants and, indeed, suitability of the methodology selected (Ramanadhan *et al.*, 2021).

My purpose in writing this section is to attempt to explain why interpretative phenomenological analysis fits my research purpose and, in doing so, make sense of the process in terms of my own values and identity as an educational professional. In doing so, my intention is to attempt to clarify what I understand to be a key tenet in qualitative

research and which, for me, provides a rationale for engaging with Willis's (2007) 'off-putting' philosophical underpinnings as a basis for my own personal sense-making of the process; namely, I aim to use this section to make clear my way of looking. This is useful because as a qualitative researcher, I am very much present in the process (Willis, 2007; Cresswell, 2013) and, as a means of striving towards trustworthiness in my findings so that the reader can see what I saw in my results (whether they agree with it or not!) (Grbich, 2013), it seems useful to make my position clear. It is important for the reader to be aware of how I have chosen to look at my research data, what I feel is important to look at and how this has been informed by my personal and professional values.

The suitability of IPA for exploring the 'lived experience', or *Lebenswelt* (Husserl, 1970), or 'lifeworld' (Gee, 2011), of students in their experience of assessment lies in a combination of factors which relates to its philosophical underpinning. These are identified by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) as phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography and it is in these terms that I will discuss the relevance of IPA as a research approach for this study.

3.3.1 The phenomenological basis for IPA

IPA builds upon Husserl's emphasis on the significance of experience and how it is perceived (Husserl, 1970), refined by Heidegger's insistence that experience takes place in relation to the world, within a context (Heidegger, 1962/1927). While Husserl's aim was to describe lived experience, interpretative phenomenology aims to reveal implicit meaning in that experience, i.e., not simply the experience, but what it means to the participant within their particular social context. It differs from Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, too, in relation to the presence of the researcher. Husserl proposed the adoption of a strategy of phenomenological reduction, or 'bracketing' in order to see the phenomenon as experienced. In phenomenological research, this is typically enacted an attempt to set aside the researcher's own experiences and previous assumptions in order to avoid influencing the participant's understanding of phenomenon (Tufford and Newman, 2010; Chan, 2013). Heidegger (2019), however, moved away from the concept of bracketing on the basis that it was not possible to put aside such assumptions and understandings. IPA further draws, too, on the work of Merleau-Ponty (2002) in that it

acknowledges the embodied and subject nature of existence, further complicating the relationship of the researcher to the participant and their experience of a phenomenon and pointing to the holistic, embodied as well as psychological nature of lived experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). How IPA manages the issue around this informs its approach to interpretation (see below).

It is its phenomenological origins which provides for the ontological basis for IPA. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and what it is possible to know about the world (Ormston *et al.*, 2014). Taking the study of experience as its central concern, IPA attempts to explain a process by which we may understand the experience of others in their embodied, subjective selves and how they make meaning of those experiences within their contexts (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) describe the ontological basis for IPA as 'minimal hermeneutic realism', which acknowledges an external reality but is focused on the experience of that reality by individuals. The ontological focus is not on the 'reality' of the world in the objective sense, but rather on how individuals perceive and orient themselves towards the world around them (Willis, 2007):

What is real is not dependent on us, but the exact meaning and nature of reality is.
[emphasis in the original] (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006, p. 107)

In the terms of this study, the focus is on the individual's experience of the phenomenon of the assignment brief and what this reveals about their subjective lifeworld. In this then, the ontological focus is the individual's personal relation to the brief and how it informs their understanding of the assessed task and, indeed, themselves as students, as individuals within the social context (what Gee (2011) would term their lifeworld Discourse). This is not absolute, but rather reflects the current situation of the individual in relation to their contexts, at that moment in the process of their becoming. Studying the assignment brief as an object itself reveals aspects of its objective reality that may be helpful, for example, a particular layout may facilitate the visual and cognitive processing of the text, the inclusion of certain information may enable students to engage with the assessed task more effectively. However, this in itself would not reveal issues around the disciplinary language and Discourse it uses and how students experience the brief as part of the way in which they construct their understanding, not only of their subject, but also

themselves as students within their institutional and disciplinary context. IPA's focus on the experience of individuals as they experience the world (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) provides an opportunity to glimpse the relationship between the phenomenon and the individual in context and how they make sense of this experience and relatedness (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006). A key example of this can be seen in the participants' sense that problematic aspects of the brief (inconsistencies, poor communication, misalignment between task and outcomes, etc.) were in some sense 'their fault', that it was something they were supposed to be able to work out. The objective reality of the situation was that the brief was faulty in some way, but the participants' perception was that their inability to engage was the result of their perceived inadequacy, reinforcing their sense of not belonging, or not being quite good enough. This is significant in the context of the study because it points to how students experience the brief and how this forms the basis for their developing understanding of their place within their disciplinary Discourse community. That is, it is through an exploration of those experiences and how students make sense of them that the mechanisms of power within the assessment process and the wider context are made evident. In Foucauldian terms (Foucault, 1977), discourse has a role in 'training' and 'making' individuals' via a process of normalisation from outside but also via a kind of internalised control of the self (Hope, 2013). Tomkins (2017) suggests that IPA has a particular interest in the effects of this process, that is the experience of individuals not as something separate from their institutional contexts, but that experience as something shaped by that setting and internalised into the individuals' sense of identity. In this, IPA provides an opportunity for exploring the way in which assignment briefs as technologies of disciplinary and institutional Discourse are experienced by students and how that experience contributes to their sense of themselves as students, through their understanding (or lack thereof) of what is expected of them and their successes (or failures) in their wider experience of the assessment process.

If phenomenology provides the ontological basis for IPA, then it is the interpretative aspect of IPA which reflects its underlying epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with what we can know about reality and how we can know it (Willis, 2007). In qualitative research, the researcher's aim is to construct knowledge on the basis of the subjective

views of their participants (Cresswell, 2013). In this study, those views are shared in speech in semi-structured interviews and their talk is treated as text for analysis as a means of accessing how their experience of engaging with assignment briefs and related activities has meaning for them (Wilkinson, 2004). At the same time, it is acknowledged that the participants are not simply passive 'vessels of answers... repositories of facts, reflections, opinions and other traces of experience' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004, p. 144); but rather that the interview itself is a form of sense-making in which the participant is actively interpreting their experiences and presenting this interpretation to the interviewer. This forms the basis for the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Smith, 2019) in IPA, the acknowledgement that the participant is involved in an act of interpretation in searching for meaning in their experiences and the researcher in turn is attempting an interpretation of their interpretation. The researcher's interpretation is therefore necessarily second order (Smith, 2019). They are not revealing the 'pure' experiences of the participants, but rather by a process of empathetic, sensitive and responsive interpretation aiming to arrive at an understanding of how the participants *perceive* those experiences that is the best they can achieve (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006).

In Husserlian phenomenology, the researcher attempts to remove their experience and presuppositions from the process of describing the phenomenon by bracketing and setting them aside in order more purely to obtain a vision of the essence of the phenomenon (Grbich, 2013). However, in IPA, the emphasis on interpretation somewhat problematises the concept of bracketing as, rather than setting aside the researcher's existing knowledge and presuppositions, the researcher is acknowledged as very much present in the process of interpretation (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), cast in the role of an active and reflexive participant (Laverly, 2003). Indeed, in their articulation of the theoretical basis for IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) draw on Gadamer's (1979) suggestion that it is not possible to separate the researcher from the researched. How IPA resolves this in terms of providing a means of, if not resolving this issue, but acknowledging it, provides a further aspect of its suitability for this study.

One of the ways in which it is achieved is by acknowledging that the researcher's interpretation of participant's experiences is necessarily perspectival (Smith, Flowers and

Larkin, 2009). This seemed of particular relevance to my own particular situation and the broader context in which I and my participants were operating. My background in learning development has had a formative impact on my values. I am aware that I am 'on the students' side', keen to view things from their perspective, to place myself metaphorically alongside them in the same way that I used, literally, to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with them as they engaged with their briefs and assessed work. I have professional experience of assessment in higher education and have engaged with other practitioners and a substantial range of literature in developing my understanding of its processes. I am also intensely involved in the business of assessment within the institution and have driven, among other developments, the design and use of the institutional assignment brief template. It is for this reason that I have included an account of the professional experiences that led to the selection of my research focus in my introduction. This is not so much an attempt to bracket my existing foreknowledge and experience in this area, but rather to make it clear and visible. Arguably, too, the traditional form of the dissertation, in which contextual introduction and literature review precede the methodology and results, also reflects a kind of making visible of my existing thoughts and knowledge of the area. Each of these provides an opportunity to make my particular perspective more visible.

A further aspect of IPA that makes it relevant and useful in this particular context is its engagement with the process of interpretation, requiring a questioning and reflexive stance of the researcher via which they arrive at their ultimate interpretation of the data. Engagement with and interpretation of data in IPA is highly structured, beginning as an initially descriptive but ultimately interpretative process, which provides the basis for a deeply reflective and analytical engagement with participants' experience of the phenomenon. The initial process of noting provides a useful illustration (Smith and Nizza, 2022). This takes the form of a structured and systematic process of:

- Initial familiarisation (typically via the transcription and initial rereading process)
- Descriptive noting
- Linguistic noting
- Conceptual noting

The detail of how these stages were enacted during this research are outlined in section 0 below, but it is worth noting that these discrete, though necessarily related, stages effectively provide a kind of bracketing. That is, the disciplined and conscious adoption of a descriptive lens, then a linguistic lens, and ultimately a conceptual lens, via which initial sense making takes place provide for a different way of looking allowing the researcher to move beyond their existing assumptions (Thomas and Sohn, 2023), providing a basis for 'deeper engagement with the material and increased reflexivity' (Tufford and Newman, 2010, p. 92). Equally, subsequent stages of analysis and interpretation also require a disciplined and focused engagement with data in a way that affords sense making, moving incrementally from an inductive approach focused very much on the participants' voices and words towards a more deductive approach as the researcher attempts to conceptualise and make sense of those words in their own terms. I am part of and subject to (in Foucault's (1977) sense that while I have some degree of agency, I am also necessarily an 'object' of its surveillance and control) the institutional Discourse, just as the participants in the study are. My experience of the Discourse is different because of my years of experience and the benefit of educational opportunities, but I am nevertheless constrained to live within the system, while I hope 'thinking outside it' (Badenhorst *et al.*, 2015, p. 98). The disciplined approach to interpretation and analysis afforded by the techniques of IPA and the opportunities for seeing differently that derive from it are thus of real usefulness in exposing not only students' experience of the power inherent within the Discourses in which they operate, but also potentially my own.

Reflexivity is a further key aspect of the interpretative process in IPA as it provides the researcher with the opportunity to engage with and critically interrogate the interpretative process and the development of their ultimate themes. This is of relevance to all researchers engaged in interpreting data and follows logically from the idea of bracketing, i.e., looking differently, in order to focus on the interpretation of the phenomenon in a way that naturally acknowledges the researcher's perspective but does so in a way that prioritises and privileges the participants' experience of the phenomenon itself. This is not ultimately to reveal the 'pure' experience of the participants, but to ensure that our interpretation is as 'sensitive and responsive' (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006, p. 108) as it can be within the inherent limitations of the interpretative process.

This is typically achieved via the keeping of a reflexive diary throughout the analytical process, providing the researcher with an opportunity to explore the process by which they arrive at their outcomes (Smith and Nizza, 2022) and a space in which to question their interpretations (Laverty, 2003).

As an illustration, I have included below an extract from my own reflexive diary in which I question my interpretation of an aspect of Bridget's second interview (see Figure 3, below). The situation was complex and, in some ways, contradictory. Bridget had demonstrated a clear commitment to learning and her own development, indeed in a way that seemed a matter of personal pride and identity. Yet, at the same time, it seemed that there were aspects of what she said that pointed to wanting to be told simply 'what to do'. What emerged following a careful consideration of her words was a picture of an oppositional, even adversarial, relationship between her and the assignment and perhaps also her teachers and the wider programme precisely because

the approaches being taken denied her the opportunity to engage independently and with agency in her own terms.

There is a link, I think, in relation to this perception she has that lecturers are wilfully withholding key information from the briefs in order to promote attendance. I find this very difficult to believe and it seems more likely that her teachers are simply trying to unpack aspects of the brief in order to, e.g., engage students more deeply with relevant concept, but it is clearly her perception that it is the case and part of the mechanism for her frustration in relation to assessment practices. This points, I think, to a growing sense of independence and having moved beyond what the programme can now offer her – she talks about being ‘ready to go’ elsewhere in the interview and her sense of finding aspects of the programme repetitive in the third year. Is there a sense that this is evidence of her sense of agency and how it is being frustrated by practices within the programme that are subjecting her to a degree of control?

The more I look and reread and probe her responses about feeling constrained and dependent, due to staff apparently ‘hiding’ certain information about assignments in sessions rather than their briefs to promote attendance, I think I am able to distinguish a quite complex and contrasting situation. Because some information is missing from the brief, she feels dependent upon teaching staff and prioritises what they say strategically in order to be able to access higher marks in her assignments. At the same time, however, she is also aware of the greater freedom afforded by the way assessment is managed in her third year through opportunities for critical analysis in academic work and problem solving and recommendation making in assignments with more authentic contexts. Indeed, this is something that she seems to value highly. She feels both enabled and encouraged to pursue her thoughts in an agentic and empowered way via her critical engagement with her assignments and yet also constrained and controlled by the manner in which the requirements and expectations of her assessed tasks are communicated to her.

There was a sense in her earlier interview that she simply accepted that difficulties in the brief were something that were ‘her problem’, that she just had to deal with. This current attitude seems rather different – she is aware of shortfalls within the briefs she is given but now firmly locates problems with them within the brief and wider context of the programme. In Bakhtinian terms, the briefs have ceased to be authoritative texts – they are no longer the ‘Word of God’...! In this, she is much more agentic and empowered than her younger, first year self. At the same time, however, she also recognises that she is still subject to the power relations inherent within the process of assessment. If she wants a good grade, she *must* do what the lecturers want her to do. In order to do so, she needs to prioritise what they say in sessions, rather than relying on the brief. There is a sense that she resents this sense of ‘dependence’, when in other respects she feels empowered and ready to move on into the world of work.

Figure 3: Extract from researcher’s reflexive diary, written during the analysis of Bridget’s second interview.

3.3.2 IPA and idiography

IPA is *phenomenological* (it is concerned with the ways in which its participants experience the world) and it is *interpretative* (it is concerned with how its participants and the researcher makes sense of experience). It is also strongly *idiographic* (Smith and Nizza, 2022). Idiographic research is concerned with the intensive study of particular cases (Wharton, 2006; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) as opposed to *nomothetic* research (which is concerned with the development of general laws from large amounts of data) (Willis, 2007; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). IPA is idiographic because it privileges the accounts of individual participants as the basis for arriving, ultimately, at an attempt to identify commonalities and make comparisons between those participants in order more fully to understand their experience of a phenomenon (Noon, 2018; Smith and Nizza, 2022). That experience is always individual, so a case-by-case approach makes sense, but it is also shared: they all have experienced it, if in different ways. The process by which IPA moves from a highly particular case by case analysis to a more general understanding of the experiences of the wider group while retaining the particularity of the individuals is reflected in its intensively analytical method as it moves from personal experiential themes (PETs) (as developed from individual cases) to general experiential themes (GETs) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Smith and Nizza, 2022) (see 3.4 Method, below).

Teaching in a mass higher education context almost always involves a certain degree of generalisation in that the relationship of the teacher to students is always one to many. The teacher must, while allowing for adaptation and some degree of differentiation in delivery, rough tune their delivery and design of learning opportunities in a way that they judge to be best suited to what Vygotsky would describe as students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This holds true, too, for the design and communication of assessed tasks and their expectations and requirements. For students, however, their relationship to their teachers and their engagement with assessment is always one to one. Ultimately, the learner must engage in their own individual meaning making. It is for this reason that a strongly idiographic approach such as that provided by IPA is so useful as it is explicitly and self-consciously focuses on the individual experience. It is only in the

experiences of individuals that things become meaningful in human terms. While the notion of generalisability is perhaps an 'appealing concept' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p. 28), generalisations must be applied to particulars in order to be of practical use.

A further aspect of the importance of an idiographic approach which privileges specific cases and gives 'voice' to the concerns of participants (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006) is the opportunity to make visible the experiences of those whose voices have typically been underheard and whose views have been under-represented. This is of particular relevance in the light of the theoretical framework used for the purpose of this study. By prioritising the voices of the participants, and attempting to interpret their experiences as seen through their eyes, I am attempting to place myself alongside them in a Freirean sense, attempting to understand their 'characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure of domination' (Freire, 2017). That is, I am positioning myself as an advocate of transformative education and challenging the normalising forces to which both students and staff are subject to. In this, too, IPA seems to have resonance and relevance as it is so closely based on the voice of the participant, the voice of the student. IPA is also an interpretative process that is ultimately a form of collaborative, 'synergistic' sense making (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 92) between researcher and researched, it is to some extent an collaborative exercise. Equally, teaching and assessment at their best are not things you do *to* people; they are things you do *with* them. It is hoped that selection of IPA as the research approach in this study reflects this.

3.4 Thinking reflectively and reflexively about the philosophy of research

It is with some sympathy that I note Willis's (2007) suggestion that the requirement to engage with the philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative research process as I know is expected at doctoral level may 'put students off philosophy for life' (2007, p. 9)... I also have sympathy with Given (2017) in finding the perceived need to justify, defend and explain the adoption of a qualitative research paradigm 'draining and tiresome' (Given, 2017, p. 2); like Given, I do not wish to engage in 'paradigm wars' or 'mock battles'

(Silverman, 2004) and in doing so rehearse the justifications of entrenched paradigmatic positions. Instead, I acknowledge that research conducted on the basis of different paradigms is best suited to different kinds of questions (Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey, 2016). I am grateful for the scientists working within the postpositivist scientific method who developed the COVID-19 vaccines that have saved so many lives in the past few years, but if my area of focus was not on the reality of the physical, microbiological world, but on the reasons why some people have refused to take those vaccines, the scientific method would not help me. Instead, I would need to adopt an approach that rather focused on the perceptions and interpretations of the people living within that reality (Ormston *et al.*, 2014). In doing so, I would not need to deny the existence of the objective, physical world, I would simply be looking at and valuing something else.

I hesitate to apply labels to myself, but in this I seem to be adopting what Ormston *et al.* (2014) describe as 'critical realism', which values individuals own interpretations of the reality in which they are situated as a means of gaining access to the complexity of that reality. A cognitive account for the interpretation of assignment briefs reveals characteristics of the brief as a document that either afford or impede a student's ability to access their assessed tasks and develop schemas for doing so, but this in itself is inadequate as a basis for understanding the role of the brief in informing the student's developing sense of themselves as an actor within the social world of the Discourse of their disciplines. Indeed, this is the basis for critiques of cognitive load theory (e.g., Derry, 2020). The positivist, laboratory-based experimental approach that informs cognitive load theory provides an account for aspects of the internal processing of the brief as a text but cannot access the role of the brief in the social world of the student.

I have worked as a teacher, researcher/developer, learning developer and academic developer in higher education in various settings and countries for more than 30 years. I am at heart a pragmatist and a practitioner; I like to make things work and will use whatever tool or approach seems best suited to the task at hand. I have taken a similar approach in selecting the methodology for this study, seeking to make use of a research framework that pragmatically fits the research approach to the specifics of my research question (Willis, 2007). I also wanted to use an approach that aligned with my personal and professional way of looking at the world and locating meaning in what I do. On a

pragmatic level, too, I was attracted to IPA as it seemed a well-formed, unified tool that I could pick up and make use for my purposes. Naturally, 'other research approaches are available' and were certainly considered. Thematic analysis, for example, strongly recommended itself as a possible approach (Braun and Clarke, 2020) and may have lent itself to a study with a larger sample which may have led to the possibility of further 'actionable' recommendations for practice. Recent involvement in other research activities without the context of this study have exposed me to the usefulness of contextual text coding (CTC) (Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021) as a possible approach. Indeed, the mixed methods involved in this method and the acknowledgement of the usefulness of deductive engagement on the basis of the researcher's existing knowledge and professional expertise as well as inductive engagement with participant data makes it a perhaps ideal approach within professional doctoral study situated within the researcher's own professional practice and context. Ultimately, however, IPA was selected because it seemed the best fit for my intention to explore the particular experiences of students in engaging with assignment briefs as encountered in my work as a learning developer, sitting (often literally) shoulder-to-shoulder with them as they attempted to make sense of sometimes confusing and poorly communicated briefs. The focus and valuing of participant voice afforded by the close and iterative analysis in IPA seemed to make this the best fit for exploring their lived experience and providing opportunities for viewing this phenomenon from their experience.

This study is a professional doctorate and as such it does not seem out of place to discuss how research approach aligns to my professional role and, indeed, the values that underpin it and which inform my own identity as a teacher, as a learning developer and an academic developer. Much of my role is in helping others to learn, whether working with students or alongside staff in their professional development or in curriculum development. In my current role, this involves driving, implementing and supporting the implementation of policy, teaching and working with staff and supporting staff in the process of curriculum development. In this, I have a deeply held value that education is not something that you do *to* people, but rather *with* them, through a process of co-creation in a space that occupies a zone between what Gee (2011) might refer to as my lifeworld Discourse and theirs. Learning is not 'told' to people, it is negotiated and

constructed in a process of interpretation and sense-making that is initially social and then ultimately individual (Vygotsky, 1978).

3.5 Method

This section outlines the process by which the interview data used in the study was collected, beginning with recruitment and sampling and then engaging with the process of data analysis, using the 5-stage IPA method proposed by Nizza and Smith (2022).

3.5.1 Data collection

This section outlines the approach taken to recruitment, sampling and analysis of participants' interview data in both first and second interviews.

3.5.1.1 Recruitment and sampling

Recruitment was purposive (Robinson, 2014), focusing on first year students in their first semester of attendance at the small professionally oriented university in the southeast of England in which the researcher was employed as an academic developer at the time of data collection. A criterion-based approach was taken to ensure homogeneity of sample (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Recruitment activities involved calls for interest via announcements in the institutional virtual learning environment and in-person appearances by the researcher at the beginnings of lectures, in which the aims of the research were shared and expressions of interest in being involved as participants were invited. Would-be participants were asked to complete a short form which aimed to capture key characteristics which would identify them as fulfilling criteria for being 'widening participation' students. These included: age, disability, whether or not they were care leavers, parental experience of higher education, whether they were in receipt of financial support from the university, pre-university qualifications and post code of what they considered to be their home address in order to determine their POLAR4 and AdultHE quintiles (UK Government, 2021). Data relating to these characteristics can be seen in Table 14, below. The online form was associated with a shortened URL and QR code to facilitate access.

An initial pilot study of an individual student from a Policing degree was conducted as a means to develop a better understanding of the IPA process and to test its usefulness for exploring the student experience of engaging with assignment briefs as part of their assessed work. This took place early on in the process in 2018 and the analysis was written up as an individual case study.

Subsequent recruitment activities focused on Social Work students as these represented a convenient cohort of first-year students from a diverse range of educational and cultural backgrounds. Social Work was also based on the same campus as the researcher, making for convenient access for the purpose of recruitment, arranging interviews, ~~etc.~~ Despite repeated attempts, poor response rates to recruitment activities yielded only four Social Work students out of an original group of five who expressed an initial interest. Consequently, ethical approval was gained to recruit from Business courses (another populous and diverse population of students), which led to the recruitment of a further participant from this context. This led to a dilemma as to which students I should include in my analysis. The Business student was recruited and interviewed shortly after the Social Work students, but although her engagement with assessment text types was similar to those of the Social Work students, she had been exposed to different assignments. The four Social Work students, however, were on the same course and engaged in the same assessment activity and constituted a more homogenous sample. I was concerned that even allowing for the small samples sizes recommended in IPA research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) that four may be too small to yield satisfactory results.

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) advise that sample selection should depend on the purpose of the interpretation, balanced with pragmatic considerations. Consequently, it was decided that all five of the students should be included. In terms of the requirement of the original research design, they represented a sufficiently homogenous sample. They were all first-year students. They were all women (Social Work is a predominantly female subject in this institution). One male student had expressed an interest to be involved but withdrew before he could be interviewed. All students, too, had characteristics that would identify them as 'non-traditional' in at least one and often a number of categories. All had taken non-traditional routes into university via Access courses, BTECs and NVQs.

One was Asian and one was Black. The one student who mentioned taking A-levels had also had to retake them after receiving poorer than expected marks the first time round and had subsequently taken an Access course to secure her route into higher education. One student was also a care-leaver. One was in receipt of financial support from the university. The Business student was from a non-Native English-speaking background and had a specific learning disability (dyslexia). Three out of five of them were first generation higher education attendees in their families and the same proportion were mature. A further uniting factor, which emerged during the interview and analysis process, was that they had all faced some considerable challenge or difficulty in their previous educational experiences.

3.5.1.2 Data collection

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. This provided a broad structure within which participants were able to discuss their experience of assignment briefs but sufficient flexibility to allow for the exploration of particular aspects of the experience as they became evident during the flow of conversation (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). A schedule was developed to reflect this structure. To capture a sense of students' backgrounds and lifeworlds prior to university as well as their immediate experiences of engaging with assessment and the impact this might have on their feelings about their future as students, the schedule was structured around the past, present and future. This interview schedule is included as an appendix (see Appendix 8) and formed the basis for the first round of interviews.

Following the decision to conduct a second round of interviews, a further schedule was developed on the basis of the initial analysis of the first round on which it builds directly. This second interview schedule was not included in the original ethics application as it was always intended to be provisional upon the findings from the first round of interviews. This was felt to be within the bounds of the original ethics application by the Chair of the Ethics Committee. This interview schedule is also included as an appendix (see Appendix 9). The usefulness of conducting this second round of analysis cannot be underestimated as it provided a further longitudinal aspect to the study, albeit from the perspective on a single participant as only one of the original sample responded to

requests for a further interview. Returning to the study also allowed for an opportunity for considering the outcomes of the participants' engagement in the assignments discussed in the first interviews which contributed to the analysis of their experiences and conclusions drawn. Clare's concerns about the Lifespan assignment, for example, which she had identified as being misaligned to the learning outcomes led to the useful discussion of the possible implications of her having to submit an assignment in which she felt it was not possible to evidence some of the outcomes and yet for which she received a very good grade. It was not possible to access the feedback she received, which is noted as a limitation in the study as it would have cast further useful light on the impact of this experience on her developing understanding of assessment processes and wider academic and assessment literacy (Price *et al.*, 2012).

Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams in accordance with COVID-19 social distancing restrictions in place at the time. The use of this technology meant that interviews could be scheduled at times of convenience for the participants, who were able to participate remotely. It also provided a visual record of the interviews as well as an audio recording, which was useful in providing a further level of interpretation of the participants' emotional state while discussing their experience of engaging with their assignment briefs.

Table 14: Summary of participant characteristics (grey highlighting indicates a marker for widening participation)

Name	Course	Gender	Age	Disabled	Careleaver	Parental HE quals.	Financial support	Pre-university qualification	Ethnicity	Polar4 Quintile	AdultHE Quintile
Mary	Social work	Female	21+	No	No	No	No	NVQ (L4/5)	White British	5	5
Ruth	Social work	Female	18-21	No	No	Yes	Yes	Access and FY (other institution)	Black British	2	3
Sara	Social work	Female	21+	No	No	Yes	No	Access course	Asian British	4	3
Clare	Social work	Female	21+	No	Yes	No	No	Access course	White British	3	3
Bridget	Business	Female	18-21	Yes ⁵	No	No	Yes	BTEC	White British	5	5

⁵ Bridget has dyslexia and, during her first year at least, had access to support in the form of regular meetings with a representative from the Inclusion Service.

3.5.1.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the research project that forms the basis for this dissertation was gained from my institutional ethics committee and with the written permission of the relevant Heads of School (see Appendix 3 and Appendix 4, respectively). The project was carried in a manner intended to conform to British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018).

Although I no longer have direct contact or formal teaching responsibilities involving students, I am still a university employee and, as such, may be perceived as a member of staff by participants. All information relating to the project that I shared with students underlined the fact that I have no influence on the assessment and marking of their work and that their participation would also in no way impact upon the way their work was assessed and marked by their tutors. This was also repeated at the outset of all interview processes.

Data collection took place at a time when COVID-19 restrictions were still partly in place at the university. For this reason, interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams. This provided for any concerns that students had relating to the transmission of Covid-19 and allowed them to participate from a safe environment of their own choosing (e.g., their own homes). If students preferred, interviews were also offered in suitable locations on campus (e.g., unused classrooms) which would allow for appropriate social distancing and anti-Covid measures (such as ready access to hand sanitiser, etc.). None of the participants elected to conduct their interviews in-person and all took place virtually via Microsoft Teams.

All participants were recruited on the basis of fully informed consent, with the option to withdraw from the process until such time that their data had been subjected to analysis. Participants have been anonymised in any written account of the study and care has been taken to avoid the inclusion of any information that might be used to identify them in any way more specific than as a first-year students at the university. All data collected relating to students, including their data in the form of interview recordings and associated transcripts has been stored securely on my own password-protected OneDrive directory, which I access and manage via a password-enabled university issue laptop.

I was concerned that the process of revisiting educational experiences relating to assessment may be stressful for some students. Information providing contact details for relevant support services at the university was made available to all participating students during the interview process. Where I felt it appropriate and useful, I also used the end of the interview process to direct students to relevant university services, such as the Student Learning and Achievement unit for further support in their written work.

3.5.2 Data analysis

Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) summarise the process of conducting the analytical stage of IPA in four stages. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) expand this to six, but this returns to four in the later practical guide to using IPA (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014) and ultimately five in the most recent guidance available (Smith and Nizza, 2022). This research study has used the most recent five stage approach. In this method, each case is subjected to analysis in turn via an iterative process of initial noting, description, linguistic noting and conceptual noting culminating in the development of personal experiential statements (PETs) (Smith and Nizza, 2022) that characterise the researcher's interpretation of the significance of the participant's experiences to the participant. Only at this point, does the researcher move on to the next case and repeat the process. When all individual cases have been subjected to this initial round of analysis and interpretation, a process of cross-case analysis is conducted in order to generate super-ordinate and sub-ordinate Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The following section outlines the approach taken in this study, which was used for both the first round of five interviews and the subsequent second round of a single interview.

3.5.2.1 Reading and exploratory notes

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams at times agreed between the researcher and the participants. Microsoft Teams automatically creates a transcript when it is recording, although this is imperfect and by no means reliable. Following the interview, video recordings were downloaded and fully transcribed by hand, using the automatically created transcript as a starting point. This provided an initial opportunity for familiarisation with the transcripts. Because the focus of IPA is on the *content* of the

transcription (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), a semantic approach was taken, aiming for a direct transcription of the spoken words (Rodham, Fox and Doran, 2015), but stopping short of exact timings for pauses or coded transcriptions of other non-verbal events. Instead, an attempt was made to note where non-verbal events occurred using square brackets. Hesitations, false-starts, repetitions, and interruptions, etc., were rendered as heard, see Figure 4, below.

Ruth: but other times it's I find it so confusing that it kind of it doesn't help, and then I end up like not doing, trying to avoid the task. [laughs] So yeah, it's that, I think that's how I find it different.

Mary: It's just a little bit OK, what's? where do I? What? What? You know? [gestures confusedly with extra piece of paper] I don't know what to explain it is.

Figure 4: Examples of transcribed text with non-verbal events indicated

In order to optimise immersion in the transcript, initial readings were accompanied by the video recording of the interview. Reading and listening in this way is widely recommend in the research methods literature relating to IPA, for example, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), in order to facilitate the capture of the emotional state of the participant at key moments in the interview. This was supplemented by the use of video, which gave greater insight into the participants' emotional state during the interview process.

Following rereading, initial notes were made using the three stage process recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and Smith and Nizza (2022): initially, descriptive comments were made (unhighlighted); then linguistic comments exploring the specific language use of the participant, e.g., word choice, grammatical features, metaphor, (highlighted in yellow); and finally, conceptual comments that point to some broader picture or issue, e.g., positive sense of self (highlighted in green), see Figure 5 , below.

<p>Complexity of the assessment criteria is intimidating and difficult initially</p>	<p>Interviewer Yeah.</p> <p>Clare I think it's scary, I mean. It's about 6 pages long or 7 pages long. It's a big document. And it's overwhelming to look at, I think, yes, I think it's a little bit overwhelming, but it's really good to be able to actually see exactly what percentage means what. Erm, even for your own when you get the feedback. You can then actually see what you can improve to be that percentage higher. So I think it's very. It's good, but it's just a big document, specially for year four, I think. A lot of us haven't been in erm education for a few years, so it's yeah I think it's quite hard.</p> <p>Interviewer Yeah, and did you, were you? Did you understand the criteria? Did they? Did it make sense to you? Were you able to sort of understand what it? What it, what they were looking for?</p>	<p>Feelings about criteria – a big document, overwhelming and scary</p> <p>Concrete aspects – weighting and marks break down. Useful to see what better performance looks like. Being out of education means it is hard to engage. (The team not following institutional recommendations here)</p> <p>Finding the complexity of the assessment criteria intimidating at the outset</p>
--	--	--

Figure 5: Coded researcher comments in transcript extract from Clare’s transcript

An example of this systematic staged approach to engagement with the data illustrates its usefulness in promoting deep analysis of the data. It provided a framework for thinking and forcing the researcher to encounter the participants’ words in a different light. In this, it constituted a kind of bracketing in the sense that it promoted seeing the data, the participants’ words differently, revealing new aspects of their experience. For example, in Bridget’s second interview, it was only when I reengaged with the text via the linguistic lens that I noticed the use of the word ‘attack’ to describe engagement with an assignment (see Figure 63, below).

<p>Misalignment between expectations and LOs</p> <p>Engaging with assignments is a battle (attacking)</p>	<p>Bridget 5:48 Yeah. So, it's unless like to achieve those two learning objectives that they wanted to achieve, it's only two of them. However, at some random point during your assignment, your lecturer wanted to do a whole new thing that is not even covering the 1st and the 2nd learning objective. But you cannot get a first without attacking that they're telling you about. But if you <u>actually study</u> it properly, it wouldn't, it doesn't fit into two learning objectives.</p> <p>Interviewer 5:54 Yes, I see. So, there's a kind of misalignment between what the brief says you're supposed to be doing and what they <u>actually want</u>.</p> <p>Bridget 6:19 Yeah.</p> <p>Interviewer 6:20 Yeah, and.</p>	<p>A sense that some tasks require fulfilment of an LO that is not present. Good grades depend on finding this out</p> <p>Attacking – an interesting word choice for engaging with an assignment</p> <p>That idea of attacking – there is a sense of an adversarial relationship. The students want to pass and do well, to do this they have to 'win' the battle, but the brief and the information provided (or not)</p>
---	--	--

Figure 63: Extract of Bridget’s second interview

This provided an insight into Bridget’s sense of being in some kind of adversarial relationship with her studies and the programme. This seemed supported by her reported perception that lecturers were withholding key aspects of assessment information from the brief in order to promote attendance of sessions.

3.5.2.2 Formulating experiential statements

Once the transcript had been subjected to multiple readings and annotations, it was explored again, though this time with the focus on the notes that had been taken during the previous stage in order to identify any experiential statements, which were added to the left-hand column of the transcript. Using this different space allowed for some degree of separation from the initial exploratory notes and transcript while also facilitating a process of iterative checking back and forth between statements, descriptive, linguistic and conceptual notes and the words of the participant themselves.

This process marks a move away from the words of the participant (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014), although inevitably during this stage further interpretation also takes place, more notes are made and existing notes refined as part of the iterative process outlined above. The emphasis at this stage, however, was on the beginning of sense-making and the identification of experiential statements grounded in the particular experience of the participant as reported in their speech and yet sufficiently abstract to provide a more psychological conceptualisation and general picture of the participant's engagement with the assessment process and assignment brief. Smith, Flowers and Larkin describe this as reflective of the hermeneutic cycle, wherein 'the part is interpreted in relation to the whole, the whole is interpreted in relation to the part' (2009, p. 92).

3.5.2.3 Finding connection and clustering experiential statements

I placed the preliminary experiential statements into a separate document and then went through them, creating headings which captured what the relevance of these statements seemed to be in terms of how she made sense of the experiences. I use the headings feature in Word to support this process. Initially, three Level 1 headings were created:

- Making sense of the past
- Making sense of the present
- Thinking about the future

This reflected the structure of the interview schedule (see Appendix 8) and provided a basis for an initial sorting of the often many experiential statements generated during the first stage (Mary: 103; Clare: 107; Sara: 76; Ruth: 43; Bridget: 67). At this stage, all of the experiential statements imported from the original transcripts were formatted as Level 3

headings. Smith and Nizza (2022) suggest an approach of printing and cutting out the statements to allow for physical sorting and grouping. However, by using the computer, I was able to retain a link between the statements and the sometimes substantial original sections of transcript to which they pertained. Having converted the statements to Level 3 headings, I then copied relevant sections of the transcript into the new document and placed them with each statement heading. This meant that the experiential statement and the participant's words that could be moved around and manipulated as a unit. It also created opportunities for further refinement of the statements as part of the process of higher-level sense-making at this stage of the analysis process

I went through the experiential statements and extracts one by one, creating Level 2 headings to provide a higher-level conceptualisation of what I interpreted these statements to mean in terms of the significance of these experiences for the participants. Headings were formatted in different colours; font sizes and weightings; and with differentiated post-paragraph spacing to facilitate clear visible separation between statements as they were when exported directly from the transcript and the newer more conceptual headings used to organise them. As I proceeded, new headings were created as required and statements were also selected and moved under existing headings. This provided a convenient and manageable way of sorting and sifting the preliminary experiential statements. Also, the Navigation pane feature in Word provided a structured outline view of the process as it unfolded as well as providing a ready means of navigating between each heading as the titles of headings act as hyperlinks to the relevant section of the document (see Figure 7, below).

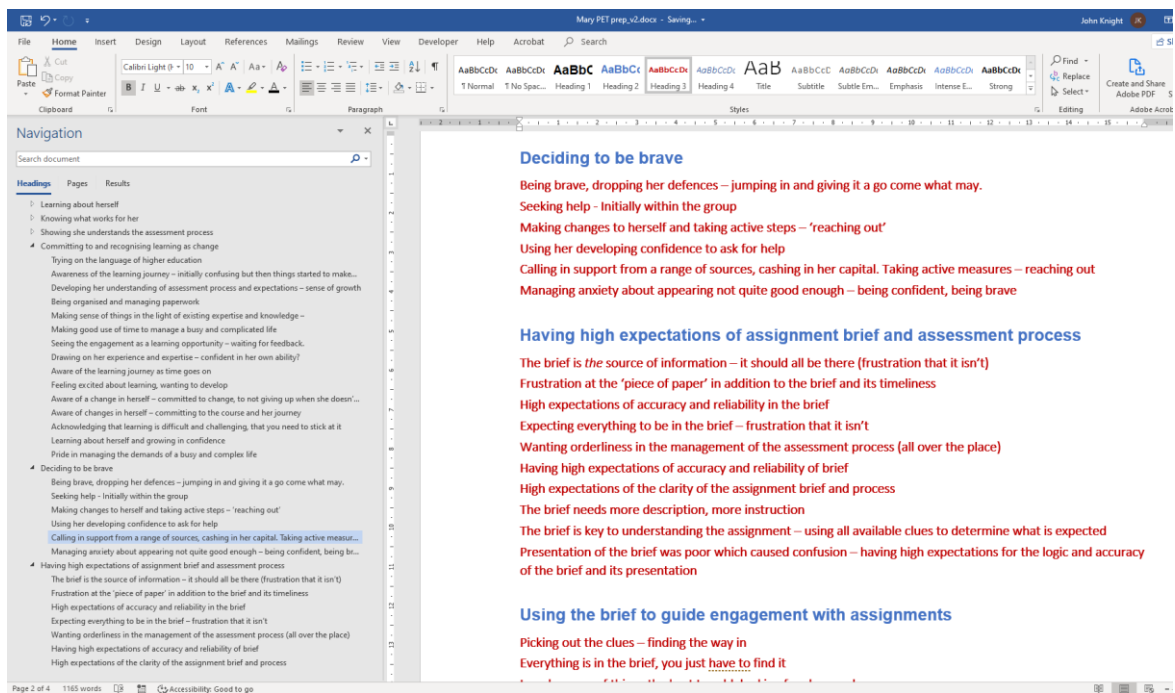


Figure 7: Using formatted headings and navigation features in Word to interpret and organise initial experiential statements (Mary)

A further feature of the Navigation pane is that it allows higher level headings to be picked up and moved as a single unit along with their nested subordinate headings. This allowed for a further sense-making activity following the initial organisation and sorting process as I was then able to place headings together thematically. This also allowed for the rationalisation of initial headings that had been duplicated, e.g., after the initial round with Mary's script I realised I had headings for 'Feeling lack of clarity is unfair and unjust' and 'Feeling a sense of injustice'; I combined the latter with the former in this case as my interpretation of Mary's sense of injustice was strongly linked what she had identified as a lack of clarity in the briefs.

At this stage, relevant sections of the transcript were added beneath the headings for each initial experiential statement to provide an audit trail and facilitate later analysis (Smith and Nizza, 2022). It also provided for the moving back and forth between original transcript and my interpretation and a further opportunity for checking and refining initial experiential statements. For example, at this stage, the initial statements in Mary's transcript 'knowing what works for her in terms of learning' and 'enjoying variety and wanting to develop' were merged to form a single statement: 'Knowing what works for her in terms of learning and wanting to develop'. Certain statements were also reworded

more closely to reflect changes in my interpretation. A section of the interview when Mary had been reading out the guidance in the brief was reframed to reflect my interpretation that this was her demonstration that she understood the language of assessment, drawing on her existing expertise as an NVQ assessor and taking pride in her existing knowledge.

3.5.2.4 Developing the PET tables

At this stage, there were still high numbers of initial experiential statements (Mary: 103, Clare: 107, Sara: 76, Ruth: 43, Bridget (round 1): 67). Bridget's second interview resulted in a further 55. During this re-reading and re-engagement with the initial statements and the transcript, certain statements were merged and discarded (for example, the few statements relating to Mary's use of humour were ultimately not felt to be of particular significance and were set aside) and the developing themes were sharpened according to my developing understanding of the significance of the experiences the participants had shared had for them. This was an opportunity for further analytical thinking, further interpretation as certain statements asserted themselves as more important, and some less so.

At this stage, I was seeking to refine my interpretation of the participants' understanding of their experiences to arrive at a comprehensive but manageable table of personal experiential themes. This was a process of identifying the most important experiential features they had shared and represented a key stage in the process of interpretation, an opportunity to crystallise my thinking in relation to each participant. This involved some reframing of the initial statements and themes as the overall picture developed as I moved from overview to specifics and back again to build a sense of the whole that contained the essence of the participant's experiences and how they made sense of it themselves. For example, a key realisation during the development of Mary's PET was moving to a higher-level conception of how she experienced the process of assessment and engaging with the assignment brief. This had originally been framed in terms of the emotional impact, both negative and positive. However, the process of moving back and forth between the original transcript and developing the themes from the experiential statements, of refining and distilling what seemed important about her experiences and

how she framed them led to a realisation not just that she experienced negative and positive emotions, but why she did so. It seemed clear to me that the negative emotional responses occurred when the brief or other aspects of the assessment process (such as being overloaded with too much information at the outset of the course) were preventing her from engaging with the assessment effectively. Equally, positive emotions were strongly linked to occasions when she felt enabled or empowered to engage.

To manage the process of refinement and distillation, as a theme became more solidly conceptualised, it was promoted to a higher heading level of heading so that the outline view in the Navigation Pane began to provide an overview of the developing personal experiential themes.

3.5.3 Compiling tables of personal experiential themes

Having established a set of experiential themes and clustered experiential statements, each of the former was saved out into a new document into which was saved relevant extracts from the transcript beneath each one. Placing the original text like this and re-reading the extracts out of context provided a basis for closer analysis and sense-making. Extracts were re-ordered to reflect the logic of my developing understanding of the participant's experiences and emotional responses until a kind of coherent story began to emerge. During this process, new insights emerged and allowed for the refinement of both super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes (for example, in relation to the development of the 'Taking control' theme, see 4.2.2.4.3 GET4c: Taking control and acting with their own power).

3.5.4 Developing group experiential themes (GETs)

Once personal experiential theme tables had been established for each participant, these were printed out and each individual experiential theme and related transcript extract was cut out and arranged on the floor (see Figure 108, below). Each experiential statement was labelled with the initial of the participant to facilitate recognition. Then a

process of matching and sorting began which provided the basis for the development of the final GET.

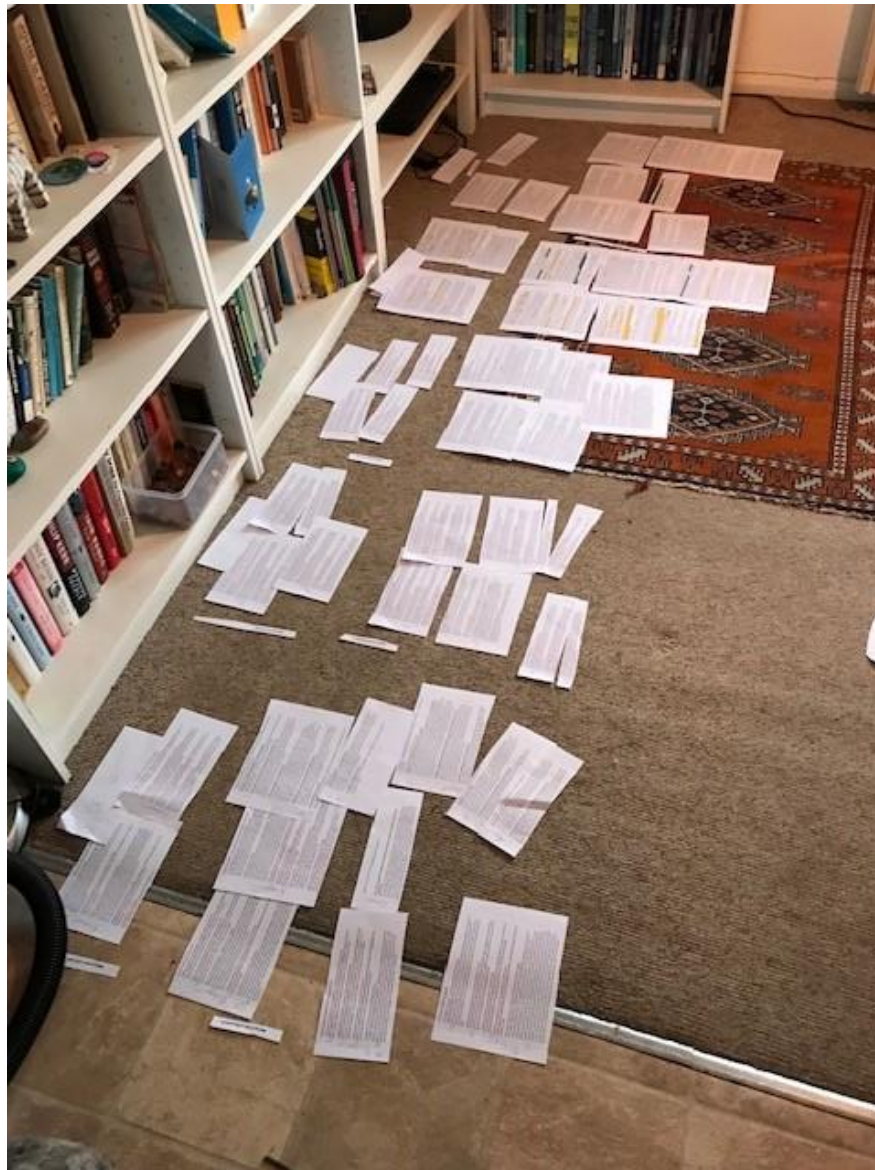


Figure 10: Developing the GET, using cut up extracts from each participants’s personal experiential themes tables following the first round of interviews

I was unsure initially about what to do with the PETs arising from Bridget’s second interview. Originally, as hers was effectively an individual snapshot taken at a time two years later than the original interviews, I considered including it as an individual case study. However, so closely aligned were the themes that emerged from the analysis of this second interview with those from that the first that ultimately it seemed appropriate to integrate them into the existing analysis as they served, often, to add a further useful perspective on the original analysis. One aspect, which related to the frustration caused

by a perceived misalignment between brief and how it was explained and discussed in class led to the development of a further sub-theme, 3b. Dissemination activities should align with assignment briefs.

3.6 Analysing assignment briefs

In order to provide an objective reference point (Wengraf, 2001) for the analysis and discussion of participants' experiences of engaging with assignment briefs as part of their studies, a number of example briefs have been selected and subjected to analysis using a framework derived from the discussion of literature relating to assignment brief design in Section 2.2 above. This framework is included in Table 15, below. It draws upon the work of Hughes (2009a), Gilbert and Maguire (2014b), Howell-Richardson (2015), and Thomas *et al.* (2019), alongside considerations deriving from cognitive load theory and literature on assessment criteria (see sections 2.2.5.2 and 2.2.4.5, respectively, above).

Since the completion of this study, an adapted version of this framework has been developed to support assignment brief development and related quality assurance processes within the institution. Here, it has been used in similar way as if advising a colleague, identifying areas of the brief that represent good practice and areas requiring improvement or further clarification. Recommendations for development are provided where appropriate. Attempts are also made to place the brief in the context of the theoretical framework of the study, considering how its features and characteristics might contribute to a greater or lesser extent to the acquisition of students' academic literacies and disciplinary Discourses

The briefs selected relate to the Social Work assignments referred to throughout the rest of this chapter as the 'Lifespan' essay or 'Context of Social Work' essay. They were selected as the Lifespan essay seemed to cause considerable difficulty for most students (though notably not all) and the context of Social Work essay seemed the least problematic. Although the Business student (Bridget) did not complete these particular assessments, the briefs nevertheless include issues that she also faced in her own work, for example, in the misalignment between task and intended learning outcomes and attempts by the designers of the briefs to scaffold student engagement. To provide a

sense of the context in which the Bridget was also working, an assignment brief from her course has also been subjected to analysis, referred to throughout as the 'People Management' report.

It is noted that the briefs were analysed following the collection of interview data as a means of further enhancing what was a more reduced data set than originally planned. As such the briefs were not always referred to specifically during the interviews and aspects of specific briefs were not addressed by the interviewer in his questions other than in response to particular points raised by participants during interview. While it is often clear which brief the Social Work students are referring to in their discussions (which they often link to their work on particular modules), this is by no means the case with Bridget and it has been difficult to match specific briefs with the comments she makes. It may be that the briefs which contained issues that she identified as problematic (such as a lack of alignment between task and outcomes) were subsequently amended and I was able to access only the amended versions. For this reason, the Business assignment that has been analysed has been selected on a random basis, in order to provide at least a sense of the context that Bridget was working within as well. It is notable that the Business brief contains a number of issues not dissimilar in nature to those from Social Work.

Table 15: Assignment brief analytical framework, developed from Hughes (2009), Gilbert and Maguire (2014), Howell-Richardson (2015), Thomas et al (2019) and related literature

Section	Prompt
Assessed task	
Purpose and statement of task	Is the purpose of the task clear and aligned to the relevant learning outcomes?
	Is the task clearly and concisely stated and, if relevant, is the process for its completion distinct, clear and logically sequenced?
	Is word count (or equivalence) clearly stated, achievable and level appropriate?
Text type	Is the text type of the task explicit (e.g., essay, report, etc.) and appropriate to the outcomes and purpose?
	If the text type is unfamiliar to students, is it clear how it should be presented and organised (e.g., via exemplars provided as part of in-class activities or via the VLE)?
Role of student and audience	Is the role of the student and the audience for this task clear (this might be particularly relevant for authentic tasks)?
Mode and medium	Is the form of the task (written, oral, visual, etc.) relevant to the purpose?
	Is the medium (paper, electronic, etc.) in which the task should be delivered clear and relevant to the task?
Clarity of language	Are instructional language and task verbs clear, accessible and level appropriate?
Scaffolding	If relevant, has brief level-appropriate scaffolding of the task been included?
Practicalities	
Referencing	Is the expected approach to referencing clearly identified?
	If relevant, has level appropriate guidance been provided on the amount and nature of reading/referencing/research required?
Presentation	If relevant, is it clear how the task should be presented (format, typographical requirements, etc.)?
Group/individual arrangements	If relevant, is it clear whether the task is to be completed on an individual or group basis?
	If group work, is it clear how group and individual contributions will be assessed and marked?
Submission	Is the submission deadline clear?
	Is the process for submission clear and explicit?
Assessment criteria	
Assessment criteria	Have the criteria been included at the end of the assignment brief?
	Are the criteria clearly and meaningfully aligned to the learning outcomes associated with this task?
	Are the criteria expressed in clear, accessible and level appropriate language?
Cognitive efficiency	

Sequencing	Are assignment elements presented in a logical order reflective of the order in which students may wish to engage in them?
Comprehensiveness	Does the brief contain all the information required for successful engagement with the assessed task?
Conciseness	Is the brief concise and manageable in terms of length and information?

4 Results and analysis

This section outlines the findings of my analysis of a selected assignment brief engaged with by the Social Work participants and the interpretative analysis of the five Social Work and Business participants' interviews. There are two main sections:

Section 4.1: Analysis of selected assignment briefs: Three briefs have been subjected to analysis using a framework developed as part of my review of literature of relevance to assignment brief design (see section 2.2 above). The intention is that this will serve as a kind of objective reference point to inform the subsequent analysis of the participants' experiences of assignment briefs as part of their studies.

Section 4.2.1: Analysis of participant interviews: This includes both first rounds involving all 5 participants and the subsequent second round in which only Bridget, the Business participant took part. It begins with brief narratives on each participant outlining their previous experiences of education and assessment as reported in their own words during the initial stage of the interview process (section 4.2.1). This is followed by an analysis of participant interviews structured according to the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate Group Experiential Themes (Smith and Nizza, 2022) resulting from the cross case analysis of all interviews from both rounds. This section concludes with a picture of how the participants view themselves as students at this stage of their studies and how their experiences have coloured their view of their future engagement with assessment and their learning. For Bridget, who participated in the second interview in her third year, this section has been expanded to accommodate her feelings about her situation as she prepares to complete her course and enter the world beyond the university.

4.1 Analysis of selected assignment briefs

4.1.1 The 'Lifespan' assignment brief

This section includes a slightly amended version of the assignment brief shared with students for the 'Lifespan' assignment. The institutional crest and usual meta data (module title, codes, module leader and contact details, submission and feedback

deadlines) have been removed. A single page of the assessment criteria for the assignment, which were not part of the brief but stored as a separate document has been included for information.

Assignment task

This module is assessed by means of an essay. Please select one of the following:

1. In what way is gender conceptualised within Social Work training, practice and delivery of services? Please choose ONE of the following TWO options and write from the perspective of either: a) a Social Worker, or b) a service user.
2. In what way can race and ethnicity be positively and negatively conceptualised within Social Work training, practice and delivery of services?
3. In what way can a Social Worker positively influence parenting styles within a range of family structures? Please choose ONE of the following TWO options: a) cohabiting parents, or b) a mono-parental family.
4. In what way can person-centred care be positively and negatively influenced within Social Work practice in relation to a service user? Please choose ONE of the following TWO options: a) a 70-year-old man with a diagnosis of mild dementia, or b) a 75-year-old woman with a diagnosis of severe dementia.
5. Explain some of the ways that attachment theory could be useful in social work practice, and also explain some of the theory's limitations from the perspective of a Social Worker working with a child (aged 16) who has been in care for most of his/her life.
6. In what way could developmental theories (e.g., Erikson) or Social Learning Theory (e.g., Bandura, Skinner) help you to work with a service user. Please choose ONE of the following TWO options: a) a child aged 14 who displays challenging behaviour, or b) a child aged 14 who has a diagnosed learning need.

This assignment has been designed to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your achievement of the following module learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of psychological theories, focusing on developmental psychology as it relates to different stages of the human lifespan.
2. Show an understanding of child and adolescent physical growth and development.
3. Consider lifespan development according to the perspectives of different groups within society.
4. Describe some implications of theoretical and empirical literature to social work practice.

Task requirements

The essay should not exceed 2,000 words. Essays that exceed or fall short of the word limit by more than 10% will have 10% deducted.

Presentation style: as this is a formal essay, you should avoid the use of the first person. Marking will be underpinned by the Level 4 generic assessment criteria, which is available on Blackboard. It is important that the quality of the prose (grammar, spelling, clarity of meaning) is at first year undergraduate level.

Layout: please use 12-point arial font, and 1.5 line spacing.

Referencing: the Harvard style of referencing should be used. The 'Cite Them Right' online system provides guidance.

Support: Do feel free to get in touch with [name of lecturer] by email if you have a question about essay preparation.

You may also seek more general support (e.g. writing and referencing skills) from the Learning Development Unit. If you think you might have special needs in this area, please get in touch with them, or talk with your academic tutor as early in the semester as possible in order that timely assistance can be provided.

Originality: co-operation with your peers is encouraged but it is expected that you will avoid suspicions of plagiarism by ensuring that your work is written entirely in your own words and is distinct from that of other students you might have cooperated with. You should make full use of the Turnitin originality report that is generated in the process of submitting your essay. This will alert you to any inadvertent plagiarism.

Referencing and research requirements

Please reference your work according to the Harvard style as defined in *Cite Them Right Online* (<http://www.citethemrightonline.com>). This information is also available in book form: Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2019) *Cite them right: the essential reference guide*. 11th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Copies are available via the University library.

How your work will be assessed

Your work will be assessed against the assessment criteria for Level 4, which is posted on Blackboard along with this document.

These criteria have been designed to measure the extent to which you have demonstrated your achievement of its associated learning outcomes (see above). They have been aligned with the institutional grade descriptor appropriate for your level.

The assessment criteria provide a basis for fair and consistent marking and indicate what is expected of you in this assignment. It is strongly recommended that you engage with them while you are working on the assignment and use them in combination with any feedback you receive once your work has been marked to help you plan for future learning and development.

Submission details

- You are reminded of the University’s regulations on academic misconduct, which can be viewed on the University website: https://bucks.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/9546/Academic-Misconduct-Policy.pdf. In submitting your assignment, you are acknowledging that you have read and understood these regulations
- Please also note that work that is submitted up to 10 working days beyond the submission date will be considered a late submission. Late submissions will be marked and the actual mark recorded, but will be capped at the pass mark (typically 40%), provided that the work is of a passing standard. Work submitted after this period will not be marked and will be treated as a non-submission.

Before you submit

- Please use the provided checklist below to make sure you are ‘fit to submit’ your work
- We recommend you use this checklist as soon as you get this assignment brief to help you plan your work

Fit to Submit: Assignment Checklist

This brief **assignment checklist** is designed to help you avoid some of the most common mistakes students make in their coursework.

Have you read the assignment brief? If not, do so now!

In it you will find details of the assessment task, word count, the assessment criteria your work is marked against, and the learning outcomes – the basis for the assessment strategy in each module.

Students often lose marks by forgetting some of the more straightforward elements of their assignments. We recommend that you “tick off” each of the points below as you prepare your work for submission. If you need any help, ask your tutor and/or visit

<https://bucks.ac.uk/students/academicadvice/assessment-and-examination>

- Have you read and understood the assessment criteria?
- Have you **met** the learning outcomes? You will lose marks and your work may even be failed if you have not.
- Have you demonstrated you can think and write *critically* in the completed work? This means you have supported your arguments/explanations appropriately e.g. using relevant academic sources and you have offered discussion points which extends your own or others’ viewpoints to make reasoned conclusions/judgements.

- Have you maintained an *appropriate tone* throughout your work? Is your work formal, focused, developed and clear?
- Have you checked that the [referencing](#) in your assignment is in line with your programme requirements?
- Have you proof-read your work and used spellcheck software to check your spelling and grammar?
- Have you checked the presentation of your work is as specified by your tutor, for example, are font size, colour, style, line spacing and margins as the tutor specified?
- Have you kept to the word count (or equivalent)? If you are not sure, check with your tutor.
- Can you confirm that the work submitted is your own and maintains [academic integrity](#)?

Assessment criteria (extract)

Level 4	Fail		Pass				
Grade Band	0-34% (F) – Fail	35-39% I – Marginal Fail	40-49% (D) – Third Class THRESHOLD PASS	50-59% (C) – Lower Second Class 2ii	60-69% (B) – Upper Second Class 2i	70-79% (A) – First Class	80-100% – (A+) High First Class
Grading Categories	Not successful	Below required standard	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Excellent	Outstanding
Knowledge and understanding 30%	0 – 10.4	10.5 – 11.9	12 – 14.9	15 – 17.9	18 – 20.9	21 – 23.9	24 – 30
(key indicators for Knowledge and understanding) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depth of knowledge and understanding Engagement with subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles Background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study 	Work demonstrates a limited and/or substantially inaccurate or no understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is little or no demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. There is little or no evidence of reading.	Work demonstrates insufficient understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is insufficient demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. There is limited evidence of reading and/or reading lacks relevance.	Work demonstrates a basic understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is sufficient demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Reading is relevant but largely restricted and only partially integrated.	Work demonstrates a sound breadth and depth of understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is a sound demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Wider reading is largely limited but has clearly enhanced the work.	Work demonstrates a refined understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is a sophisticated demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Wider reading shows a range of sources being used and applied, some of which are independently selected.	Work demonstrates a highly accomplished understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is a highly accomplished demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Application of wider independent reading is fully evident in the work.	Work demonstrates an exceptional understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is an exceptional demonstration of the ability to identify principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Application of extensive independent reading is evident throughout the work.

4.1.1.1 Analysis of the ‘Lifespan’ assignment brief

4.1.1.1.1 Purpose and statement of task

The purpose of the task is not explicitly shared, other than that students will write an essay on one of a range of topics. The framing of the learning outcomes (LOs) immediately below the statement of the task is such that it provides some basis for the purpose in that the task has been designed to provide an opportunity to demonstrate the outcomes. However, a clear explicit statement of task and its purpose would provide a basis for students’ purposeful engagement with the assignment.

The choice of seven possible questions complicates the use of Hughes’ (2009a) ATD Framework as a means of framing the purpose of the task, as effectively there are multiple possible tasks. However, each of the possible questions is framed around the need to explain or discuss a particular aspect of Social Work practice and/or theory (‘in what way...’, ‘explain...’), so a generic purpose may usefully be identified. The task verbs in the learning outcomes relate to the demonstration of knowledge of aspects of theory and the ability to describe the implications of theory to practice, but the use of ‘consider’ as the task verb in LO3 suggests a move beyond description to analysis and discussion (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). Using Hughes’ ATD Framework, the overarching task might therefore take the form outlined in Table 16, below, followed by the range of actual question options available:

Table 16: Applying Hughes’s 2009 ATD Framework to an assessed task (rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) shown in brackets)

Mode	Text type	Purpose	Subject matter
Write	A 2000-word essay in response to one of the following questions	to explain how (Analyse)	aspects of the theory and practice of Social Work relate to different stages of the lifespan

Arguably, each of the options provides opportunities for students to demonstrate relevant knowledge and understanding and to describe and discuss aspects of Social Work theory and practice. In this, there seems to be evidence of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) between LOs and assessed task. However, not all of the essay topics align to all of the outcomes. For example, while child and adolescent physical growth and development (LO2) could feature in a discussion of the positive and negative conceptualisation of race and ethnicity (Topic 2) it is not explicit how this might be achieved. Nor is it clear how this same outcome might relate to Topic 4, which focuses on the case of the elderly with dementia. Any student opting for Topic 4 will be faced with an unsolvable problem, in that they will not be able to evidence achievement of LO2...

The provision of choice in the assessed task may provide opportunities for students to pursue particular interests or draw upon areas of existing knowledge in which they might feel particularly confident (Jopp and Cohen, 2022). However, optionality in assessment can also raise challenges, not least of all in imposing a further burden on students who may already feel overwhelmed (Balloo *et al.*, 2018; Firth *et al.*, 2023). As an early assignment in the student’s engagement with the course, this may well be the case.

Word count, which has been discussed in terms of it being a ‘practicality’ is perhaps more usefully discussed in relation to the task as it defines the depth and scope with which the student is expected to engage with it. That is, a 3000-word essay is in essence a different task, requiring a different approach to, e.g., a 1500-word essay, requiring a different approach, different resources, engagement, etc. The word count is shared on the brief, but not until the ‘Task requirements’ section on page 2. It is advised that the word count is included in the task statement as a defining aspect of the task, as well as for practical reasons.

4.1.1.1.1.1 Text type

The text type of the task is explicit and seems appropriate. The assessed task requires students to engage in description, application of theory and discussion in a manner that seems suited to the academic essay format. Other tasks and text types could perhaps have been used which would have provided opportunities for meeting the outcomes, but the use of a form that is likely to be familiar to many (the academic essay) should mean that students are able to draw on their existing knowledge of the text type when framing their responses to the task (Gilbert, 2012; Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

4.1.1.1.1.2 Role of student and audience

Role of the student and audience are not mentioned as they are implicitly understood within the context of the academic essay. The role of the student is to complete the essay because they have been told to, so they can demonstrate their learning. Their audience is their teacher, who will also mark the work in question.

4.1.1.1.1.3 Mode and medium

Equally, mode and medium are unlikely to be problematic. For some students, however, clarity over the need to produce their text in electronic form may be helpful in terms of making explicit what might otherwise be assumed (Collier and Morgan, 2008) as they may be more familiar with submitting their work in hard copy in previous educational contexts.

4.1.1.1.1.4 Clarity of language

Overall, the language is clear and while clearly related to and of the discipline, using relevant terminology (e.g., 'parenting styles', 'attachment theory'), nevertheless seems accessible to students who will have spent some weeks engaging with disciplinary language and concepts within the context of the module (the assignment is due at end of Semester 1). The use of the verb 'conceptualised' in questions 1 and 2, however, seems somewhat sophisticated and may benefit from unpacking, e.g., via in class discussion as part of dissemination activities (Cureton *et al.*, 2017).

The use of 'consider' in LO3 seems clear, but may be prone to "common sense" (Williams, 2005b) understandings for those less used its application as an academic task verb. The more straightforward 'discuss' may be more helpful.

LO4, despite being framed as description via its task verb (typically linked to the lower end of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001) and seemingly clear linguistically, seems rather complex conceptually for an early assignment in Level 4, requiring quite sophisticated consideration of literature (theory?) and its implications for practice, requiring engagement at the higher levels of the knowledge dimension that may be challenging at this stage of students' engagement with the discipline/profession.

4.1.1.1.1.5 Scaffolding

Scaffolding is entirely absent from the statement of the task, although aspects of the requirements for discussing things from particular perspectives within some of the questions could constitute a form of limited support for student engagement.

It is suggested that students lacking experience and confidence in writing academic essays within the university context and who therefore may be unsure of expectations for university writing, may find the absence of supportive guidance in relation to engaging with the task problematic (Balloo *et al.*, 2018). Given the profile of typical Social Work students, many of whom have not completed A Level routes into university, this seems not unlikely.

The sharing of exemplars of previous essays written in response to these or related questions (Carless and Chan, 2017) and/or opportunities for students to engage with each other and the teacher collaboratively in the classroom (Cureton *et al.*, 2017) may help to provide a basis for them to develop understanding of expectations and confidence in engagement.

4.1.1.1.2 Practicalities

4.1.1.1.2.1 Word count

Word count is explicitly shared only in this section, but it is recommended that it should be included in the statement of the task (see above). It is custom and practice within the institution to define assignment word limits within a range of '+/- 10%'. There is no requirement in policy that students are penalised for submitting work without this range, an eventuality which is instead typically dealt with via the marking scheme (excessive over or under delivery is likely to indicate that the student has not engaged with the task in the required manner) or via local programme, department or School-based arrangements. The

threat of penalty and the imposition of same is not felt to be useful at this stage of the students' engagement with assessed work and it is recommended that it is removed.

Clarification of what is included or excluded in the word count, e.g., reference list, in this section may allay anxieties around uncertainties arising from a lack of explicitness (Collier and Morgan, 2008; Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b; Walsh, 2021b).

4.1.1.1.2.2 Referencing

The referencing style is clearly identified via the appropriate section of the assignment brief template, using the approved template text. Given the relatively inexperienced nature of the students undertaking this assignment, it may be useful to provide some explicit indicative guidance on either the type or amount of engagement with literature that is expected, e.g., recommended or set texts, expectations for wider reading beyond these, etc. (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

4.1.1.1.2.3 Presentation

The 'presentation style' heading points to issues of academic style (use of third person, formality) and refers to the generic Level 4 assessment criteria (see 'assessment criteria', below). The importance of achieving 'first year undergraduate level' quality of prose is highlighted and identified in terms of technical proficiency in written English and 'clarity of meaning'. The usefulness of this exhortation is questionable. It is expressed in straightforward, accessible language, but this belies the complexity of what is involved. In academic literacies terms, this statement seems closely associated with a technical/study skills model of student writing (Street, 2003; Lea and Street, 2006) that discounts the complexity of the development of whatever might constitute 'first year undergraduate level' quality of writing. While not discounting the need for students to acquire (developmentally, over time) understanding and ability to write effectively, this statement seems unlikely to promote feelings of belonging or being appropriately equipped for university study (Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011; Marshall, 2016). A simple statement identifying the task as a formal academic essay and therefore likely to involve 3rd person, rather than 1st person forms, and 'acquisition friendly' (Gee, 2003a) opportunities in class to discuss and unpack concepts of formality, 'academic' style, etc., as part of students' ongoing, developmental acquisition of academic and assessment literacies (Cureton *et al.*, 2017) are recommended as a replacement.

Clear information on presentational aspects is provided under the 'Layout' heading, which should help to allay any anxieties deriving from uncertainty in this regard (Collier and Morgan, 2008; Walsh, 2021b).

4.1.1.1.2.4 Group/individual arrangements

The assignment is clearly identified as an individual piece of work. Formative cooperation between students is encouraged but advice about the need to submit individual work in the students' 'own words' is provided.

Given the complexity of the process by which students developmentally acquire the skills that allow them to use the ideas from other sources to inform and extend their own thinking and then articulate this successfully in their written work (e.g., McGowan, 2005; Gallant, 2017), whether this statement is of genuine use is questionable. What constitutes 'original work' and a student's 'own words' are not uncontested aspects of a student's development of academic skills and literacies and could well be described as belonging to what Lillis refers to as the arcane 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 2001, p. 53). In a time in which there is considerable anxiety around the use of generative AI in student work, notions of authorship and ownership might also be of particular relevance (Kumar *et al.*, 2024). This information is communicated in simple, straightforward language, but this belies the complexity of the concepts to which it refers. The use of the term 'plagiarism' and 'suspicions of plagiarism' seem likely to heighten student anxieties in relation to this aspect of engaging with academic work (Walsh, 2021a, 2021b).

A simple statement identifying the task as an individual piece and 'acquisition friendly' (Gee, 2003a) opportunities to discuss and unpack aspects of originality, the use of sources and academic integrity, etc., as part of students' ongoing, developmental acquisition of academic and assessment literacies (Cureton *et al.*, 2017) are recommended as a replacement.

4.1.1.1.2.5 Submission

The submission deadline is explicitly identified in the assignment metadata panel at the top of the brief (not visible on this version of the assignment brief).

Submission of written assignments of this kind will typically be managed via the institution's VLE via a Turnitin submission point. This information forms part of the standard text in the

relevant section of the assignment brief template but seems to have been removed in this case. As a result, the process for submission is not shared. As an early assignment and potentially the first that students may have submitted, including a description of the process for submission may have been useful. The process is not difficult and is similar to attaching a document to an email – the student is required to search for and select the relevant file and confirm that this is the one they wish to submit. Nevertheless, it is likely to be unfamiliar initially and maybe a cause of anxiety as an aspect of the summative assessment process. Explicit information may thus help to mitigate uncertainty about the process (Collier and Morgan, 2008).

Following Walsh (2021a), it is suggested that, as the submission process is unlikely to change in relation to the submission of written assignments, this information could usefully be shared once via a convenient central location, such as the programme handbook or relevant shared area of the VLE. It is expected that students will quickly familiarise themselves with the process and not need reminding in each brief.

4.1.1.1.2.6 Other practicalities

The lecturer's contact details and an invitation to get in touch for further support are helpfully provided.

A recommendation to contact the learning support service (Learning Development Unit) is also included. Provision of contact details for this service is useful. However, framing the use of this service around possible 'special needs' may be off-putting and stigmatising to some students (Haft, Greiner de Magalhães and Hoeft, 2023). It is wondered whether this is the best location for such information, which is also typically shared via common documents, such as programme handbooks, and forms part of the standard information available in module areas within the VLE. While not unuseful, providing this information is somewhat redundant and serves further to add to the cognitive burden of processing the brief.

4.1.1.1.3 Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria have not been included as part of the assignment brief and are provided in another location in the VLE. In this, the minimal expectation that criteria should be made available as part of or alongside the brief has been fulfilled (QAA, 2018a).

Criteria provided do not reflect institutional advice and guidance at the time, which requires that criteria should be specific to each assignment and predicated upon the requirements for that assignment (i.e., strongly linked to the relevant learning outcomes). The criteria provided are instead framed generally and are derived largely from unmediated extracts from the institutional grading descriptors. As such, they have not been communicated in language likely to be accessible to Level 4 students in general and certainly not to those from non-traditional backgrounds. It is also the case that the statements within the criteria are not universally relevant to the requirements of this assignment.

It is also noted that because the criteria that apply to this assignment are generic nature, then the statement that they have been designed specifically for this task in the 'How your work will be assessed' section is not correct.

4.1.1.1.4 Cognitive efficiency

4.1.1.1.4.1 Sequencing

The brief has been written using the institutional assignment brief template (2021-22) and is sequenced according to recommendations to reflect the order in which students might be expected to work through the brief: task, outcomes, task requirements, etc. (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

4.1.1.1.4.2 Comprehensiveness

The task is clearly (if problematically) stated (see above). Practical information relating to presentation, referencing style, etc., has been provided (see note in 'Conciseness', below)

Given the timing of the assignment (end of Semester 1 in the first year) and the likelihood that students in this cohort will not have come into university via traditional A Level routes, students may lack confidence in academic writing and their ability to engage effectively with this assignment. The lack of any form of brief scaffolding to provide students with a starting point, or basic approach that might otherwise enable their independent engagement with the assignment may be problematic. The range of choice provided at this stage may also be overwhelming rather than enabling and limit opportunities for support and formative peer engagement (see above) (Firth *et al.*, 2023).

4.1.1.1.4.3 Conciseness

The statement of the task is concise, although there may be concerns about the range of optionality provided (7 options) (see 'Purpose and statement of task', above). The task may also lack key information (e.g., clarity of purpose) as defined in Hughes' (2009a) ATD Framework.

Useful practical information is provided clearly and concisely in 'Task requirements', e.g., presentational issues, referencing style, tutor contact details. Following Walsh's (2021a) recommendation, it is suggested that information and instructions that are common across all briefs within a programme (e.g., referencing style, presentational issues, access to support services, academic integrity regulations, etc.) may better be shared via some shared external location. This might be a programme handbook, relevant section of the VLE, etc. This would ensure students' access to this important information should they require it, while not unnecessarily complicating and lengthening the brief⁶.

The inclusion of academic literacy related elements, such as exhortations to write at Level 4 undergraduate level, links to the academic skill development service (Learning Development Unit) and advice with regard to academic integrity are felt to be unhelpful and could usefully be removed (see 'Presentation', above). This would have the benefit of reducing the length of the brief and removing instructional information of questionably utility that the student must otherwise be required to process as it is part of the brief. The inclusion of such material arguably adds to the extraneous cognitive load imposed by the brief with, it is suggested, limited benefit to students as the skills and understanding to which it refers cannot simply be 'told' but must be acquired.

In line with institutional policy at the time, the brief also includes the Press Pack 'fit to submit' check list (University of Derby, 2016). Anecdotal feedback from students suggests that some find this useful as a means of scaffolding the process by which they make sure their work is ready for submission. Drawing on the notion of the cognitive 'expert reversal' effect (Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003; Chen, Kalyuga and Sweller, 2017), however, it is recommended that this checklist is included as part of the brief only for first year assignments and only for those assignments for which it is relevant (the checklist is strongly oriented towards 'traditional' academic writing

⁶ The implementation of BNU's 2023-24 assignment brief template affords this approach

tasks)⁷. By including the checklist as a matter of course, there is a risk that students with greater assignment related expertise may be disadvantaged as they may still be subject to the extraneous cognitive load it imposes. As the checklist is presented discretely and consistently at the end of the brief, however, it may be that students for whom it is less important can simply side step it, thereby removing any further cognitive burden.

4.1.1.1.5 General comments

Drawing on the work of the DiSA project (Cousin and Cuerton, 2012a; Cureton *et al.*, 2017), BNU institutional guidelines (BNU, 2021b) recommend the use of student-led discursive engagement with assignment briefs early on in modules to provide opportunities for students to interpret and acquire understanding of assessment issues via student-student and student-staff discussion. It is not expected that this will form part of the assignment brief itself, although a brief mention that the task will be discussed in class may help to allay anxieties from students looking at in isolation prior to its formal dissemination (it is institutional policy that assignment briefs should be available in the VLE at the beginning of the module). Certainly, the nature of the task and how it has been communicated would strongly support the usefulness of opportunities for student-student and student-staff discussion around the brief, if only to provide an opportunity for identifying and addressing issues of misalignment between task and outcomes and the discussion and possible clarification of further disciplinary or more general academic literacies related issues.

In its current form, there are aspects of this brief that seem likely to cause challenges to the students for whom it is intended. These might be usefully identified and addressed as part of in-class discussion, but this should not be seen as an alternative to a clearly communicated, well-formed task and brief, including, where appropriate, relevant scaffolding. Such acquisition friendly activities are of value in their own right in providing opportunities for students to acquire understanding of assessment processes and key ways of thinking and doing within the wider Discourse of their discipline. However, their usefulness is also predicated upon the specification of the assessment task being a 'models of clarity' (Sadler, 2014, p. 12). Students

⁷ Indeed, the most recent 2023-24 assignment brief template has adopted an approach whereby the checklist has been removed from the brief and recommendations provided for its provision as a discrete document which is readily available in the VLE location used for the submission of work.

cannot be expected to develop and apply their 'goal knowledge' in their response to the assessment process if the materials on which they are basing their responses are faulty. In Bakhtinian terms, we might hope that there are opportunities for students to exert their centrifugal force upon the assignment by following their own interests and speaking with their own voice. But, if we take the 136referent brief and the statement of the tasks to be 'authoritative' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342), then the fact that it is imperfect and problematic (the task is poorly communicated, misaligned and the choice is potentially overwhelming, along with other issues with the way it is communicated, see above) becomes all the more significant and makes it all the more difficult for students even to conform to the centripetal 'pull' of the disciplinary Discourse. This seems likely to have implications not only for the students' sense of themselves – if the text of the brief is authoritative then it *must* be their fault that they cannot understand it – but also the relationship and trust between students and their teachers and the wider process in which they are engaged (Carless, 2009).

4.1.2 The 'Context of Social Work' assignment brief

This is another of the briefs with which the Social Work participants engaged as part of their work in the first semester of their first year. Unfortunately, it makes use of the previous year's assignment brief template, so differs slightly from the Lifespan assignment (above). As a result of this and some confusion on behalf of the colleague responsible for framing the brief, the task is not communicated in the appropriate section, but included in 'tasks requirements' on the second page. This is particularly unfortunate as, although this version is broadly similar, the consistency of the brief template is key in providing students with the opportunity to develop schema for engaging with the way in which their assessed work is communicated to them.

Assignment task

This module has a 100% percentage weighting attached.

The essay should be no more than **2500** words.

The assignment assesses the module learning outcomes (1-5).

Choose Option One **/or/** Option Two.

Focus on the Knowledge and Skills Statements for Adults **OR** for Children and Families

This assignment has been designed to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your achievement of the following module learning outcomes:

LO 1: Identify the key roles, purposes, and functions of the social work profession.

LO 2: Relate social work as an activity to the social policy context.

LO 3: Identify the context within which social work operates in contemporary society

LO 4: Consider Social Work in the context of service user expectations and perspectives

LO 5: Understand the contribution of social work to society in a context of changing economic, political, and professional context

Task requirements

Choose ONE option to focus on in this essay:

Option One:

Consider the Knowledge and Skills Statements for Social Workers working with Children, young people, and families.

As part of this essay you will need to do the following:

- Identify the key roles and skills of social workers working with children, young people, and families.
- Relate social work practice with children, young people, and families to the social policy and legislative context.
- Describe and explain the core professional principles and values of social work with children, young people, and families.
- Describe and comment on service user and carer expectations in relation to social work practice as this relates to working with children, young people, and families.

Option Two:

Consider the Knowledge and Skills Statements for Social Workers working with Adults.

As part of this essay you will need to do the following:

- Identify the key roles and skills of social workers working with adults.
- Relate social work practice with adults to the social policy and legislative context.

- Describe and explain the core professional principles and values of social work with adults.
- Describe and comment on service user and carer expectations in relation to social work practice as this relates to working with adults.

Referencing and research requirements

Please reference your work according to the Harvard System style as defined in *Cite Them Right Online* (<http://www.citethemrightonline.com>). This information is also available in book form: Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2019) *Cite them right: the essential reference guide*. 11th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Copies are available via the University library.

Blackboard materials are available to support you in using citations to evidence your work. You will be referring to communication theory. The session notes include in-text citations. A full list of references used to support the module is on Blackboard.

This essay will be marked in accordance to the Assessment Marking Criteria for Level 4

How your work will be assessed

Your work will be assessed against the assessment criteria for Level 4 (see on Level 4 Blackboard).

These criteria have been designed specifically for this assignment and are intended to measure the extent to which you have demonstrated your achievement of its associated learning outcomes (see above). They have been aligned with the institutional grade descriptor appropriate for your level.

The assessment criteria provide a basis for fair and consistent marking and indicate what is expected of you in this assignment. It is strongly recommended that you engage with them while you are working on the assignment and use them in combination with any feedback you receive once your work has been marked to help you plan for future learning and development.

Submission details

- You will need to submit your reflective essay **via Turnitin before 2pm on Friday 11 February 2022**.
- Please use the relevant Turnitin submission point in the **Submit your work** area in your Blackboard module shell.

- You can submit your work as many times as you like before the submission date. If you do submit your work more than once, your earlier submission will be replaced by the most recent version.
- Once you have submitted your work, you will receive a digital receipt as proof of submission, which will be sent to your forwarded e-mail address (provided you have set this up). Please keep this receipt for future reference, along with the original electronic copy of your assignment.
- You are reminded of the University's regulations on academic misconduct, which can be viewed on the University website: https://bucks.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/9546/Academic-Misconduct-Policy.pdf. In submitting your assignment, you are acknowledging that you have read and understood these regulations
- Please also note that work that is submitted up to 10 working days beyond the submission date will be considered a late submission. Late submissions will be marked and the actual mark recorded but will be capped at the pass mark (typically 40%), provided that the work is of a passing standard. Work submitted after this period will not be marked and will be treated as a non-submission.

The Fit to Submit checklist is included at this point. It is identical to the list included in the Lifespan assignment and not included here for the purposes of conciseness (see section 4.1.1 above).

4.1.2.1 Analysis of the 'Context of Social Work' assignment brief

The assignment is communicated via the assignment brief template in accordance with institutional policy, albeit a slightly out-of-date version from the previous year.

4.1.2.1.1 Purpose and statement of task

The purpose and statement of the task is not explicitly shared in the Assignment task section, which contains minimal information stating that the assignment is a 2500-word essay which assesses the five module learning outcomes and that there are two options: students may focus their work on the knowledge and skills statements for adults or for children and families⁸. At this point, there is no statement concerning what the title of the essay is or, in real terms, what its purpose is, other than to provide an opportunity to evidence the learning outcomes. Instead, the detail of the task is communicated in the 'Task requirements' section.

A substantial amount of the information in the 'assignment task' section is also communicated elsewhere in the brief. The 100% weighting for the assignment (it is the sole summative

⁸ Social Work knowledge and skills statements identify the standards and competences that Social Workers are required to demonstrate as part of their professional registration.

assessment for the module), the word count and the outcomes with which it is associated are communicated as part of the assignment metadata at the top of the brief (not included here) and the following learning outcomes section. As such, only the information about the two options is germane to the task. Redundancy of this kind is likely to impose a higher cognitive burden on the student, as they will need to process it to determine whether it is helpful or not (Chandler and Sweller, 1991; Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003), even if the information is subsequently ignored as lacking in relevance.

In terms of Hughes' (2009a) ATF Framework, it is understood that students will be expected to write [mode] a 2500-word essay [text-type], focusing on the subject matter of the knowledge and skills statements in one way or another, but there is no statement of rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) in terms why they should do so, or how. Indeed, this specification of the task rather reflects the example of a poor task provided by Sadler in his recommendations for effective task design (Sadler, 2016).

4.1.2.1.1.1 Text type

The text type is identified as an essay, but the task as defined lacks both a rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) and the characteristics of what might normally be expected in this text type. That is, a question that students are required to answer, a statement to which they are required to respond, a contentious issue to debate, etc., that would provide them with an opportunity to 'devise and sustain an argument' (QAA, 2014a) for a relevant purpose.

By identifying the assignment text type, the brief communicates to students that their response should take the form of an essay about an aspect of some subject matter. It is considered good practice to identify the text type (Hughes, 2009a; Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b) as this allows students to activate existing schemas and use them as a basis for engaging with the task.

Students' essay schemas are likely to involve structural elements (introduction, body, conclusion), methods for linking paragraphs and showing how ideas relate to each other (e.g., via the use of discourse markers, such as 'because', 'however', 'therefore', etc.), a sense of narrative line and argument, formality of voice, the use of 3rd person forms, etc. (Cottrell, 2019). However, without a cue for its purpose, it is difficult to see how students might usefully form an idea of how to approach and complete the assignment at this stage (Sadler, 2014), other than to 'write something' about the aspect of the subject matter identified within the

constraints of what they understand to be the structural and other conventional characteristics of an essay as developed in previous educational contexts.

This is a missed opportunity to expose students to a key assessment text type within their discipline and develop their understanding of how it works within the disciplinary context, a valuable aspect of their developing academic literacy (Rai, 2004; Price *et al.*, 2012) and goal knowledge (Sadler, 2014). Social Work students are expected to write different kinds of essay (see section 1.2.3 above), which are likely to be different in purpose to those they may have written before. For example, this essay requires a quite complex bringing together of professional standards, the needs of service users, aspects of social policy, etc., epitomising to some extent the complex nature of Social Work as a discipline and profession (Crisp and Lister, 2005). It contains rhetorical purposes of description, analysis and evaluation (see below), but does not signal these via an effective articulation of the task. As a result, instead of an opportunity for students to gain an understanding of and experience in a key aspect of disciplinary Discourse (both in terms of purpose and text type), this task seems rather likely to promote an approach in which the student will simply write what they know about the topic, while further complicating matters by requiring them to impose on their response an essay structure and associated conventions that in fact are not really required.

4.1.2.1.1.2 Role of student

As with the Lifespan essay above, no role for the student or audience for the assignment is specified. This is an academic piece of writing that will be read and assessed by the marker. It is not imagined that students will find this problematic, but it may be of use to explore it in classroom-based activities to provide opportunities for interrogating and unpacking the 'taken-for-grantedness' (Hughes, 2009b, p. 557) of this aspect of otherwise unquestioned assessment practice (Aiken, 2021).

4.1.2.1.1.3 Mode and medium

As an essay, it is assumed it will be written [mode] and, in keeping with institutional policy, will be expected to be word processed and submitted electronically [medium]. This is not stated here and can be assumed to be understood. However, an explicit statement to this effect made available to students via some shared central location (Walsh, 2021a), such as a programme

handbook, should be sufficient to communicate these requirements in the event that any student is at all uncertain or unfamiliar with electronic submission processes.

4.1.2.1.1.4 Clarity of language

As with the lifespan essay (above), language seems clear and level appropriate. There is evidence of disciplinary language (e.g., the use of ‘practice’ to denote the knowledge, skills and behaviours of professional Social Work, ‘the social policy and legislative context’), with which students at this stage (at the end of the first semester) might reasonably be expected to have some familiarity and should be neither unduly problematic nor exclusionary (Devlin *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, the use of level-appropriate disciplinary language in this way may rather serve to foster a sense of belonging, making use a shared language whose meaning is clear to both teachers and students and providing students with an opportunity to engage with the Discourse of their discipline and profession.

The use of ‘consider’ as a task verb in the statement of the task, however, is vague and does not seem well suited to either to providing a purpose for the essay or as the task verb in learning outcome 4. It is assumed that students will understand that they need to do something in writing relating to the identified subject matter (and not just think about it!), but what they will do will depend upon their interpretation of ‘consider’ and what it might mean in this context, which could be a cause for confusion and uncertainty (Williams, 2005a). This is not insignificant because although the task as defined does not signal a particular purpose or expectations for how students should engage with the subject matter, the outcomes clearly do.

For example, in curriculum development resources relating to Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001) (e.g., (CELT, 2023), the task verb ‘identify’ (LOs 1 and 3) is typically associated with the cognitive process of Remembering and the Factual knowledge dimension. In order to evidence of achievement of these outcomes, the student will simply be expected to point to and describe relevant aspects of the subject matter. ‘Relate’ in LO2, however, surely requires students to engage more conceptually and analytically, linking Social Work with its broader social policy context. ‘Consider’ (LO4), which we will assume means to ‘think reflectively and analytically’ also requires some level of conceptual analysis and perhaps a degree of higher-level evaluative engagement. ‘Understand’ (LO5) is not an appropriate task

verb for a learning outcome, but if we assume it requires the student to ‘explain’ their understanding, then this would also necessitate evidence of conceptual understanding.

4.1.2.1.1.5 Scaffolding

It is clearly the intention to provide scaffolding to support student engagement with this task. This takes the form of four bullet points linked to the module outcomes for each option. However, as the purpose of the essay as a whole remains unclear and is only vaguely communicated, it is not entirely clear that these can be called ‘scaffolding’ *per se*. In the Vygotskian sense, scaffolding provides a supportive bridging function to allow the learner to engage with a task at a higher level than they might without the support. As it is not entirely clear what the task is because the main essay task in the assignment is only vaguely defined in terms of its purpose, these statements might better be considered as loosely linked discrete tasks in their own right, providing different ways of engaging with the subject matter. Indeed, it seems likely that students will simply treat them in this way, responding to them as they might, for example, to short answer exam questions and simply write ‘some text’ that seems relevant to their understanding of the task verbs provided (describe, relate, comment, etc). Certainly, (allowing for the mode and text type to be ‘off-record’ or otherwise assumed) they conform to the requirements of Hughes’ (2009b) ATD Framework and provide a purpose and subject matter that should allow a student to respond to them relatively unproblematically, assuming they are able to interpret the relevant task verbs. Examples from Option One are provided in Table 17 below:

Table 17: Applying Hughes (2009) ATD Framework to Option One sub-tasks in the Context of Social Work assignment (rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) shown in brackets and linked to relevant cognitive dimensions of Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001))

Mode	Text type	Purpose	Subject matter
[Write]	[some text]	to identify (Remember/Understand)	the key roles of social workers when working with adults
[Write]	[some text]	to relate (Understand and Analyse – describe and explain links between)	social work practice with adults to the social policy and legislative context

[Write]	[some text]	to describe and explain (Understand + Analyse]	the core professional principles and values of social work with children, young people, and families.
[Write]	[some text]	to describe and comment (Understand and Evaluate)	on service user and carer expectations in relation to social work practice as this relates to working with children, young people, and families.

It is not that these sub tasks are not effective. They are well-formed in their own right and seem likely to engage students in activity that is relevant and valued with the disciplinary context (describing and engaging with standards, relating standards to policy, considering the needs of service users, etc.). However, what these tasks are not, is an essay.

4.1.2.1.2 Practicalities

4.1.2.1.2.1 Word count

The word count is explicitly identified as 2500 words, which is within the range defined with the institutional assessment workload policy (2000-3000 words, with the recommendation that Level 4 written assignments will tend towards the lower end of the range). Taking into account the word count for the assignment as a whole and assuming equal weighting for each of the bulleted sub-tasks, it is assumed that students will be expected to write around 500 words in response to each, leaving around 500 words with which to top and tail them with an introduction and conclusion in accordance with the requirements of the essay format. As discussed above, given that these are effectively discrete tasks, providing the expected word count might usefully cue students with a sense of the scope and depth with which to engage with them. Because it is not communicated explicitly, students may feel uncertainty and anxiety about how much to write in response to each (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

4.1.2.1.2.2 Referencing

The brief contains the standard text at the time relating to the relevant referencing style for the disciplinary context and provides useful links to online and paper-based guidance.

Further information is also included, directing students to support materials on referencing available within the VLE. This seems useful. The use here of the term ‘citations’, however, is potentially confusing and may present a barrier to students unfamiliar with the term.

Institutionally, it is more common to use ‘reference’ as a noun to describe an individual instance of a ‘citation’ and also as the verb to describe the process of using one in written work. As such there is a missed opportunity for consistency in language to promote clarity and the acquisition of a shared language for discussing aspects of the assessment process.

It is not clear what is meant by the reference to communication theory, which does not seem of relevance to this assignment and could easily cause confusion. Presumably, the session notes in the VLE contain references that students might use as examples to guide their own referencing, but this is not clear in the way this is expressed. Equally, the ‘full list of references’ is the module reading list, which is typically shared in the form of a Keylinks resource⁹, which may have been clearer as a means of referring to it. The sentence referring to the assessment criteria is in the wrong section. Rather than helping students, then, it seems likely that this extra information may serve to impose further extraneous cognitive load and heighten anxiety with little evident benefit.

4.1.2.1.2.3 Presentation

No information is included in relation to presentational requirements. Explicit provision of such information may help to alleviate any anxiety or uncertainty about how to approach this aspect of assessed work, which may otherwise simply be assumed (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Walsh’s (2021a) suggestion of sharing information of this kind in a central location where it can be accessed if required without unduly adding to the cognitive burden of the brief seems sensible and is to be recommended.

⁹ Keylinks is the University’s reading list management system (<https://www.kortext.com/keylinks/>)

4.1.2.1.2.4 Group/individual arrangements

This is clearly an individual piece of work, although this is not explicitly mentioned.

4.1.2.1.2.5 Submission

Submission details are provided as part of the template from this time. Following feedback, these were felt subsequently to be excessively detailed and likely to impose an unnecessary cognitive load on students. As a result, they were removed from future iterations of the brief template and replaced with a simplified version.

The mention of the assignment as a 'reflective' essay in the first bullet point is presumably a copy and paste error from another assignment and may cause some confusion if noticed. Again, consistency in language use and terminology across the brief (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b) and any related discussions (Devlin and O'Shea, 2012; de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014) should be considered prerequisites for clear, explicit communication of assessment requirements.

4.1.2.1.2.6 Other practicalities

The module leader's name is shared as part of the meta data shared at the top of the brief (not included here), but their contact details are not. At this juncture, students may well be aware of how to contact their teachers, but the provision of a specific email address via which to make contact with queries or concerns relating to the assignment, or some shared alternative, e.g., via the module discussion board, would be helpful in the event that this is not the case. Non-traditional students may already feel uncertain about contacting their teachers (or even if they are allowed to do so) and mature students particularly (Mcsweeney and Mcsweeney, 2014). It is suggested that all efforts should be made to make the process as accessible and frictionless as possible. Ensuring that a contact email address, or equivalent, is consistently available across all briefs seems a minimal requirement.

4.1.2.1.3 Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria have not been included as part of the assignment brief and are provided in another location in the VLE. The criteria provided are generic in nature for all Level 4 assignments. An extract of these criteria can be seen above in section 4.1.1 above). As discussed in the analysis of the Lifespan assignment (see section 4.1.1.1.3 above), these criteria are essentially unmediated extracts from the institutional grading descriptors for Level 4 and as

such are not really intended for student consumption. As such, they are not framed in level appropriate language and are likely to be inaccessible or at least unhelpful to students as a source of further information about what is expected in the assignment.

4.1.2.1.4 Cognitive efficiency

4.1.2.1.4.1 Sequencing

The brief has been written using the institutional assignment brief template and is sequenced according to recommendations to reflect the order in which students might be expected to work through the brief: task, outcomes, task requirements, etc. (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b). However, because the template being used is from the previous year, there are some differences between this and the more recent template used for the 'Lifespan' essay. The differences are not huge but consistency in brief format is key to the formation of schemas that students can use as the basis for engaging with briefs in the future. Furthermore, the more recent brief is somewhat more concise in form, having removed lengthier extracts of unnecessary instructional text (e.g., relating to the submission process) on the basis of feedback.

4.1.2.1.4.2 Comprehensiveness

As discussed, there are issues with the communication of the task as an 'essay' as it lacks an explicitly signalled rhetorical purpose. However, the inclusion of the range of bulleted sub tasks, ostensibly as a form of scaffolding, but which are effectively tasks in their own right, does mean that students have a clear and comprehensive idea of what to do. They need simply to respond to the tasks as listed. As outlined in section 4.1.2.1.2.1 above, without guidance to the contrary, it is assumed that the tasks are equally weighted and should be engaged with accordingly in terms of words allocated to each. Clarity in expectations in this regard could be helpful in guiding student engagement and the way in which they allocate time and resources to their responses.

Other important information relating to the deadline, overall word count, referencing style, etc., are provided in relevant parts of the brief. No information on presentational issues is included, which may have been helpful as this is one of the first assignments students will have encountered and there maybe uncertainty about expectations in this regard.

4.1.2.1.4.3 Conciseness

The statement of the task in the 'Assignment task' section is both insufficient in terms of failing to identify a clear purpose for the assignment (beyond the identification of the text type and subject matter) and also somewhat excessive in the extraneous information included (see section 4.1.2.1.1 above).

The actual statement of the task in 'Task requirements' is clear, worded in level appropriate language and seems neither overly complicated nor complex. There is an element of choice included, but this is not excessive and seems likely to provide a useful opportunity for students to follow their interests without overwhelming them with excessive choice (Balloo *et al.*, 2018; Jopp and Cohen, 2022; Firth *et al.*, 2023).

The 'Referencing and research requirements' section of the brief contains extraneous information and the 'How your work will be assessed' section is entirely extraneous other than advising students of the generic criteria that will be used as the basis for assessing their work. This section, included in previous versions of the template as a means of signalling to staff the need to develop criteria specific to each assignment, has been removed from more recent versions of the template. In the form used in this brief, it provides text that students will have to engage with but does not materially support their engagement with the task, serving only to add to the cognitive burden of interpreting the brief. It is also contradictory; this assignment does not use specific criteria. Because a previous version of the template has been used, the 'Submission details' section is unnecessarily detailed and also contains extraneous information. Unfortunately, due to a copy-and-paste error from another assignment, this section is also contradictory, referring the assignment as a 'reflective essay', and likely to cause confusion.

As was the practice at the time, the 'Fit to Submit' checklist (University of Derby, 2016) has been included at the end of the brief. This is not irrelevant in terms of supporting student engagement with a written assignment and may serve to encourage students to check their work before submission. However, it has been removed from subsequent versions of the template in the interests of conciseness with recommendation that, where relevant, it is made available as a discrete document for students to make use of as they see fit. See section 4.1.1.1.4.3 above.

4.1.2.1.5 General comments

This 'essay' based assignment is not without some difficulties in terms of the communication and well-formedness of the task. Nevertheless, it is relatively clearly communicated, making of use of relevant disciplinary language that seems well-pitched to the needs of students at this level and seems unlikely overall to cause difficulties to students in their interpretation of its requirements. There are elements to the brief that are redundant and thus which may increase the extraneous cognitive load associated with its interpretation (Kalyuga *et al.*, 2003; Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 2019). There are also elements which, although minor, are contradictory or out of place, which may cause some confusion. Aspects of the brief are also not explicit, which again may result in some degree of uncertainty and anxiety for some students (Walsh, 2021b).

An essay without a purpose is merely a structure and a collection of conventions. The initial communication of the task is that it is an essay about an aspect of subject matter (the knowledge and skills statements for adults or children and families). In essence, though, the underlying message to students is that they should 'write what they know' about something. If they understand the learning outcomes and their purpose in relation to the assignment (Hussey and Smith, 2002, 2008), then students may have a sense of what they need to include, but the task verbs of some of the outcomes are themselves not unproblematic: what does 'consider' look like in the context of an academic assignment? The subsequent 'scaffolding' provided in the form of four sub tasks for each of the options means that the expectations for what students should do are relatively clear. In support of this, the tasks seem constructively aligned to the outcomes (Biggs, 2014b) and thus likely to 'trap' students into the required engagement with the subject matter and their learning, e.g., in the form of describing key concepts, engaging in conceptual analysis and evaluative judgement making. This does depend, however, upon students' ability to interpret what is required by the task verbs in this context: 'identify, relate, describe, explain, comment'. This strongly suggests the usefulness of acquisition-friendly opportunities for engaging with this key language as part of classroom-based discussions and activities (Williams, 2005a; Cureton *et al.*, 2017).

Where the issue is, is not so much that students will not know what to do in the assignment, but rather that there is a missed opportunity for meaningful engagement with a valued and

significant form of assessment within the disciplinary context and Discourse (i.e., an essay, requiring very particular engagement with subject matter in a manner quite specific to Social Work, e.g., description, conceptual analysis and evaluation of professional policy, the role of Social Workers, social policy, service user experiences, etc.) Instead, what students have to do is to respond to several quite clearly defined tasks (as defined in the guidance) and then impose an entirely extraneous introduction and conclusion on their responses in order to make what they have written an 'essay'. This does a disservice both the students in imposing a further cognitive load having to force their assignment into an inappropriate format and also the purpose, structure and conventions of the essay as a disciplinary text type.

4.1.3 The 'People Management' assignment brief

This section includes a slightly amended version of the Introduction to People Management assignment brief engaged with by the Business participant. As with the Social Work briefs, the institutional crest and usual meta data (module title, codes, module leader and contact details, submission and feedback deadlines) have been removed. The assessment criteria for this assignment have been included in full.

Assignment task

Context

Change has been a constant theme over the past 3 years, and next year will be no different. From dealing with the biggest remote working experiment in history, to tackling new and nuanced issues such as furlough, redundancies and employee engagement amid a global pandemic... The skills and behaviours required by the managers of today have been put to the test. Their support system too has been challenged.

This assignment has been designed to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your achievement of the following module learning outcomes:

LO 1: Demonstrate an understanding of the knowledge, skills and behaviours to be an effective people manager

LO 2: Identify and evaluate key HR processes which underpin the performance management of people at work

LO 3: Demonstrate an understanding of contemporary issues facing line managers relating to people management

Task requirements

You are tasked with writing a 'Reflective Portfolio' of 2,000 words (+/- 10%) which will contain several parts compiled in the form of a written report. Using appropriate theory and relevant models, you are to reflect on key topics covered throughout this module and create a portfolio which demonstrates your reflection on:

1. Current issues facing line managers relating to people management
2. The knowledge, skills and behaviours to be an effective people manager
3. HR processes which underpin the performance management

The main contents are described below in more detail and should be discussed with the tutor throughout the module as you work on your assignment.

The portfolio will contain the following parts:

1. Title Page
2. Executive Summary
3. Table of Contents
4. Introduction
5. Reflection on current issues facing line managers relating to people management
6. Reflection on the knowledge, skills and behaviours to be an effective people manager
7. Reflection on HR processes which underpin the performance management
8. Conclusion
9. Recommendations
10. Reference List
11. Bibliography

Appendices (as appropriate) to provide related evidence and information.

Referencing and research requirements

Please reference your work according to the Harvard style as defined in *Cite Them Right Online* (<http://www.citethemrightonline.com>). This information is also available in book form: Pears, R. and

Shields, G. (2019) *Cite them right: the essential reference guide*. 11th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Copies are available via the University library.

How your work will be assessed

Your work will be assessed against the assessment criteria which have been provided at the end of this brief.

These criteria have been designed specifically for this assignment and are intended to measure the extent to which you have demonstrated your achievement of its associated learning outcomes (see above). They have been aligned with the institutional grade descriptor appropriate for your level.

The assessment criteria provide a basis for fair and consistent marking and indicate what is expected of you in this assignment. It is strongly recommended that you engage with them while you are working on the assignment and use them in combination with any feedback you receive once your work has been marked to help you plan for future learning and development.

Submission details

- This assignment should be submitted electronically. Please use the relevant Turnitin submission point in the Submit your work area in your Blackboard module shell.
- Please ensure that your work has been saved in an appropriate file format. Turnitin will only accept the following file types: Microsoft Word, Excel or PowerPoint, PostScript, PDF, HTML, RTF, OpenOffice (ODT), Hangul (HWP), Google Docs, or plain text. Your file must also contain at least 20 words of text, consist of fewer than 400 pages and be less than 40MB in size.
- You can submit your work as many times as you like before the submission date. If you do submit your work more than once, your earlier submission will be replaced by the most recent version.
- Once you have submitted your work, you will receive a digital receipt as proof of submission, which will be sent to your forwarded e-mail address (provided you have set this up). Please keep this receipt for future reference, along with the original electronic copy of your assignment.
- You are reminded of the University's regulations on academic misconduct, which can be viewed on the University website: https://bucks.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/9546/Academic-

Misconduct-Policy.pdf. In submitting your assignment, you are acknowledging that you have read and understood these regulations

- Please also note that work that is submitted up to 10 working days beyond the submission date will be considered a late submission. Late submissions will be marked and the actual mark recorded, but will be capped at the pass mark (typically 40%), provided that the work is of a passing standard. Work submitted after this period will not be marked and will be treated as a non-submission.

Before you submit

- Please use the provided checklist below to make sure you are 'fit to submit' your work
- We recommend you use this checklist as soon as you get this assignment brief to help you plan your work

The 'Fit to Submit' checklist is identical to the one included in the Lifespan assignment brief (see section) and has not been included here.

4.1.3.1 Assessment criteria – Introduction to People Management assignment

	Fail	Fail	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass
	0-34 (F) – Fail	35-39 E –Marginal fail	40-49 (D)	50-59 (C)	60-69 (B)	70-79 (A)	80-100 (A+)
	Not successful	Below required standard	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Outstanding
<p>Knowledge and Understanding (30%)</p> <p>This should include evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth of knowledge and understanding • Engagement with subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles • Background investigation, analysis, research 	<p>Work demonstrates a limited and/or substantially inaccurate or no understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with people management. There is little or no demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. There is little or no evidence of wider reading.</p>	<p>Work demonstrates insufficient understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with people management. There is insufficient demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. There is limited evidence of wider reading and/or wider reading lacks relevance.</p>	<p>Work demonstrates a basic understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with people management. There is sufficient demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Wider reading is relevant but largely restricted to core texts and only partially integrated.</p>	<p>Work demonstrates a sound breadth and depth of understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with people management. There is a sound demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Wider reading is largely limited to core texts but has clearly enhanced the work.</p>	<p>Work demonstrates a refined understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with people management. There is a sophisticated demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Wider reading shows a range of sources being used and applied, some of which are independently selected.</p>	<p>Work demonstrates a highly accomplished understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with people management. There is a highly accomplished demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Application of wider independent reading is fully evident in the work.</p>	<p>Work demonstrates an exceptional understanding of the underlying concepts and principles associated with the subject area. There is an exceptional demonstration of the ability to identify people management principles, concepts, underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches. Application of extensive independent reading is evident throughout the work.</p>
<p>Analysis and Criticality (35%)</p> <p>This should include evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logic and argument • Use and range of independently selected sources • Analysis and synthesis • Analytical reflection • Organisation and communication of ideas and evidence 	<p>Work demonstrates a limited or no ability to develop lines of argument and make judgements in accordance with basic people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little or no demonstration of an ability to devise and sustain arguments • little or no demonstration of an ability to describe and 	<p>Work demonstrates an insufficient ability to develop lines of argument and make some sound judgements in accordance with basic people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insufficient demonstration of the ability to devise and sustain arguments consistent with the norms of the discipline 	<p>Work demonstrates a sufficient ability to develop lines of argument and make largely sound judgements in accordance with fundamental people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of ideas and techniques to devise and sustain arguments, some of which are consistent with the norms of the discipline 	<p>Work demonstrates well-developed lines of argument and sound judgements made in accordance with fundamental people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of ideas and techniques to devise and sustain arguments most of which are consistent with the norms of the discipline 	<p>Work demonstrates well-developed lines of argument and sophisticated judgements made in accordance with fundamental people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of ideas and techniques to devise and sustain arguments which are consistent with the norms of the discipline • the ability to describe, synthesise and critique 	<p>Work demonstrates highly accomplished development of lines of argument and independent judgements made in accordance with fundamental people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of ideas and techniques to devise and sustain arguments which are consistent with the norms of the discipline 	<p>Work demonstrates exceptionally accomplished development of lines of argument as well as sophisticated and independent judgements made in accordance with fundamental people management theories and concepts, evidenced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of ideas and techniques to devise and sustain arguments which are consistent with the

	<p>comment upon aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little or no use of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some ability to describe and comment upon aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts • there is some limited evidence of the ability to select evaluate and comment on a limited range of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to describe and comment upon aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts • use of a sufficient range of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments, some of which are independently selected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to consistently describe and comment upon aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts • use of a sound range of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments some of which independently selected 	<p>aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of a sophisticated range of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments some of which are independently selected 	<p>and beyond what has been taught</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to describe, synthesise and critique all relevant aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts • use of a highly accomplished range of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments many of which are independently selected 	<p>norms of the discipline and well beyond what has been taught</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to describe, synthesise and critique in great depth all relevant aspects of fundamental people management theories and concepts • use of an exceptional range of relevant and appropriate sources to support arguments many of which are independently selected
<p>Application and Practice (20%)</p> <p>This should include evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and application discipline-specific specialist skills • Presentation of research findings and use of data 	<p>The work demonstrates a limited or no ability to evaluate and accurately apply given problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working contexts, and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • processes attempted but inaccurate and error strewn • presentation of findings is not clear or effective, and gathering, processing and interpretation of data ineffective and/or incomplete 	<p>The work demonstrates an insufficient ability to evaluate and accurately apply given problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working contexts and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practical tasks and/or processes completed with partial accuracy and independence • presentation of findings is often not clear or effective, and gathering, processing and interpretation of data is substantially ineffective and/or inefficient. 	<p>The work demonstrates a sufficient ability to evaluate and apply given problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working contexts and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete practical tasks and/or processes accurately in well-defined contexts • present findings in clear and appropriate formats, and gather, process and interpret data in a predominantly efficient and effective manner. 	<p>The work demonstrates an ability to evaluate and apply, in a consistent and informed manner, given problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working contexts and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete practical tasks and/or processes accurately with a degree of autonomy in well-defined contexts • consistently present findings in clear and appropriate formats, and gather, process and interpret data in an efficient and effective manner. 	<p>The work demonstrates an ability to evaluate and apply in a capable and effective manner, given problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working context and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete practical tasks and/or process autonomously and with accuracy and coordination in well-defined contexts • consistently present findings in detailed, clear and appropriate formats, and gather, process and interpret data in a consistently efficient and effective manner. 	<p>The work demonstrates an ability to select, evaluate and apply in a highly accomplished manner, appropriate problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working contexts and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete practical tasks and/or process autonomously and with a high degree of accuracy, coordination and proficiency in well-defined contexts • consistently present findings perceptively, convincingly and appropriately and in a wide range of appropriate formats, and gather, process and 	<p>The work demonstrates an ability to select, evaluate, and apply in a exceptionally accomplished manner appropriate problem-solving approaches and techniques relevant to well-defined aspects of the subject and working contexts and so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete practical tasks and/or process autonomously and with an exceptional degree of accuracy, coordination and proficiency in well-defined contexts • consistently use in a highly developed and sophisticated way the full range of given technical, creative and/or artistic skills

						interpret a wide range of data in a highly consistent, efficient and effective manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> consistently present findings perceptively, authoritatively and appropriately and in a wide range of appropriate formats, and gather, process and interpret a very wide range of data in an exceptionally consistent, efficient and effective manner.
<p>Transferable Skills (15%)</p> <p>This should include evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written, verbal and electronic communication Digital and Numerical literacy Personal motivation, organisation and time-management Capacity to work within a framework of professional values/code of conduct and social & ethical considerations in their work 	<p>Work demonstrates limited or no ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. -manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues 	<p>Work demonstrates an insufficient ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. -manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified (e.g. professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues 	<p>Work demonstrates a sufficient ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. Manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified (e.g. professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues 	<p>Work demonstrates a consistent and confident ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. -manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues 	<p>Work demonstrates a highly proficient ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. -manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues 	<p>Work demonstrates a highly accomplished ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. -manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues 	<p>Work demonstrates an exceptional ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions accurately and reliably utilising relevant numeracy, digital literacy, oral and written communication skills in well-defined contexts. -manage their learning and work with direction and supervision -use Initiative to take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs - work in relation to specified professional values and codes of conduct, adapting behaviour to meet these obligations -demonstrate awareness of ethical issues

4.1.3.2 Analysis of the ‘People Management’ assignment brief

4.1.3.2.1 Purpose and statement of task

As is often the case, the colleague responsible for developing this brief has confused the purpose of the ‘Assignment task’ and ‘Task requirements’ sections, placing the specification of the task in the latter. The former is used solely to provide a contextual statement. The link between this statement and the following task is not made explicit, though it is clear that its purpose is to signal to students that the professional and social context in which Business operates (and which they will be operating in following graduation) is volatile and changeable. The inclusion of this statement makes it feel as though the task is being set up to respond to this context in the same way that an authentic task might relate to a given scenario. However, this is not pursued and the link between contextual statement and actual task is not made explicit. The inclusion of this text seems to be of limited usefulness in supporting student engagement with the task, other than serving as reminder of what presumably has been discussed during module sessions. As such, this may create expectations in students that this text is of relevance, which are otherwise not fully fulfilled. It is part of the brief, so will be read and processed and therefore impose a cognitive burden, but it does not obviously connect to the task, which, although it references ‘current issues’, remains otherwise discrete and entirely independent of the statement.

The statement of the task itself conforms loosely to Hughes (2009) ATD Framework (see Table 17 below), clearly identifying it as a written task (with the assumption of electronic submission) and establishing the subject matter to which it relates. However, the identification of the task as both a portfolio and report is potentially confusing (see Text type below) and the statement of the task as a whole is unnecessarily complicated by the the inclusion of the second main clause (indicated in row two of the table). This makes the sentence more complex linguistically and serves little further purpose; it could readily be simplified by the removal of the text indicated in red in Table 18.

The selection of ‘reflect’ as the task verb and purpose of the assignment is also not unproblematic. Reflection as it is commonly used in higher education may be defined as:

a deliberate and conscientious process that employs a person’s cognitive, emotional and somatic capacities to mindfully contemplate on past, present or future (intended or planned) actions in order to learn, better understand and potentially improve future actions (Harvey, Coulson and McMaugh, 2016).

Typically, students will be asked to reflect on an experience, either as part of their learning or in some other context, e.g., relating to a placement. In this sense, the process of reflection tends to be highly structured, often making use of a reflective model (e.g., Gibbs (1988)) and signals a quite particular way of thinking and doing that does not seem entirely what is required in this task. Business students are encouraged to reflect and to learn how to reflect in the typical sense. For example, in a contemporaneous module, students are required to reflect upon their experiences of engaging in a series of work-related tasks. Reflection on learning, however, is likely to be unfamiliar as a concept and may cause confusion. There may also be confusion arising from how to write reflectively within the report format; reflective writing typically involves 1st-person forms (Cambridge University Libraries, 2024), while reports will more often be written in the 3rd-person (Robinson and Pedley-Smith, 2010). In terms of Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001), the learning outcomes signal a requirement for Factual Understanding (via the task verbs, ‘demonstrate an understanding of’ and ‘identify’) and Evaluation (via the task verb, ‘evaluate’ in LO2). If ‘reflect’ is to be used as a means of signalling the purpose the assignment as suggested in the outcomes, it will need to be unpacked and discussed as part of in-class discussions and activities (Williams, 2005a). More readily accessible, measurable and understandable alternatives such as those already in use in the learning outcomes might usefully be substituted instead.

Table 18: Applying Hughes (2009) ATD Framework to ‘portfolio’ task in the Introduction to People Management assignment (rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) shown in brackets and linked to relevant cognitive and knowledge dimensions of Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001))

Mode	Text type	Purpose	Subject matter
[You are tasked with] writing	A reflective portfolio of 2000 words which will contain several parts in the form of a written report	Using appropriate theory and relevant models, you are to reflect upon	Key topics covered throughout this module
[and] create	A portfolio	Which demonstrates your reflection on	1. Current issues facing line managers

			relating to people management 2. The knowledge skills and behaviours to be an effective manager 3. HR processes with underpin performance management
--	--	--	--

4.1.3.2.1.1 Text type

There is some confusion in terms of the identification of the text type for the task. It is variously mentioned in the specification as a reflective portfolio, report and portfolio. Definitions of assessment tasks used as the basis for BNU validation processes are taken from the QAA (QAA, 2011). Portfolios are described as collections of work that relate to a given topic or theme, which have been produced over a period of time, typically involving a range of artefacts and often a reflective element. There is no indication in the brief that students have been involved in producing texts or other artefacts that they might include in a portfolio, nor how these might be collated into some kind of whole within a portfolio. As such, the task does not provide students with an opportunity to learn about the portfolio as a future assessment task, thus encouraging the development of useful content knowledge (Sadler, 2014) and assessment literacy (Price *et al.*, 2012); nor, for those students who may have encountered portfolios previously, does it allow for the activation of existing schemas for the text type (Gilbert, 2012; Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b) as these will not be relevant in relation to this assignment.

The issue is further complicated by the requirement for the ‘portfolio’ to be presented in the form of a report. Report formats can be very diverse (Coffin *et al.*, 2003; Robinson and Pedley-Smith, 2010). However, it is clear in the way the report is described and scaffolded that the intention is for students to produce a kind of Business report. Reports are identified as privileged text types within Business programme specifications (e.g., BNU, 2016, 2018) and are widely used as part of authentic assessment practices within the discipline on the basis that they are a commonly used means of communication within the world of work. Business reports have particular characteristics (Robinson and Pedley-Smith, 2010): typically, they make use of

headings and may feature charts and figures, usually they are written in 3rd-person forms, they tend to feature particular sections and functional elements (an executive summary, tables of contents, introduction, section outlining primary and/or secondary research methods, results and analysis, different sections afford different approaches to writing, descriptive, discursive, analytical, evaluative, etc., often they will make recommendations. A key feature, too, is that they will have some kind of purpose (e.g., to support a business decision, recommend a solution to a problem, etc.) and an audience (i.e., they are written for someone in order to support the making of that decision, solving that problem, etc.). For this reason, assignments requiring report-based responses often feature scenarios that place students within particular roles in organisations attempting to achieve a particular business purpose. This is not the case here, despite the appearance of such in the contextual statement. This assignment resembles a report in terms of its structure but lacks an authentic purpose and audience (other than the default 'academic' one: students are expected to complete the assignment because they have been told to and to do so for their teachers, who will assess it. The student is thus required to 'perform' report writing for their teacher (Gee, 2011), but without the organisational principle of an authentic purpose and audience. This process might usefully provide students with an opportunity to learn and rehearse aspects of report structure and other characteristics, but this remains purely a surface, gestural activity, somewhat separate from the typical rhetorical purposes of a report. What they are required to produce will look like a report and may feel like a report but will not be a 'report' in a meaningful sense. As with the portfolio-which-is-not-a-portfolio, this report-which-is-not-a-report denies students a valuable opportunity for acquiring knowledge and understanding of a key communication formats within the disciplinary Discourse.

4.1.3.2.1.2 Mode and medium

It is clearly, if awkwardly, made clear that the assignment should be written and it can therefore be assumed that it will be submitted electronically as required by institutional policy. This is communicated as part of the 'Submission details' section, however, because of the potential confusion between portfolio and report formats, it may be useful to mention this explicitly in a more prominent part of the brief. It is not unusual for portfolios to be submitted in hard copy (e.g., as folders of collated materials and artefacts) and there may be a potential for uncertainty.

4.1.3.2.1.3 Clarity of language

Overall, language used seems clear, straightforward and level appropriate (Howell-Richardson, 2015). Disciplinary concepts are referred to, but these seem relevant to the module and will presumably be familiar to students at this stage (close to its end). The use of 'reflection' to indicate expectations for sections of the report may cause uncertainty in terms of what this involves in this particular context (Williams, 2005a). It may be that task verbs used within the learning outcomes would be clearer and more transparent in terms of communicating how students are expected to respond to this aspect of the task.

There are aspects of wordiness and complex grammatical structures in the specification of the task that are likely to impose unnecessary cognitive load on students as they interpret them. For example, 'You are tasked with writing...' could simply be substituted for 'Write'. Equally, the complex sentence structure of the task statement serves to complicate rather than clarify the definition of the task.

4.1.3.2.1.4 Scaffolding

Scaffolding is provided in the form of the headings to be used for the purposes of writing the report. Given the importance of the report text type within Business, this seems sensible and is recommended as part of a progressive approach to scaffolding student understanding of the format (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

4.1.3.2.2 Practicalities

4.1.3.2.2.1 Word count

Word count is clearly identified at 2000 words in the specification of the task. As part of providing support to students in their engagement with the report structure outlined as part of the task specification, it may be helpful to indicate approximate or expected counts for different sections. It would also be useful to be explicit with regard to any elements which are not included in the word count (e.g., it is typical for executive summaries, reference lists and appendices not to contribute to the overall word count) (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

4.1.3.2.2.2 Referencing

The relevant referencing style is clearly identified using the standard text within the assignment brief template. No further information is provided in terms of the expected number and type

of sources that students might use in their work. In the absence of explicit advice in the brief, in-class discussions and activities should provide opportunities for students to develop an understanding of these expectations relevant to their level, discipline and tutor requirements (Butcher *et al.*, 2010b, 2017).

Confusion may arise from requirement to include both a reference list and a bibliography (both are which are included in the recommended heading structure) as both terms are often treated synonymously, although have distinct functions as typically outlined in study skills resources (e.g., University of Birmingham, 2024). Reference lists typically include works cited within the body of the assignment, while bibliographies might also include works that have been used but not directly referred to. Ensuring that these terms are used consistently throughout the module and in discussion of assessment requirements should ensure that students learn how and when to use them appropriately (Devlin and O'Shea, 2012; de Silva Joyce *et al.*, 2014).

4.1.3.2.2.3 Presentation

No specific presentational requirements are included in the brief. Explicit provision of such information may help to alleviate any anxiety or uncertainty about how to approach this aspect of assessed work, which may otherwise simply be assumed (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Where they are common across assessments in the programme, students should quickly familiarise themselves with such requirements and have no further need of accessing the guidance. Walsh's (2021a) suggestion of sharing information of this kind in a central location where it can be accessed if and when required without unduly adding to the cognitive burden of the brief is to be recommended.

4.1.3.2.2.4 Group/individual arrangements

This is an individual piece of work, although this is not explicitly mentioned.

4.1.3.2.2.5 Submission

The process for submission is briefly described, using the standard text in the assignment brief template of the time.

As the colleague creating the brief as reused a previous year's template for this purpose, there are inconsistencies with other briefs students will encounter as this section of the template was adapted to reduce the excessive detail included in previous versions. The inclusion of

unnecessary detail adds to the cognitive burden of processing the brief. Inconsistency between this and briefs communicated via the more recent template at the time may also negatively impact schema formation as part of students' learning about the way in which assessment is communicated.

4.1.3.2.2.6 Other practicalities

As with the Context of Social Work assignment, the module leader's name is shared as part of the meta data shared at the top of the brief (not included here), but their contact details are not. As a means of ensuring frictionless access to their teachers for students who may already be reluctant and uncertain about contacting them for support (Mcsweeney and Mcsweeney, 2014), the inclusion of contact details in the form of an email address or similar seems a minimal requirement.

4.1.3.2.3 Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria are provided at the end of the brief. Although they have to some extent been contextualised to the subject matter of the module and, indeed, the specifics of the assignment and associated outcomes, the criteria statements contain large extracts of unmediated text from the institutional grading descriptors. As a result, they are unnecessarily lengthy, complicated, not level appropriate and not always relevant to the needs of the assignment. For example, in the 'Application and Practice' category, the completion of 'practical tasks and/or processes in well-defined context' and the 'presentation of findings, etc.) are not irrelevant to the completion of the report, but the generic wording seems likely to obfuscate rather than clarify what students are to be assessed on. It is also difficult to see how this particular report might require students to 'evaluate and apply problem-solving approaches' in any meaningful sense. Equally, in the 'Transferable Skills' category, the use of grading descriptor language has resulted in an unnecessary level of complexity beyond the essential requirement of demonstrating an ability to 'communicate ideas and information accurately and reliably' and a good deal of irrelevant material in the form of the demonstration of personal management skills, initiative and conforming to relevant professional values and standards. There may well be ethical issues linked to the subject matter of the assignment, but these are not highlighted in the learning outcomes or statement of the task and may or may not be of particular relevance.

As has been discussed in section 2.2.4.5, the value and use of assessment criteria is not uncontested (e.g., O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004, 2008; Sadler, 2005, 2014) and may not reflect what teachers do when marking student work in practical terms (Bloxham, 2009; Bloxham, Boyd and Orr, 2011; Bloxham *et al.*, 2016). However, there remains an expectation on a sectoral and, indeed, institutional level that assessment criteria will be shared with students in a manner that is 'clearly articulated... [and] understood by all students and staff...' (QAA, 2018c). Regrettably, as with the generic approach taken in the example Social Work assignments above, it seems likely that rather than promoting student trust in the transparency and fairness of assessment processes (Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Kite and Phongsavan, 2017), criteria such as these will have the opposite effect, assuming students are willing or able to engage with them at all.

4.1.3.2.4 Cognitive efficiency

4.1.3.2.4.1 Sequencing

As with the other examples, the brief has been written using the institutional assignment brief template and is thus broadly sequenced according to recommendations made by Gilbert and Maguire (2014b). The misuse of the task specifications section for communicating the task as a whole, however, means that it is not communicated first in keeping with Gilbert and Maguire's advice.

4.1.3.2.4.2 Comprehensiveness

The task is clearly communicated, albeit with some issues and problems (see above). The outline of expected content provided by the recommended headings means that students are likely to feel that they know what to do and feel that they have a clear structure to work within, despite any confusion brought about by the identification of the assignment as both a 'portfolio' and a 'report'. This structure thus provides a degree of scaffolding in terms of assessment expectations and also typical structural features of Business reports.

Minimal referencing information is provided specifying the required referencing style, although no further indication of the kind and scope of sources that might be used is provided. Other than the structure of headings to be used, no further information is provided in relation to presentational requirements. Perhaps particularly as the assignment is a Business report, suggestions for typical or useful approaches to presentation of conventional report elements,

etc., may be of relevance to this task. As mentioned in relation to the Context of Social Work assignment, above, students may benefit from explicitness in guidance on presentational requirements as a means of allaying uncertainty about this aspect of the assessment process (Collier and Morgan, 2008), or at least 'explicit inexplicitness' if the intention is that they should make their own decisions concerning how the report is presented (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

Assessment criteria are also included as part of the brief, but their usefulness may be compromised by the manner in which they have been framed and communicated. In the original brief, they are spread over three pages and the length, combined with the complexity of language seems likely to overwhelm students rather than effectively communicate expectations for the assignment.

4.1.3.2.4.3 Conciseness

Discounting the detail of the initial context statement, submission details, 'how your work will be assessed' and the 'Fit to submit' sections, it would be possible to communicate the assessed task, outcomes and practicalities in around a single page. The statement of the task is somewhat complex and its description as both portfolio and report is likely to confuse. The use of the task verb 'reflect' in the task specification is also not ideally aligned to the expectations enshrined in the learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the task conforms broadly to Hughes' (2009) ATD Framework in communicating the key aspects of what students are required to do and includes clear supportive scaffolding in the form of the system of (albeit problematic) headings that students should use to frame their response.

It is a requirement in policy for assessment criteria to be included in the assignment brief or at very least that they should be made readily available in the same location to facilitate access. However, at three pages, these criteria cannot be considered concise. Equally, rather than comprehensive, they are instead rather excessive; they are expressed in complex and high-level language (lifted directly from the institutional grading descriptors) and include extraneous criteria that are not relevant to this assignment.

4.1.3.2.5 General comments

It is not that students will not know what to do with regard to this assignment. Indeed, the instructions and guidance are quite clear, e.g., in terms of the headings to use and content to include. It is likely that students will feel they know precisely what to do in terms of

reproducing the headings and then attempting to fill in the blanks. Rather, the challenges students will face is that they are being required to do something analogous to fitting a 'square peg' into a 'round hole'. This derives from the potential confusion in labelling the assignment both as a 'portfolio' and a 'report', two quite substantially different text types and also from requiring students to impose a report structure on an activity that is not ideally suited to the Business report format that is clearly expected, i.e., the text type is has been inappropriately communicated (Gilbert, 2012).

The task as presented, once the distraction of the portfolio is set aside, lends itself to some kind of report format, but there are aspects of the Business report headings required that seem likely either to impose an unnecessary burden on students, because they are not applicable, or to mislead students in terms of what the proper function of that particular section of a Business report might be. Executive summaries, for example, perform a similar function in Business reports as abstracts in research articles, outlining the purpose, research methods, results and conclusions with a nod towards the implications this might have for the wider context. In this case, this section might usefully provide opportunities for students to summarise their report, but the nature and purpose of the report required do not fit the conventional approach. A similar issue can be seen in the requirement for a 'Recommendations' section. This would be normal in a Business report context, but it is difficult to see what recommendations students might make on the basis of their reflective engagement with their learning on the module.

Equally, there is no authentic purpose or audience for this report. For a reflective report, i.e., a written reflection in which the internal structure is made visible via headings, the lack of an authentic purpose and audience would not necessarily be problematic. It is likely to be written as an opportunity for learning (its purpose, as determined by the teacher) and to be read by the teacher (the audience). An authentic Business report, however, would always have both (Reid, 2010; Robinson and Pedley-Smith, 2010). While it is clear that the assignment has been selected as a means of introducing students to a key text type within their disciplinary and professional context, presumably on a programmatic basis (Jessop and Tomas, 2017b), the lack of alignment between the task and the text type means that valuable learning opportunity has been missed. Students who already understand Business reports will face an increased cognitive burden in finding a way to impose an inappropriate structure on their writing; student who do not will have missed an opportunity to do so.

4.2 Analysis of participant interviews

This section includes an analysis of the first round of interviews conducted with all five participants and also the second round, in which only Bridget took part.

4.2.1 Participants' feelings about their previous educational experiences

4.2.1.1 Mary

Mary is a mature student who lives in her own home with her two children, some five miles away from the university. She came into higher education from an extensive background of vocational education and working in the social care sector, with her highest qualification a Level 5 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). Mary's experience of compulsory education had been very difficult, leading to the development of what she describes as 'defensive behaviours' and opting out, taking long absences from secondary school. She did not explain explicitly why she had such challenges at this time, but it seems strongly associated with feeling ill-suited to and unsupported by the education system. There also seems to have been considerable anxiety about being tested and exposed to judgement by unsympathetic teachers. During her interview she speaks with considerable appreciation about the supportive environment provided by her lecturers in which a key aspect is that she does not 'feel judged' or made to feel in any way inadequate.

Her experience of vocational education and professional life in the social care system, however, has been extremely positive and she has clearly thrived in the more observation based and discussion driven approach to learning and assessment in this context. Certainly, she has a raft of vocational qualifications, including a Level 3 teaching qualification, an A1 assessors award and a Level 5 Diploma in Health and Social Care, along with her functional skills in English and Maths. Quite apart from the practical orientation to her vocational learning, it is clear, too, that the highly systematic and structured nature of the vocational assessment process has suited her very well:

Mary: so that I found for me very guiding, very directive and I knew what it was it was, it was expected from me. So erm. I really enjoyed that type of learning because it suited me

There is a strong sense of Mary having learnt and developed a great deal during her time since secondary school and her having made a determined and courageous decision that she is going to do everything she can to succeed in her aspirations to become a Social Worker. This has involved a real change in herself to be able step out of her comfort zone and ask for help when she needs it – a real challenge for someone who has not been an ‘asker-for-helper’ – and a determined decision to stick at it and not walk away, despite the challenges she has faced. And these have been considerable during this first year of her studies, not least of all the complexity of managing a complicated home life with two small children while engaging with her studies. Indeed, a miscalculation in her childcare arrangements meant that one of her children and their friend was present during our interview, a challenge she met with humour and forbearance (and the promise of pizza if they behaved themselves).

Of all the participants, it is Mary who seems to have experienced most anxiety at aspects of her assignment briefs and the way assessment has been managed during this first stage in the course. There is a strong sense that for her the lack of directiveness and consistency in her briefs and inconsistencies in the wider assessment process has not always met her needs and left her feeling frustrated and stressed as a result. One example in which a supportive document providing information about expectations for one of her assignments was provided rather later in the process seems to have caused her particular unhappiness. Having proactively engaged with the assignment in a timely manner to accommodate her other responsibilities, she discovered that she had not done what was expected and had to rework her response:

Mary: And then I got given this [the extra information] a week ago and I was like oh delete the whole thing, so... [Interviewer: Oh, dear. Yes, OK. So...] It was a bit disheart, disheartening really because I'd gone to do something that I thought was expected of me and then it was really not the right thing to do. [Interviewer: Yeah, yeah] So I've gone back over and I think I've done it now and it's much erm this is this is [the paper] this is brilliantly detailed, but it would have been lovely if we'd had it a while ago. It was a bit disheart, disheartening really because I'd gone to do something that I thought was expected of me and then it was really not the right thing to do.

As much as feeling let down by the absence of all the information she required in the brief, there is a sense that the rather haphazard nature of the way in which this particular assignment was managed, the fact that it was 'all over the place', seems not to have met her own high expectations of the way in which she felt higher education assessment practices would be conducted in comparison to her experience of being assessed (and assessing) in the vocational context.

4.2.1.2 Clare

Clare is a mature student who lives in her own home in a nearby town slightly under 20 miles away from the university. Like Mary, she also had a difficult time in her early education. A care leaver, she experienced considerable disruption and lack of continuity in both care and attendance throughout primary and secondary school. During this time she felt inadequately supported and struggled to fit in, consequently switching off from 'normal classroom learning' and dropping out of compulsory education before taking her GCSEs. Like Mary, however, Clare secured employment in the social care sector and thrived, responding well to the practical nature of vocational learning and assessment and successfully achieving a Level 2 apprenticeship. A long-held ambition to be a Social Worker (a degree-level profession) led her to the proactive decision to take an Access course so she could go to university. It also provided the motivation for her success in this course, which was entirely online due to Covid-19 restrictions, an experience for which her practical, hands-on orientation left her ill-suited and through which she had to 'struggle' with persistence and resilience.

4.2.1.3 Sara

Sara is Asian and the third mature student in the group. She also lives in her own home in a nearby town some 20 miles away from the university. One or more of her parents have a higher education qualification and her mother and brother are both Social Workers.

Sara was the only participant who took A-levels prior to coming to university, although unfortunately she did not do as well as expected. This led to a proactive decision to take an Access course at a local college in order to further her aspirations for a professional career in health care, despite a hoped for opportunity to take a break from learning before going to university (somewhat contrary to her parents' plans for her). College was a challenge and

something of a culture shock for her initially; she never thought she would be ‘the type of person to go college’, having had a strong orientation towards educational success during her upbringing:

Sara: I was brought up in that sort of. I had that sort of like really strict educational upbringing like I had to study every day. Do my homework in time, all of that, so that’s instilled into me

Nevertheless, she quickly adapted to her new environment, established a social network of new friends and found a routine. The security of having a routine as a basis for engaging with her education is important for Sara. She has a strong sense of herself as academically able (she is ‘not the kind of person who will struggle’) and is confident and capable in her engagement with assessed work, but is aware of her need to find her focus and get on with things, to develop that discipline that was instilled in her as a child. During her Access course, events outside of her studies led to her falling behind but she was able to draw on available support within college to address this. Ultimately, she was successful and immediately began a degree in Occupational Therapy at another university. During this time, however, she experienced further difficulties. She did not provide details of this and I did not press her, but it was clearly a profoundly affecting experience relating to something outside of her studies that led to her dropping out of the course and returning home. This was a period of considerable difficulty for her:

Sara: I was really upset. But I had a lot going on at that time and I told everyone, my family and friends, all I wanna do is go back to uni, become a student, have that experience and graduate, that’s all I wanted to do.

Now she is at university again and studying to be a Social Worker, there is a strong sense that Sara feels both happy to be a student again and is confident and capable in her abilities to do well. She has worked hard to achieve this and taken steps to ensure she is organized and systematic in her approach to her studies and assignments. Living away from home and developing her independence has clearly contributed to this as aspects of her home life seem to have been quite stressful for her.

She perceives herself as less stressed than her classmates and has a clear sense of what’s expected of her, drawing on her upbringing to ‘switch mode’ and proactively engage with assessed work in a timely and organized manner:

Sara: Like, I know what's expected of me. They give us the assignment brief. I read it. I know what I need to do. Uhm, I know where to go for help or to ask questions if I need to. And, I, I finished my work, at least one two weeks before the deadline anyway.

4.2.1.4 Ruth

Ruth is a young black student (aged 18-21) whose permanent home address is in a town in the East Midlands. It is not clear whether she commutes from this location (around an hour and a half away by car) or lives locally during term time. Like Sara, one or more of her parents has a higher education qualification. She is also in receipt of some degree of financial support from the university. Although she is not technically a mature student, after completing an Access course (condensed into 1 year) at a local college in her hometown and a Foundation Year at another university, she is at the top end of the usual age range and talks of feeling older and more mature than many of her fellow classmates. Like Clare, Ruth also experienced challenges during her Access and Foundation Year courses. The move to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurred midway through her Access course, leading to a chaotic and poorly managed learning experience. This was stressful, but she nevertheless felt it helped her to establish a routine of engaging with regular assessment and interpret assignment expectations and requirements from briefs. The use of predicted grades to provide final results for the course was a source of some frustration for her as she felt she would have done better if she had been allowed to have completed the work for herself.

Having completed her Access course, Ruth went on to take a Foundation Year, the first half of which also suffered from 'teething problems' as a result of its online delivery under COVID-19 conditions before it settled into something resembling 'normality'. Again, aspects of the organisation and management of the Foundation Year were quite stressful. Assignments were delivered in briefs with teacher explanations and support which helped her feel more prepared for when she came to university. Although she concedes that the briefs were different and somewhat simpler, it is clear that her experience on this course helped her feel more confident about meeting the demands of higher education and seeking support when required. It also provided a foundational knowledge base on which she was able to draw during her first year at university. Overall, she seems happy and confident in her studies, grateful to be doing coursework rather than exams and feeling she has strategies for dealing with the higher expectations of higher education.

4.2.1.5 Bridget

Bridget is a young UK-domiciled student of Greek origin (aged 18-21) who has a declared specific learning disability (dyslexia). It became clear during her interview that an aspect of her dyslexia is a strong focus on details and a difficulty in processing ambiguity.

Bridget lives in West London, some 40 miles away from the university. It is not clear whether this is her own or her parental home, but she seems to commute into the campus for her classes. The only Business student in the group of participants, she came into university after successfully completing a BTEC in Travel and Tourism. Assessment on the BTEC was well-managed, though she perceived it to be arduous and somewhat repetitive in nature, with a focus on lower-order cognitive skills that she found frustrating. Overall, Bridget seemed rightly confident in her abilities at this time with a clear sense of knowing what she needed to do.

A key aspect of Bridget's thoughts about this earlier experience and her early time at university is a driving commitment to developing herself and her own perspective on things. She also talked about her career aspirations and wanting to run her own business, which led to her proactive decision to study Business. She also has aspirations for postgraduate study. She is aware of her own needs in terms of her dyslexia and conscious that this means she sometimes requires support beyond that of other students. She is registered with the university's Inclusivity and Diversity services and has access to sessions with a designated dyslexia helper. Overall, there is a strong sense of Bridget as a capable and committed student who is determined to work hard and do well to achieve her ambitions.

4.2.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

This section includes my sense-making of the participants' thoughts and feelings about aspects of assignment briefs and the wider assessment process, linked to the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes identified during analysis of the first round of interviews with all five participants and the second round, featuring a single interview with Bridget, the Business participant. For clarity, Bridget's extracts are labelled 'Interview 1' and 'Interview 2' as relevant.

Table 19, below, provides an overview of the group experiential themes (GETs). All participants to a greater or lesser extent were interpreted to have found aspects of the super-ordinate

experiential themes of relevance to their interpretation of their experiences and in all but one case, at least three participants discussed aspects of each sub-ordinate theme. This approach was taken in response to recommendations for ensuring quality in IPA studies as defined by Smith (2011).

Only in relation to the alignment between dissemination activities and briefs (sub-ordinate theme 3b) and the use of exemplars (sub-ordinate theme 3c) was this discussed by only two of the participants and one (Bridget), respectively. Theme 3b has been included because of the particular relevance it seemed to have in terms of the participants' confidence in adopting individual and personal approaches to their assessed work and anxieties about getting the 'right answer' that I felt to be particular relevance for the Social Work group. The common and widely recommended use of exemplars in formative assessment activities evidenced in the literature (e.g., Carless, 2007; Carless and Chan, 2017) (see section 2.1.2 above) also suggested the particular relevance of including this sub-theme. Theme 3c, which only Bridget reported, nevertheless was experienced so strongly, promoted such strong feelings of frustration and seems to have coloured her feelings about the programme to such an extent that it was felt that it must be included.

Table 19: Summary of Group Experiential Themes by participant

Group Experiential Themes	Mary	Clare	Sara	Ruth	Bridget
GET 1: Valuing comprehensiveness and clarity: knowing what to do	x	x	x	x	x
1a. Comprehensiveness promotes confidence	x	x	x	x	x
1b. Insufficient information causes stress and anxiety	x	x	x		x
1c. Using the brief to scaffold engagement	x	x	x	x	x
1c. Including presentational requirements in the brief is useful	x			x	x
1e. Consistency and logic in presentation of briefs is useful		x	x		x
GET 2: Experiencing the brief as a barrier	x	x	x	x	x
2a. Experiencing confusion due to misalignment and ambiguity	x	x			x
2b. Complexity impedes engagement	x	x		x	x
GET 3: Well-judged dissemination provides a basis for effective engagement	x	x	x	x	x
3a. Using dissemination to frame learning and understand expectations	x	x	x		x
3b. Dissemination activities should align with assignment briefs					x
3c. Use of exemplars can be problematic		x		x	
GET 4: Striving for independence	x	x	x	x	x
4a. Doing it for themselves	x	x	x	x	x
4b. A supportive environment creates space for independence	x	x	x	x	x
4c. Taking control and acting with their own power	x	x	x	x	x
4d. Problems with the brief can negatively impact students' sense of themselves	x	x			x
GET 5: Building on success and existing strengths promotes confidence	x	x	x	x	x

5a: Success breeds confidence	x	x	x	x	x
5b. Building on existing strengths is empowering	x	x	x	x	x

4.2.2.1 GET 1: Valuing comprehensiveness and clarity

All the participants reveal expectations that the assignment briefs should be comprehensive and definitive specifications of assignment expectations and requirements. In this there is a sense that there is a 'belief' in the brief and an assumption and trust that it will provide an accurate indication of what is expected in the assignment. They wanted to know what to do and when they felt that what was expected was clear and transparent, they responded accordingly on the assumption that what the brief said (or they interpreted it to say) was what was required of them. This trust in the brief is also clear in their use of briefs to scaffold aspects of their engagement with assessed work. Aspects of the design of the brief also seemed to afford clarity of engagement. Where these factors come together, they promoted empowered and confident engagement with work.

4.2.2.1.1 GET 1a: Comprehensiveness promotes confidence

Comprehensiveness and comprehensibility are universally acknowledged by the participants as fundamental characteristics of effective, useful assignment briefs. Ruth describes her experience of engaging with assessment on her Access course in terms of the enabling quality of clearly communicated expectations:

Ruth: When I understood the assignment, I could just get on with it and plan it and write it straight away, but when I kind of didn't understand the assignment brief, I could plan, but I wasn't as confident in writing it.

What she seems to be referring to here is the experience of encountering a brief for which her existing knowledge is insufficient to allow her to comprehend what it requires. This might be because of a shortfall in the communicative efficiency of the brief itself, or simply that the language and/or concepts it refers to are beyond her ability to understand at this point. She is able to activate her existing knowledge and understanding to engage as best she can (she can plan her response) but lacks confidence in whether it is appropriate or not. For Ruth the language in which the brief is communicated is of particular relevance and its interpretation plays a key role in her understanding. This is something she works at explicitly in order to build that

comprehensive picture of what is expected, taking ownership of the language and respeaking it in a way that she can work with:

Ruth: if I still don't understand it then I'd try and sometimes it's like words that are used, so I'll try and find like, like similar words that mean the same thing and try to word it differently to see if I understand. Yeah.

Sara also speaks of the importance of having all the information required as a basis for confident engagement with assignments and achieving the outcomes associated with them. This extends beyond an indication of structure (e.g., for essay text types as in the extract below) to a modelling of how to link to professional standards as part of the evidencing of professional competencies, a key aspect of Social Work education. It is clear that she is referring to the Context of Social Work assignment (see section 4.1.2 above). The inclusion of the text type (the assignment is identified as an 'essay') activates Sara's existing knowledge of essay structure and the instructions make clear what she needs to do within this framework. It is assumed that she is referring to the guidance provided in the form of bulleted sub tasks in relation to passing the learning outcomes:

Sara: Although it's just an introduction main body conclusion but knowing what to put in each section. So, what to talk about. So, uhm. What we can use to link whatever we need to talk about, like erm for example with Social Work, if we talk about something then we have to link it back to the KSS [Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers]... So it gives us a clear lay layout of what we need to include, what we need to link it to how we can make our assignment like so it's passed all the learning outcomes. So very clearly written out and set out.

The brief is helpful because it is framed in clear accessible language (it is 'clearly written out') and presented in a way that is accessible. The use of bulleted points may be a factor in affording accessibility and readability. Bridget mentions them specifically:

Bridget: I can agree with information was communicated well. It had the what was needed to be done fully... Well, the bullet points needed to produce sections each by each. It's just what was in them. It was clear that it was a report. We need the contents page. While the bullet points, that needs to be talked about in the words and the conclusion. They all of them, it was really clear. (Interview 1)

As with Sara's engagement with the Context of Social Work brief, Bridget's engagement with this brief is also facilitated by what she perceives as clear guidance in terms of what is expected in the assignment. Some of this relates to the structural aspects of the report

(the sections) and some to the expected purpose and content (the ‘what was needed to be done fully’). Clearly, part of the purpose for the inclusion of report text types in early assignments in the first year is to introduce students to what is a key communication form in the Business context. Bridget has evidently learnt enough about the report text type already to allow her to apply this existing knowledge to this brief – she is able to recognise the characteristics she has learnt to expect in a brief and confirm what is being required of her in this particular task.

Clarity and comprehensiveness do not simply enable work, they also provide for confidence and empowered engagement. Mary, for example, responded enthusiastically to the Context of Social Work assignment considering it a model of clear communication and expectations:

Mary: but when they were good like that one [the Context of Social Work assignment] that came with the erm directive, erm, excited! Because I was like, yes, I know what’s expected of me. I know what I’ve got to write. I know what I’ve got to put in this. I know what I’ve got to apply. I know I’ve got to put it into my [assignment].

The analysis of this assignment (see section 4.1.2.1) reveals some issues with the well-formedness of the task specification, but it is clear, too, that the guidance provided has

Extract from researcher’s reflexive diary

Mary’s engagement with the Context of Social Work essay is interesting. Initially, this did feel as though she was responding to excessive guidance – it was ‘directive’ as she called it, a term she uses elsewhere and clearly associates with a positive aspect of the brief in that it gives her guidance in terms of what she needs to do. Looking at the tasks in those bullet points, though – it doesn’t do much more than point students in the right direction. This could be a case of Mary simply ‘writing what she knows’ as Sadler suggests, but I don’t think it is. In the interview she was quite energised at this point and she clearly felt empowered and confident in her engagement with this assignment because of this scaffolding. The bullet points really just specify tasks. The students still have to demonstrate their understanding, engage in conceptual analysis, evaluative comment, etc. It’s difficult to tell without seeing the finished assignment and the teacher’s comments (Mary did quite well in this assignment, receiving 52, but I don’t have access to her actual work and feedback), but this feels very much more like scaffolding than spoon feeding. It may be that she didn’t recognise the cues in the tasks in terms of what was expected of her as well as she might, because of her inexperience, but surely the fact that she felt confident and able to engage is significant and to be welcomed!

Figure 9: Extract from research diary, relating to Mary’s engagement with the Context of Social Work essay

enabled Mary to engage confidently, overcoming her considerable anxiety about being assessed and the potential for exposure to 'judgement' it entails. The 'directive' nature of the guidance was initially an area of concern as I did wonder whether this was an example of Mary responding to 'conformative' practice and spoon-feeding (see Figure , for the relevant extract from my research diary Figure 9: Extract from research diary). However, on reflection the guidance provides a basis for her to engage, but does not, I think, overly specify or spoonfeed. She has been given a starting point, a 'way into' the assignment, but she is still required to do the work.

Unfortunately, however, it is clear that the briefs do not always provide sufficient information for some students to feel they are able confidently to engage in such a positive way. For example, Clare's practical orientation means she was able to get on with things and complete one of her assessed pieces, while at the same time feeling that she had not done as well as she might if she had had access to everything she had needed. This comment is in relation to the Lifespan assignment (see section 4.1 above), which initially lacked any kind of scaffolding or guidance in relation to the task:

Clare: If that makes sense because it wasn't clear enough. Whereas with the other assignments, I kind of in my assignment, I knew. I've done this. I've done this. I've done this, whereas because this one wasn't clear and it wasn't... It wasn't covering what what it was asking us to do. Uh, yeah, I kind of knew I didn't cover it, but I've answered the question. So, I just kind of just submitted it, 'cause I just wanted it over and done with.

Clare's comment points to a key issue in relation to comprehensiveness that links it closely to the provision of scaffolding and guidance. That is, that these aspects of the brief are relative and subject to some extent to the level of existing knowledge of each student. At this stage, Clare is unable to respond effectively to the essay tasks in this assignment, because she doesn't have the existing knowledge and understanding of the subject and how it is discussed (e.g., in essay text types). She lacks the experience in both to be able to respond confidently to the prompts in the essay titles. In the other assignments, such as the Context of Social Work essay, the scaffolding provides for this shortfall and provides an external model against which to compare her response to compensate for the absence of an internal one. To Clare's credit, she doggedly and pragmatically did what she could, knowing that it probably was not quite what was

expected, but it is clear from the response of Sara and the reported anxieties in the rest of the group that many found this experience highly challenging and anxiety-inducing (see section 4.2.2.1.2 below), which would suggest that the lack of scaffolding was misjudged. Mary's response to the same essay is markedly different because she *did* have the existing knowledge to draw upon. This allowed her to engage confidently in a way that was not available to her peers; she was ready for this approach to communicating the assignment, they were not.

4.2.2.1.2 GET1b: Insufficient information causes stress and anxiety (and frustration!)

While comprehensiveness and clarity promote confidence, it is perhaps unsurprising that where students felt they were lacking, strong feelings of anxiety and stress were reported. This was linked to an absence of guidance in terms of both how to engage with the task and its expected subject matter. This is something that Bridget also discussed in her second interview, pointing to the need for key information relating to the purpose and expected content of assignments to be shared explicitly in the brief. Her sense of frustration in encountering briefs in which she felt this was not the case was palpable.

As discussed at the end of the previous section, the Lifespan assignment (see section 4.1 above) in particular seemed to cause particular difficulties. Sara's reaction to this assignment captures this perfectly, if with good humour:

Sara: No like support or like how to start it. How to write it, what to include, nothing like that. [Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?] Worried. It was really worrying. [laughs]

It is significant that Sara articulates this in relation to the worry and anxiety facing an assignment which she feels she is under-equipped to engage with as presented. Sara, perhaps of all the students, has a strong sense of herself as being academically strong. She understands essay structures and has systematic and well-developed methods for proactively engaging with assessed work. However, at this stage she lacks either the subject matter knowledge or the confidence to engage independently with this assignment. It is acknowledged that aspects of the brief may also be problematic and that the purpose of the task and task verbs used in the learning outcomes are not as clear as

they might be. The range of choice may also be overwhelming. These are not mentioned, though. Instead, it is the sense that she feels unable to engage without some support or guidance. This is worrying because the stakes in summative assessment are high. Students need to pass their assignments in order to proceed in their course and receive their certification. This anxiety is exacerbated by the feeling that she is not sure about what to do in order to engage effectively. That is, in its current form, there is insufficient information in the brief to allow her to engage appropriately and confidently. For her, the assignment designer's assumptions about what students should be able to do are misplaced.

Anxiety was also associated with a lack of clarity around expectations. Clare's comments frame this very much in terms of it making it difficult to deliver on specific teacher expectations. She is aware that everyone may approach a task in a different way, dependent upon their interpretation, so how is she to know which is the 'right' way unless the brief tells her? This seems likely to be linked to Clare's confidence in herself and is reflected in her attitudes to engaging with exemplars (see section 4.2.2.3.3 below).

Clare: It's stressful 'cause it's very hard when you've got a sentence or few sentences in front of you. It's very hard because everyone interprets, everyone reads it differently. Erm, so it's very hard to like realise what it's actually expected you.

Clare has not yet understood that there *are* many ways in which tasks might be completed and that individual interpretations are likely to be valued, provided that they are appropriately supported and underpinned by relevant theory, etc. Provision of carefully selected scaffolding and guidance may therefore give her a starting point and model an approach on which she may be able to build in future assignments. Some explicit indication that a range of responses are possible or that there is no single right answer may also be helpful. The lack of such a statement may well be an example of assumptions made within the context about the extent to which students are aware that in assignments of this nature there is potentially an infinite range of possible responses and that what is valued is the extent to which a response delivers on the task and has a meaningful and appropriate rationale.

Lack of clarity relating to unfamiliar kinds of assessment activity and text types, such as reflection, is also seen as problematic. Mary faced a particular challenge (as, it is suggested, did her classmates) in relation to one assignment which required students to film themselves interviewing a 'service user' (another student) and reflect upon the experience¹⁰. For her, the issue seems to be around a lack of scaffolding for the main component of the task (the writing of the reflective essay), rather than the activity on which the students were required to reflect (videoing an interview), somewhat compounded by the poorly communicated statement of the task itself, which for her rather prioritized the video element (which the lecturer clearly thought was technically challenging) over the essay:

Mary: There so it says what it is that's expected, but that's, that's just telling us what we needed to do. It doesn't tell us on how we're meant to reflect in an essay on it. It tells us what the activity is. So as far as we were concerned, this tells us that we've got to do a video interview. Not write about it.

Again, for Mary, quite apart from her perception that the brief is misleadingly communicated, the issue seems to be around her lack of preparedness for engaging in the task in the expected way. She is unsure of how to reflect in essay form and because the process seems not to have been scaffolded, the designer of the task and brief presumably assumed that students would know how to do this. As with Sara and the Lifespan essay, Mary has insufficient existing knowledge and experience to form an idea of how to complete this assignment. The provision of even minimal guidance would have given her a starting point and allowed for meaningful engagement.

In Bridget's second interview, poor communication of assessment expectations and missing information lead to a palpable sense of frustration. In her first year, Bridget had been highly focused on the statements in the brief itself, to the extent of persistently attempting to square issues that were in fact unsolvable via reference to the brief alone (e.g., misalignment between outcomes and task, inconsistency about requirements) (see section 4.2.2.2.1 below). This was conceived of as something that she felt she was 'expected to do' as though any confusion was in fact her 'fault'. At this time, she was able

¹⁰ This assignment has not been analysed as part of this study.

to identify issues with the briefs and clarify inconsistencies with the assistance of her dyslexia helper and thus address them or engage in 'detective' work with the rest of the module content and documentation and so work out what was required. Nevertheless, the brief was central and the predominant means via which she worked out what was required of her in her assessed work.

At this later stage in her time at university, there is a sense that Bridget is more knowledgeable and confident in her understanding of her subject knowledge and how to engage with the assessment process. She is aware of different assignment formats and their expectations and she has a keen sense of what she needs to do to engage successfully. This is frustrated, though, where key information that determines the nature of the required response for an assignment is missing or at least not explicit, or hidden. The assignment that caused her particular frustration was problematic because she perceived it to be directing her towards one response while in fact expecting another that was not fully specified.

Bridget: it wasn't made clear to us cause on the assignment brief it only looked like 'what is change and why it's important', but it never actually specified that you need to use VUCA¹¹ and that's and that's what your whole assignment is actually based on that analysis as well. (Interview 2)

In fact, VUCA is as part of the Knowledge and Understanding and Analysis and Criticality sections of the assessment criteria and is mentioned as part of the context for the task, but is entirely missing from the specification of the task itself. This particular assignment has not been included for analysis within this study, but it will be useful to consider the statement of the task in order better to understand the challenges Bridget faced (see Figure below). The assignment is based upon a quite extensive scenario relating to a company (MCL) and students are cast in the role of consultants, advising on aspects of the business.

Task requirements

¹¹ VUCA is a model for understanding the volatility of business environments. VUCA is an acronym for: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Taskan, Junça-Silva and Caetano, 2022)

You have been hired by MCL to do some work around how the company has been affected by the VUCA environment in which they operate in. Before MCL commissions a report from you (CW1), they wish for you to offer them some insight as to how change management might help them, and what strategies/tactical options are available to see them through this difficult time.

As an Individual or in a Pair, you are to create and deliver a presentation in which you:

- 1) Examine and investigate the strategic and operational importance of change for MCL
- 2) Identify, apply and evaluate an appropriate change management model that you would advise MCL to use.
- 3) Identify the role that Organisational Development will play in the future success of the business.

Figure 10: Task specification for Change and Organisations assignment (Business, Level 6)

Lacking Business expertise, I do not feel well placed to comment, but the main thrust of the task as articulated would seem to be around change and managing change, presumably as part of a future Organisational Development approach. Applying Hughes's (2009) ATD, identifies the strands of the task and suggests a well-formed, coherent and meaningful specification of what students are expected to do, how they are expected to do it and in relation to what aspects of the subject matter, pitched at an appropriate level for Level 6.

Table 20: Applying Hughes's 2009 ATD Framework to the Change and Organisations assessed task (rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) shown in brackets and linked to relevant cognitive and knowledge dimensions of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson *et al.*, 2001))

Mode	Text type	Purpose	Subject matter
Create and deliver	A presentation [to]	examine and investigate (Conceptual Analysis)	the strategic and operational importance of change for MCL
		identify, apply and evaluate (Factual Analysis, Procedural Application and Evaluation)	an appropriate change management model that you would advise MCL to use
		Identify (Procedural Analysis)	the role that Organisational Development will play in the future

			success of the business
	[and]	provides (Procedural Creation)	possible solutions to overcome resistance

For Bridget, the task as presented strongly points towards an engagement with change. She is only forced to amend her vision of this approach following a discussion of the assignment with her teacher:

Bridget: Like is so that like for example in my experience with the VUCA environment, I went to my lecturer, that's how I found out to before my presentation to have a debrief to see what's going on and everything. I went in there with one presentation that I made and she said to me 'You're supposed to do this for coursework two, not for this presentation? Then? She's like, where's the VUCA environment? You need to add that as well. Otherwise you can't pass. (Interview 2)

She does not seem to be alone in her misconception. The nature of the specification of the text strongly connotes an engagement with change, to the extent that other students, too, were unsure of how they should use VUCA in the assignment:

Bridget: Yeah. It [VUCA] is like some type of analytical model that the whole presentation should have been based on you analysing. But if you have never asked or anything, 'cause, you would have never known 'cause it was not on the assignment brief or like 'cause usually before it'll be 'what's the usage or causes of this thing?'. And then you do the other thing or like what? Yeah, 'what is change or why it's important?' That actually kind of like makes you think, let me use a change model to explain, 'cause, you know, change, it's academic work. You need models. And theories. With using VUCA to analyse the environment like people were like, yeah, how do we... You know, the majority of them didn't know want to do. Unless you actually asked? (Interview 2)

It is notable that Bridget is at pains to point out that she is not expecting to be told precisely what to do in relation to her assignments. Indeed, during her first interview she strongly resists what she perceives as being given too much guidance so that there is no room for her to engage properly with the task:

Bridget: Sometimes giving too much detail can actually mean you're, you're giving the answer without giving the answer... I mean but, but that's my point though. It's challenging, but that that's the point of academia. (Interview 1)

Bridget wants to learn, she wants to develop, even though it is challenging – this is the ‘point of academia’. Importantly, too, she wants to do things for herself. However, she also recognises that it is only fair that she is given everything she needs to complete the task as expected. There is a sense of real injustice and frustration in not being given access to what seems to have been key information that she is expected to use:

Bridget: I think it's like they're not even like they're telling you, but they're not telling you what they want. You see? And I'm not asking oh like, 'put in the assignment brief 'use this theories and models this, this, and this topic', but I'm asking like if the whole of a particular assignment focuses on one topic and it and the whole topic focuses on that analysis. I mean it should be made clear, since the whole assignment is based on that particular thing. Otherwise you you'll be kept at a 40% [the pass mark]. Or not even pass. (Interview 2)

4.2.2.1.3 GET1c: Using the brief to scaffold engagement with assessment

There was a sense in all the students, if to a greater or lesser extent, that the specification of the task as presented in the brief should provide at least minimal guidance and scaffolding on what they should include to meet expectations. There is a trust that the brief will provide this and a belief that the information provided in the brief will be useful and help them engage. Clear, well-aligned learning outcomes were a key part of this, as well as brief directive indications of what should be included in the assignment in order to demonstrate their achievement. Bridget captures what seems to be a universally understood and accepted aspect of the assessment process, whatever the background and previous educational experience of the student:

Bridget: it will be tucked into the learning objectives... That's the key to the assignment (Interview 1)

This informed the approach taken to assignments by all students, though somewhat differently and at different stages in the process of writing the assignment. Mary, particularly, had strong expectations that clear information and scaffolding should be available in order to provide a basis for learning how to engage with assignments for students new to higher education and the higher expectations it involves:

Mary: I think it depends on how the assignment brief is delivered. I definitely think they need to have more consistency and directed, especially for undergraduates in their first semester. They need to be more directive

When this happens, this has an empowering and confidence building effect for her in an environment which is otherwise often frustrating and stressful because of a lack of a sense of what it is she is required to do. The following comment was in relation to the context of Social Work assignment (see 4.1.2 above):

Mary: It was really directive, right? So as long as I've discussed and I've criticised what I've said in this and as long as I've reviewed it, as long as I've backed it up with all the theories and evidence, that's out there. I know what it is that I had to meet.

Other participants used the brief to scaffold initial engagement and provide a structure for their subsequent work on the assignment:

Sara: OK so with me, I will erm I will write everything down. Like, I'll type it on my laptop. The learning outcomes what I need to relate, what I need to write for each outcome. So, for one of our assignments, there's three main outcomes that we need to focus on. So that's how I start. I'll write the title of each one, and then I'll put brief paragraphs and bullet points for each, and then I'll, I'll erm slowly write it into paragraphs and make it an assignment.

For Ruth, this initial stage involves taking control of the brief and actively annotating and transforming it before she moves to a planning stage:

Ruth: So, I read like all the headings to see like what I need to include and then after I've done that, I'll add my little notes of like what I can write about in that section. So I know like what I need to do and then I do my assignment plan and layout, do a layout of what how I'm gonna write it. And that's just how do my assignments.

Bridget also has a systematic, highly structured process by which she unpacks the brief as the basis for planning and drafting the main points in her assignments. This involves planning strategies that she has presumably been taught or has developed in order to overcome aspects of her dyslexia and manage the business of completing assignments and the quite sophisticated squaring of the outcomes and guidance provided in the brief. For Bridget, the outcomes are privileged as containing important information about how the task should be completed and thus form the basis for her developing understanding of how to approach the assignment:

Bridget: I have a process. First, I think the three Los. Then the objectives. I take them one by one and then I and then I create like a mind map. And then I write things down and about the topic that which came from and I do this for each

individual LO... Yeah. So, they, they give us three Los, but you have five bullet points I need to speak about. So I'm trying to find which one of the Los fits with the one or two of the bullet points. So when I write my assignment, I can refer back the bullet point to the erm learning objective. (Interview 1)

Clare has a practical and pragmatic approach to engaging with her assessed work with a focus on getting it done and 'out of the way', even when she has struggled fully to make sense of the expectations due to a lack of clarity. For her, the brief provides a means of checking her work and confirming that she is on the right track once she has already had a go at making sense of things on the basis of her learning in the module. For her, too, the brief provides a basis for avoiding straying off topic in her writing and delivering on what the assignment requires. She is aware on a quite sophisticated level of the need to meet the requirements of the task, rather than simply writing 'what she knows' and uses the learning outcomes to guide this:

Clare: It is, yeah. I mean I try and read all. However, what I find myself doing so far in during level 4 is I'll start writing my assignment based on the learning that we've done. But then I have to go back and I have to look at the learning objectives and I think, 'oh, am I really meeting them?' and then I have to change the way I write because my understanding was different from the learning objectives 'cause I find them very... I don't know, the learning objectives are very like straightforward, whereas when you're writing it's easy to go off the topic. [Interviewer: OK, yeah, so if so, referring back to them, that's quite a useful thing to do?] Yeah, I yeah. I mean I have to refer back to them 'cause quite easily I can start talking about something else, which is still relevant to the module, just not the assignment, if that makes sense? Right?

Mary also values specific instructions and guidance as a means of supporting her writing, about which she has some insecurities. For her, too, there is a clear sense that assignment tasks have particular expectations that need to be met. The inclusion of 'specific instructions' such as the scaffolding/sub tasks in the Context of Social Work assignment are examples of precisely the kind of 'directive' guidance she values and finds so helpful in ensuring that she delivers what is expected:

Mary: it's, I'm not very good with writing anyway. I, I can speak, as you can tell [laughs], and explain myself through and through but to put it down on paper is a massive challenge for me and that's why I like the specific instructions of how this... Cause I can flow. I'll go off. I'll go off on a tangent if they don't have that to bring me back in.

For all the participants, the brief is clearly expected to be *the* definitive statement of what is expected in the assignment. This involves a clear understanding of what is required to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes and an indication of any other content that is expected. Of all the participants, however, only Clare explicitly mentions the use of assessment criteria, missing them when they are not available:

Clare: No, it's [the assessment criteria] not part of the brief at all. To be honest, it would be helpful to have it on the brief.

Somewhat contrary to institutional policy, the Social Work team have a common set of assessment criteria which they use across the first year and which is not always included as part of the assignment brief itself. The fact that the criteria are separated from some briefs may account for why most of the Social Work participants do not mention them. Criteria are typically included in Business briefs, however, so given Bridget's highly systematic engagement with assessment processes, it is perhaps surprising that she does not discuss making use of them as part of her interpretation of expectations. It is assumed that the complexity and lengthiness of the criteria as present (see section 4.1.3 above for an example) prevents her from accessing them.

For Clare, while she considers the criteria to be of use for the purpose of interpreting feedback and planning for improvement, the principal issue is that they are overly complex and difficult to interpret:

Clare: I think it's scary, I mean. It's about 6 pages long or 7 pages long. It's a big document. And it's overwhelming to look at, I think, yes, I think it's a little bit overwhelming, but it's really good to be able to actually see exactly what percentage means what. Erm, even for your own when you get the feedback. You can then actually see what you can improve to be that percentage higher. So I think it's very. It's good, but it's just a big document, specially for year four, I think. A lot of us haven't been in erm education for a few years, so it's yeah I think it's quite hard.

This may be a further factor in the participants not using them proactively to guide their engagement with their work. A section of the assessment criteria has been included in the 'Lifespan' assignment brief (section 4.1.1 above), for information. As can be seen, they have been implemented contrary to institutional expectations, using unmediated sections of the institutional grading descriptors as the basis for the criteria. It is

unsurprising that Clare (and other students) found them difficult to understand. Given the nature of their presentation, they cannot really be seen as contributing positively to the student experience of engaging with the briefs not in any way providing additional support in the completion of the tasks.

The brief is also used as a kind of self-checking tool. This takes place retrospectively in relation to the task specification and outcomes, which are used as a means of confirming that the assignment conforms to perceived expectations:

Sara: And then I look at the learning outcomes after I've written the assignment to see if I've included everything... Yeah yeah, just to make sure that everything in the learning outcome. I haven't mentioned it in my assignment.

The final section of the brief is designed specifically to support students in self-checking of their work prior to submission¹². Both Sara and Clare mention this as part of their engagement with assignments in positive terms, seeing it as a useful tool either during or, for Clare, at the end of the writing process:

Sara: So every time we've done something then we can tick it off [on the Fit to Submit checklist] and know that that's one task that we've done, so that makes it easier for us....[Interviewer: Do you use that to help you then?] Erm, so far I have. It is really helpful. So once I've done something I can pick it up and be like, 'yeah, I'm sure this is done'. Then I can move on to the next part.

Clare: I personally think when I'm looking at it, the assignment brief is quite clear. Erm. It even tells you like what you need to do before you submit, how you submit, and then you've got assignment checklist. Erm.... 'cause sometimes like it's quite, it's quite easy to get lost in what you're doing. So yeah, I've definitely used it in two of my submissions. Not in all, but I have used it in two of them. Erm, yeah. I find that quite useful. That's right at the end.

A further aspect of comprehensiveness that seems a welcome feature of the assignment briefs that Bridget engaged with in Business and which Clare suggests would be useful in Social Work is the inclusion of recommended sources for use in the assessed task. This is something that is suggested in guidance on using the assignment brief template for staff (see Appendix 1) as part of programme wide approach to scaffolding and developing students' engagement with their reading and secondary research activity, but is not a

¹² Part of University of Derby (2016) PReSS (Practical Recipes for Student Success) materials

practice that is widely adopted across the institution. Certainly, though, for Bridget it is a welcome and valued aspect of the information provided to her in the brief:

Bridget: Yeah, the most useful part is that additional reading. I believe and then from there you can just have your own viewpoint and find your own thing. But I think that's the main part and what also helps in the assignment, which is really helpful (Interview 1)

Rather than being perceived as spoon-feeding or being overly-specific and directive, an approach to which Bridget in particular seems rather resistant, this is seen as a basis for the development of her individual response to the assignment, providing her with the material with which to engage initially and make sense of her developing understanding of her subject area through wider reading. For Clare, too, this is something that she feels would be useful as part of her conception of the brief as a single definitive document providing clear specification of expectations and useful scaffolding for engagement with the task. This seems useful in terms of managing to focus her reading and learning in an efficient manner but also very much as a starting point (to 'get you going'), rather than as a suggestion that she should limit her reading to a set of specific sources:

Clare: I think it's quite, the template itself, I think it's quite good. One thing that maybe I would add. Is, erm, I know we get it in the module scheme and but I would add maybe the reading list at the end. Just because sometimes you have, even though you've got a module and then you've got your reading list in the module scheme. But sometimes you have more than one assignment based on that module. Whereas if you have a reading list for that assignment, that might be quite helpful. Yeah, I think that's. Yeah, I think that would be quite useful to just have one document of things that to kind of get you going.

4.2.2.1.4 GET1d: Including presentational requirements in the brief is useful

It is also clear that some students feel uncertainty and even anxiety about how their work should be presented when they submit it. The assignment brief template includes a section on 'Task requirements' which is intended for this purpose, but which is often misused by staff to provide extra information on the task or other issues. The lack of consistency across briefs designed by different lecturers that results from this inconsistent use of the brief template can sometimes cause confusion in students as information is not available in the section of the brief in which they expected to find it. Perhaps because it is on the brief, students place importance on presentational issues as

a further aspect of the assignment that they need to attend to as part of their engagement. Indeed, there is a sense that it is highly valued by some, even when other aspects of the brief may be problematic. Mary, for example, clearly finds the specification of such requirements very welcome:

Mary: So the information was very relevant in the Lifespan one, so in that 100% this the Lifespan one. This is this one. [she locates the brief in her papers and points to it] This is great. There was lots. I personally think there's lots of information in there that I know what I've got to do. Information on how many words it's can be 10, 10% either side, the style of referencing and even gives a referencing, referencing information on where to go to reference and tells you how your work will be assessed. So that was great.

Ruth also specifically mentioned presentational requirements as an aspect of briefs she found useful and would want to see in effective briefs going forward:

Ruth: So, though I'd include those in it as well. And. And obviously any extra information like the word count and sometimes it's also good to have, like you know when they say to do like double spacing and the, the font, the font size and things like that, 'cause a lot of people forget to to to do that, when they're writing assignments. I definitely do. I have to remind myself to do it every time.

In Bridget's context, it is clear that while requirements are communicated to students in their briefs, these vary from module to module, lecturer to lecturer. For her, having consistency across the programme would be valued:

Bridget: I would like to be changed is some of the assignment brief have what the assignment should look like it. I would like to see most of the assignment, all of the assignment brief to have one size and name of the writing that they would like, and the spacing. I think that would be ideal. Some of the assignment brief has some of them, but I think they all should have that. (Interview 1)

Having variation resulting from lecturers' idiosyncratic preferences for presentation or whether certain aspects of an assignment text type should be included or not, is something of a further complicating factor for Bridget, another aspect of the assessment process that requires attention and focus:

Bridget: It's harder how their lecturer would like to receive the assignment, like the font size, what kind of writing would they like, in a New Times Roman or Calibri, one of those. And the spacing between paragraphs. And if they really prefer any executive summaries, I know that some of them would like one. Some don't really

mind not having one. That would be and if there's an executive summary, if it's included in the word count. (Interview 1)

This points rather eloquently to the challenge faced by students in that they need not only acquire an understanding of ways of doing within their discipline and particular programme, but also with regard to the idiosyncratic requirements within different modules.

4.2.2.1.5 GET1e: Consistency and logic in presentation of briefs is useful

The content of the briefs is not the only aspect which contributes to effective student engagement with their assessed work. The use of a consistent template and logical sequencing of brief elements is also felt to be useful. The template used across the institution is modelled on Gilbert and Maguire's (2014b) recommendations for order and sequence that privileges the specification of the task by placing it first, immediately below standard assignment metadata (module title, module leader, submission time and date, etc.) Subsequent elements are included in the sequence in which it is expected students will engage with them: task, learning outcomes, practicalities, etc. This would seem to be performing a valuable function in terms of allowing students to manage their attention and cognitive load. Briefs may sometimes be long documents, but because they are logically and consistently ordered, students are able to focus on discrete sections as and when required in their engagement:

Sara: I mean, it is sort of helpful the way they've, they've, they've laid out is good. They put like at the beginning, they put details that we might need. Like they put the lecturer's details there, put the deadline, they put the date when we will get their feedback and then it goes to the learning outcomes and what we have to include in the assignment. Then there's the layout and the references and then the checklist. So it's good to have it in that order, 'cause you get used to it... Yeah, so every other assignment brief will be like that which is helpful, so you when you get it, when you look at it, you know the order it's going to be and you know what you need to do, the first thing to look at, what you need to refer to. In that sense, it's a lot easier.

This also has a learnability function in that the consistency of delivery provides the basis for learning how the briefs work, thus making engagement with subsequent briefs less cognitively demanding.

Clare: Yeah, but I do think the other ones I found easier and it it was all linking them from each other. So even though it's the same boxes, so assignment task and you know I'm this is what you need to demonstrate and task requirements. It was all kind of following from each other. I don't know if they're written by the same person I'm but yeah, the other ones we've had. I found it quite easy to follow

As a dyslexic student, Bridget might have been expected to have faced a particular challenge in engaging with the complex structure of the brief, but it seems that for her, too, the layout and visual presentation in the template are quite useful, despite their length and complexity:

Bridget: Yeah, it is helpful because everything gets in our own little square and then the order, it's nice and clear. And I don't see how it can be better. The structure [of the task] can be confusing. It may look overwhelming, 'cause it's about 3 pages but apart from that, it's alright.

Whatever other challenges the students might face in engaging with their assessed work, it seems that what we might describe as 'cognitive efficiency', i.e., an approach to brief design that aims to optimize students' cognitive engagement with the process of interpreting their assignments, is a useful aspect. Certainly, the consistency of the templated approach would seem to support the development of schemas for briefs which students are able to retrieve when encountering new ones. It may be, following Bridget's comments, that using a consistent template also enhances the inclusivity of this aspect of the assessment process, enabling students with specific learning difficulties to manage how they engage with assignment information.

4.2.2.2 GET 2: Experiencing the brief as a barrier

While comprehensiveness, clarity and consistency can help to provide for students' confident engagement with their assessed work, there were aspects of some of the briefs that seemed rather to conspire against this. Indeed, instead of providing a bridge into the assignment and scaffolding student engagement, at times aspects of some briefs acted as barriers, preventing students from accessing the tasks and what was required of them, or at very least increasing a sense of insecurity in relation to their approach to the assignment.

4.2.2.2.1 GET2a: Experiencing confusion due to misalignment and ambiguity

Student conceptualisation of the importance of the learning outcomes associated with assessed tasks and the need demonstrably to achieve them in their work can lead to difficulties when the outcomes and the task are not properly aligned.

In the Social Work context, this occurred in relation to the essay-based 'Lifespan' assignment in which students were required to select from a list of questions relating to the implications for Social Workers when working with service-users from different age groups and family contexts (see section 4.1 above 4.1.1). One of the outcomes related specifically to an understanding of child development, but not all the questions provided opportunities for evidencing it. Only Clare discussed this, although it seems the wider group were aware of the issue in her use of the collective 'we':

Clare: I mean at first because with that module every single session was about a different topic, so at first, we were like, 'oh like, let's just leave it. You know, it'll make sense' erm and I think towards the end is when we started writing it and we're like 'OK, how, how are we going to meet the erm module's, if that makes sense, learning objectives?'

Mary, recognizing that she could apply her own expertise in the area chose one of the questions relating to the treatment of elderly patients with dementia, and seems otherwise to have responded positively to the assignment. Indeed, because she does feel that she has the knowledge to engage effectively with the assignment, the confidence this instils means she simply does not notice the issues with the misalignment between outcomes and task. For the others, however, most of whom lack Mary's existing knowledge, the main issue seemed to be in the lack of guidance in terms of how they should engage with the questions. Without that starting point, confidence to even try to respond to the task and consequently felt disempowered and anxious. Clare's comment, above, is significant because it indicates that there was a sense that there was a trust that eventually 'things would make sense' as the module proceeded, even though it did not seem clear how they would achieve the module's 'objectives'. Clare and her classmates, it seems, were waiting for the information and guidance they needed for the assignment to become solvable, even though as defined it was unsolvable. There is a trust and a belief

in the process, even though in this case it was misplaced. For Clare, this lack of alignment was a cause of considerable anxiety:

Clare: So, this is the, so I've chosen the dementia one, but one of the learning objectives is 'show an understanding of child and adolescent physical growth and development', and that does not apply to me at all, when, erm. And also 'demonstrate an understanding of psychological theories, focus on, focusing on developmental psychology as it relates to different stages of the human life span', whereas with dementia, erm, mine, my question was in regards to a 70 year old man with a diagnosis of my mild dementia so... so it was very confusing as to how I'm talking about the whole life span when it also asked me to just focus on that one age.

Coming from a vocational educational background, Clare is likely to be used to quite explicit and specific alignment between learning outcomes and assessment activities. Consequently, she recognises the issue, but is unable to resolve it. Ultimately, this has an impact upon her trust in the assessment process as a whole: how could so many questions all provide opportunities to meet all the outcomes?

Clare: OK, I'm just going to open the one I struggled with. I've got it in front of me now Erm. OK, so this one.... So this one has given us. Six different questions that we can choose from... Uhm, I think that's quite a lot. I mean, it's it was good 'cause everyone could focus on their interest... Erm.... However, because the questions were so different, the learning objectives were probably not met in all of them.

This module is led by an associate lecturer, so it is likely that he inherited the assignment brief along with the module scheme and simply used what he had been given. Institutional policy and practice may also have conspired against a desire to revise the assignment brief even if he had noticed the misalignment and wanted to address it. While they are not validated documents in the same way as programme specifications and module descriptors, which require a rigorously quality assured process of amendment via the institution's course amendment procedure, assignment briefs are nevertheless considered formal documents. There is a requirement in policy that assignment briefs are subjected to internal (and external, for those briefs linked to awards) moderation before being ratified for use with students. There is also an expectation that assignment briefs should be made available from the very start of a module in order to facilitate effective and timely engagement with assessment processes. Once the module has started, therefore, there is an added burden on the lecturer to

enact change in the briefs in terms of engaging in a new, potentially lengthy moderation process. For already busy, time-constrained lecturers this may result in simply going ahead with what there is and managing shortfalls in the brief via teaching and dissemination activities. Institutional and individual anxieties about changing the briefs in the light of potential complaint and, in extremis, litigation by students unhappy of changes made to existing course content and documentation once they have already begun working and engaging with their work on the basis of what has already been shared with them may also further conspire against the amendment of briefs.

Bridget's issue with ambiguity in one of her assignments both points to the importance of clarity and consistency in task specification and the particular challenges that students with specific learning difficulties may face in processing information that is both complex and poorly communicated¹³.

Bridget: some of the assignment briefs were really confusing... The LOS didn't match with the criteria... I have a core incident. When you mention, for example, when they mentioned that they want an example of something and then at the bottom they said they want two examples. That can confuse people. I think that as students especially, I think it would be best to just have one example or just an example and then you probably like just use your common sense and just use more than one to make you proofread, to make you write more clearly. But some of them were really confusing, the assignments. They just didn't really make sense... Yeah. Yeah, that's how it was. The LO said one thing and then the bullet point was a different thing. (Interview 1)

Students with greater tolerance for ambiguity or with less focus on details may not have noticed the issue or, drawing on their own confidence and understanding of assessment processes, may simply have chosen to use one or two examples as they say appropriate to the task. For Bridget, though, the task simply did not make sense and she was unable to resolve the issue without the thoughtful support of her dyslexia helper. Should she, for example, she suggests with some humour, use three examples?

¹³ I have tried to find this particular assignment. Bridget was unable to identify it and although I have examined all of the briefs she would have worked on at this time, I have been unable to identify precisely which brief this might apply to. It may be that Bridget simply misinterpreted the brief, although the comments of her dyslexia helper would indicate that she, too, found the issue ambiguous. It is, of course, possible that the brief was amended following identification of the issue and only the amended version is now available.

Bridget: We [with her dyslexia helper] saw that mistake together because I came up with questions for the next sessions for her. What do I have to do for this and that? Is this the same question? Is this the same bullet point or is this just two different completely things? And then we spoke about this and then she's like, you know what, Bridget, you're right. These two are really different. But it's the same thing. You just need to do two examples, not one example. (Interview 1)

This experience left her feeling frustrated and confused, further adding to the challenge of understanding complex concepts in her subject by creating a further barrier of difficulty.

Mary's experience of ambiguity in the purpose of assignment relates to the communication of the task and how it was presented. An assignment that caused her particular difficulty was one in which the students were required to use their mobile devices to film a short video of an interview with a peer and then write a reflective essay on what went well, areas for development and how this might relate to future practice as a Social Worker. This was an unfamiliar activity for her, both in terms of the video and in writing reflectively, each of which presented their own challenges. Of particular difficulty, though, was the way in which the brief was communicated, as it forefronted and provided a great deal of detail on the video activity, at the expense of guidance on the essay:

Mary: It tells us what the activity is. So as far as we were concerned, this tells us that we've got to do a video interview. Not write about it. It does, that's yeah. Oh, and then it says 'the essay will', for it does say 'the essay will focus on the extent you are able to apply'. So, it does have that information there, but. Because so boldly it talks about the video. It almost interprets that the video is what the assessment is, not the writing.

It is clear, too, that Mary was not alone in her confusion in relation to this assignment, but that it was also one that had been discussed among students as they strove collectively to make sense of it:

Mary: Oh, it's [the section on the essay] still. It's. It's tiny, but then you've got. So people obviously focusing on focusing on this massive paragraph here because it's stands out the most. Whereas, if they'd started with the purpose of the recording is so you can see how you apply your practice and then reflect on that within an essay that would made a whole lot of difference, because it's just all of a sudden you're recording an interview and then at the back it just sort of says 'oh and by the way you've got to apply that, you gotta write about it' and it's like 'OK, so

everyone was then getting worked up about the video when the video didn't matter at all!' [laughs]

Like Bridget, she is able to discuss this with humour after the fact, but the manner in which the task was communicated had a negative impact on her and other students' abilities to engage with it effectively, resulting in anxiety and confusion and the need for teacher intervention and explanation.

In summary, then, there are two issues that caused challenges to students in respect to this theme: problems with the task (e.g., misalignment between outcomes and task) and problems with communication (e.g., inconsistency or ambiguity as with Bridget's one or two examples and poor presentation and clarity of instructions).

4.2.2.2 GET2b: Complexity impedes engagement

As well as issues with the alignment of assessed task to outcomes and how the assignment itself and the process for its completion are made clear and distinct, complexity of tasks and the manner in which they are communicated also represent substantial barriers to the participants. Overall, there is a sense that the business of engaging with the multiple aspects of the assignment brief is a challenging task in its own right. As Clare notes, with some wry humour:

Clare: It's overwhelming [laughs], looking at a brief...

Mary and Ruth also use the adjective 'overwhelming' to describe aspects of the experience of engaging with the assessment process. This relates variously to aspects of the brief itself, for example, the assessment criteria, which were felt to be inherently complex, as well as the complexity of certain assessed tasks. The portfolio assignment, which has multiple components, was felt to be particularly problematic.

Mary: but it was definitely in the Preparation for Practice [title of module] because it consists of so many different aspects. It's not just one essay, it consists of so many different aspects. I've found it, it it's very overwhelming.

Clare: Erm so far we've had a portfolio that is due in January, but that was the first one we were told about. Erm. That one has quite a few different things inside, so that one was a little bit over overwhelming 'cause it's like it's got three different reflective accounts. It's got an essay, it's got presentation, so it was like a big piece of work.

The participants find aspects of individual assignments challenging, but with appropriate scaffolding and/or with teacher support, or where they are able to draw on existing knowledge, they are able to engage effectively. What seems to have been the issue in relation to both the portfolio task and the criteria was the size and extent of both. The multiple components of the portfolio and the multiple pages of the assessment criteria (along with the complexity of the language with which they are expressed) promote feelings of overwhelmedness. This seems to be the result of having to take into account the requirements of numerous assessment components simultaneously and the sheer volume and complexity of the criteria.

Ruth: I think it's scary [the assessment criteria rubric], I mean. It's about 6 pages long or 7 pages long. It's a big document. And it's overwhelming to look at, I think, yes, I think it's a little bit overwhelming, but it's really good to be able to actually see exactly what percentage means what... It's good, but it's just a big document, specially for year four, I think. A lot of us haven't been in erm education for a few years, so it's yeah I think it's quite hard.

For Ruth, too, the complexity of the language in which the briefs were communicated also created a barrier at times, which led to task avoidance and a reluctance to engage:

Ruth: Sometimes I feel like it's all right, but other times it's I find it so confusing that it kind of it doesn't help, and then I end up like not doing, trying to avoid the task. [laughs] So yeah, it's that, I think that's how I find it different.

Bridget, too, encounters challenges arising from the complexity with which the assignment was presented within the brief. It is acknowledged that we might reasonably expect students to engage with complex tasks and do complex thinking, but there is a difference between complexity and complicatedness. Bridget's particular issue is not so much the assessed task itself, but the manner in which it has been communicated. The language of the brief obscured the message, key aspects of the task were 'hidden' or inadequately explained, rather than made explicit and clear. This served to impose an extra burden; before engaging with the task, she had first to interpret it – a process that took up considerable time and energy:

Bridget: Yeah, I had an issue with another assignment brief. It was, the assignment brief was complex. Written in a complex language and things were really hidden. And you had to go and actually find for them... It wasn't like really deeply explained it was just briefly, briefly. And then you have to think, and it was, it was

a really complex way. I've managed to understand that assignment brief but it took me four weeks to understand that assignment. (Interview 1)

The impact of this process is to promote feelings of frustration and overwhelmedness and a sense that it is making the process of completing assessed work more complex and demanding than is necessary. The business of learning and engaging with assignments is challenging enough, without the process being further complicated by the way the assignments have been communicated in the brief:

Bridget: I think it would be frustrated and overwhelmed. There would be one of the things 'cause I'm trying to understand something then barely understanding and then this assignment brief makes [it] even more confusing. (Interview 1)

4.2.2.3 GET 3: Dissemination can provide a basis for effective engagement with assessment

For the purposes of this discussion, dissemination is taken to refer to any activity involving the teacher sharing the brief with students and providing opportunities for discussion and questions. All the participants experienced what seem to have been teacher-led sessions on their assignments and reported receiving assignment briefs often at the very beginning of their modules along with other documentation, such as module schemes, etc. It was clear that these were felt to be useful and valued activities by most participants, although this depended heavily upon when they occurred and the extent to which the participants felt able to process the information. Discussions of assignments at the very outset of the module, for example, were not universally found to be helpful. For Bridget in her second interview, the relationship between dissemination activities (the teacher discussing the brief in class) and the brief was problematic as she felt that these were often not in alignment, forcing her to decide how best to accommodate what she felt was sometimes contradictory guidance and leading to what she perceived as a form of 'dependency' on what the teacher said.

4.2.2.3.1 GET3a: Using dissemination to understand expectations

For Sara, who overall approached university with confidence and a clear commitment to wanting to be independent and grow as a student, the initial period of her time on the course was a source of some anxiety, which the explanatory sessions on the assignment

briefs went some of the way to allaying. This provided a basis on which she was then able independently to engage with her studies:

Sara: At the beginning it was different. It's been a while since I've been back into education and that initial worry is what scares me. But once you get the assignment briefs and the work and they talk to you, they explain everything. Then it makes me feel more comfortable about what's expected of us and what we need to do, like their standards.

For Mary, however, this had entirely the opposite effect, at least initially before she was able to start make sense of things in time. For her, exposure to the assignment briefs in advance of any other learning meant that she was unable fully to process what was being presented and led to strong feelings of confusion and being overwhelmed:

Mary: At the start I remember just feeling very overwhelmed. And very confused because it was what's it and it and I think it's only through learning that as the time goes on. But initially it is very overwhelming 'cause they just all of a sudden before you learn anything they hand you all these assignment briefs. All this module information. With a very, very brief explanation on actually what they what's expected of them and what they are and how you're going to apply what you learn in the future on on on them, and it's, 'OK, what do I do with this?'

For Mary, it would have been more suitable if she had been able to settle in first and have more of a context in which to engage with and understand the briefs. Mary's extensive experience of vocational training and, indeed, her own work as a qualified vocational assessor may also have been a factor here, perhaps because of the more systematically managed and specific nature of vocational assessment. There is a sense in her suggestion of how it might have been handled differently that, in this case at least, the higher education approach did not quite measure up to the way she would have managed things in her own vocational context:

Mary: Get into the learning and then once you've had a couple of, even a couple of sessions, 'cause I think it's important to have them quite early on '... But I think I do think an explanation of... We have the module scheme. I haven't got it here. And that tells you certain things, but again, it's also very brief and I think it just needs that extra clarity of that initial meeting of what's expected: 'You will, in a couple of weeks, have your assignment brief that will meet the learning objectives of what you're going to be taught, so you can then apply them to your essay'.

At the same time, however, Clare, who also had a vocational background, responded to this same approach extremely positively:

Clare: But erm at the beginning of the term so we all got like a printout of the module. We all went through it. Same with the assignment briefs erm so that was quite helpful because before we started the learning, we were told what the assignment expects of us and which was quite good. 'Cause then when we're doing the learning, we kind of knew what we need to pay more attention to. If that makes sense. [Interviewer: Yes.] So I found that really helpful, 'cause it wasn't like assignment at the end. It was like at the beginning. This is what we're doing. This is what you're going to be learning. This is what your assignment is going to look like.

For Clare, having the information from the outset provided a ready framework on which to hang her understanding of the learning to come. For one lecturer, the assignment brief was referred to throughout the module with clear links between session content and relevance to the assessment in a planful and considered way, which for Clare at least seems to have been hugely useful:

Clare: And she also during the lectures throughout the whole module, she would link back to it, so quite often she'd be like, 'oh, you know, this is what's being expected, and, you know, make sure this topic is quite important in there. Make sure you speak, speak about it'. So I think... because of her input that made the whole assignment brief a lot more easier to read 'cause we have discussed it if that makes sense, whereas the other one, it was very much, I don't know, was a lot harder because it wasn't spoken as much in the lecture.

As Clare suggests at the end of her statement, this was by no means a universally adopted approach and one lecturer in particular seems to have adopted a more laissez-faire approach until requested to provide some level of support by the group:

Sara: Erm. Yeah, I think for one of my modules for Lifespan Development, our lecturer, he's very. He makes us very independent, so he didn't mention anything about the assignment unless we asked. [Interviewer: Oh right, OK.] Yeah, there was no mention of it at all. We were all like starting to panic so we brought it up [laughs]

It is not clear, though it is intimated, that this is the result of a conscious decision on behalf of the lecturer to promote 'independence'. It may also be that as an associate lecturer, relatively new to the institution, he simply misjudged the readiness of the students to manage the demands of the assignment unaided. Contrary to his intention, the absence of guidance in fact served to prevent, rather than promote independent engagement for most students. Certainly, too, it seems to have fueled anxiety and concern:

Sara: No like support or like how to start it. How to write it, what to include, nothing like that. [Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?] Worried. It was really worrying. [laughs]

The lecturer's response and subsequent formative activity involving the giving of feedback on introductory paragraphs was clearly useful in providing for the shortfall in the communication of expectations in the brief, but was clearly experienced by Sara very much in terms of its therapeutic impact:

Sara: At last, when he finally like sat us down, talked through everything and helped us with examples and how to set it out, lay it out, what to put in and checks like an introduction of each of our assignments just to put us at ease...

The need for balance between useful scaffolding and unpacking of assessment expectations and overly prescriptive spoon-feeding is clear and will naturally depend upon the lecturer's understanding of the particular needs of the group and the levels of their existing knowledge and experience. However, this does point to a key challenge between fostering independence on the one hand and providing adequate scaffolding and support on the other. Getting the balance right so that there is sufficient guidance to enable students to engage but ensuring they are still stretched and given opportunities for development and learning is a challenge for those setting assignments. Bridget captures this dilemma with some insight in relation to her own experiences:

Bridget: Sometimes giving too much detail can actually mean you're, you're given the answer without giving the answer... I mean but, but that's my point though. It's challenging, but that that's the point of academia. (Interview 1)

4.2.2.3.2 GET3b: Dissemination activities should align with assignment briefs

A further challenge from Bridget's perspective that she referred to in her second interview was the importance of dissemination activities and briefs being in alignment. Discussion of the brief and explanation by the teacher can be helpful in alleviating anxiety and promoting confident engagement as can be seen in the previous section and can help to unpack assessment expectations and requirements, but as a minimal requirement, both explanations and brief need broadly to be aligned. For Bridget, this seems not always to have been the case. Hers was the only experience of this aspect of brief

dissemination processes, but it was experienced so strongly and promoted such strong feelings of frustration that it was felt that it must be included. Central to her experience of this theme was what she perceived to be marked differences in what is stated in the brief and what is shared in in-class dissemination discussions:

Bridget: Like some of the assignment briefs, they're a bit more confusing. Like, yeah, sometimes you read them and you don't know what they want or they're telling you, the lecturers are telling you something and then the assignment brief tells you something else and you don't know how to, and you don't know how to, like, what do you call it, like, make the best of the two of them? (Interview 2)

This has led her to adopt certain strategies to deal with the situation she finds herself in, via which she prioritises what lecturers say and uses the brief as a kind of safety net:

Bridget: Personally, I think at this point is if the lecturer is giving you the structure of how they want this. I mean what they want included, that's much more suited to follow first and then you use the and then use the assignment brief as a second view to see if it mentions any models that you should be using, because the lecturers may speak about a topic but they will not tell you to use a model by the assignment brief. It says use models and theories as well for this particular topic. So, I'll implement that, but I think when it comes to the first point of view of look, it's a matter of what the lecturer says rather than the assignment brief. (Interview 2)

Clearly, it is important for staff to talk about assignments in class and to provide opportunities for students to develop their understanding of what is expected of them. Certainly, as can be seen above, in the first round of interviews, all participants, including Bridget, valued sessions in which assignment briefs were unpacked and discussed. As seemed the case then and seems the case for Bridget in her second interview, these seem to have been essentially teacher-led sessions, with opportunities for students to ask questions and seek clarifications. The key thing for Bridget is the perceived lack of alignment between what is shared in session and what is stated on the assignment brief. For Bridget, this has led to a strategic decision and approach to prioritise what is said in sessions over the brief (see above):

Bridget: As you, as they teach it along, they give you opportunity to ask questions. If you're not understanding a few things, but what's been happening, some lectures will not exactly post the structure on Blackboard. So, it's just like for those that attend class. (Interview 2)

It has also led her to the belief that the withholding of key information in the briefs (and also subsequent provision of online access to recordings of assessment related sessions) is part of a conscious decision on behalf of teaching staff to promote in-person attendance of module sessions.

Bridget: I think what can make an assignment brief better is the way that they are being purposeful beside the way they're being made, like what's required for you to do in your assignment should be clearly stated on the assignment brief, and the lectures should be like matched with the assignment brief that's been produced. I don't think that lecturers should hide a few things just because people are not attending class.

Interviewer: You think they do? You think they're doing that deliberately? Is that something that they think that, to try and get people to come along?

Bridget And. Yeah, I think, yeah, I think that's happening. Some lectures, they're recording and post some of them, they are not recording and posting, especially the assignment debriefing ones. (Interview 2)

Without interviewing staff or observing sessions, it is not possible to determine whether assessment information is actually being withheld, but it is clear that Bridget perceives that this is the case and sees that it is having a negative impact on her ability to engage independently and confidently with her assessed work. Again, this does not seem to relate to an expectation on her behalf that she will simply be told how to complete her assignments, but rather that fundamental key information is sometimes missing or not successfully communicated in the brief. When asked about what she meant by what is 'required for you to do in your assignment should be clearly stated on the assignment brief', she clarified her statement:

Bridget: Oh, what I mean by that is like to have a clear like understanding on what, it's what, the content that's required to have in the assignment, that's required. (Interview 2)

And then went on to give the example of the VUCA issue in relation to one of her presentations (see Figure 10 above):

Bridget: ...what's interesting, it was not mentioned in the assignment brief that you need the VUCA environment, and to me that's an essential part that needs to be on the assignment brief. Otherwise they can't let you pass with the model or theory. You can still pass, but you will not pass as high. (Interview 2).

Extract from reflective diary:

There are times when Bridget's engagement with assignments does seem 'strategic'. She often discusses the importance of grades and has developed ways of engaging with tasks, that while they could also be entirely sensible methods for coping with her dyslexia, could be interpreted as instrumental. There is a real change in her attitudes to the briefs from first year to third, though. Thinking about the efforts she expended trying to square the issue of the one or two examples in one of her first assignments and the four weeks she spent worrying at another brief – these are clearly indicative of a sense that the key is in the brief, which must be right. If she can't see it, she just hasn't looked hard enough... Now, there seems a real confidence that allows her to see that aspects of the assessment process are sometimes unfair and poorly communicated – something that has been both 'frustrating' and 'disappointing'.

See also Figure , p. 96

Figure 4: Extract from researcher diary, considering Bridget's changing attitudes to her assignment briefs

Whether it is indeed the case that information is being withheld, it is clear that this has constituted something of a shift in Bridget's attitudes to her lecturers and the way assessment is managed in the wider programme. The briefs have become less authoritative and she seems to see them less as the source of all information on the assignment as she did during her first year. Whereas in her first interview, there was a sense that Bridget felt that shortfalls in the brief were in some way her fault, now she is able to see that sometimes briefs are not accurate. She has learnt that they are imperfect and might be poorly communicated and has had the confidence to adopt strategies that allow her to access the required information (see Figure 11, **Error! Reference source not found.**). Accessing staff explanations of the brief as part of dissemination activities in class are a key way in which she achieves this. If her response can be said to be strategic in the pejorative sense, then it must be acknowledged that this has been prompted by her response to her environment.

4.2.2.3.3 GET3c: Use of exemplars can be problematic

All the dissemination activities the participants referred to seem to have been teacher-led in nature, although some resulted from collective requests by the group in response to growing confusion and anxiety about a particular assignment (notably the Lifespan essay). The impression from the descriptions of these sessions by the participants suggests a predominantly didactic and transmission-based approach. That is, the teacher went through the assignment and explained things, with some opportunities for discussion and questions. These took part during module sessions dedicated to this purpose, were sometimes distributed across sessions as the lecturer pointed to the relevance of session content to aspects of the assignment and also via optional, supplementary sessions outside of the formal timetable. These approaches were welcomed and seen to make up for shortfalls in the clarity and comprehensiveness of assignment briefs that participants found problematic.

None of the participants reported opportunities to engage with models, examples or exemplars of work relevant to their different assignment tasks. It is only in relation to previous educational experiences, for example, during Access courses, that approaches of this kind are mentioned. Nevertheless, this has been included in the analysis because the use of exemplars as part of developing students' assessment literacies and as part of formative development of evaluative judgement is often promoted as good practice. Here it is notable because it points to a particular challenge for students who lack confidence in their abilities to deliver on what is expected of them in their assessed work. That is, when provided with an exemplar or example answer, some students may question their own approach on the assumption that is likely to be inferior to the exemplary version, or that their own response is not the 'right answer'.

Relating to her experience of the Access course, Clare discusses the way they used exemplars as part of dissemination activities to help clarify expectations. Interestingly, Clare feels rather uncomfortable about this as if it was in some way not quite allowed but perhaps made possible as part of Covid-19 responses. It is also clear that Clare did not find accessing someone else's work in this way useful, although she concedes that others in her group did. Rather than providing a basis for understanding how the assignment

worked, the experience rather created greater confusion, perhaps arising from Clare's lack of confidence in her own abilities. Instead of providing insight into ways of engaging with the assignment, for her, it caused doubt as to whether she was giving the right answer:

Clare: I mean it was, no. I think that it was more confusing. [Interviewer: Oh, really? [laughs]] Because, I mean, with essays. Everyone writes differently. Everyone has different ideas about the same topic, so to see someone else's work. It was like, 'OK, well, I wasn't thinking about doing it that way', so it was. It was very confusing 'cause you didn't know whether you're on the right track... So, when I see some someone else's work, I think mine is completely different. So, I actually found that more confusing, but I know a lot of people found it quite helpful... it made me question if I'm on the right page, like everything that I already done, it really made me worried that maybe I'm not doing it correctly.

A similar experience was shared by Ruth, also in relation to her Access course, in which she and her classmates used to read through each other's essays as part of a mutual support strategy. For her, again, this seems to have rather created nervousness that she hadn't done the right thing, rather than providing a useful opportunity for formative learning:

Ruth: ...cause I had friends in the in that class, so we used to like read through each other's assignments to see if we'd missed anything and then that would that would also make me feel quite nervous that I haven't written what I'm supposed to.

While Ruth's example was not of an exemplar *per se*, nevertheless it does point to a tension underlying the use of exemplars or examples as a means of promoting understanding of assessment requirements. New students or students lacking in confidence in their abilities may assume that the example is the right way of doing things at the expense of their own, perhaps equally valid, but individual responses. Clearly, any such approaches would need to be carefully managed in order to avoid this eventuality and provide reassurance that there was neither one single right answer nor that responses from the individual's particular perspective would not be appropriately valued.

4.2.2.4 GET 4: Striving for independence

All the participants discussed aspects of their growing independence as learners and developing sense of themselves as university students. All spoke in some way of their

understanding of expectations about being more independent learners in higher education. All, too, spoke of their own commitment to becoming independent or demonstrated commitment to independence in their proactive engagement with assessment, sometimes in difficult circumstances and with insufficient or poorly communicated information.

4.2.2.4.1 GET4a: Doing it for themselves and seeking support

There was a clear sense of a commitment to developing independence and developing themselves as learners among the participants. This both involved acknowledging the need to 'do it for themselves' as part of their learning and growth as students and a conceptualization of what sources of support they felt was appropriate to draw upon in achieving this.

Clare, lacking other sources of information on the expectations of higher education from family, relied on what she could gain from friends and colleagues. The sense she is given of the lack of support available to 'adult learners' points to the usefulness of ensuring that communications to new students, perhaps particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds could usefully emphasize the highly supportive nature of aspects of the higher education experience and the presence of a range of services dedicated to providing support on a range of issues:

Clare: actually I don't know if this is a bad thing or, a lot of times when I said I'm going to university last year, a lot of people said like oh, are you sure? You know when you're an adult learner, you're not supported much, and that's kind of what I heard, so I prepared myself to, kind of come into university and just having to do everything on my own.

Her practical and pragmatic response was to commit to having to do this for herself. It is clear that she realized that this was a misconception once she arrived at university. She was surprised and relieved at the extent to which lecturers were happy to provide support and guidance:

Clare: ...I was very shocked how supportive the lecturers have been so far erm and it's a very positive thing. I just wasn't expecting it erm I guess. I was prepared for like the worst so far.

Mary, with her greater experience and maturity, had a clearer sense of what it means to be an independent learner, framing the student as having an active role with responsibility for developing their understanding and learning beyond the 'basis' provided by the lecturer:

Mary: Absolutely, because it was just because it's so, it's an independent learning, isn't it? A lot in university, a lot of it's done. You're given the basis and then you have to go and fulfil your knowledge further and read further.

This was a challenge, but a positive one. She acknowledged the need for students to have to work at things and deal with difficulty and indeed welcomed this with regard to her own work. However, this was dependent upon appropriately pitched and levelled learning and assessment activities that at least provided for that 'basis' for learning. Young, new students coming directly from the rather more supported and guided environment of school and college, she suggested, face particular challenges in adjusting to this new way of doing and being, with consequent impact on their ability to engage with assignment briefs effectively. She is referring to the Lifespan essay in this comment (see section 4.1.1 above):

Mary: So, to be given, like the minimal information and then to understand that they need to improve that by going off somewhere else to research it further, is quite daunting as well. And then that affects the understanding of the assignment brief.

Independence, then, requires not just students' willingness and preparedness to strive and work hard, but also a kind of unwritten, implicit contractual agreement between student and lecturer that they will at least be provided with the fundamentals they require to do so. Bridget expresses similar thoughts and feeling in her second interview. She talks about the importance of having:

Bridget: ...a clear like understanding on what, it's what, the content that's required to have in the assignment, that's required. (Interview 2)

When this fundamental information is not made available, the result is frustrating, even 'disappointing', as though the university has not quite lived up to expectations:

Bridget: I'm er it can be a bit frustrating to see that [not being given key information in the brief] happening, 'cause you're like, I've did everything with the assignment brief that was given. Yeah, I'm not receiving that grade I would have

won, I should have received based on the fact that I was supposed to do something that's not even in the assignment brief.

Interviewer

Yes. Yes, yes, yes, that does seem unjust, doesn't it?

Bridget

I think it it, yeah. Yeah, we can say disappointing. (Interview 2)

For Bridget this is particularly important because she so strongly values the sense of being able to do things for herself. Given an effective assignment brief that contains the key requirements she needs and properly signals the kind of response expected, she will work at it until she interprets what is required. Without this, however, she is forced to rely on her lecturers for what she perceives to be the missing information (that may have been willfully withheld to promote attendance of sessions):

Bridget: So, I think it created like a dependency on that. I mean, for whatever reason, you cannot attend the lecture due to numerous circumstances. Anything can happen. Some of the things can be missed out and they don't do not upload everything on Blackboard, they only upload the limited amount of stuff. But when you look at the assignment brief, what's being required and what's being taught, they do not collate with one another. (Interview 2)

Like the other participants, Bridget will contact her lecturers for advice and reassurance that she is approaching an assignment appropriately at times, but she also clearly values doing things for herself and values the opportunity to learn from her experiences of assessment. In Bridget's initial interview, she emerged as a self-reliant, persistent and resilient student, committed to learning and developing her understanding of her subject, despite some challenges with poorly communicated assignment briefs. Some initial successes also provided for a degree of confidence about her ability to engage successfully with her course. Overall, with the support of her dyslexia helper at times to clarify complexities and inconsistencies, there was a sense of Bridget having a certain pride in her abilities and her agency:

Bridget: So, I managed in the end. It was a struggle in the beginning. You just need to keep on carrying on and then you get there at the end. (Interview 1)

This is strongly linked to positive feelings about herself, her learning and its implications for her future:

Bridget: I like engaging with my assignments, they're stimulating with my intelligence. They're making me think, not just copying things off Google, but they make me do critical thinking with things....And it's it's not just doing good assignments. It's more like, you can apply the knowledge you would learn even in the workplace. I think that's why they did that, that's what they're trying to do, to apply their knowledge. I take it with me. It doesn't just go into a piece of paper [laughs] (Interview 1)

This is an aspect that continues into her final year at university, despite other frustrations and challenges. If she feels frustrated and disappointed in the 'dependency' on her teachers that she feels she is forced into by inadequately communicated assessment requirements, she also values the 'space' for independent engagement in what she refers to as 'critical analysis'. This seems to be particularly valued as an opportunity for independent engagement with her work from her own personal perspective and also to engage in professionally oriented activity through more authentic approaches (e.g., advising hypothetical companies):

Bridget: I think as of now, ... it's more the way that they allow you to express yourself is through critical analysis. It critically analysing the work, in third person and just explaining how the authors did all of this works. So yeah, they're quite like dictating on what you need to do and giving you less space. But as you progress in third year, they're allowing you, the only way that they allow you is to do that is through the critical analysis and to any recommendations with research evidence that would be given to a company. (Interview 2)

For Bridget, then, there is something of a mixed experience of independence. There are opportunities, particularly in the third year, for the empowered independent engagement from an individual perspective that she values, but these do seem contingent upon being provided with the essential information required to deliver according to expectations (see Figure 12: Extract from researcher diary, below). Assessment is a key factor in making for a purposeful and focused environment for learning and therefore clarity of briefs and expectations is paramount. Provided she has a clear sense of her destination, Bridget is able to direct her learning towards it independently and with confidence:

Bridget: Yeah, I think that the assignment brief is one of the difficulties actually, because the assignment briefs are made on what actually you need to be taught on... Really, so it just like it makes a bit difficult in actually to learn new things and like at the same time they're not clear. So, you're you actually sometimes you may

be end up being in a class and you're not knowing what you're actually learning.
(interview 2)

Extract from reflexive diary:

Bridget's use of the present tense ('they're quite like dictating...') is initially confusing, but contrasted with the following statement comparing this to how it is different in the third year it seems clear that this is referring to previous experiences, not those she is involved with now (in her third and final year). Instead, there seems in fact to be more opportunity for engaging in critical analysis and exploring aspects of the subject for herself, which is clearly a valued aspect of her engagement with assessed work:

Bridget: Yeah, I, I think that's a good thing to be able to critically analyse yourself, the resources they've been given and what the author's trying to portray.... Or understand or to analyse how credible their work is. (Interview 2)

She does not state explicitly whether issues with the briefs have an impact on her ability to pursue this empowered and critical approach to her work, stating that it 'depends' on the kind of assignment and then describing the characteristics of more academic and presentation based work and more authentic professionally oriented activity, in which the expectations are to solve managerial problems and make recommendations. Regrettably, during the interview, I did not pursue this for clarification, but other examples she has given of issues with briefs (such as a lack of clarity over the model to use as the basis for analysis) and consequent frustration would suggest that this is the case. There is also a sense, I feel, despite the opportunities to engage in freer, critical analysis and problem-solving, that the issues with the brief as outlined above mean that Bridget is required to adopt more strategic, less agentic approaches in order to achieve the grades she desires and deserves. To ensure that she is fully aware of what is expected of her, she cannot simply rely on the brief but must instead choose to be more dependent on what the teacher says in sessions.

Figure 5: Extract from researcher diary, considering Bridget's desire for independence

The importance of being given timely access to fundamental information and guidance on assessment requirements as the basis for effective, independent work is also discussed by Mary. She had particular anxiety about her writing and took proactive steps to addressing this by voluntarily attending a pre-sessional academic skills course prior to the start of the programme and subsequently sought support via the Student Learning and Achievement hub. Absence of useful guidance early on in the assessment process therefore was keenly felt:

Mary: ...today we only just got given advice on assignment writing and and and we think 8 weeks into the course... is a bit late to be arranging assignment writing

because the anxiety of the assignments have already built up because the confusion of it being there and the assignment brief itself.

Striving for independence and committing to growth was not only linked to engagement with studies but also to future professional competence. For Ruth, for example, engaging with complex disciplinary and academic language was seen as a useful, if challenging, preparation for aspects of her professional role as a Social Worker:

Ruth: Sometimes I feel like the language could be simplified, but then at the same time obviously we're in uni now and when we start working, we're gonna have, we're gonna have to be reading erm paperwork that address things like that, like the way they're written, so in a way, I guess it's good practice.

She committed to engaging with this aspect of her work on her own terms, acting on the language with her own power, respeaking and reformulating complex terms in order to provide a basis for her engagement with her assignments:

Ruth: ...and if I still don't understand it then I'd try and sometimes it's like words that are used, so I'll try and find like, like similar words that mean the same thing and try to word it differently to see if I understand. Yeah.

Only after this initial attempt on her own terms, did Ruth seek further support from the lecturer:

Ruth: it's probably the way the questions are worded because I feel like sometimes I read it and I'm like I don't understand this and then, say for example, the teacher explains it to me and be like, oh, that's like [phone rings], oh, sorry, that's like so straightforward, so why didn't I get that before? So yeah.

In this, Ruth was demonstrating not only her commitment to working at things with independence in order to gain access to her assessments and learning, she was also acknowledging that students can only do so much by themselves. That is, a key aspect of learning to work independently is knowing when it is appropriate to ask for help.

Accessing support involves an awareness of what is available. In the interviews, it was linked to how students conceived what was appropriate and, indeed, permitted, as part of their understanding of what it means to be independent. In various ways, the participants identified the following as appropriate sources of support and in broadly this order:

- The assignment brief
- Relying on self
- Classmates and peers (e.g., via the WhatsApp group chat)
- Family and friends outside of university (if available)
- University services, such as the Student Learning and Achievement hub (and for Bridget, her dyslexia helper)
- Lecturers

For Sara, approaching her lecturer was something that she was nervous about as she was unsure whether it was in some way not permitted. It was also very much a 'last resort' once all other possibilities had been exhausted. Her starting point, as with others, was to rely on herself initially and do what she could to solve the problem through her own endeavours. Her family also provided a level of support to which none of the other participants had access:

Sara: I'll message someone else or erm, I'll research, I'll do it myself first. I'll research it. See if I can find the answer online or in a book or somewhere or ask someone. Or I'll speak to my mum and my brother, 'cause they're Social Workers anyway... Yes, um, or I'll go to our student support, student learning and achievement. Yeah, email them to see if there's something they can do to help me, but if the worse comes to the worse and I'm really unsure like, erm, yesterday in class, I ended up having to ask my lecturer to clarify a few things for me. [interviewer: And so that's like the last resort?] Yeah, that's a last resort because I want to be fully independent before going back to my lecturer... Uhm. I was a little nervous about asking her purely because I wasn't sure if she would be able to help me with it fully or not. Uni is different. It's very independent, isn't it? So, there are certain things that they can't actually give us. Because of an unfair benefit to others.

Sara's staged approach to help seeking was indicative of the way others conceived of what was appropriate to draw upon and when it was appropriate to do so. Ruth, as we have seen, engaged on her own terms first, then approached her peers and finally her lecturers, again this seemed to have been something of a final resort:

Ruth: Erm. And obviously if you ever get stuck either like trying to ask your peers for help, because sometimes they're actually quite helpful. And if they can't help, then you've always got your, your teachers to ask as well.

Bridget relied upon her own determination and hard work initially. She also made planful and purposeful use of her dyslexia helper for help in making sense of complexity and difficulty, as in the case with her difficulty in processing the misalignment and complexity in her assignments. Only after this did she engage with her lecturer:

Bridget: First, what I will do first is, I will look at it my own and try and find if I could do it on my own and resolve the problem. See if I can actually try and understand. If not then, I will go if I can't understand that on my own then I'll go to my lecturer (Interview 1)

It is notable that for Bridget being forced to seek support and guidance from her lecturers is seen as detracting from her independent engagement, an aspect of her learning that she values particularly. It is frustrating not to have all of the information she requires in the assignment brief and she rails against the dependency on her lecturers that this creates as it requires her to access the extra information required in order to do well in her assessed work:

Bridget: I'm er it can be a bit frustrating to see that happening, 'cause you're like I've did everything with the assignment brief that was given. Yeah, I'm not receiving that grade I would have won. I should have received based on the fact that I was supposed to do something that's not even in the assignment brief. (interview 2)

Overall, there is a picture that emerges from the ways in which the participants engaged in help seeking that there are sources of support around them on which they can draw as part of their independent engagement with their studies that are in some way allowed while not compromising their quest for independence. What was available to the participants in terms of these sources of support varied, dependent upon their particular circumstances and individual inclinations towards doing things for themselves, but for all but Bridget, the use of peers was most often the first level with which they engaged (outside of the brief itself and themselves), typically via a student-led WhatsApp group. It is acknowledged that this may or may not have been useful, but it was nevertheless important to try this first. For example, other students were often also equally confused and uncertain:

Clare: I mean, we all have a group chat. The whole of Social Work level one, and I think we're kind of when we had questions we would ask each other, 'cause

maybe someone else already got the answer. Erm, It didn't help that all have us felt like that. So we were like, 'OK, you're worried and I'm worried'

Even in situations of unanimous confusion, however, engagement with the group provided the basis for collective action and a concerted approach to the lecturer for clarification in way that removed a sense of personal anxiety about exposing individual deficit, despite the lecturers' overall supportive and welcoming approach to answering questions. Clare captured this in her discussion of the usefulness of face to face discussion with lecturers as a means of clarifying issues:

Clare: ... I think because a few of us had the same question, so I think that made me feel better.

These different sources of support formed part of an arsenal of resources on which student were able to draw without threatening their sense of themselves as able, independent students or exposing their anxieties about not being quite good enough in comparison to each other, and, importantly, their lecturers. It is notable that while the students did engage with their lecturers, as individuals or collectively as a class group, this was often seen as the 'last resort'.

The use of group chats seems to be absent in the Business context. For Bridget however, her attitude to working with other students is perhaps indicative of her own independence and self-reliance.

Bridget: No, people don't have any group chats or what have you in my class. And what I've been finding is that even when working on groups, some of the students that you can work with, they will not exactly what you call 'stimulate your intelligence or your understanding'... Like, some, some of them is very difficult to work with...(Interview 2)

One source of support, she does mention, is friends who have previously completed the course, but other than this Bridget is forced to rely on herself, the briefs and what access she can manage to her lecturers via attendance in sessions or the limited opportunities for seeing them outside of timetabled classes. In such a context, the need for clarity and consistency in briefs and assessment expectations is all the more important as opportunities for clarifying issues or resolving inconsistencies are relatively limited (see section 4.2.2.4.2 below).

4.2.2.4.2 GET4b: A supportive environment creates space for independence

Aside from the participants' desire to work independently and avoid exposing any sense of themselves as not being equal to the task of being a university student, the picture presented in the first round of interviews of the levels of staff supportiveness and guidance on assessed work seemed universally positive. There was clearly a range of strategies taken by staff in relation to providing support on different assignments, from the highly managed, directive and scaffolded to more hands-off approaches, (the latter of which were rapidly rethought when it was clear that rather than promoting independence, they were instead causing anxiety and stress). This seems to have been welcomed by the more anxious and more confident participants alike and provided a valuable means both of reducing the perceived distance between the students and their lecturers and creating a space for useful learning.

Sara, who in general had a well-developed sense of herself as a confident and capable student, framed access to support in terms of meeting the needs of others, but nevertheless saw it as useful as a basis for approaching her own work:

Sara: Yeah, it depends. If people in our cohort are struggling. So for one of our assignments we were given. Our lecturer, she gave us erm a guide on how to reference... So people could get help with that. And we were also given. Erm. Well with her, she writes everything down for us. So what we've learned in the class, she'll write it down in the handout so we could have it later to refer to. [Interviewer: Oh, I see. Yes.] So it's not just our notes will have everything we learned in the class, so we can refer back to it while we write our assignments. So we have that. Erm. It depends if anybody is struggling, anyone that has questions, she'll print, she'll write it down and print it out and give it to us. So, it depends. [Interviewer: Yeah, cool, I see. And it's a useful erm useful thing for them to do?] Yes, that is very helpful.

This particular lecturer clearly took a highly structured approach to providing students with the information and materials she perceived they needed for effective engagement with their learning and assessed tasks, presumably on the basis of her understanding of their existing knowledge and preparedness. Rather than being conceived of as spoon-feeding, however, it seems to have welcomed and valued as providing the basis for further independent work:

Sara: And so she'll talk through the assignment brief with us, and let us know the requirements. What we need to do and how to structure it if we need to, or where to go for research references. Everything will be handed to us so we know what exactly what our task is. And then we take it from there.

It is not a question of the lecturer having done the work for the students, more of ensuring that they had all they need to do it for themselves. All of the participants had an awareness that they needed to work at things, to develop as students and meet the higher expectations of university study, but in order to do so, they required an understanding of those expectations and access to all of the information they needed to deliver on them:

Sara: Yeah they give us a lot so we're not, like, struggling with anything. We know the basics. Yeah, that's all provided to us.

For Mary, the mediation of module content and assessment expectations by the lecturer was certainly welcomed and valued and was framed as a means of reducing anxiety due to a lack of clarity and understanding of what was expected:

Mary: and he was amazing, the way he explained what was expected from us and he spent two hours for the last two sessions lectures we had with him explaining what he's expected to have from us in his essays and things like that, which really settled the anxiety of people's like 'Whoah, what's going on?' But the descriptions were already there, so it was quite nice to have that clarity.

It is clear that in situations where there was a mismatch between lecturer expectations of what students were able to do for themselves and what they themselves felt capable, this had a negative impact on their ability to engage effectively and independently, particularly when it did not reflect the typical approach across the programme:

Sara: ...but for that assignment brief, all it had was erm there was a list of questions where we had to pick out one. We had the question list and it had the layout and that's it. There was nothing else in that brief. It was so different to the others. And that's what scares me. For me that's a bad example of this. I know it's to make us independent, but there was nothing in it. At all.

Clare also experienced frustration and anxiety at the absence of clear guidance on expectations as the basis for making sense of her assignments:

Clare: It's stressful 'cause it's very hard when you've got a sentence or few sentences in front of you. It's very hard because everyone interprets, everyone

reads it differently. Erm, so it's very hard to like realise what it's actually expected you.

This may have had a root in a misconception of the need to deliver a particular kind of response to an assignment and an anxiety about the extent to which this could be framed individually. However, it is also clear that having clear guidance and, importantly, a trust in the effectiveness of the task in allowing students to achieve the learning outcomes was also a precursor for effective engagement with the task:

Clare: OK, I'm just going to open the one I struggled with. I've got it in front of me now Erm. OK, so this one.... So this one has given us. Six different questions that we can choose from... Uhm, I think that's quite a lot. I mean, it's it was good 'cause everyone could focus on their interest... Erm.... However, because the questions were so different, the learning objectives were probably not met in all of them.

The availability and receptiveness of staff to requests for clarification and discussion of assignment expectations was seen as a key aspect of providing a basis for effective engagement. While the participants had clear expectations of clarity and comprehensiveness in their briefs as a basis for effective independent engagement with their work, it also evident that interaction between students and staff was highly valued as a means of developing understanding of what was expected, of developing as capable and independent students. It was also important that this was managed in an inclusive manner that did not unnecessarily stigmatise or make uncomfortable those students who felt they needed extra help:

Ruth: I feel like verbal communication for me is better, 'cause then you have the opportunity, you feel more confident to ask questions. Because sometimes we find that people in the class have the same questions but they don't want to ask, but someone else asks that question for them, and then they get the answer.

This seems particularly important for students who had relatively fragile conceptions of their preparedness and capability to deal with the demands of university study. Mary, for example, responded very positively to the perceived readiness of staff to engage with discussion and answer questions:

Mary: it's taught me that they're not going to... Anyone that I have asked and spoken to, people don't not want to help. They're not gonna not. They're not gonna label you stupid, they're not gonna think any less of you and that's what's really nice about the tutors and things as well in the course is that I feel very

confident that I can ask them anything. And that really, and they're not gonna go 'What? She, she wants to be a Social Worker and she's asking that?' And the judgment, the feeling judged.

Bridget also acknowledged the supportiveness and availability of staff and their willingness to help students do their best in the Business context, where it was provided in a planned and structured way in a manner similar to approaches taken in Social Work:

Bridget: They talk about them in class. They actually some of them even remind you and that I managed to. Like they, they arrange one session that's all assignment related if you need any help with any questions or any clarification for the assignment. They do have one session close to, close where's the end of the deadline. But if you need it earlier their help, then you'll, you'll have to go through them. (Interview 1)

This was further supported by a willingness to be available outside of these formal sessions and a welcoming and warm approach to providing support as required to individuals:

Bridget: Yeah, supportive and friendly. So there is no shyness with them. They actually turned. They they're willing to help. (Interview 1)

Although heavily self-reliant, Bridget also used support of this nature to provide the basis for her engagement with assessed work to ensure that her response to the assignment was appropriate:

Bridget: Yeah, I did go and ask for them help when it came to the assignment brief once. Just to ensure that doing the right thing and I've understood what I'm meant to do, like a clear briefing. (Interview 1)

When making sense of an ambiguity in an assignment brief, Bridget was also able to make effective use of her dyslexia helper, who was able to provide for an issue that other students may not have noticed or felt able simply to make sense of for themselves. The task description had pointed initially to the need to use a single example, but later referred to using two examples. This represented a real barrier to Bridget's engagement with the assignment, as she was unable in her literal interpretation to reconcile the requirement of providing both one and two examples:

Bridget: Yeah, I saw that mistakes and I was confused on between those two and she [her dyslexia helper] clarified for me that it is indeed the same point. You just

need two examples. There is not two completely different things 'cause it looks similar. But in my brain, I thought: Do I need 3 examples? [laughs] (Interview 1)

The importance of staff openness to questions and requests for support was also evident in managing students' anxieties about asking for help. For some, reluctance to ask for help was based on a misconception of what is considered appropriate in the higher education setting:

Clare: ...I was very shocked how supportive the lecturers have been so far erm and it's a very positive thing. I just wasn't expecting it erm I guess. I was prepared for like the worst so far. Especially one lecture more than the others has really spoken about the assignments in detail. Uh, and like all the lecturers have made themselves available, if you do need to come and ask questions about the assignment briefs.

For Clare, opportunities to do this were of real importance in providing a basis for confident and empowered engagement with some of her assessed work when the brief was felt to be inadequate:

Clare: But actually, a lot of it was very clear because I know it's not the same as having it on the assignment brief but because we spoke about it, it was a lot clearer. So, I think that's why it makes so much sense to me.

For others, a reluctance to ask for help was more to do with shyness about approaching their lecturer or a personal sense that they should be able to do things for themselves. Ruth, for example, spoke of how the supportive environment of her class has allowed her to get beyond this and seek assistance when she needs it:

Ruth: I used to struggle asking like for help, but with the class that I'm in now, everyone's just like if they're if they're not like confident in what they're doing, they'll ask for help so and they don't, like they're not the kind of person that will like get annoyed if someone asks a question so I feel quite confident in asking questions now.

Sara also mentioned her nervousness about approaching her lecturer, which was quickly allayed by their willingness to help and provide support as required:

Sara: Yeah, so I did. I was a little nervous in that sense, but she was happy to help me and she went the extra mile. She took a particular, she had, she walked, she talked me through it, so that was helpful. That was really good.

Of all the participants, Mary perhaps responded most positively to the supportiveness of the environment as a space in which she could take risks and develop herself and her engagement with assessment processes. This was of particular relevance for her as in her experience of compulsory education, her unwillingness to expose her perceived lack of fit, fragility and fear of judgement meant that she chose to absence herself from school almost completely. There was a clear sense that Mary had taken steps to change and develop herself in order to meet the needs of higher education and further her career in a determined and proactive manner in order to overcome challenges:

Mary: Yes, I'm going to. I I'm going to ask for help when I'm stuck. This is what I'm going to do. Right? Uh, from from my that was for myself, but however, if I didn't change that in myself. I would have been extremely overwhelmed.

The supportive environment provided by her classmates and her lecturers enabled her to do so with optimism and motivation:

Mary: But yeah, I am still very excited. I feel very committed and I don't commit very well. I change my mind very quickly and and I can give up very easily, especially if things if I don't understand things. I'm not an 'asker-for-helper', but I went into this to make sure that I did ask for help

Without her commitment to changing herself and a supportive environment in which to do so, it seems there would have been a real possibility that Mary could have withdrawn from the course in response to her feelings of anxiety and overwhelmedness. There was a committed and proactive sense in her 'reaching out' to available sources of support provided by the university that seems very much to derive from a sense of confidence and willingness to develop rather than merely expecting someone else to do things for her.

Mary: Uh, so I reached out to them [the Student Learning and Achievement Hub] and that was just that's more of a personal thing. Having the confidence to ask for the help has really helped. But if you were to ask somebody... If this was me a few years ago as a person, I wouldn't have asked for help, and I probably would have left given those assignment briefs.

Accessing support in this way had a powerful impact on Mary at a time when she was clearly experiencing considerable stress and anxiety:

Mary: There's a, I don't know if I'm allowed to use names, but XXX [a student learning and achievement tutor] he was amazing. He was really, really, really helpful. I had so much, and he met me and I did cry on him and he was amazing. He was really, really helpful and you know, he said 'Obviously I can't give you feedback on your assignment, but I can give you feedback on how you're writing and help you that way'.

Perhaps ironically, Mary's courageous commitment to seeking support provided a basis for future independent work. Without it, she may not have been able to remain on her course.

It is notable that for Bridget, in her second interview, there is a clear sense that staff willingness to provide support and the presence of support services not not necessarily mean that either will be available. Even proactive and timely engagement with services cannot guarantee that there will be opportunities for accessing access support. There is a realistic awareness of the pressures on lecturers as a result of reduced staffing and lack of subsequent recruitment:

Bridget: Yeah, I think that has changed now. The last year, the lecturers they were more available compared to this year. Now it looks like there are so much into teaching, they're, they're teaching so much that they, they don't have as much time to see their students. (Interview 2)

In addition, access to wider services within the university is also limited due to sheer weight of numbers of requests for support. Bridget does not mention working with her dyslexia helper during this second interview, it may be that this results from the pressures on university services she mentions:

Bridget: And I think that the university services they're over saturated. There's too many. There's not enough time and space to fit everyone in, for example, you're trying to book an up your assignment that is you at the end of the month and you're booking. 'Let me, let me just book on the 2nd' because I've did everything and then they're telling you, 'oh, we can see you after your assignment was due....' (Interview 2)

4.2.2.4.3 GET4c: Taking control and acting with their own power

There are a number of strategies that the participants used to assert their independence and take control of the process of engaging with their assessed work in their own terms.

Sara was able to draw upon her strong sense of herself as an academically able student and 'throw a switch', drawing upon well-established routines for engaging proactively with assessment:

Sara: Yeah, for me, I'll just come when we have, when we get an assignment brief or we know we've got assessment coming up. I, like, my mode switches. So I'll get the assignment brief, I'll know what I need to do, I'll head to the library and get the books I need. Do the research I need to do if I know we have an assessment coming up, I'll start the research as soon as possible.

For Mary and Clare, there was a sense that this required some level of risk taking and attempting to make sense of the assignments on their own terms first. In Mary's case, this seemed part of her decision to be brave and expose her fragile sense of identity as a learner as part of her commitment to her learning journey:

Mary: ...so the first reflective account I believe, and this is my understanding of what's expected of me. If this is wrong, then I'm gonna get it very wrong... So I wrote it, thinking, OK, yes, that's fine. I've just gotta wait for my feedback.

Clare's approach seemed rather more rooted in her practical and pragmatic approach, engaging in a way that made sense to her first and subsequently engaging with the assignment brief and other information as part of a process of self-checking and confirmation:

Clare: Erm, so I kind of... Not that I ignored the assignment brief, but I kind of knew my question that I was focusing on and I focused on that rather than the rest of the assignment. It's only towards the end that I've gone back to the assignment.

This pragmatic approach was also seen in her desire to 'get things done', even in the face of having incomplete or confusing information:

Clare: So, when I submitted it, I kind of knew I didn't meet some of the learning objectives, but I was OK with it because I just wanted it out of the way.

It is notable that Clare, who had some nervousness about extended written work, engaged with her concern by focusing on the word count when she first encountered a new assignment brief. This provided both a way into the task in terms of expectations about the extent of work it involved and also a means of facing her fears proactively and courageously from the very outset:

Clare: Erm the first thing I look up personally is the word count. It's like the first thing that I always, I just want to know what the word count is like. I don't know why 'cause it overwhelms, overwhelms me even more sometimes, erm.

As well as drawing on personal characteristics, the participants also demonstrated a range of proactive strategies with which they transformed and took control of the assessment process in their own terms. Ruth, for example, engaged in respeaking and reformulating complex language in the briefs in order to find a way into them, seeing this as something she needed to do first before seeking further support. Other strategies involved relatively simple actions, such as printing out briefs and annotating them. For example, the brief that Mary referred to during her interview was heavily marked up with notes, underlining and circling of key elements. Clare also took control of her briefs, printing them out when necessary for note-making and highlighting and keeping them available throughout module sessions:

Clare: But I do, also for the other one that we weren't given one, I did print it out 'cause I like to make notes in it as I got along. I find it quite useful... I mean, on the laptop it's easy to access it when you need it to read it, but sometimes it's so much easier to have in a paper in front of you to be able to like make notes. Uh, and highlight things

Sara, too, ensured that she has hard copy of her briefs if they were provided by her lecturer:

Sara: Erm either if we it was given to us, that's a lot easier. If not, I'll print anything that I know I need. I'll go to the library and print it off, right?

Ruth also engaged in annotation and sense-making on her assignment briefs, but 227referred to do so on the computer:

Ruth: I do, like write notes and stuff but I like to do everything on my laptop 'cause it keeps me more engaged in what I'm doing. So, if I need to like write notes on the sheet to kind of help me write the assignment, I normally just type it up on my laptop, 'cause I find it a lot quicker.

Both Ruth and Bridget also mentioned strategies for managing cognitive overload when engaging with complex assignment briefs, allowing time for the brain to process information:

Ruth: Sometimes I'll take a break, I'll do something like completely different. Whether it's like getting a snack or like. Just something like completely like away from this the subject, and then I'll try and go back to it and see if that helps, 'cause sometimes I find that doing something else and then coming back to it, it kind of refreshes my brain.

Bridget: Read it once and then you put it back. Take a break and then you re-read again and then you understand so much more things. Instead of reading it six times in a row and you don't understand anything. Take a break from it. It clears the brain. And then when you come back with a fresh mind and it works...(Interview 1)

These were small steps, perhaps, but they do signal a kind of taking ownership of how they work in practical and meaningful ways and provide a picture of proactive and useful engagement with the assessment process.

4.2.2.4.4 GET4d: Problems in the brief can negatively impact students' sense of themselves

As can be seen in the sections above, all the participants spoke in some way of their understanding of the need to be more independent as an aspect of how university was different to other educational contexts and demonstrated commitment to doing what they could for themselves. However, independent engagement with assessment did not solely depend on individual commitment and determination or a willingness to seek support or adopt useful strategies. It was also important that students had access to the essential information to engage effectively. Clare discussed this in terms of having a 'clearer vision of what is required', wanting some indication of some of the expected content in the task as part of the specification of the brief:

Clare: I mean, it's level four. I mean, it's university level so you can't have an actual example, but maybe like a bullet point of few things that you should include. If that makes sense? I think I would personally find that quite useful, because when you're looking at assignment brief, you've got the topic, you've you know the word count, whereas if it actually had... 'You need to include this, this, this'. I think that would be quite helpful. Erm. But I guess maybe that's kind of leading us into... I'm not sure... kind of having a clearer vision of what is required. Yeah, what is required in the assignment

Clare's comment is interesting, not necessarily because of what she said, but *how* she said it. There is a tentativeness in her interpretation of the brief that suggests that having

that clearer vision is not necessarily permitted in some way. Clare was also concerned with the use of exemplars in her experiences on the Access course, again as though this was something not quite 'proper'. My interpretation of what Clare says here is that she feels that this is something that students should be able to work out for themselves, or just 'know'.

Where that 'clearer vision' was not available due to a lack of guidance or issues with the communication and presentation of the assessed task, the business of sense-making and effective engagement with assessment was compromised. Importantly, it seems, this resulted in students locating problems that were in fact in the brief, in themselves, with subsequent impact on their sense of themselves as students. For example, Mary and Bridget both point to an assumption that the need for independence was some way part of a student's responsibility, even in the face of lack of adequate guidance or poorly communicated expectations. Mary had proactively and courageously attempted her reflective essay on the videoed interview as a means of testing out her conception of its expectations. She framed this as a learning opportunity on the understanding that the feedback she received would help her work things out if she had missed the point. The subsequent sharing of a further guidance document in which the expectations were made more explicit quite late in the process resulted in something of a disheartening experience:

Mary: It was a bit disheart, disheartening really because I'd gone to do something that I thought was expected of me and then it was really not the right thing to do... So, I've gone back over and I think I've done it now and it's much erm this is this is [the paper] this is brilliantly detailed, but it would have been lovely if we'd had it a while ago. It was a bit disheart, disheartening really because I'd gone to do something that I thought was expected of me and then it was really not the right thing to do.

This extra guidance was clearly provided with the best intentions to support students' engagement with the assignment. However, although Mary found it useful and was able to rework her original attempt in line with the new information, it is clear that she felt not only disheartened by this experience but also that this was in some way her fault. That is, that she *should* have been able to work out what was expected and that her failure to do so was because she was not quite meeting expectations:

Mary: And because until we got given this, which was a lovely thing. It says, 'the essay will focus on the extent to which you are able to apply the skills learned during the module so far. Your understanding...' So I understand that now is that where I've written, I need to write about how it applies to my interview, as I didn't have that information before, and I think there was an expectation that we're expected to recognize that.

Mary knew that the provision of this extra information at this late stage in the process was not ideal practice; she is herself a trained assessor and clearly recognised that aspects of assessment practice on the course were not ideal. And yet, even so, an intervention by the teacher that was clearly intended to assist and support her instead had the impact of making her feel negatively about herself and question her ability.

When discussing a brief with which she had difficulties due to its complexity and lack of clarity, Bridget also conceptualized the working out of overly complex tasks as the student's responsibility:

Bridget: I think it was something that I was expected to do? (Interview 1)

She acknowledged that there are demands on students to deal with complexity and solve problems (indeed she welcomed the challenge of developing this aspect of her learning) and framed this in the same terms, while at the same time recognizing there did need to be sufficient clarity and detail:

Bridget: It's just I understand that sometimes it needs to be detailed enough. But at the same time, it's a higher education. Some things in high, in higher education, they're focusing, they're not focusing on your remembering skills, they're focusing on your thinking skills and how you will solve issues and how would you interpret things. That's what it's like being looked for. Sometimes giving too much detail can actually mean you're, you're given the answer without giving the answer. (Interview 1)

Perceptively, Bridget pointed to the fine line between spoon feeding and giving students just enough information to be able to complete their assignments effectively. My interpretation of this is, that in this case, the brief fell somewhat short of reasonable expectations of clarity, with a consequent negative impact on Bridget's ability to engage with the assignment. Bridget determinedly worked at the assignment over a period of four weeks, breaking it down point by point and searching for clues in her module sessions and the overall module scheme. A student otherwise more than capable of

engaging with a clear specification of the same task, but who lacked Bridget's eye for detail, determination and resilience, however, may not have been able to do so. Nor might a student with complex demands on their time due to work and family commitments outside of their studies.

In Bridget's second interview, there is less of a sense of her feeling that she is just 'expected' to work out issues with poorly designed briefs and more of a recognition that sometimes the problem is with the brief and how it has been communicated. At this point, she has the knowledge, experience and confidence to see that it is the environment that is at fault, not herself. The experience is frustrating, even disappointing, but the issue is not in her.

Bridget: I think it's like they're not even like they're telling you, but they're not telling you what they want. You see? And I'm not asking oh like, 'put in the assignment brief 'use this theories and models this, this, and this topic', but I'm asking like if the whole of a particular assignment focuses on one topic and it and the whole topic focuses on that analysis. I mean it should be made clear, since the whole assignment is based on that particular thing. (Interview 2)

4.2.2.5 GET 5: Building on success and existing knowledge promotes confidence

4.2.2.5.1 GET5a: Success breeds confidence

All the participants discussed how early successes in their engagement with assessment provided the basis for confidence about future work. This somewhat reduced the overwhelming nature of interpreting long and complex briefs for Bridget:

Bridget: I, I guess, it gave me somewhat of a confidence... It does give you a confidence when you get when you do an assignment and get a good grade for those. I mean you get confidence from that. It does carry on the knowledge and then when you when it comes to the next assignment you feel more comfortable doing that assignment. It's not so overwhelming when you receive one, you know I have done this before, I can manage this. It becomes more easy and with time. (Interview 1)

Sara, too, found her anxieties reduced as a result of having successfully completed her first two assignments:

Sara: Erm, now that I've done a first couple of assignments, I feel, I feel fine. [Interviewer: Really? Yeah?] Yeah, I feel really comfortable.

Ruth also acknowledged the empowering nature of early success, though in somewhat more guarded terms:

Ruth: Uhm, I feel bit more confident 'cause when I when I can. When I confidently write an essay or an assignment it it kind of gives me more confidence to do it again, whereas I feel like when I'm not as confident in an assignment it makes me more reluctant, to want to do the assignment.

For Clare, while she had successfully made sense of a number of assignments, there is a sense that her confidence about future work is contingent upon the manner in which it is delivered:

Clare: Not that I felt less positive, but I was just worried of not being able to meet the expectations and I think when you start university, it's like you have so much mixed emotions, 'cause you're excited. You're nervous. Erm, so I think when you get given a big assignment brief, it's just overwhelming. Like, the one word I can say is overwhelming. Whereas now, because I've done it and I found two of them very clear, three of them even, very clear. I do feel quite positive about it. Yeah.

She clearly developed some familiarity with how assessment is managed and seems to have become assimilated into certain assessment practices, but this is by no means a linear and irreversible process. Rather, it remained dependent upon the clarity of expectations provided in future briefs and associated dissemination activities:

Clare: I think I can see that the one that I found useful was written by by the lady that explains the whole module, so maybe that's why because maybe she wrote in her style. But when I'm looking at the Lifespan Development one. Erm. I don't feel as comfortable with that one. So, if moving forward, all the assignments are the same as my Preparation for Practice and the Context of Social Work, if I can say that. Then yeah, I'm positive, but whereas this. The one where it has less information for me. I'd feel nervous. Yeah.

Mary was the first of the participants to be interviewed and although she had completed some assessed work at this time, she had not yet received formal feedback and marks. For her, success seemed to have been most strongly associated with having dealt with the overall challenge of being a student and managing a complex home life:

Mary: I have learned to balance quite well

Despite her anxieties and frustration, she, too, recognised that she has developed in confidence and understanding of aspects of her learning and engagement with assessment that initially proved to be problematic:

Mary: Because we were given all these things and then the learning started, then it started to fall into place.

While the first interview reveals participants who, despite their challenges, feel confident and optimistic overall about the future of their studies, in Bridget's second interview a somewhat different picture emerges. Now, it is clear that her experiences and successes have equipped her to recognise where aspects of her environment, the course, assignment briefs, lecturers, etc., have not delivered what she needed to engage effectively with her studies. There is a sense of disappointment in this, but also of confidence in her willingness and readiness to move on and begin a new chapter in the world of work:

Bridget: I do quite well in my studies with the grades that I get. 'cause I'm like if I, as of now, it looks like I just wanna, I just wanna know like, what do you call, pass and just get it done with 'cause I think it's not 'cause I'm graduating or anything. I think it's just that in the third year the way that everything has been handled. It wasn't done nicely. (Interview 2)

She has been successful and has done well, but perceived issues with aspects of her experience on the course, particularly in relation to assessment and clarity of expectations in assignment briefs have left her feeling disappointed and jaded.

4.2.2.5.2 GET5b: Building on existing strengths is empowering

Almost all the participants spoke at some point during the interviews of how opportunities to draw upon existing strengths, expertise and knowledge provided a basis for confident engagement in their assignments. For Bridget, in her second interview, experiences without the university context were also significant in building a sense of confident preparedness for the future.

For Sara, this was closely linked to her sense of herself as an effective student and the instilling of a strong orientation to academic work as part of her upbringing:

Sara: 'Cause I was brought up in that sort of. I had that sort of like really strict educational upbringing like I had to study every day. Do my homework in time, all of that, so that's instilled into me

Although she experienced stress and anxiety about aspects of her assessed work, overall, her sense of knowing how to 'do' being a student and a disciplined and organised approach to time management provided her with a basis of confident and effective engagement. Sara had limited experience of the Social Work field in the way that Mary

and Clare had as professionals in the social care context, although it was clear that her mother and brother, who already work in the profession, were a valuable source of support. Where Mary and Clare, for example, were able to draw on their professional experiences in the *Lifespan* assignment, however, Sara experienced real challenge in engaging this because she did not have a context in which to interpret the rather sparse specification of the task. Once provided with the relevant support, she was able to engage confidently. For her, it was more a case of drawing upon and applying her existing academic abilities as a means of making sense of what she needed to do:

Sara: Yeah, like compared to the other people in my cohort. I'm not as stressed as they are. Like, I know what's expected of me. They give us the assignment brief. I read it. I know what I need to do. Uhm, I know where to go for help or to ask questions if I need to. And, I, I finished my work, at least one two weeks before the deadline anyway.

Bridget, too, was able to draw upon her understanding of learning and assessment processes and use this as a basis for dealing with challenging work, unpacking the rather complex task and engaging with her learning on the module as a whole as a means of coming to terms with its expectations:

Bridget: Yeah, I really took it apart. Broke it down. Each individual point. Mixed it with the lesson, to see which one will fit with which bullet point. What do I need to do? And then I'm also look at the module scheme 'cause that's where the answers are [laughs] (Interview 1)

There was also a strong trust in her own abilities to work hard and be persistent and resilient which gave her a means of carrying on and engaging with difficult tasks:

Bridget: So, I managed in the end. It was a struggle in the beginning. You just need to keep on carrying on and then you get there at the end. It's a matter of the strategies that you use. (Interview 1)

In her second interview, Bridget acknowledges the impact of her learning on the course on her ability to do things in placement and work-based contexts as part of work experience opportunities, but also her own creativity and ability to respond to challenges:

Bridget: Yes, there were things that I was being taught in class that were being applied, but there were some things that actually I need to come up with myself to

get things done. They're like, OK, think out., they're like, 'think out of the box'.
(Interview 2)

Ruth's extended preparation for university in the form of a social care related Access course and Foundation Year at another institution also provided her with something of a head start on her studies. This enabled her to use her existing knowledge of aspects of the subject as a bridge into the higher-level engagement at Level 4 with some confidence:

Ruth: Some of the things that we speak about I've already done so I'm not. I, I'm a bit more confident in like writing assignments about it because I've already done it.

In contrast, Clare, alone among the participants in mentioning negative feedback, discussed her surprise at the lack of preparation in her Access course for expectations of academic writing as communicated to her by one of her lecturers. She had been confident about this aspect:

Clare: I've always like, even my introduction and stuff. It was always like erm good introduction, like nobody has ever actually commented on my paragraph structure. So, I was very shocked 'cause I don't think I've changed my style of writing. I thought I. I personally thought I improved it to make it more academic, but maybe not [laughs]

She was able to use humour to mitigate this criticism, but the mention of the absence of a quite specific form of paragraph structure in the lecturer's feedback ('P-E-E-L... Point-Evidence-Explain-Link') may be suggestive that this was their particular preference, rather than necessarily a general deficit in Clare's writing. Clare's response was nevertheless characteristically practical and pragmatic; she would learn how to write them again:

Clare: actually I was very like shocked that you know, I've written assignments all throughout last year and nobody has ever said anything, so that's something that I feel like that, erm, that Level 3 didn't prepare me for 'cause now I have to learn to write paragraphs all from the beginning if that makes sense.

Of all the participants, Mary, with her extensive professional expertise in social care and her experience as both a vocational teacher and an assessor, benefitted most from opportunities to bring herself in to the assessment process. It provided a means for her to work things out in complex assignments:

Mary: I think with having the apprenticeship teaching knowledge, I've picked out. I think it was by past my past knowledge in in the assessment factor. I've sort of picked out what I've perceived it to mean.

In the *Lifespan* assignment, which caused such challenge for the other participants, she was able to draw upon her professional experiences to make up for the shortfall in scaffolding that she had relied upon in assignments related to more unfamiliar contexts.

Mary: I mean I did for me because I've worked with people that live with dementia since I was 16 and a lot of, I've done dementia care mapping. I've done courses with Bradford University and things, so one of the choices was people that live with dementia and I was like 'yes, I can start planning' because that's my ex... I drew on my past experience that enabled to start planning, so that was only because I had that experience that I was able to do that. Erm, so that wasn't too bad

There was a palpable sense of her confidence in how she discussed her engagement with this assignment as a result, finding the statement of the learning outcomes genuinely meaningful as a guide to what was expected:

Mary: ...it gives you the, you've got your titles that you've got to choose. Great, I know what I'm going to choose and then on the other page it does say 'demonstrate an understanding of the psychological theories of [incoherent]'. I understand that, right? I know what I've got to do there and then, it says how it relates to the human span, life span. So I've got to include that, obviously show an understanding of... understand or doesn't that. But it is just the different things. So consider Lifespan development according to the perspectives of different groups within society, so depending on what age group you chose, you need to relate that and then it says 'describe some implications of the theoretical, theoretical...' And I can't actually read this, 'empirical literature Social Work....' Yeah, and that that for me is pretty directive

4.2.3 Feelings about themselves and looking forward

All the participants discussed their sense of growth and development during their interviews, reporting overall that they were developing positive identities as students with a growing sense of belonging in their new educational environments. To a greater or lesser extent for participants, this has been a challenging journey, coloured by varying degrees of anxiety and stress, particularly in relation to their engagement with

assessment practices. Assignment briefs have played a key role in this, as has the participants' readiness and ability to engage with them in terms of their own existing knowledge and skills and the extent to which their engagement has been supported and scaffolded, either within the brief itself or as part of wider supportive activities. For Bridget in her second interview, which took place during her third and final year, there is very much a sense of her having learnt and developed a great deal, but also of being ready to move on and into the world of work.

Having begun the analysis section with a picture of the students as they made sense of their previous educational experiences and perceived themselves prior to coming to the university, the purpose of this section is provide a sense of distance travelled and how they feel about themselves looking forward to the rest of the course, and, for Bridget, as she approaches the end of it.

The discussion included at this point is based upon the analysis of their situation at the point of participating in the interview process at that particular point in their first year. At this time, they had not received feedback or marks for work completed (they had all engaged with and submitted two assignments). Subsequent access to their data has provided a picture of their successes, which are discussed in 'Where are they now', see section 4.2.4 below)

4.2.3.1.1.1 Mary

Mary was the first participant to be interviewed, towards the end of her first term. At this time, she had completed two assignments, but was yet to receive feedback on them. Nevertheless, it is clear that she is aware that she has changed and learnt about herself even at this early stage. This seems to relate to a developing understanding and internalisation of the underlying values of Social Work as a caring, non-judgemental profession and her own sense of herself as a student:

Mary: So, the course as a context has taught me a lot about myself and making those judgments and not judging looking at different things. And that's subject specific, I think, erm but it has massively influenced with the assignment brief and in the future I will always ask what I don't understand. I'm just going to ask the question, and even if I ask the same question over and over and over again.

It is notable that Mary discusses this in terms of personal change and development. For her, this has been very much a personal journey towards the development of a new sense of herself. Mary had considerable anxiety about seeking support in earlier compulsory education that left her feeling isolated, threatened and defensive. She has made a proactive decision to address this in her engagement with the Social Work course and has been supported in doing so by the highly caring and supportive environment provided by her lecturers, who seem to have been modelling person-centred Social Work values in their educational practice. At the same time, however, aspects of the management of assessment processes and issues relating to the communication of assignment expectations and requirements in assignment briefs have been a source of anxiety and frustration. She wants to learn and clearly strives to do so but does not always feel that she has been given the tools and information she needs. Her very positive experience of engaging with an assignment in which did feel confident and capable because she had an existing wealth of expertise and experience with which to contextualise her engagement is significant. In this case, there was considerable overlap between her own world and identity and that of the subject matter and she responded with confidence and empowerment in a way that was not available to her classmates. When she struggles, it is because there is insufficient context in which to negotiate her understanding of what is expected of her because the distance between herself and what she perceives to be expected is too great. At these times, it is all the more important that the assignment brief makes up for this shortfall with clarity and sufficient scaffolding. Her response to this is to keep asking questions in order to clarify what is expected:

Mary: I'm just going to keep asking it until I understand what it is that's expected of me.

An area in which Mary's engagement with the course has had a particular impact on her growth and conceptualization of what it means to be a student is her developing confidence in seeking support without feeling that she is exposing her perceived deficits as a learner. This seems to acknowledge that learning is both an individual activity, it requires work and application on behalf of oneself, but also one that is social and connected. She has access to a great many sources of support within her network of friends and colleagues with her personal and professional contexts as part of the

community is which she lives and has developed the confidence to draw upon these in her learning journey:

Mary: So I am going to erm 'cause I'm sending it out. I'm seeking advice from all over the place. I've got a friend that's a teacher in secondary school. I'm going to my other friends and getting her to read it, so I'm getting all these different perspectives to get feedback to help me develop and and it is about asking for help. As before, I wouldn't have asked, would have been like 'they're gonna think I'm stupid. They're gonna think this...' and it is a massive confidence thing to just have the confidence to say, you know, but I don't know whether that comes with age. And I mean, I'm I don't know. I'm I bit older as when I first tried or when I was, I wouldn't ask for help. 'Cause you think differently, don't you?

4.2.3.1.1.2 Clare

When I recruited students to be participants in this study, the only inducement I offered was that they might find it a useful opportunity to reflect on their engagement with assignment briefs and the wider assessment process, learn something about themselves as students and learners and perhaps contribute in some small way to the development and improvement of assessment practices in their courses and across the institution. For Clare, the experience of engaging with the interview and thinking about her experiences seems to have provided her with a space for useful reflection on how she has developed:

Clare: Because I'm not worrying about getting it done. I think when you're worrying about it and there's written, there's such complexity. It's quite. It's sometimes very hard to understand it, so I'm looking at the one that I did find find difficult. Erm. Even though it's still difficult now [laughs], I kind of understand whether I've done it properly or not. Erm. But yeah, I don't. You definitely read it different then you do when you're writing the assignment.

Clare found aspects of assignment briefs quite challenging, particularly where there was misalignment between the intended learning outcomes and the assessed task. She overcame this as a result of a pragmatic and practical inclination to simply get things done. Her growing familiarity and understanding of expectations has also had a positive effect. Overall, she has clearly had a positive and empowering experience, clearly feeling increasingly confident in her achievements and ability to continue successfully on her course. There is a sense of excitement and anticipation of future learning, particularly as the course moves into the development of professional competences and learning as part of placement activity:

Clare: Oh, I'm so excited. I'm really excited to do placements, but it's not till next year, uhm? I'm really excited for that.

Ongoing optimism and confidence in relation to assessment, however, is somewhat contingent on the continued effectiveness of future assignment briefs in providing clear expectations and scaffolding:

Clare: So, if moving forward, all the assignments are the same as my Preparation for Practice and the Context of Social Work, if I can say that. Then yeah, I'm positive, but whereas this, the one where it has less information for me, I'd feel nervous. Yeah.

Like Mary, too, Clare has responded positively to the warm and caring environment provided by her lecturers, seeing this as a supportive space in which she and others can ask questions and negotiate their understanding of their subjects and the specifics of assessment expectations:

Clare: I think it's not just myself, but as a class erm quite often we spoke about the assignment, um, and it wasn't. It wasn't like a topic that nobody wanted to speak about. I think the lecturers were quite happy to kind of discuss it with us and there's something that we didn't understand they would kind of go over it with us. Erm. So yeah, but that's something I've learned is like you can ask questions and it's OK.

Where there is nervousness and uncertainty, it relates to aspects of assessment with which she is still unfamiliar. Although the majority of the course is assessed via coursework, for example, there is a traditional examination in Year 2 on aspects of law in Social Work which is already causing some anxiety:

Clare: I don't know if it's with assignment briefs, but one thing that I am nervous about is the law exam that we have. [Interviewer: Oh, right. Yeah.] So I'm not it's not in their first year, so I don't know if we're gonna get assignment brief, but I know that's something that already worries me now.

4.2.3.1.1.3 Sara

Sara's experience has been positive overall. After major difficulties in her first entry into higher education, it is clear that she is now very much at home and feeling happy and confident in being a student again:

Sara: Ah, I love it. I'm, I was still happy being a student in my other uni, but when like certain circumstances forced me to drop out, I was really upset. But I had a lot

going on at that time and I told everyone, my family and friends, all I wanna do is go back to uni, become a student, have that experience and graduate, that's all I wanted to do. And now I'm back in that position, I'm so grateful.

She has responded well to the highly structured and scaffolded approach to assessment taken in some of her modules, which has provided her with a space in which to apply her highly developed academic skills with confidence and empowerment. Where she faced particular challenge was in assignments where she had neither the guidance to enable this, nor the existing knowledge and experience within which to situate her understanding of what was required. Again, the caring and supportive approach taken by her lecturers has provided an environment in which she has been able to overcome these barriers. As a result she is confident and optimistic about her ability to continue to engage with challenges as she proceeds in her course.

Sara: Erm. Yeah, I mean I've been told as you go on with uni, it, it does get harder [laughs]. That's naturally, that's a bit worrying, but every like, now, I mean I'm sticking to it. I'm doing well and doing the assignments, doing the research, writing them. I feel confident. I feel like if anything, my confidence will only improve and I'll get better in the future.

Sara's assimilation of academic skills and orientation to academic success instilled in during her upbringing has been a source of strength in her engagement with assessment during the course so far and it is on this area that she focuses when considering how she might apply her learning going forward:

Sara: Erm. Probably be more organized. Do the research beforehand. Understand, understand what I'm supposed to be doing. Do it beforehand so it's less work for me. Less worry for me, when the deadline comes closer.

4.2.3.1.1.4 Ruth

Ruth suffered particular challenges in the move to online learning as part of national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic which had an impact upon the way in which her Access and Foundation Year course were managed and delivered. The experience of being in an in-person environment once more has clearly been positive and enabling when meeting the challenges of engaging with assessment:

Ruth: Like, the way the briefs are is different. Erm. They are, some of them do get explained, so if or if you don't understand, we can, 'cause obviously we're in the

building, so we can go to the teacher and say, 'Oh, I don't understand this. Can you explain it to me?' So there's that support as well.

Like the other participants, she has also found the supportive and caring attitudes of her lecturers a key factor in providing a positive space environment for learning:

Ruth: at this uni I feel like everyone's supportive. The teachers are supportive and obviously the students are supportive as well, so, you know, I haven't really got many. I haven't got any issues really.

Overall, Ruth's experience has been positive, an area of particular focus for her has been on engaging with the language of higher education and her discipline/profession, with she has engaged proactively and with support from her lecturers. She has also benefitted from the experience of an extended preparation for university via an Access and a Foundation Year course, both of which had a social care orientation. This provided a context within which she was able to situate her learning and engagement with assessment. She has enjoyed her learning and is appreciative of the emphasis on coursework rather than examination as an assessment strategy:

Ruth: I mean, I enjoy writing assignments, I'd rather that than an exam, so I actually enjoyed writing most of the assignments I've done so far, like I enjoy doing the planning and things like that. Erm. I just yeah, it's just been a good experience.

She feels confident going forward and seems aware of the process of her learning and development as a student as a journey of gradual sense-making:

Ruth: But I feel like as time goes on, I'll probably understand why I did it. It makes sense.

4.2.3.1.1.5 Bridget

Bridget has found aspects of her experience of engaging with assignment briefs a challenge, particularly when they have been poorly communicated or there is ambiguity or lack of alignment between the intended learning outcomes and the specification of the task. This has been the cause of some confusion, but she has determinedly made sense of things, using her dyslexia helper in a focused and planful manner to help her navigate difficulty.

Bridget: Even though that there was confusion within some assignments, it hasn't really impacted much, I still did it. So I mean, I've still enjoyed doing that assignment. I can see maybe like a typing error. Or it might be just the layout that the lecturer would like, that does it. And then I might have over confused myself. But despite all of those, I think I'm engaging with them really well.

Overall, she feels she has done well and feels confident in her abilities to manage complexity and issues. She particularly values opportunities to develop her sense of herself as a student, and develop her critical thinking abilities:

Bridget: I like engaging with my assignments, they're stimulating with my intelligence. They're making me think, not just copying things off Google, but they make me do critical thinking with things.

She has responded particularly positively to work that she feels aligns to the professional practices of her discipline and future career aspirations and provides opportunities to apply her developing knowledge in authentic contexts:

Bridget: And it's it's not just doing good assignments. It's more like, you can apply the knowledge you would learn even in the workplace. I think that's why they did that, that's what they're trying to do, to apply their knowledge. I take it with me. It doesn't just go into a piece of paper [laughs]

Despite her challenges, she is confident in her abilities and optimistic about her future studies based on her successes in the first year, both on the course and in relation to possible further postgraduate study.

Bridget: Yeah, I'm. I'm confident with my studies. I've I've. I'll go through to the third year.

In her second interview, conducted during her third year, it is clear that those aspects of the course that link to professional practice, whether as part of work on assignments or work experience opportunities, have been particularly valued. Indeed, such experiences are key as a means of preparing for the world of work:

Bridget: I've managed to be able to get like those skills and I'm just like looking and I'm like I'm much more ready to be sent off to the workplace, but I think that make me ready to go to be like, oh, and now I can actually be sent off to work in the Business industry. It was not entirely the degree. It was the experience I got alongside the degree. (Interview 2)

Bridget is, in her own words 'ready to go'. She has done well in her studies and learnt a great deal from her work experiences. However, the third year, it seems, has been something of a frustration for her and has somewhat negatively coloured her experience of completing her degree:

Bridget: I do quite well in my studies with the grades that I get. 'cause I'm like if I, as of now, it looks like I just wanna, I just wanna know like, what do you call, pass and just get it done with 'cause I think it's not 'cause I'm graduating or anything. I think it's just that in the third year the way that everything has been handled. It wasn't done nicely. (Interview 2)

There is also a sense of a keen awareness of how aspects of the programmatic and institutional context are in some way failing or not quite delivering on expectations. Her growing confidence in herself and her greater understanding has equipped her to identify shortfalls in, for example, staffing ratios and the availability of student support services. There seem to be reduced opportunities for engaging with and seeking support from lecturers as a result of reduced staffing and lack of subsequent recruitment

Bridget: Yeah, I think that has changed now. The last year, the lecturers they were more available compared to this year. Now it looks like there are so much into teaching, they're, they're teaching so much that they, they don't have as much time to see their students.

In addition, access to wider services within the university is also limited due to sheer weight of numbers of requests for support. Bridget does not mention working with her dyslexia helper during her second interview, it may be that this results from the pressures on university services she mentions:

Bridget: And I think that the university services they're over saturated. There's too many. There's not enough time and space to fit everyone in, for example, you're trying to book an up your assignment that is you at the end of the month and you're booking. 'Let me, let me just book on the 2nd' because I've did everything and then they're telling you, 'oh, we can see you after your assignment was due....'

A recent update to the virtual learning environment has also complicated things to some degree, making it more difficult for her to navigate content.

4.2.4 Where are they now?

As I write this section, the participants are currently completing their third year and it is possible to look back and see whether they have been successful, albeit in a limited sense. I do not have access to their feedback on specific assignments or more detailed reports from their tutors and the Social Work students have either elected not to participate in further interviews¹⁴ or are no longer on the course, but an overview of their results is perhaps useful in demonstrating some degree of their success and achievement.

Regrettably, Ruth has withdrawn from the Social Work course and information on her performance in the first year is no longer available. It seems she simply decided that a career in Social Work was not for her. The remaining Social Work participants, however, all successfully completed their first year, achieving mean grades across all assignments that would place them in the category of achieving a good degree (i.e., 2.1 or First, 60+). Notably, the Lifespan assignment (see section 4.1 above) that caused anxieties for all but Mary was completed to a very high level in terms of grades received, as they all attained marks of 70 or above (Sara received a mark of over 80). Equally, the portfolio-based assignment involving the video recording and reflective essay that caused Mary particular anxiety was passed by all (assessed on a Pass/Fail basis). Looking at their current final year results, which do not yet include the outcomes of their practice placements and dissertations, both Mary and Sara are set to achieve good degrees with Mary on track for a First. Clare elected to suspend for personal reasons at the end of her second year, having passed all but one of her second-year modules. I understand she has now returned to her studies and is now in the process of retaking her second year, committed in her pragmatic and practical way to completing the course. One is aware of the particular challenges faced by care leavers (Cotton and Nash, 2014), but I have no way of knowing what particular challenges she faced in relation to the module she dropped. I do know that it was related to practice placement, rather than 'academic' and assignment-based. It is hugely pleasing and heartening that Clare has felt able to recommence her work towards completing the course.

¹⁴ See Limitations section.

Bridget's trajectory through her Business course reflects that of Mary and Sara. She passed her first year very successfully with an overall mean grade of 71. At the current stage of her third year, which does not include her dissertation results, she is set to receive a good degree overall. The assignment in Bridget's third year that caused her particular frustration because she felt she was not given the information she needed to engage with it was passed, but with a markedly and uncharacteristically lower mark than she has typically received throughout her second and third years. Had Bridget received a mark for this assignment more in keeping with what she has usually achieved, she would currently be on track not only for a good degree, but potentially a First. The frustration she reports in relation to this assignment in her second interview (see section **Error! Reference source not found.**) is perhaps understandable. This and other aspects of her experiences have somewhat negatively coloured Bridget's attitudes towards her course, to the extent that she wishes now simply to move on and be done with things:

Bridget: I do quite well in my studies with the grades that I get. 'cause I'm like if I, as of now, it looks like I just wanna, I just wanna know like, what do you call, pass and just get it done with 'cause I think it's not 'cause I'm graduating or anything. I think it's just that in the third year the way that everything has been handled. It wasn't done nicely. (Interview 2)

5 Discussion

In this section, I will discuss the themes I identified in my analysis in relation to the literature on students' experiences of assessment and assignment briefs as discussed in the literature review, drawing on Gee's conception of Discourse (Gee, 1989, 2003b, 2011) and the academic literacies model (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006; Street, 2013; Lillis and Tuck, 2016) to provide a lens with which to view and interpret the challenges faced by my participants in this early stage of their journey to becoming (Gale and Parker, 2014a, 2014b) as university students and future professionals in their chosen fields. In this, I am moving from a strongly inductive approach to a more deductive engagement, exploring my inductive interpretation in the light of relevant literature in order to explicate my analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) and identify implications that they may have relevance for practice in the programme, institutional and, perhaps, sectoral context. Rather than discussing it in a discrete section of its own, analysis of three of the assignment briefs that participants engage with (see section 4.1 above) is referred to where relevant and where it provides useful context or clarification of participants' experiences. It is hoped that the analysis of these briefs provides a useful objective referent (Wengraf, 2001) to inform understanding of those experiences and provide a basis for their interpretation and interrogation, but the focus remains upon the participants and their lived experience of engaging with assessment as part of their studies.

Where it is relevant to do so, I reuse the words of the participants in order to illustrate and underline my discussion. Otherwise, I refer to the themes via their labels as identified in the Group Experiential Themes table (see Table 19 above Table 19: Summary of Group Experiential Themes by participant), e.g., GET 1a, GET 3b, etc., and adopt a broadly reflective approach to the discussion of the themes in general. For the purposes of organisation and narrative clarity I have structured this discussion using the super-ordinate themes as headings. In this approach, I am following the example of other IPA studies which have been identified as exemplary in their approach (Smith and Nizza, 2022), for example, Huff *et al.* (2019), Smith and Rhodes (2015) and Conroy and de Visser (2015).

5.1 Valuing comprehensiveness and clarity

The findings of this study reflect Walsh's (2021b, 2021a) conclusions with regard to the importance of the assignment brief's comprehensiveness in promoting students' confident and effective engagement with assessment (GET 1a). For Walsh, confidence was strongly linked to students' sense of having clear understanding of expectations, clarity on procedures they were expected to undertake as part of their assessed work and explicit guidance on requirements, for example, in relation to referencing, submission processes and avoiding academic integrity issues. This would seem to confirm the importance of clarity and explicitness in assignment briefs as advised in Gilbert and Maguire's (2014) guidance on assignment brief design and the inclusion of certain minimum requirements in assignment briefs as identified by Gilbert and Maguire (2014), Howell-Richardson (2015), Hughes (2009) and Thomas *et al.* (2019). Certainly, clear, explicit statements of what is expected in assignments along with comprehensive guidance in terms of structure and content were highly valued by the participants as a means of scaffolding their engagement with their assessed work (GET 1c). Without them, the participants did not feel they had the information they required to engage effectively and confidently in their assessment activities, with consequent negative impact on levels of overwhelmedness, confusion and anxiety (GET 1b).

All the participants discussed ways in which they used the assignment brief to provide structure and guidance for their engagement with their assessed work. For Mary, Sara and Ruth, the brief was used as a prospective means of planning and structuring their approach, while Clare spoke of its use as a means of retrospective confirmation that she had evidenced the learning outcomes. Sadler's view of formative assessment (Sadler, 1989) requires that students have some concept of the standard they are aiming for against which to evaluate and judge their performance (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Tai *et al.*, 2018). The students' use of the brief would seem to suggest that they are using it as an external representation of this concept. The practices of lecturers in providing the guidance that would otherwise scaffold task completion varied across the modules the students were completing at the time of the study. One adopted a highly structured and guiding approach from the very beginning, while the other, at least initially, made the

brief available and left students to it. The anxiety in evidence in the latter case, in which the Social Work participants discussed their concerns about not knowing how to engage with the task, suggests that they lacked a strong internal representation of the work that was expected via which to plan, regulate and evaluate their engagement (Clark, 2012). This seems strongly linked, too, to Sadler's conception of goal knowledge (2014a). This points, too, to the usefulness of acknowledging that while the literature that is *directly* focused on the communication of assessment expectations and requirements via assignment briefs is still a growing area, there is much that is of value in the wider literature on assessment that is relevant and helpful in understanding of students' experience of this aspect of the assessment process. As a key example, Sadler's (2014a) work on goal knowledge seems of particular relevance in understanding participants' experiences.

Goal knowledge (Sadler, 2014a) is a complex combination of understanding the end (the product, or final work that the student will produce and what it will 'look like') and the means (the process by which they will complete it). Although he does not discuss it in these terms, it seems strongly linked to his thinking around formative assessment (Sadler, 1989) and the need for students to develop internal models and tacit knowledge with which to engage with their work in a process of self-regulation and evaluative judgment (Clark, 2012; Tai *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, the approaches Sadler suggests would be useful in developing students' acquisition of goal knowledge and ability to respond appropriately to their assignments are essentially the same as those that would typically form the basis for formative assessment as discussed previously in this dissertation (see section 2.1.2 above). Where Sadler's concept is perhaps lacking, however, is in the needs of non-traditional students in relation to their engagement with assessment. He discusses the experiences of 'high performing' students and 'lesser performers' (Sadler, 2014a, pp. 5–6), but does not, I think, adequately consider how the latter might be supported more effectively in their engagement.

Naturally, non-traditional students are not necessarily 'lesser performers', although they are likely to lack the knowledge, understanding and confidence of their more privileged counterparts (Ashwin, 2009) and experience less of that 'effortless fit' that Sadler suggests characterises the way in which the more able deliver on the expectations of

their assessed work. The kind of 'acquisition-friendly' activities for developing evaluative judgement and goal knowledge that Sadler recommends are, I think, undeniably of use in helping students in the broader task of developing their understanding of disciplinary Discourse and internalising its ways of being and thinking. However, the experiences of the students in this study would suggest that they also benefit when assessed tasks are presented not simply as 'models of clarity', but also with some level of scaffolding and guidance (GET1c). In the case of the Context of Social Work essay and the People Management report, the provision of scaffolding, in the form of the bulleted sub tasks and report headings served to promote confident engagement (even allowing for shortfalls elsewhere in the definition of the tasks), that had a positive impact upon the students' sense of agency and being able to engage with their assessed work at the appropriate level. It also seemed to reduce anxiety, which must be considered useful effects. Acknowledging that the students may not have well-developed internal models and representations of the goal knowledge required and/or lack confidence in what is expected of them, the inclusion of scaffolding in the briefs provides for both. It offers a bridging function into the assignment by providing aspects of the goal knowledge required and also supportively gives students a starting point to promote confident engagement. Sadler cautions against the provision of 'recipe-like instructions or formulas' (Sadler, 2014a, p. 5) largely, it seems, to avoid the over-specification of assessment requirements and to guard against what Torrance refers to as 'conformative assessment' (Torrance, 2012). The sample of assignments included and subjected to analysis in this study, however, while some of which provided some degree of scaffolding, could not, I think, in themselves be accused of providing 'recipes' for engagement, as having broken the task down into subtasks or provided a system of headings to work within, the briefs otherwise leave the students to frame their own responses. Rather, as Balloo *et al.* (2018) suggest, the directiveness (as Mary would describe it) and transparency provided by the inclusion of such support is instead 'essential to providing equality of opportunity and promoting students' self-regulatory capacity' (p.69).

Participants' positive attitudes to the templated, consistent nature of the way in which assignment briefs were presented to them (GET 1e) would seem to bear out the cognitive efficiency of this approach in allowing students to direct their cognitive resources

towards the assessed task rather than interpreting the brief itself (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b; Walsh, 2021a). This provides a basis for a cognitive account for this aspect of students learning how to engage effectively with their briefs. Their discussion of the consistency of the template, suggests that it is indeed contributing to the internalisation of schemas for the structure of assessed tasks, promoting ease of processing (Eiriksdottir and Catrambone, 2011; Paas and van Merriënboer, 2020) and reducing anxiety relating to the complexity of the brief (Walsh, 2021b). It is notable that Bridget, as a student with dyslexia found the templated nature of the brief and the use of boxes and white space to distinguish between different sections particularly useful.

Three of the participants indicated that they found the guidance on how their work should be presented was useful and that they made active use of it as part of their engagement with the assignments (GET 1d). Mary, particularly, valued this as a means of promoting confidence in knowing what she had to do. Its inclusion served to clarify a further part of the assessment process about which she would have had to make decisions and which may otherwise have caused anxiety. Ruth also mentioned this aspect in her suggestions for what made an effective brief, seeing it as something she might otherwise forget about, which suggests that she is aware of its importance in some way as part of the assessment process – it is something she has to ‘remind herself’ about. In fact, while some colleagues may have preferences for the way in which student work is presented, there is no programme or institutional policy that dictates what font or line spacing should be used in typical coursework submissions other than the expectation that work should be word processed and presented in a way that is communicatively effective. For Bridget, this aspect of the briefs was felt to be useful, although she found the variation in requirements between modules unnecessarily complicated and burdensome.

Both Mary’s and Ruth’s attitudes seem to reflect Collier and Morgan’s (2008) suggestions that non-traditional students desire explicitness in documentation and instructions to make up for the shortfalls in their understanding of otherwise tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of their university environments. Consistency in presentation requirements for the programme as a whole, as suggested by Bridget, might also serve to alleviate anxiety resulting from the need to respond to individual lecturers’ idiosyncratic requirements,

allowing for greater concentration on the actual task (Walsh, 2021b). A consistent, programme-based approach would also allow for rapid internalisation of such requirements, providing a basis for confident and efficient engagement in future work. As a means of reducing the cognitive load associated with processing long and complex assignment briefs, Walsh suggests that certain consistent information (e.g., submission processes, presentational requirements, information about late submission, extensions, etc.) could usefully be stored centrally with links from the brief, thus avoiding repetition from brief to brief and reducing their overall length and complexity (Walsh, 2021a). While this might result in some initial additional extraneous cognitive load associated with the split attention effect (Chandler and Sweller, 1996), provided that the information was consistently relevant and, where necessary, changes could be included as required in briefs for assignments that had different requirements, it should be quickly learnt and internalised. Importantly, in the interests of providing comprehensive and explicit information about assessment processes, it would mean, too, that students were at least aware of where to access it. The removal of information of this kind that is common across assignments would also make for shorter briefs.

The assignments discussed by the participants were the very first they had encountered as university students and in the absence of any other external models or exemplars on which to base their sense of their goals in completing the tasks, it is unsurprising that they should have looked for whatever support they could to support their engagement. The assignment brief clearly represents an important source of such guidance, with an expectation that it should provide support and scaffolding as well as a clear specification of the task. This was especially valued when it takes the form of brief bullet points, or in the case of unfamiliar text types, such as Business reports, recommended headings, providing a basis for engagement with the assignment. This kind of explicit guidance provides the basis for students to work at a level analogous to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), providing a bridging function to enable them to engage in a way for which they felt underprepared without.

On the face of it, this seems likely to have led to the development of the students' understanding of how to engage with similar assignments as part of their growing assessment literacy (Price *et al.*, 2012), provides for confident engagement (Boud, 2000)

and contributes to students' sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015). Practices seem to vary across the programmes, but certainly the students were highly appreciative of clarity in relation to task specification and practicalities and what they felt to be appropriate levels of scaffolding in their briefs.

5.2 Experiencing the brief as a barrier

The positive experience of assignment briefs outlined in the previous section, however, does require that they are well-formed and communicatively effective. Students also reported occasions where the brief, rather than affording confident engagement with assessment, acted as a barrier. This was associated with issues in the design of the task itself (GET 2a) (for example, misalignment between task and outcomes (Biggs, 2014)) and ambiguity of expression and complexity (GET 2b), both of the task and in the way in which it and associated assessment criteria were communicated. It must also be noted that some of the issues in the briefs included in this study also had problems that were rather overlooked by the participants but were revealed via the close analysis they were subjected to as part of the study. It is suggested that these invisible issues, however, may also be important in raising potential barriers to students' ongoing understanding of assessment processes and sense of belonging and agency within their disciplinary contexts.

Not all Social Work students noticed the misalignment between outcomes and task in the Lifespan assignment, for example, as their anxiety relating to the absence of scaffolding in this case was such that it was this aspect that they focused on. Where it was noticed, however, this too caused considerable confusion. Clare, who discussed this issue at some length, comes from a vocational training background in which outcomes tend to be quite specific and which will typically be assessed discretely and explicitly (Gill, 2019, 2021), found this issue particularly problematic. Certainly, this seems to have been a moment in which the cognitive demands of engaging with the task and attempting to resolve an unsolvable problem (the assignment was also not constructively aligned (Biggs, 2014)) somewhat overtook the demands of engaging with the task itself, thus complicating an already complex and demanding activity (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a; Walsh, 2021b).

Although Clare engaged with the assignment as best she could with her typically pragmatic and practical approach to things, this had a negative impact upon the assessment of a module which she otherwise had enjoyed and felt confident about, as it drew upon aspects of her own professional experience in social care. Rather than promoting her confidence (Boud, 2000), this particular task left her feeling that she had failed to meet some of the outcomes and somewhat mistrustful of the fairness of the assessment process (Carless, 2009). In this case, as Gustafson-Pearce (2009) suggests, it may well have been better if the outcomes had not been included in the brief, albeit on the grounds that they were not appropriately aligned to the task, rather than being difficult or confusing to understand. In fact, contrary to Gustafson-Pearce's (2009) suggestion that learning outcomes are seldom understood by students, who find them confusing, the participants in this study actively used them to inform their understanding of assessment expectations, leading, as in Clare's case, to confusion and anxiety where the outcomes and task were not felt to be in alignment.

Issues with the presentation of the assessed task were also found to complicate students' engagement with their assessed work. Ambiguity and inconsistency within one of Bridget's briefs around the number of examples required in her response caused particular difficulty, clarified ultimately via the engagement of her dyslexia helper who was able to identify the issue. This lack of clarity clearly had implications for how the students felt they should respond to the task and what the finished product should include (Sadler, 2014a). This was also notably the case for Mary in her interpretation of the reflective essay on a videoed mock interview. Lack of clarity and separation of the procedural aspects of the task (conducting the interview and recording the video) and the task itself (reflecting on the experience) caused her to focus on the former rather than the latter. Again, this raised anxiety levels and, because it raised the extraneous cognitive load associated with processing the task (Chandler and Sweller, 1996; Sweller, van Merriënboer and Paas, 1998), seems to have obscured and made more complicated the nature of the task itself (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b).

Further issues of communication related to the complexity of language and the overall complexity of the assessment criteria. Both Gilbert and Maguire (2014b) and Howell-Richardson (2015) include the importance of clear, accessible, level appropriate language

in their assignment brief design guidelines. It is not clear precisely which aspects of the language in the assignment briefs were problematic as only Ruth identified this as a particular challenge and did not elaborate. The analysis of the briefs encountered by both Social Work and Business students suggests area where language could be potentially difficult, not so much in terms of disciplinary terminology, which seemed largely to be level appropriate, but perhaps in the very particular meanings of otherwise 'everyday' words within the disciplinary context. In the Context of Social Work assignment, for example, the use of 'consider' and in the Business assignment the use of 'reflect' as task verbs within the task specification pointed to meanings beyond their everyday usage which may have caused confusion for students (Williams, 2005b; Richards and Pilcher, 2014). For Ruth, the issue was quickly resolved following explanation by the teacher and her own respeaking of complex terms, which provided a basis for her interpretation of the briefs in a manner reminiscent of Carless's (2007) approach of encouraging his students to reformulate aspects of assessment criteria in their own words. In this, she seems to have taken ownership of the language, acting upon it with her own power as a means of appropriating it to inform her engagement with the task.

Analysis of the briefs also reveals issues with the assessment criteria, although I cannot say very much about them. The complexity of the criteria as shared as well as issues relating to their applicability to the particular tasks (see section 4.1 above) meant, I believe, that students largely ignored them, treating them perhaps as another aspect of the disciplinary and institutional environment that was inaccessible and opaque to them. Only Ruth commented on the challenge of engaging with them, even though it seems that they were available in relation to all the assignments, either as part of the brief or as a discrete document (e.g., the Lifespan assignment, see section 4.1 above). Clare noted their absence in relation to at least one of the assignments she discussed, although this may have been because she was unaware of their location as a separate document. As has been discussed in the section on the programme context (see Section 1.2.2, above), the programme team are in something of a transitional state with regard to their application of relatively recent institutional policy relating to the communication of assessment criteria and it is clear that practice in this area is in an ongoing state of development. A similar issue seems to be in evidence in some of the Business

assignments, too, suggesting that staff development opportunities in relation to the framing of effective assessment criteria have not been universally successful to date. Certainly, in the assignment briefs analysed in the study, the criteria were made available either as part of the brief or via the VLE and seem likely to have been shared in class. A particular concern, however, is that the current versions in use in both contexts are rather too closely modelled on the institutional grading descriptors, rather than the specifics of the outcomes for each assignment as is the recommendation in policy. The grading descriptors are heavily based on the QAA's FHEQ statements (QAA, 2014b) framed in high level language and not really intended for unmediated student consumption. It is little wonder that Ruth found them dense and inaccessible.

The issues discussed above point to aspects of the brief that represented barriers to the participants' engagement with their assessed work in relation to specific assignments, causing confusion due to misalignment between outcomes and task, the inclusion of ambiguities or inconsistencies in framing of the task and complexity, perhaps particularly in relation to the communication of assessment criteria. Analysis of the briefs (see section 4.1 above), however, also points to potential barriers, albeit on a more theoretical basis. Although these aspects were not raised in the interview, they were surfaced by the close analysis of the briefs and it will be useful to discuss them here.

The well-formedness of the specifications of the tasks in all three of the selected briefs included in the study is questionable. In Sadler's terms, each of them in their own particular way fails to 'identify, directly or indirectly, the response genre required' (Sadler, 2014a, p. 5). That is, each of the assignments invokes relevant text types (essay, report, etc.), but in each case the directly or indirectly required text type is in some way not representative of typical versions of that form. The rhetorical purpose (Thomas *et al.*, 2019) in the essay in the Context of Social Work is somewhat obscure and overall the essay lacks a strong defining organisational principle in terms of an issue to discuss, or position to defend or explain. Instead, the assignment consists of a number of well-formed sub-tasks that quite helpfully engage students in appropriate levels of engagement with their subject. As has been discussed above, the Lifespan essay is both bewildering in its range of choices and lacks clarity in the statement of its overarching task, but also contains misalignment between some of its possible responses and its

learning outcomes. The people management assignment is initially confused about its text type, identifying initially as a portfolio and then as a report. Of particular significance, however, is the imposition of a Business report format and structure on what is in fact not a Business report with a clear Business-related function and purpose, but a reflective report in which the focus is on what the students have learnt.

With the exception of the misalignment in the Lifespan essay, none of the participants seem to have noticed these issues. Instead, they simply did 'as they were told', responding to the identified text type accordingly, dutifully imposing an essay structure on their response to the Context of Social Work essay, doing their best in the Lifespan essay despite its lack of alignment and producing a report in the required format in the People Management assignment. It is in this that the significance of the shortfall in the communication of these assignments can be found. Because the Context of Social Work is not a well-formed essay, it is questionable whether students' engagement with it will contribute to their ability to engage more effectively and with greater confidence in future essays. The subtasks/scaffolding provides a basis for meaningful engagement with the subject matter and opportunities for delivery according to appropriate rhetorical purposes (description, conceptual analysis, evaluation, etc.), but it is doubtful whether these prompts will provide a basis for approaching future essays on different aspects of the subject matter. Equally, the People Management report both looks and feels like a Business report but does so only on a gestural and structural level as it lacks an authentic purpose and audience. Students who notice the misalignment between outcomes and task in the Lifespan essay will remain mystified as to how they might complete and pass an assignment that does not align with its learning outcomes. All of these examples then might be said in some way to contribute, rather than serve to clarify or render transparent, what Lillis describes as the arcane 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 2001, p. 53) quite apart from imposing further cognitive burden on students by requiring them to impose the conventions and structures of text types on their response that do not really fit.

Rather than being provided with 'models of clarity' and opportunities to engage with and learn from valued text types within their disciplinary Discourses as part of their academic socialisation and develop an understanding of how they function, students are required

instead to engage with briefs containing corrupted versions of those text types and impenetrable and opaque assessment criteria. They are forced to engage with them because they are 'authoritative' in the Bakhtinian sense (1981) and inescapable in the Boudian sense (1995). Where they provide scaffolding and guidance, this may provide for more confident engagement but the briefs otherwise miss opportunities for supporting student engagement with valuable learning of particular relevance to non-traditional students (Balloo *et al.*, 2018). Instead of promoting belonging, I would suggest that they rather serve to exclude because they normalise otherwise illogical and corrupted practices and, importantly, because they have no option, require students to engage with and accept them. Clare, when she identified the misalignment between the task and the outcomes in the Lifespan essay felt nevertheless required to complete it to the best of her capabilities. In this, the underlying message to her seems plain: even though the problem she have been given is unsolvable, it is her fault that she cannot see how to resolve it and her response will be assessed in a way that she cannot hope to understand, using criteria that are impenetrable and inaccessible to her...¹⁵

5.3 Dissemination can provide a basis for confident engagement with assessment

As part of the initial round of interviews and the second with Bridget, participants were asked about whether they had opportunities to discuss their assignments with their teachers and with each other. The intention behind this question was to explore how briefs were disseminated, i.e., shared and discussed in formal settings, such as the classroom, and also informally between peers. This aspect of the interview process was not pressed hard during the first round, but a specific question on how briefs were shared with students and its impact on how they felt was explored. Responses to these questions and indeed indications of how briefs were shared and discussed in class as part of responses to other aspects of the interview process reveal a complex picture in

¹⁵ It is hoped that this and possible related experiences with subsequent briefs did not contribute to her decision to withdraw from her course at the end of her second year...

relation to dissemination practices, in which different approaches are either welcomed or resented. Overall, it seems that dissemination activities can indeed support student engagement with their briefs and assessment activities, but this is dependent upon a number of factors. Overall, the Social Work students valued opportunities for engaging with their briefs as part of in-class activities and having their teachers explain things to them (GET3a), but timing can be a key factor in its usefulness. Bridget also valued this in her first interview but had a markedly different experience and attitude to this aspect of the process in her second, in which she found the perceived disparity between what was shared in her briefs and what was shared in class a source of frustration and disappointment (GET3b). A further aspect of dissemination activities that has been included relates to the use of exemplars as a means of developing student understanding of assessment expectations and requirements (GET 3c), which, it seems, can have unintended consequences if not managed appropriately.

The participants in the study mention a range of ways in which their assignment briefs were disseminated to them. These ranged from initial 'hands-off' approaches in which the Social Work participants were given the brief with little attendant explanation and support as in the case of the Lifespan essay (although later amended to include extended classroom-based explanatory sessions) to highly structured approaches in which aspects of the brief and assignment were referred to during sessions throughout the module, as in the case of the Context of Social Work essay. Overall, efforts to explain and support engagement with the briefs in these activities were well received and much appreciated by all participants during the first interview (GET 3a). Certainly, it seems they did much to alleviate anxieties the students had regarding meeting the expectations of university level study and engagement with summative assessment tasks (Craddock and Mathias, 2009).

As mentioned, a central characteristic of the approaches to supporting student engagement with assessment via what I have loosely described as dissemination activities is that they seem teacher-led in nature. As reported by the students, this typically takes the form of explanatory sessions during scheduled contact hours in which the teacher unpacks, explains and interprets the assignment, with the opportunity for students to ask questions. Sara's comment seems indicative of the general feelings experienced by the Social Work students:

Sara: At the beginning it was different. It's been a while since I've been back into education and that initial worry is what scares me. But once you get the assignment briefs and the work and they talk to you, they explain everything. Then it makes me feel more comfortable about what's expected of us and what we need to do, like their standards.

Such approaches clearly alleviate anxiety and can be valuable in helping students develop an understanding of disciplinary values, expectations and ways of doing in relation to assessed tasks (Howell-Richardson and Ganobcsik-Williams, 2016; Balloo *et al.*, 2018). However, they may otherwise do little to address inequality in power differentials between students and teacher and promote the possibility of transformative engagement (Lillis and Scott, 2015) and identity development (Gale, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014b). While acknowledging the usefulness of this approach in alleviating student anxieties and providing for a confident engagement with assessment by clarifying expectations and requirements, it is somewhat unidirectional (Lillis and Scott, 2015) and rather oriented towards Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the 'centripetal' pull towards disciplinary norms and conformity, leaving little space for students to bring their own voices, their own values and existing identities into the process.

Howell-Richardson (2012) suggests that students' have a sense that there is a 'golden key' to assignments that, once revealed will unlock the 'secret' of the task. Such a conception may be rooted in students' previous educational experiences, but it seems likely, too, that it is promoted (if implicitly) by approaches to engaging students with assessment processes that are predicated on authoritative 'telling' (Balloo *et al.*, 2018; Tai *et al.*, 2018) rather than opportunities for exploration and discussion. Approaches that provide 'recipe-like instructions' in the form of over-specific guidance in briefs as warned against by Sadler (2014a) may also serve to reinforce such misconceptions. The powerful impact of the approach to disseminating assignment briefs in the DiSA project (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Cureton *et al.*, 2017) in which students engage actively and discursively with briefs with their peers before engaging with their teachers to explore and unpack the assignments would suggest that this represents a useful alternative as it creates a space for the possibility of different perspectives and different voices. The staff on the programme are models of supportiveness and are clearly willing to answer questions and engage with the students when approached, which clearly encourages

students, but the teacher-led approaches to dissemination and formative assessment as reported by the participants rather seem to promote student confidence that they can engage effectively in assessment on the basis that they are doing what they have been told what to do.

Teacher-determined engagement with assessment also requires students to engage with its requirements at a time and in a manner decided by the teacher rather than in a way best suited to their particular stage of readiness. For example, when assignment briefs were shared at the outset of the programme, some students were ready and responded positively. For some, however, the experience served to overload and overwhelm. Ideally, such exposure to the assignments would be managed in a way finely tuned to their individual stages of existing knowledge and preparedness with appropriate support and scaffolding to allow for engagement within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Such an individualised approach, however, is not practicable in a large cohort context and teachers are required instead to adopt approaches that are likely to be broadly helpful to the majority. The social dimension of Vygotskian notions of learning may provide a means of allowing students to come to the briefs on their own terms. Engagement based around the collaborative support of peers, as in the DiSA approach (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Cureton *et al.*, 2017), for example, may provide opportunities not only for useful social bonding but also for the useful negotiation of relevant disciplinary and institutional norms (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019), both between students and also between students and staff (Clark, 2012).

Attending classroom-based sessions in which the assignment briefs were discussed were certainly valued by Bridget in her first interview. However, in her second interview, she paints a somewhat different picture. Discussions and explanations of assignments in sessions is still valued, but as a result of a strategic decision to prioritise the guidance she receives in these sessions over what she was able to gain from her assignment briefs. This is the result of a perceived disparity between what was shared in the briefs and in these sessions, which was a source of considerable frustration (GET3b). Instead of allowing her to engage with her assessments independently on the basis of a full and comprehensive brief, Bridget felt that she was instead constrained to be dependent upon what the teacher said during sessions.

5.4 Striving for independence

In Penketh and Goddard's (2008) study of mature women transitioning from Foundation Degrees to Level 6 study, the student experience was characterised by anxiety around assessment and the challenge of managing paid work and study. Indeed, for some of their students the experience of their course was one of being 'beset by trials' (Penketh and Goddard, 2008, p. 320). The students in this study certainly experienced anxiety and, for some, it was clear that their engagement with their university work required careful management of complex home lives and childcare. Overall, however, although all students reported feelings of anxiety, there is a clear sense, too, of a desire to be independent and 'get on' with their studies, even in the face of sometimes poorly framed assignment briefs. This manifests itself in a number of ways, from practical and pragmatic individual responses aimed at simply getting things done (as in Clare's case), to the recognition that independence requires not simply heroic self-reliance but also a willingness to draw on sources of available support (as in Mary's case, involving a considerable and, indeed courageous, determination to do so) (GET 4a). In this, there are perhaps echoes of Bandura's collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and certainly there is a clear sense of different levels of support and a kind of order in which it is appropriate to access them.

The first port of call for support is invariably other students, for Social Work students this was often via the cohort's WhatsApp group. Bridget, however, notably, somewhat eschews any reliance on others. As well as a response to the challenges of engaging with assessment, such collaborative engagement can be viewed as rather a fact of contemporary higher education life, perhaps particularly since the impact of the pivot to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jisc, 2021). Many Social Work students, too, are mature 'commuter students' (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) and may thus lack the opportunities for the easy social interactions otherwise afforded to younger, residential students as they move around campus, share interests outside of formal classes, etc. Participation in virtual groups may serve to mitigate any sense of isolation arising from their separation from the traditional life of the residential student and promote wellbeing (Jisc, 2023).

A further consideration underlining the usefulness of unpicking the possible impact of WhatsApp groups or similar social media platforms, however, lies in understanding how such participation promotes a sense of control and agency or in some way informs the students' feelings about themselves in relation to their environments. As social beings it is perhaps not surprising that students should seek to engage socially with others in order to mitigate the challenges and difficulties of engaging with a learning environment in which they feel disadvantaged, disempowered and uncertain. The kind of group discussion described in this study and the action arising from it as a result, e.g., requesting clarification of assessment requirements from a tutor as a class, can also be seen as a form of empowered collective efficacy (Bandura, 1977) via which students bring their collective influence and agency to bear on 'matters over which they have some command' (Bandura, 2000, p. 78), i.e., how they negotiate the power relations inherent in the environment and, in particular, the assessment process.

Aspects, too, of university services, such as the academic skills support offered by the Student Learning and Achievement hub are also perceived as being part of the students' 'world' in a way that the teacher, however approachable and willing to offer support, is not. Indeed, almost universally, the students discussed approaching their teachers for help as a kind of last resort. In this there seems something of an analogy with Guitart and Moll's (2014) concept of the 'funds of identity' that learners draw from in the creation of their new identity in their new educational contexts. Rather than being alone in their struggles with assessment, there is a growing sense in the students of a realisation that there are instead a range of sources, of 'funds', of support and academic capital available to them that can provide the basis for their engagement with their studies.

Sometimes, too, the way students assert their independence is discussed in relatively small terms, such as proactively taking measures to take control of aspects of the study environment, for example, by printing out and annotating the assignment brief, respeaking difficult language and adopting useful study strategies, taking short breaks and varying activities to refresh tired brains (GET 4c). For Sara, for example, drawing on a strong sense of herself as an effective student developed as part of a strict family attitude to the importance of education, it was a case of 'throwing a switch' and adopting a disciplined and focused mindset, relying in tried and tested patterns of study developed

in previous educational experiences. This points strongly to the power of the primary Discourse in determining how individuals feel able to engage with secondary Discourses (Gee, 2011).

Studies of mature social care students have identified a tendency towards reluctance to ask for support (McSweeney, 2014). This may arise from a sense that they should be able to 'do it for themselves' and a wish to avoid being perceived as 'needy or incapable' (McSweeney, 2014, p. 323). Certainly, for those students with experience, sometimes in quite senior capacities, in professional life prior to coming to university, such as Mary and Clare, this seems to have been the case. Both them had difficult experiences of early education, which seems likely to have exacerbated this reluctance to seek help. Willingness to seek support, however, emerges as an important aspect of how the participants manage challenging aspects of their engagement with assessment and it is clear that it is fostered by the extremely positive and supportive environment created by the caring and committed staff on both programmes (GET 4b). This helped Sara overcome nervousness about seeking support and Mary particularly to overcome her feelings of fragility as a learner (Crozier *et al.*, 2008) and anxieties about being viewed and judged negatively when asking for help. Clare seems to have been surprised at the levels of supportiveness in teaching staff, arising from misconceptions about the nature of the independent study required at university acquired from friends.

The final subtheme identified under this Group Experiential Theme relates not so much to aspects of the environment which promote independence as their opposite. Problems in the assignment brief clearly impeded all students' engagement with their assessed work to greater and lesser extents, but for some students in particular, the impact of this was perhaps more negative and insidious as it seems to have affected their sense of themselves as learners (GET 4d). In an earlier, questionnaire based study that a colleague and I were unable to take further forward than initial presentation at a conference (Rochon and Knight, 2013), we felt there was an indication that less confident learners were locating issues that actually resided in the assignment brief in themselves, with consequent impact on their feelings of confidence in themselves as learners. By contrast, more academically confident students identified the brief as problematic and either side-stepped the issue or proactively decided how best to engage for themselves. That is, the

less confident students perceived their difficulty in making sense of a poorly expressed brief as a result of their own shortcomings, rather than problems in the brief. This seems to have been rather borne out in this study in Clare's uncertainty about being allowed to want a 'clearer vision of what is required', as if this was in some way overdelivering on an aspect of the brief that she should otherwise be able to interpret for herself. It is particularly notable, however, in Mary's experience of proactively engaging with her reflective essay in advance of the teacher (somewhat belatedly) providing further guidance on how to complete it and discovering that she had not really done what was expected. This is understandably something of a disheartening experience, but importantly the way in which she discusses it indicates that she feels it indicates a deficit on her own behalf rather than in the way the assignment was made available:

Mary: ... So I understand that now is that where I've written, I need to write about how it applies to my interview, as I didn't have that information before, and I think there was an expectation that we're expected to recognize that.

The shift in Bridget's perspective on this between her first and second interview is marked. As with Mary and Clare, there is a sense initially that Bridget, too, feels that there is an expectation that she should just be able to work things out for herself and that her inability to do so reflects upon her, rather than issues in the way her briefs have been communicated:

Bridget: I think it was something that I was expected to do? (Interview 1)

Shriver's work on document design and instructional text from other contexts provides a useful analogue for these experiences, pointing to the tendency for people to assume that it is their fault and not the text or product if they cannot complete a task:

...over time, people's repeated experiences with badly designed products and instruction guides may convince them that they are incompetent as both readers and users of technology' (Shriver, 1997, p. 222)

Indeed, there is a clear parallel between Shriver's discussion of students' experiences of engaging with poorly designed textbooks, technology and instruction manuals and the experiences of students making sense of poorly designed assignment briefs. It seems that textbooks and other instructional texts tend to be viewed as 'authoritative discourse' (Bakhtin, 1981) in the same way as assignment briefs. Consequently, if a user or student

has problems understanding them, the issue must be theirs, as the briefs 'must' be infallible... In her third year, however, Bridget's attitude and confidence in her own abilities have changed. At this point, she is readily able to determine where she feels there are errors, inconsistencies or unfairness in her briefs:

Bridget: I think it's like they're not even like they're telling you, but they're not telling you what they want. You see? And I'm not asking oh like, 'put in the assignment brief 'use this theories and models this, this, and this topic', but I'm asking like if the whole of a particular assignment focuses on one topic and it and the whole topic focuses on that analysis. I mean it should be made clear, since the whole assignment is based on that particular thing. (Interview 2)

She is, to borrow from Badenhorst *et al.* (2015, p.98) at once 'living within the system but thinking outside it'. As a consequence, rather than blaming herself, she adopts strategies to deal with the difficulties she identifies in her environment. It is notable, however, that she considers this somewhat negatively, as a form of 'dependency', of having to submit in some way to the authoritative discourse provided by the teacher, rather than her preferred agentic engagement with assessment on the basis of her understanding and interpretation of the brief.

5.5 Building on success and existing knowledge promotes confidence

The final Group Experiential Theme identified relates to the students' developing sense of self-efficacy (GET 5a) and the usefulness and importance of assessment practices providing opportunities for students to approach their assessed work from a position of strength and existing knowledge (GET 5b). Without wishing to overstate things, it would seem that some aspects of the students' experience of engaging with their assignment briefs have caused them challenges and that they have to some extent also be 'beset by trials' (Penketh and Goddard, 2008). Certainly, for all of them, aspects of the experience have variously promoted feelings of anxiety, confusion, frustration and overwhelmedness, if in response to different aspects of the experience and to greater and lesser extents. It is also clear, however, that, overall, the students felt that they were making progress and that initial engagement with their assessed work had provided the

basis for greater confidence in engaging with future assignments (Boud, 2000) (GET 5a). It is noted, however, that, as Clare suggests, this is not necessarily simply a natural progression but rather that it is contingent upon the availability of appropriately framed and well-formed assignment briefs in the future.

In situations where students were able to draw upon existing strengths and knowledge, this promoted confidence in their engagement with assignments and a strong sense of their own efficacy. Mary's was the most marked of these experiences and, perhaps surprisingly, given her otherwise high levels of anxiety around assessment, occurred in relation to an assignment that the other students found particularly problematic. The Lifespan essay (see section 4.1 above), which was initially disseminated with minimal support and scaffolding, caused considerable consternation among the students in the study and (according to their reports) to the cohort as a whole. For Mary, however, the subject of the assignment she chose to focus on related to her many years of professional experience in caring for elderly people with dementia. Her confidence in how she spoke of engaging with this assignment was palpable; her existing knowledge and the opportunity to draw upon aspects of herself provided for an empowered engagement with the task, allowing her to sidestep the issues that caused others so much difficulty.

Mary's experience in this assignment allowed her to bring aspects of her life before university into the context of her studies in a way that had a powerful, empowering impact on her sense of herself as a student. Other students in the study talked, too, of how, for example, positive previous educational experiences and successes also created a basis for confident engagement with assessed work. Aiken's (2021) use of Bakhtin's (1981) metaphor of centripetal and centrifugal forces is useful in understanding this. Quite apart from challenges with interpreting sometimes problematic aspects of the assignment briefs, there is a sense in all the students of having to engage with assessment activities that require to them fulfil expectations that are defined other than in themselves. That is, that the predominant thrust of assessment practices within the programme are centred around promoting conformity with disciplinary requirements and conventions as communicated in their briefs and by their teachers in dissemination activities. On a certain level this is a necessity and to be desired; the students aspire to become members of a disciplinary and professional community and clearly need to

acquire the knowledge, skills and values that this entails. However, there is a sense that this is perhaps too heavily reliant upon a unidirectional and normative approach that leaves little space for the possibility of transformative engagement in which students are given opportunities to bring themselves and their own values into the equation. The supportive and highly committed teaching staff on the programme have succeeded in creating a learning environment in which participants clearly feel they can develop and grow as students, as evidenced in the way they discuss their feelings about the future on the course. Yet, there are missed opportunities for further fostering their confidence and identities as active and engaged learners and future professionals so that they might contribute from the basis of 'who they are and what they know' (Gale, 2012, p. 253) rather than purely conforming to normative expectations (Biesta, 2009).

5.6 Conclusion

By way of concluding the Discussion section, it will be useful briefly to attempt to situate the findings of this study within the broader context of the literature on assessment and draw conclusions with regard its usefulness and value. The work of Sadler (2014) on goal knowledge and the importance of providing students with sound material on which to base their engagement with assessment (Sadler, 2016) is of particular relevance and I feel that this study contributes both to an understanding of this concept and also to the particular challenges faced by non-traditional students and how they might be supported. This links strongly to the suggestions of Balloo *et al.* (2018) that carefully pitched and progressive approaches to scaffolding may help to provide equality of opportunity and promote self-regulation skills. I would suggest, too, that a consideration of Sadler's work provides a useful bridge between a consideration of the beginning of the assessment process when students first engage with assignments via interpretation of their assignment briefs and thinking about formative assessment, which is more typically associated with the process of completing work and engaging effectively with feedback (Sadler, 1989; Carless, 2015; Carless and Chan, 2017; Tai *et al.*, 2018).

A focus on the student experience of briefs has revealed the particular challenges faced by first year students in their engagement with assessment, particularly for the non-

traditional students who formed the basis for this study, and has suggested what might be described as key 'affordances' (Norman, 1988) of effective assignment brief design and task specification that may be of benefit in promoting greater transparency and communicative efficiency (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014b) in assessment communication. This links strongly to Sadler's call for task specifications to be 'models of clarity' (Sadler, 2014, p. 12) and how that might be usefully achieved (Sadler, 2016). Indeed, in this regard, this study seems to reflect Sadler's recommendations (Sadler, 2016) as well as those of Gilbert and Maguire (2014b), Howell-Richardson (2015), Hughes (2009) and Thomas (2019) in terms of key requirements that need to be included in the brief if this is to be achieved. It also aligns with Walsh's suggestions that effective assignment brief design depends upon clarity of instructions and task, consistency in presentation to promote cognitively efficient engagement and a balance between conciseness and comprehensiveness (Walsh, 2021a, 2021b). Why clarity is important, however, is where a consideration of Sadler's work is of particular relevance as it is in the clarity and precision of task specification that students are given clear signals and cues about what is required of them in a given task. It is 'illogical and counterproductive' (Sadler, 2016, p. 1084) for it to be otherwise and a failure properly to provide a purpose and intention for students to achieve in their work is likely to lead to less effective outputs.

The business of engaging with assessment is necessarily a complex one, it is (ideally) not simply a transactional activity via which students follow clear instructions in order to deliver a pre-determined output, despite misconceptions students might have about the existence of a 'golden key' (Howell-Richardson, 2012) via which they might unlock the 'secret' of an assignment. Rather, it involves a complex interplay of technical proficiency in written language, knowledge of disciplinary content, values and conventions (disciplinary Discourse) and difficult decisions about what an effective response should consist of and how it should be achieved. Learning how to achieve this is an incremental and developmental process that students grow to understand over time via engagement with successive assignments and tasks. It is a challenging process that must be acquired rather than 'told' (Sadler, 2014a) and aspects of summative assessment practices in contemporary mass higher education might arguably be said to conspire against its acquisition (Hounsell *et al.*, 2008; Jessop and Tomas, 2017a; Dodd, Ellis and Singh, 2020).

Sadler's conception of goal knowledge (Sadler, 2014a) provides a useful basis via which to interpret students' challenges in this difficult process. It requires an internalised model of both what the assignment might 'look like' when complete (product) and also ideas about how it might be completed (process). This seems not unrelated to conceptions of evaluative judgement as part of formative assessment activities and points to the first of Sadler's principles for enabling students' ability to self-regulate, i.e., that they should 'possess a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for' (Sadler, 1989, p. 121). This relates not only to disciplinary knowledge but also the acquisition of tacit understanding of valued ways of doing with ideas within the discipline, as enshrined in the task verbs via which tasks are communicated. In this, there seems a clear analogue with the challenges of understanding otherwise seemingly clear and straightforward learning outcomes (Hussey and Smith, 2003, 2008).

The use of scaffolding that was so valued by the participants in this study is particularly useful because it helps make up for the shortfall in existing knowledge and/or insufficiently developed internal models of goal knowledge (Sadler, 2014a) about tasks and possible responses to them. It also provided a basis by which they determined the appropriateness of their responses. The specification of the Context of Social Work task in this study was flawed (largely because it lacked a clear purpose (Sadler, 2016; Thomas *et al.*, 2019)). However, the scaffolding provided in the sub tasks which formed the effective task specification provided a clear direction in terms of what the students were required to do. It also provided the means with which they could determine that they had achieved it: has the work related *this* to *that*, described and explained *this* and commented on *that*, etc?

While scaffolding was welcomed, however, I do feel that the experiences of the students in this study suggest that there is at least a tension between supportive and enabling prompts that student can use as the basis for confident engagement with assessment and over-specification. Scaffolding in the Vygotskian and Brunerian sense (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978) necessitates stretch and challenge in order for the learner to move beyond proximal to actual performance. Well-intentioned over-specification of assessed tasks, what Sadler terms 'recipe-like instructions' (Sadler, 2014a) may result in what one of the participants insightfully described as being 'given the assignment,

without giving it...'. The positive impact on students confidence in their ability to engage with their tasks and the mitigation of some of the anxiety associated with summative assessment processes (Walsh, 2021b) cannot be under-emphasised, but carefully judged supportive guidance will leave room for students to experiment, develop and try out their own voices in a way that is less likely in more over-specified 'conformative' (Torrance, 2007) contexts. This would seem of relevance not only to student engagement with assignment briefs but also more broadly with assessment as a whole (Torrance, 2012). Solicitous rehearsal of assessed tasks to ensure students can complete them successfully is perhaps not without merit and in my experience is much welcomed by students, but equipping them with evaluative judgement and self-regulation skills so they can judge the success of their own work seems rather more empowering (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Tai *et al.*, 2018) and likely to contribute to more sustainable outcomes.

While well-presented, clear, comprehensive specifications of assessed tasks combined with scaffolding promoted confident engagement with assessed work, it was clear that issues with the brief also constituted a substantial barrier to students' effective engagement and impacted levels of student anxiety. This reflects Welsh's suggestion that clarity and consistency in assignment briefs may help to reduce anxiety levels (Walsh, 2021b) and feelings of confusion and frustration (Gilbert, 2012; Walsh, 2021a). Poorly designed tasks, for example, in which learning outcomes and task were misaligned, presented students with particular challenges, raising anxiety and increasing cognitive load as they attempted to solve what were, at times, unsolvable problems. I suggest that this may also have a negative impact upon students' developing sense of themselves as effective higher education learners and their sense of belonging within the disciplinary and institutional Discourse, causing them to locate the problems in themselves rather than in the brief, with consequent implications for identity formation and transition. As a possible analogue to this in the fields of document design and user-centred design, Shriver identified a similar tendency via which repeated experiences with 'badly designed products and instruction guides' (Shriver, 1997, p. 222) may convince users that they themselves are incompetent even though it is the product with which they are engaging that is at fault. Students with vocational backgrounds in the study, who coincidentally also had had difficult experiences of early education and had somewhat fragile

conceptions of themselves as learners (Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2016), seemed particularly challenged in relation to misaligned tasks, perhaps because of their experience of tightly aligned outcome-based assessment within the vocational context (Gill, 2019, 2021). It is noted, however that all students experienced difficulties in such situations.

A further aspect of this study has been its use of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006) and aspects of Gee's Discourse (2011) and Bakhtin's (1981) conception of dialogue to inform an understanding of students' engagement with their assignment briefs. In this, it contributes further to the literature on academic literacies as a descriptive conceptual framework and perhaps also as a basis for suggesting the usefulness of a socially and ideologically situated informed approach to assessment brief and task design (Lillis, 2003b). I feel there are two areas in particular in which this is of relevance:

- The importance of clearly specified and well-formed assessed tasks and assignment briefs in order to provide useful material with which students can form their internalised understanding of valued text types and ways of thinking and doing within their disciplinary Discourses
- The provision of opportunities for dialogic and potentially transformative engagement with assessment by approaches which value students' existing knowledge and identities.

The first area relates strongly to Sadler's concept of goal knowledge (2014a). For Sadler, students who fail to provide appropriate responses that fulfil the intention and purpose of a task should not be assessed but encouraged to try again. What then should be the outcome for tasks that do not properly allow for fulfilment of that purpose? The academic socialisation model within the academic literacies framework (Lea and Street, 2006) acknowledges the need for students to acquire the ways of thinking and doing within their disciplinary Discourse. Within this view, one of the purposes of higher education is to support students' development as expert users of text types valued within the Discourse communities of their chosen disciplines and professions (Hughes, 2009). With this normative function in mind (Lillis and Scott, 2015), it is sensible and useful for

relevant disciplinary text types and other conventions to be used as part of assessment regimes and for students to be provided with supportive guidance to scaffold their engagement with them and opportunities to discuss them. This is relevant to their learning within their subjects and also in terms of the development of associated assessment literacies (Price *et al.*, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2013; Balloo *et al.*, 2018). Clarity and comprehensiveness of purpose, text type and other expectations (for example, as communicated via Hughes' (2009) ATD Framework) are therefore of particular importance as these provide the building blocks from which students construct their understanding of these valued and privileged forms of communication as part of the acquisition of their disciplinary Discourse (Gee, 2003a).

However, as has been seen in this study, the assignment briefs and tasks that are presented to students are not always the 'models of clarity' that they might be. Where this causes confusion and anxiety, this is of evident relevance to the students' sense of themselves as learners with possible consequences for their feelings of confidence of success. However, even where students feel enabled to engage with problematic briefs because they are well-scaffolded or otherwise supported, I would suggest that this too may have a negative impact. It is noted, for example, that even with assignment briefs that I have identified through analysis as being problematic, students nevertheless often completed them with confidence. The identification of the Context of Social Work essay as an *essay*, for example, along with its scaffolded sub tasks, meant that students were able to approach it confidently on the basis of their existing understanding of how essays were structured. And yet it was not a well-formed essay task. As such, it must be questioned how engagement with this task might usefully help prepare students for engaging with future examples.

Along with other aspects of assessment practices, I would suggest that assignment briefs represent part of the very fabric from which students construct their academic and assessment literacies (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006; Price *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, if students are given poor building blocks in the form of poorly framed tasks, then it seems likely that it will have an impact on how they develop those literacies, those key ways of thinking and doing within their disciplinary Discourses. A key example of this can be seen in Clare's experience of completing her Lifespan essay. She experienced an uneasy sense

of dissonance in submitting work that she felt could not possibly demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes because she could see that the task she was required to complete was not appropriately aligned to them. And yet, I have been informed that in fact she received a good grade for this assignment. I have no doubt that she was pleased and relieved, but this must have added to her feelings of confusion. It is noted that she felt some nervousness about engaging with future assignments that were not well specified when speaking about her thoughts for the future. I would suggest that rather than clarifying and making more transparent the 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 2001, p. 53). I would also suggest that such experiences serve to accentuate rather than mitigate the power inequalities between the student and their disciplinary and institutional contexts (Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis and Tuck, 2016), underlining the authoritative nature of the academic environment and the teacher's specification and assessment of tasks in the Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin, 1981). It was arguably not possible for her (or anyone!) to pass that particular assignment, and yet she did... It is wondered how well this experience might contribute to her developing goal knowledge as a basis for future work (Sadler, 2007, 2014a, 2016).

The third level of the academic literacies framework (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006) moves beyond academic socialisation to the possibility of dialogic transformation. In approaches of this kind, students are enabled to move beyond the centripetal pull towards conformity to the potentially transformative centrifugal push outwards to diversity, acting with their own power and speaking with their own voice. Mary's experience of that same essay is a case in point. Empowered and confident by the opportunity to approach the task from a position of strength and knowledge on the basis of her lived and professional experience, she sidestepped or did not notice the issue of misalignment and engaged with palpable enthusiasm. I suggest that this points to the usefulness of designing tasks that provide opportunities for students to draw upon existing strengths, whether on the basis of professional expertise, educational or cultural background or personal interests (what Gee would term their lifeworld, their existing primary and secondary Discourses). There seems a useful link in this to Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) suggestion of the usefulness of approaches that allow students to draw upon existing 'funds of identity' (Discourses) in their learning as a means of promoting the

development of positive identities, using a Vygotskian analogy of the classroom and appropriately designed learning tasks as 'zones of proximal identity development'. This is also strongly related to Aiken's (2021) recommendations for approaches to assessment that allow students scope for centrifugal 'tilts', that is opportunities for students to draw upon 'personal resources' (Mitchell and Scott, 2015) and the 'stuff available to them' (Lillis, 2014), allowing students to contribute on the basis of 'who they are and what they know' (Gale, 2012, p. 253) rather than purely conforming to normative expectations (Biesta, 2009).

I conclude this section by repeating Boud's (1995, p. 35) statement concerning the inescapability of engaging with the assessment process:

Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment. Assessment acts as a mechanism to control students that is far more pervasive and insidious than most staff would be prepared to acknowledge.'

I also reiterate my reframing of that statement as a means of underlining the importance of assessment communication as an area of study. Students are not only constrained to deal with the assessment practices they are confronted with if they wish to graduate; they are also unable to escape the way in which their assessed tasks are communicated to them if they wish to engage successfully with those tasks and so succeed as learners and future graduates. Much of Sadler's work on the specification of tasks has been on how the communication of assessment provides a basis for students to produce appropriate responses as part of their learning (Sadler, 2007, 2014a, 2016). Other literature that has engaged directly with issues around assignment brief design adds useful further detail in terms of how tasks can be effectively communicated. It is hoped that this study provides a further contribution via an exploration of students' lived experience of engaging with their assignment briefs. By way of final comment, it seems useful to refer, not to the literature on assessment in this instance, but to draw upon Shriver's work on design:

A well-designed device may not need a good manual and a well-designed manual may allow readers to use a badly designed device. However, if both the manual and device are poorly designed...(Shriver, 1997, p. 227)

Well-designed briefs and well-designed instructions, for example via well-pitched, progressive scaffolding, provide a basis for students to engage effectively with their assessed work and may help to promote feelings of confidence as part of the development of positive identities as learners. It is, to quote Sadler once more, both 'illogical and counterproductive' (Sadler, 2016, p. 1084) for it to be otherwise.

6 Conclusion

The final study involved five participants, all of whom were interviewed once in their first year and one of whom was interviewed a second time during their final year, rather later in their university journey than had been expected. Without the original design, some of the assignment briefs the students engaged with have also been subjected to analysis using a framework developed as part of this study, bringing together literature from diverse areas of relevance to assignment brief design and drawing upon my own professional experience. This study has revealed some powerful insights into non-traditional first year students' experience of engaging with assignment briefs. It is noted, too, that the subsequent interview of the one participant has provided a powerful perspective with which to view those early experiences. It is a regret that it was not possible to re-interview more of the participants to enrich this perspective and this is acknowledged as a limitation to the study. It is hoped, though, that the analytical framework developed in order to analyse the briefs in this study may be of use to others in their exploration and development of assignment briefs across the sector. A version of this framework is already in use as part of the quality processes associated with assignment briefs at BNU and has been shared at staff development events at other institutions, where it has been well received. Equally, I feel the study, even in its limited way, has pointed to the importance of the setting and communication of assessment, Gilbert and Maguire's unconsidered 'Cinderella of the assessment cycle' (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011b), as an area of relevance to the student experience of assessment and a topic that is fruitful for further study.

This final section begins with a restatement of my original research aim and research questions and provides a brief summary of my methodology. It will then briefly summarise my findings in relation to these questions and consider how this study might make an original contribution to knowledge. Limitations of the study as conducted will also be discussed and tentative implications for policy and practice in relation to the communication of assessment expectations and requirements via assignment briefs and related dissemination activities will also be included. The section will conclude with suggestions for future areas of research.

6.1 The research aim and research questions

The aim of this research was to explore students' experience of how assignment requirements and expectations are communicated to them in assignment briefs and related dissemination activities and how this affects their ability to engage effectively with their assessed work and develop confidence in themselves as learners. In achieving this aim, I intended to answer the following questions.

- What aspects of the assignment brief, related documentation and dissemination activities afford or impede effective engagement with the assessed task and how are these experienced by students?
- How does engagement with the brief contribute to students' confidence in their identities as learners as part of their transition into higher education

6.2 Methodology

I set out to answer these questions by adopting a methodology based on interpretative methodological analysis (IPA) as defined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and Smith and Nizza (2022) involving the analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews with a small sample (n=5) of first year non-traditional students studying Social Work (4 participants) and Business (1 participant) at a small, professionally-oriented post-1992 university in the M40 corridor in southeast England. The first round of interviews took place towards the end of the first semester as the participants were engaging with and completing the first assessments they had encountered as part of their university studies. A subsequent second round of interviews was also conducted at a similar time in the participants' third year of study, although regrettably only one participant from Business took part in this stage of data collection. The IPA based analysis of the interview data collected was complemented with the analysis of three selected assignment briefs, two of which were encountered by the Social Work participants and one which was encountered by the Business participant. This analysis was conducted using an analytical

framework developed on the basis of the survey of the literature around assignment brief and assessment task design conducted as part of this study.

6.3 Returning to the research questions

This section will briefly engage with each of the original research questions and summarise my findings in relation to each. The focus in this section is particularly on what seems to have been experienced by the participants in the study. An attempt to contextualise these experiences in relation to the literature will be discussed in section 6.4, in which I will consider how this study contributes to knowledge.

What aspects of the assignment brief, related documentation and dissemination activities afford or impede effective engagement with the assessed task and how are these experienced by students?

Where the participants in the study felt that they 'knew what to do', they were more likely to engage with confidence with their assessed work. This sense of confidence in their ability to engage would seem to be dependent upon a clear statement of task, in which *inter alia* the purpose and text type are explicit, and clear, accessible and level appropriate assessment criteria are included. The findings of the study also suggest the importance of assignment briefs that are concise as well as comprehensive, as excessive instructional material can be perceived as complex and overwhelming. In a similar vein, the lack of clear distinction between process related guidance (things the students needed to do to inform their completion of a task) and the task itself (what they actually had to do) caused some confusion to students in terms of how to focus their efforts.

The inclusion of brief indicative content and guidance to provide scaffolding for tasks was felt to be useful and facilitative and seems to be particularly valued by students who might otherwise lack or feel insecure about their existing knowledge base and ways of writing in their disciplines. The breaking down of the larger Context of Social Work essay into subtasks and the provision of headings for use in the People Management report were examples of this approach. It is noted that both of these assignments were in various ways problematic and not well-formed examples of the text types involved. However, the inclusion of this scaffolding seemed to be of particular importance for the

participants as it reduced anxieties about the summative assessment process and provided a basis for agentic and empowered engagement. The absence of such scaffolding in the Lifespan essay, by contrast, caused high levels of concern and anxiety and impeded independent engagement for the majority of the Social Work participants.

The assessment criteria included in the briefs were often generic in nature, rather than based upon the specific requirements of particular tasks and drew heavily upon the language of the institutional grading descriptors. As such, they were complex, complicated and communicated in high level language and also included reference to aspects that were not always of relevance to the assignments in question. Consequently, they seem largely to have been ignored as a potential source of further guidance on the expectations for the tasks and do not seem to have been considered helpful. Most of the participants did not mention them at all and where they were discussed it was in terms of their opacity and complexity. The extensive nature of the assessment criteria included, for example, in Social Work assignments seems also to have added to student feelings of overwhelmedness as they added considerably to the overall length of the brief.

There is some indication that the provision of clear, explicit instructions relating to presentational requirements was felt to be useful and helpful. There is a section in the assignment brief template that provides for this and this may be why students were keen to have clarity on expectations for presentation: 'if it's on the brief, it must be important'...However, it seems likely that this relatively minor issue is nevertheless valued by students otherwise uncertain about how to present work in a higher education context. This would seem to be in keeping with accounts elsewhere in the literature (Collier and Morgan, 2008) in which the provision of explicit information on aspects of the assessment process that are otherwise assumed or understood was welcomed by non-traditional students. Transparency in this regard may be particularly relevant to this latter constituency of student in the light of Ashwin's suggestion that they may lack the 'effortless fit' (Ashwin, 2009, p. 85) with their new higher education contexts that seems otherwise to be the case for their more privileged counterparts. As such, they may find aspects of the environment sources of anxiety and concern that are surprising to others. Comments by one of the participants suggest the usefulness of consistent approaches to

presentational requirements across programmes in order to reduce the burden of adapting to different approaches from module to module.

The consistency of approach afforded by the use of the institutional template to guide presentation of assessment expectations and requirements in assignment briefs seems to have been useful in providing for effective student engagement and somewhat confirms the usefulness of appropriate sequencing of brief elements as recommended by Gilbert and Maguire (2014b). This would seem to bear out a cognitive account for the usefulness of consistency of format as a means of promoting 'learnability', developing useful schematic knowledge (Eiriksdottir and Catrambone, 2011; Paas and van Merriënboer, 2020) of how assignment briefs are structured and organised which serves to provide for efficient processing of the brief and its contents. It is notable that the dyslexic participant particularly valued the structure and layout of the brief, which seems to have aided her processing of its content.

While well-presented, clear, comprehensive specifications of assessed tasks combined with scaffolding promoted confident engagement with assessed work. It was clear that issues with the brief also constituted a substantial barrier to students' effective engagement. Lack of scaffolding before students were ready to engage without it left many of them feeling overwhelmed and unsure what to do and raised anxiety levels (Walsh, 2021b). Poor framing of instructions and presentation of the brief also created confusion (Gilbert, 2012; Walsh, 2021a). Poorly designed tasks, for example, in which learning outcomes and task were misaligned, presented students with particular challenges, raising anxiety levels and increasing cognitive load as they attempted to solve what were, at times, unsolvable problems.

The experience of one of the students who had otherwise exhibited high levels of anxiety and concern about her writing ability, points to a highly positive aspect of one of the tasks. For this student, the opportunity to draw upon her existing knowledge in relation to the care for the elderly in her completion of the Lifespan essay, which otherwise caused such challenges for the other participants, provided for an empowered engagement with the task. It is suggested that tasks that allow students to draw upon existing strengths, either on the basis of existing knowledge, educational or cultural

background or expertise on the basis of experience are likely to afford opportunities for confident and empowered engagement.

How does engagement with the brief contribute to students' confidence in their identities as learners as part of their transition into higher education

At the end of analysis section of this study, I included a section on how the participants felt about themselves at the time at which the interviews were conducted. For the Social Work students this was at a point about midway through their first year. They had engaged with their first assignments and were waiting to receive grades and feedback. Bridget, the Business participant also spoke of her feelings about the future at this time but was also able to provide further thoughts much later at around the same point of her third year. At the point in the first year when all participants were interviewed, there is a sense, despite the challenges faced in relation to engaging with sometimes problematic assignment briefs, that they are confident, if sometimes guardedly so, of having engaged well with their assessments and about being able to engage effectively with their future studies. It must also be acknowledged, however, that by the end of the first year, Ruth had elected to withdraw from the programme, apparently having reconsidered her career aspirations. Clare, too, has had to repeat an aspect of her second year, although as a result of issues related to a challenging experience on placement, rather than her engagement with the academic aspects of the course. Informally, I have been informed that Sara is doing well in her third year and that Mary has excelled, both academically and in relation to her work on placement. Bridget, too, has done well and is 'ready to go' on to the world of work.

The interview schedule used for the first interviews was designed to attempt to elicit thoughts about how they felt about their transition into higher education, drawing on sometimes difficult early experiences (where they came from), their experiences of assessment at the time (what they were doing 'now') and their feelings about their future studies. There is a sense for all of the participants at this early stage of a sometimes challenging journey coloured to varying degrees by anxiety, confusion and stress, particularly in relation to their engagement with assessment processes. But, overall, there is a sense, too, of their early time at university having been a period of growth,

development and learning and examples of where they had felt confident and agentic in their assessed work. These seemed particularly to relate to moments where they had felt equipped to engage confidently, either on the basis of their own existing knowledge, skills and aptitude, the solicitous support of friendly, caring and approachable teachers or via the provision of support and scaffolding in briefs which provided them with starting points and ways into otherwise complex assessed work.

Cureton *et al* (2017) suggest that students new to university often have misconceptions about what is expected of them. They may, for example, have an understanding of the need to be independent, but do not always fully understand the behaviours associated with this. Overall, however, students in this study seemed keen to engage independently and evidenced a range of behaviours that demonstrated a desire to take control of the assessment process in whatever way they could and act on it with their own power. This sometimes manifested itself in relatively small ways, but there is a sense, too, of a commitment to resilient, even courageous striving and a conception of 'independence' that may be closer to that held by their teachers, even if it might be 'daunting'. Mary, for example, spoke eloquently of an awareness that higher education involved being given the 'basis, then you have to go and fulfil your knowledge further and read further'. Bridget, too, railed against what she perceived to be overly-specified assessment tasks that left little room for her to pursue her interests and commitment to learning, tasks in which she was 'given the answer without giving the answer', and spoke of the importance of engaging with challenge, 'the point of academia', and feeling stimulated by the opportunity for critical thinking.

Experiences of engaging with assignment briefs seem to have had an important role in the participants' developing sense of confidence in themselves as students and the possibility of future success. Clear, scaffolded approaches such as in the Context of Social Work essay seem to have contributed to this, whatever other shortfalls there may have been in the specification of the task. The confidence inspired by knowing what to do and feeling that they could engage effectively would seem to have an impact beyond the immediate assignment and contribute to a sense that were able to succeed in future work. Mary's experience of the opportunity for empowered and confident engagement with her Lifespan essay because it drew on her experience and expertise from

professional life clearly had a profoundly positive effect on her sense of herself. Successes and the feeling of being able to engage in assessment successfully seem to promote confidence in future abilities. Sara mentions, for example, concerns about work getting harder but also optimism and belief in her ability to meet future challenges:

Sara: I'm doing well and doing the assignments, doing the research, writing them. I feel confident. I feel like if anything, my confidence will only improve and I'll get better in the future.

It is also noted, however, that that sense of confidence and optimism in engaging with assessment can be somewhat fragile and contingent upon the clarity and accessibility of future assignments. Clare, perhaps poignantly in the light of her future experiences, suggests as much:

Clare: So, if moving forward, all the assignments are the same as my Preparation for Practice and the Context of Social Work, if I can say that. Then yeah, I'm positive, but whereas this, the one where it has less information for me, I'd feel nervous. Yeah.

Indeed, instances of confusion and dissonance, for example, arising from poorly-formed tasks misaligned to their learning outcomes would seem to have had a negative impact on the participants' developing identities, causing them to locate problems that were otherwise in the brief in themselves. Mary, in response to guidance she had not had access to prior to completing an assignment in the time available to her, time she had proactively set aside in a busy and demanding home life as a mother, was left disheartened and disappointed and feeling that her inability to deliver what was required was her fault:

Mary: I didn't have that information before, and I think there was an expectation that we're expected to recognize that.

Bridget, too, was left feeling that working out overly complicated and poorly communicated tasks were in some way her responsibility:

Bridget: I think it was something that I was expected to do? (Interview 1)

Such experiences, I would suggest, are likely to do little to promote senses of belonging and empowerment and contribute positively to successful transition and points to the usefulness of proactive timely provision of support rather than later reactive

intervention. Mary suggests the possible outcome of engaging with poorly communicated briefs for students lacking in confidence in their abilities and unable to ask for help:

Mary: Having the confidence to ask for the help has really helped. But if you were to ask somebody... If this was me a few years ago as a person, I wouldn't have asked for help, and I probably would have left given those assignment briefs.

Outside of the brief, the wider environment and how briefs were shared with students seem also to be significant in providing for a sense of confidence in engaging with assessment. Friendly, supportive and approachable staff who were happy to answer questions and provide guidance on assessed work were highly valued and, perhaps in evidence of other misconceptions about the nature of higher education, surprisingly so for some of the participants. Dissemination activities via which teachers explained and answered questions about briefs seem also to have been welcomed and found useful by the participants. It is noted, however, that the timing of such introductions and explanations of assignment briefs should be timed carefully. Some welcomed exposure to their assessed tasks early on in modules. Others found the experience overwhelming at a time when there was already so much to take in. I have mentioned elsewhere that I feel that what seems to have been the rather teacher-led, transmission-based nature of these activities presents at least missed opportunities for more active discursive engagement with assignment briefs. However, overall, such activities were undeniably welcomed and would seem to have created the basis for engagement with assessed work and contributed to the sense that the participants were being supported and cared for. Bridget's experiences in her third year, however, would point to the importance that such activities are at least aligned with the content of assignment briefs.

Despite the willingness of staff to provide support, however, participants reported reluctance to engage with their teachers to seek advice, either because they felt it was not 'allowed' or because they did not wish to expose themselves as in some way incapable. Instead, it seems that they preferred to seek help from sources that were 'closer' to them. In the study, participants tended to rely first of all on the brief and themselves, then their peers, friends and family and then university services, such as the academic skills unit. Bridget rather avoided engaging with her fellow students for this purpose, but the group chat in the Social Work class seems to have afforded, as well as

opportunities for sharing anxieties, some sense of collective efficacy and agency. For example, shared concerns about the Lifespan essay led to collective action which resulted in explanation and discussion of the assignment in class and some degree of formative support from the teacher. On the basis of the experiences of the participants in this study, I would suggest that, as with other aspects of the institutional context, explicit information on the kinds of support that are available, for example, from individual staff, personal tutors and wider university services, would be helpful in encouraging students to access support where and when it is needed. Bridget's experiences of attempting to access such services as shared in her second interview, however, point to challenges for students in need of support. The impact of lean approaches to staffing and the resourcing of such services in the increasingly challenging economic environment of contemporary higher education is acknowledged.

Bridget's perspective as the only participant who was interviewed again in her third year is particularly useful, although it is acknowledged that hers is the experience of an individual in a particular context. Bridget encountered challenges in her first year in relation to assessment as did the other participants, but her attitudes and sense of self in relation to issues in assessment communication in her third year point, I would suggest, to the importance of transparency and trust in assessment processes. As suggested, there was a sense that initial experiences of problematic briefs were conceived as her responsibility to work out, even when it was clear that the problem lay in the brief. This has changed markedly at this later point and she is now able to see in a clear-eyed way that there are shortfalls in the wider environment and the way in which assessment is communicated. This has led to something of an adversarial or oppositional relationship with her programme in which she feels that certain aspects of key information in relation to assignments are deliberately withheld. It is not possible to determine whether this is actually the case, but certainly it is her perception. As a result, she feels constrained to adopt certain strategies that she feels make her 'dependent' upon her teachers in order to be able to engage effectively with her work, when her preference would have been to approach her assignments independently on the basis of clearly communicated briefs. It is clear that this has been a source of some frustration and disappointment which has,

among other aspects of her wider experience, somewhat negatively coloured her experience of completing her studies.

Bridget has always seemed very much her 'own person', both in her first year and in her third. There is a sense, perhaps, too, that in her third year she embodies in some ways Gale and Parker's concept of transition as 'becoming' (Gale, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014a) in that she has found a way of being in which she is able both to operate effectively within the bounds of her disciplinary context while also retaining a sense of herself and a keen and clear-eyed view of how it works to the extent that she is as Badenhorst *et al.* (2015, p. 98) at once 'living within the system but thinking outside it'. I would suggest that greater transparency, not only in assessment communication about expected or required content or approaches, but also in the acknowledgement that aspects of the assessment process can be difficult to communicate explicitly may help others to make similar transitional journeys. Opportunities for shared discussion of briefs and collaborative exploration of key aspects of assessment practices, including but not restricted to the way assessment is communicated via briefs may help to promote a more positive experience that acknowledges the challenges faced by both students and teachers in the process of assessment and fosters a sense of joint and collaborative enterprise.

6.4 Original contribution to knowledge

In general terms, this study contributes to the relatively small but growing body of literature focused on the specifics of how assessment requirements and expectations are communicated to students via assignment briefs, related documentation and dissemination activities. In particular, it complements and supports Walsh's (2021a, 2021b) findings with regard to the role of clear, consistent, comprehensive but concise briefs in affording effective engagement with assessed work and reducing student anxiety around summative assessment. More specifically, there are three main areas in which the study has made a contribution to knowledge. The first relates to the use of the IPA methodology to explore the lived experience of students in their engagement with assignment briefs and the wider assessment process. The second and third areas relate to

the theoretical framework underpinning the study, and the application of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006), Gee's conception of Discourse (2011) and Bakhtinian dialogism (1981) to the study of students' experience of engaging with assignment briefs as part of the wider assessment process. As such, this study contributes further to the literature on academic literacies as a descriptive conceptual framework and perhaps also as a basis for suggesting the usefulness of a socially and ideologically situated informed approach to assessment brief and task design (Lillis, 2003b). In particular it offers insights into the normative function of the assessment process and the role of clear, consistent assessment communication in support of students' induction into their disciplinary communities and also an example of potentially transformative assessment in the form of an approach that allowed students to draw upon existing knowledge, backgrounds and identities.

The use of IPA to explore the experiences of first year students' in their engagement with assignment briefs and the wider assessment process represents a novel application of this research methodology. Its idiographic, interpretative and deeply analytical approach would seem to lend itself particularly well to exploring the lived experience of non-traditional participants in higher education, providing insights that might otherwise have failed to emerge or be identified in more readily generalisable approaches. It is clear that there are high levels of anxiety relating to students' engagement with summative assessment, which may be higher still for those students from non-traditional backgrounds. Their experience of engaging with assignment briefs and other aspects of assessment processes is intensely felt and very much a profoundly experienced 'lived phenomenon' that lends itself well to an IPA-based approach. Equally, although so much of higher education relies upon generalised approaches, e.g., teachers rough tune content, related learning activities and assessed tasks to the perceived needs of the majority of their students, there is nevertheless a particularity in how students experience education as individuals. Teachers may well work on a 'one-to-many' basis, but for students it is always 'one-to-one' and highly personal in nature. It is suggested that this study has highlighted the usefulness of the IPA methodology in educational research, particularly because of its idiographic, case-based approach and intensity of its analytical processes.

Analysis of the assignment briefs the participants encountered in the study and their responses to them points to importance of well-formed, clear and comprehensive assignment briefs as a means not only of communicating assessment requirements and expectations relating to specific assignments, but, more broadly, providing students with opportunities to develop their understanding of valued and privileged ways of communicating, thinking and doing within their disciplines. Where briefs are not clear and tasks are misaligned, ambiguous or in some other way not well-formed, it seems less likely that students will benefit from this valuable normative function of the assessment process. This also relates strongly to Sadler's (2014a) concept of goal knowledge and underlines the role of the assignment brief as a means of providing the cues for students to respond appropriately to assessed tasks and raises the question of how students might be expected to engage effectively where they are absent or poorly communicated.

This study also points to the usefulness of approaches to assessment that enable students to move beyond the centripetal pull towards conformity to the potentially transformative centrifugal push outwards to diversity, acting with their own power and speaking with their own voice. This points to the usefulness of designing tasks that provide opportunities for students to draw upon existing strengths, backgrounds and identities. There seems a useful link in this to Esteban-Guitart and Moll's (2014) suggestion of the usefulness of approaches that allow students to draw upon existing 'funds of identity' and Aiken's (2021) recommendations for approaches to assessment that allow students scope for centrifugal 'tilts', i.e., to draw upon 'personal resources' (Mitchell and Scott, 2015) and the 'stuff available to them' (Lillis, 2014), allowing students to contribute on the basis of 'who they are and what they know' (Gale, 2012, p. 253) above and beyond responding to normative expectations (Biesta, 2009).

6.5 Limitations of the study

This study has been based predominantly upon the student experience of engaging with assignment briefs as part of the assessment process. My intention in adopting this approach was to place myself alongside the students and attempt to explore and interpret their particular experiences in a manner analogous to the way I had once

worked with others, quite literally 'shoulder to shoulder' in front a computer screen, discussing and unpacking aspects of assignment briefs as part of my work as a learning developer. For this, the idiographic nature of IPA has proven to be particularly useful. The inclusion of some of the assignment briefs they engaged with has also provided a useful context against which to consider their lived experience of this aspect of assessment and has acted usefully as a kind of objective referent against which to consider their experiences, as well as providing useful source for analysis in their own right. However, it is acknowledged that they were analysed subsequent to the original analysis of the participants' interviews and, although this has been addressed in the subsequent revisiting of that analysis as part of the resubmission process, this was not ideal. The usefulness of a multidimensional engagement with students' experience of assignment briefs that includes a consideration of the briefs themselves, as well as other aspects of their engagement with the assessment process, such as feedback received is discussed below. It must also be conceded that the lack of the staff perspective means that a useful perspective on assessment process has been lost. It has been possible to infer and interpret staff intentions and motivations from students' reports of their experiences, but the presence of teachers as participants in the research would have provided a welcome further dimension.

As an aspect of this, while the intention of the research was to focus particularly (and by doing so, value and make visible) the student experience of engaging with assignment briefs, it is clear that an engagement with the phenomenon solely from this perspective misses opportunities for the richer, deeper exploration that a 360° exploration might provide in terms of the participants' experiences and the implications for the development of their understanding of assessment processes and their identities as learners. As well as examining the student experience of engaging with a brief, then, it would also be useful to engage with the brief itself, the intentions and assumptions of the member of staff in framing it, student responses to the brief and any subsequent feedback and grades and how these are received by students. This would have provided a useful basis for judging the impact of issues with assignment briefs on the ability of students to produce work that addresses the requirements of assessed tasks appropriately and would have added to the potential of the study to contribute to wider

understanding of the relationship between task specification and student learning. I would also add to this the usefulness of focused engagement with dissemination activities, i.e., how the brief is shared with students and what opportunities are provided for them to engage formatively with it. Within the current study, participants did report on aspects of how this aspect of the assessment process was managed, but this is an area that I feel could have been further explored during the interviews with participants.

There is a value in privileging the student experience of assessment in order to explore the impact of the power differentials inherent in the assessment process and the various ways in which assessment expectations and requirements can be miscommunicated. However, without data from other sources, such a view fails to provide a useful objective referent against which to consider that experience that would serve to enrich and clarify its interpretation (Wengraf, 2001). It is acknowledged, too, that the failure to share the transcripts and results of the analysis of the first interviews with students as had always been planned meant that a valuable source of further comment and input into the analytical process was lost. Ethically, too, this must be considered as a shortfall in effective practice. Following Bridget's second interview, her analysis was initially written up as an individual case study and was shared with her for comment. However, she chose not to engage and did not respond, although otherwise maintained communications in relation to other aspects of her involvement in the process. To some extent, the rigorous and systematic nature of the IPA analytical process and reflexive engagement of the researcher during the process, do mitigate against the lack of an objective element, but the lack of this further perspective must be considered a further limitation. The need to work at speed at a time of excessive workload and pressure, both related to the completion of this project but also in my professional and personal life contributed to this, coupled no doubt with my inexperience as a researcher, but it is nonetheless regrettable.

IPA's ontological and epistemological focus on participants' experience of a phenomenon, their interpretation of that experience and the researcher's subsequent interpretation of their interpretation via the double hermeneutic (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) is at once a strength in that it gives voice to the participant and reveals and values their lived experience and what it means to them as individuals, but at

the same time, can be seen as something of a limitation. It is acknowledged, for example, that a focus on participants' perceptions in isolation may be insufficient (Tuffour, 2017). It is hoped that the inclusion of the analysis of some of the assignment briefs encountered by the participants serves to mitigate this to some extent and provides a useful further dimension to an understanding of participants' experience of engaging with this (and similar) briefs, both in terms of how their identifiable deficiencies caused challenges to some while other aspects acted to enable and empower others.

The idiographic nature of IPA means that the particular experiences of individuals are especially valued as a means of subsequently identifying patterns and commonalities between cases. As the sole Business participant, Bridget presents a unique perspective on her own experiences, particularly in the light of her reluctance to engage with other students on her programme for the purposes of clarifying assessment requirements. Rather, she avowedly relies on herself, discussions with her dyslexia helper and only occasional engagement with staff to support her interpretation of and engagement with assignments. The Social Work participants, however, belong to and refer to the use of a shared WhatsApp chat group via which all students share concerns and thoughts about different aspects of their studies, including assignments, as well as other practicalities and opportunities for socialising. As such, there may be a risk of 'groupthink' (Huynh *et al.*, 2021) and shared anxiety deriving from rumour and conjecture relating to the perceived requirements and expectations of individual assessments. Oldham and Dhillon (2012), for example, acknowledge that students will always engage in sometimes ill-informed discussion and rumour mongering around their assignments. It is assumed, however, that this is likely to have been the case whether facilitated by a virtual chat group or as part of in-person interactions. Nevertheless, student communications via the group chat may have resulted in a blurring of individual responses to assignment briefs, which it would have been useful to have unpicked in greater detail via appropriately focused interview questions. Exploring further the use and impact of digital communications on the participants' engagement with assessment processes and their developing sense of themselves as students, as well as providing a useful further dimension to this study, may also suggest a useful direction for further valuable research into students' experience of assessment.

6.6 Recommendations for policy and practice

The nature of idiographic research approaches is that they focus on the experiences of individuals in particular contexts and it is, therefore, only tentatively that I make suggestions for practice on the basis of my findings. The nature of idiographic study is not to say something about other contexts, but rather provide a detailed examination of a particular one (Wharton, 2006; Smith and Osborn, 2015). It is the very particularity that provides its strength, on the understanding that nomothetic generalisations (Jupp, 2006) are ultimately only meaningful to the extent that there is sufficient particularity to make them so (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Larsson rather neatly characterises this the usefulness of the idiographic approach as ‘filling a “hole” in the whole’ (Larsson, 2009, p. 7), providing a richer picture of an aspect of a particular context that was previously not understood. As this is a professional doctoral study, this aspect is perhaps sufficient for my own purposes. Conducting the research has provided real insights into how the implementation of institutional policies relating to the communication of assessment expectations and requirements to students in the form of assignment briefs is experienced by non-traditional students. The opportunity to explore this phenomenon from a deep engagement with relevant literature and theory and a close interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants has provided for a much deeper understanding of the student experience of assessment and how we might usefully support students in their learning journeys, providing opportunities for reflection on and adaptation of existing practices.

As well as having relevance to my own situation, however, I would argue that my exploration and findings are not entirely without relevance for other contexts. Somewhat guardedly, I draw on the concept of ‘context similarity’ (Larsson, 2009, p. 13); what might be the case for my participants might also be the case for other, similar students in similar contexts. Allowing for differences in the disciplinary, institutional and national environment, it is noted, too, that there were commonalities of experience between the participants in this study and the study conducted by Walsh in Ireland (2021a, 2021b). For example, we both recorded high levels of anxiety in students in relation to their

engagement with summative assessment and the usefulness of consistent, clear, concise but comprehensive approaches to assignment brief design in providing a basis for confident engagement with assessed work. Nevertheless, our theoretical frameworks and research approaches were different and only tentatively do I suggest that common aspects of our findings might point to the possibility of further generalisations to other contexts. Further studies in this area may help to provide a fuller picture from which lessons can be learnt and applied to other contexts.

It is with this in mind, that I make the following suggestions for policy and practice in relation to communication of assessment expectations and requirements in the form of assignment briefs and related dissemination activities.

- The consistency of experience afforded by templated approaches to assignment brief design recommends itself strongly as an approach. Within my own relatively small institution, the adoption of an institution-wide assignment brief template has been well received by both students and staff. In larger institutions, it may be more appropriate to consider how templates could be used at School, Faculty or Department level to ensure that aspects of good practice are embedded as standard into this aspect of the assessment process and provide for cognitively efficient engagement with briefs by students.
- Brief indicative and carefully pitched scaffolding of expected or recommended approaches to assignments provides a useful basis for students to engage with their assessed work and is recommended, particularly for students new to university study. It is suggested that this be treated progressively and withdrawn as students develop confidence in their disciplines and understanding of assessment processes and practices.
- Assignment briefs should be clear, comprehensive and concise, with complexity in instructions and guidance reduced wherever possible. For example, in cases where students are required to complete processes and tasks as part of their engagement with assessed work, the brief should separate instructions relating to process and task to avoid confusion and misdirection of students' resources and energies.

- Explicit sharing of practicalities in assignment briefs, e.g., referencing styles and requirements, presentational aspects, etc., can help to alleviate anxiety in students unfamiliar with otherwise assumed and understood practices within the disciplinary and institutional context. Equally, where there is a requirement for students to present assessed written work in a particular way, it makes sense for there to be both a consistent programme-wide approach and for this to be communicated explicitly to students.
- While all efforts to ensure clarity and explicitness of task specifications should be made when writing the brief, it is acknowledged that this alone is often insufficient in providing for effective student interpretation of assessed tasks and related expectations. In this study, dissemination activities in which teachers explained assignment briefs and students had opportunities for questions and discussion were welcomed by students as opportunities to gain better insights into what was expected of them in their assessed work. The theory strongly points to the usefulness of more student-led active, collaborative and discursive approaches to dissemination activities as a means of empowering students and addressing inequalities, but even teacher-led activities seem to have been considered useful by students.
- Ongoing availability of staff support and availability for questions and discussions of briefs is useful. As an aspect of this, friendly supportive and available staff seem to be particularly valued by students.
- Assignments which encourage students to draw upon their existing knowledge, identities and strengths create opportunities for confident and empowered engagement with assessment. It is recommended, particularly for new students, that tasks be designed with this in mind where possible and relevant.
- Non-traditional students may lack confidence in seeking support from their teachers, perhaps because of a sense of their fragility as learners and a reluctance to expose themselves as 'needy or incapable' (McSweeney, 2014, p. 323). Efforts should be made to reassure students that approaching staff is welcomed, if within agreed parameters, and ensure that they are aware of the full range of support

services available to them with the institution, such as inclusivity and disability services and academic skill support.

- Finally, no teacher sets out intentionally to create assignment briefs that raise barriers to students in their engagement with assessment. However, it is clear that some staff lack training in how best to communicate assessment expectations and requirements clearly and concisely and may lack awareness of key elements of effective task design and what makes for well-formed tasks. It is suggested that opportunities for staff development in relation to effective assignment brief and task design would be useful in ensuring better practice in this aspect of the assessment process. Experience of using, for example, Hughes' (2009) Assessment Task Design Framework in recent staff development activities in my own institution would suggest that this framework may be of particular use in achieving this.

6.7 Recommendations for future research

IPA has been useful to explore the lived experience of participants in relation to a very small sample within a particular context. Further studies of this kind or with approaches that involve larger samples will help to provide a fuller picture of the student experience of engaging with assignment briefs as part of their work on summative assessment. The larger datasets afforded by, for example, the more recent versions of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020, 2023) may make for more generalisable results. Alternative approaches, such as Contextual Text Coding (CTC) (Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021), a mixed methods informed method which values and attempts to operationalise the researcher's professional knowledge as part of deductive as well as inductive approaches to analysis may also be of interest and perhaps particular relevance to research carried out within professional settings. Indeed, CTC is an approach I am already exploring in collaboration with Walsh (2021a, 2021b) in an initial study on the staff experience of developing assignment briefs.

Clearly, the process by which students engage with, interpret and respond to briefs and the role this plays in their developing understanding of themselves in relation to their

programmatic, disciplinary and institutional contexts is a highly complex one.

Approaching this from the perspective of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis and Scott, 2007; Lea, 2020), drawing on the concepts of Gee's Discourse (Gee, 2011) and Bakhtinian (1981) dialogue has been useful and revealed rich opportunities for further research. In particular, students' experience of what I have referred to as dissemination activities, i.e., the ways in which briefs are shared and students are given opportunities to engage with them, seems an area that would benefit from closer and more focused exploration. There is a strong theoretical basis for active, collaborative and discursive approaches to engaging students with their briefs and some indication in the literature (e.g., Cureton *et al.*, 2017) of their benefits, even though such approaches were not in evidence within this study. It is noted, however, that students found the seemingly more teacher-led, transmission mode dissemination activities that they reported experiencing here to be useful and supportive. This is certainly an aspect of students' engagement with assignment briefs that would warrant further exploration and it is suggested that the academic literacies framework would be useful lens via which to explore it.

It has been noted in the section on limitations, above, that the staff perspective on writing assignment briefs was not explored as part of this study. Exploring the experiences of staff in framing and communicating assessed tasks would be a useful area for further research and may serve to guide staff development activities in this aspect of their work. An area of interest in this study has been the extent to which students are constrained by or empowered to act within (and upon) disciplinary and institutional conventions as part of their engagement with assessed work. Indications of the challenges encountered by staff in relation to designing and managing assessment processes in the literature (Hughes, 2009a; McGrath, Negretti and Nicholls, 2019; Fernández Ruiz *et al.*, 2022) would suggest that they themselves are subject to the power relations within their disciplinary and professional contexts. As mentioned, this is an area in which I am already engaging in some research as a means of exploring how better staff may be supported in the challenging process of framing effective assignment briefs.

It is also acknowledged that this research was conducted in a very focused way within a particular institution and with students from only two programmes. The participants in the study were also all 'non-traditional' and female. Research into the experiences of a

diverse range of students in other institutional settings may help to provide a fuller picture of the role of the assignment brief in framing the student experience of assessment and point to further insights into this still relatively under-considered phenomenon.

The somewhat misjudged approach to providing options in assessment in evidence in the Lifespan essay points to the usefulness of further exploration of the usefulness of choice and how it is managed in the definition and specification of assessed tasks. This may be of particular interest in the light of contemporary interest in, for example, Universal Design for Learning (Morris, Milton and Goldstone, 2019), which somewhat champions choice as a means of providing opportunities for students to engage with assessed work according to their preferences and strengths. Further consideration of how choice can be used to provide students with opportunities to follow interests and approach assessment from a position of strength would build usefully on the indication that this can encourage empowered and confident engagement with assessed work arising from this study (e.g., Mary's experience of the Lifespan essay).

In terms of my own learning resulting from my engagement with this study has been a growing awareness of the importance of identity as an aspect of students' learning journeys. Students do not simply acquire new knowledge and develop new skills in their engagement with their disciplines, they are also involved in the construction of new versions of themselves. These entail both their existing lifeworlds and newer identities as a developing experts in their disciplines and future professions. It seems clear that student engagement with assessment practices plays a significant role in this process. An exploration of how students form their new identities through their engagement in assessment and how these represent a combination of students' lifeworld and disciplinary Discourses would seem a fruitful area for further investigation.

Finally, this research study has provided an insight into the experiences of some students at a particular moment in their studies as they strive to come to terms with the challenges of the new ways of thinking, doing and being within their new disciplinary, professional and institutional contexts. The opportunity to explore Bridget's experience later in her university journey via a second interview provided valuable insights into her

ongoing development and changing attitudes to her studies and the wider programmatic and institutional context. While the snapshots of the student experience provided by this study have been useful and have revealed much that seems of interest and importance in relation to the student experience of assignment briefs and wider assessment practices, it is suggested that more longitudinal studies, via which the ongoing development of students' understanding of assessment processes and their impact upon the development of their identities as students and future professionals could be explored over time would also be beneficial.

References

- Advance HE (2019) *Student Success: Transforming Assessment in Higher Education*. York: Advance HE. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/transforming-assessment>.
- Aiken, V. (2021) 'Academic literacies and the tilts within: the push and pull of student writing', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 0(0), pp. 1–17. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2021.1952565.
- Aitchison, J. and Graham, P. (1989) 'Potato crisp pedagogy', in Cristicos, C. (ed.) *Experiential learning in formal and non-formal education*. Durban, SA: Media Resource Centre, University of Natal, pp. 15–21.
- Al-Kadri, H. M. et al. (2012) 'Exploring assessment factors contributing to students' study strategies: Literature review', *Medical Teacher*, 34(SUPPL. 1). doi: 10.3109/0142159X.2012.656756.
- Alvesson, M. and Sköldbberg, K. (2009) *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE.
- Anderson, C. and Hounsell, D. (2007) 'Knowledge practices: "Doing the subject" in undergraduate courses', *Curriculum Journal*, 18(4), pp. 463–478. doi: 10.1080/09585170701687910.
- Anderson, L. W. et al. (eds) (2001) *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives (Abridged edition)*. New York: Longman.
- Andrade, H. L. (2019) 'A Critical Review of Research on Student Self-Assessment', *Frontiers in Education*, 4(August), pp. 1–13. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2019.00087.
- Ashwin, P. (2009) *Analysing teaching-learning interactions in higher education: accounting for structure and agency*. London: Continuum.
- Ashwin, P. (2014) 'Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding in higher education', *Higher Education*, 67(2), pp. 123–126. doi: 10.1007/s10734-014-9715-3.
- Avery, P. G. et al. (2001) *Linking authentic instruction to students' achievement: Using peer coaching: Evaluation Report*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. Available at: [https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/138370/Authentic Pedagogy_Linking Authentic Instruction to Students%27 Achievement Using Peer Coaching.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/138370/Authentic_Pedagogy_Linking_Authentic_Instruction_to_Students%27_Achievement_Using_Peer_Coaching.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).
- Baartman, L., Gulikers, J. and Dijkstra, A. (2013) 'Factors influencing assessment quality in higher vocational education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(8), pp. 978–997. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2013.771133.
- Badenhorst, C. et al. (2015) 'Thinking creatively about research writing', in *Working With Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, pp. 97–106.

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Edited by M. Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Baloo, K. *et al.* (2018) 'Transparency Isn't Spoon-Feeding: How a Transformative Approach to the Use of Explicit Assessment Criteria Can Support Student Self-Regulation', *Frontiers in Education*, 3(September). doi: 10.3389/educ.2018.00069.
- Bandura, A. (1977) 'Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change', *Psychological Review*, 84(2), pp. 191–215. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-75361-4.
- Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bandura, A. (2000) 'Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(3), pp. 75–78. doi: 10.1111/1467-8721.00064.
- Barnes, J. (2016) 'Why PhD students at a private university Thailand delay completing their doctoral dissertation or drop out', *AU-GSB E-Journal*, 16(1), pp. 49–60.
- Barron, P. and D'Annunzio-Green, N. (2009) 'A smooth transition?: Education and social expectations of direct entry students', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(1), pp. 7–25. doi: 10.1177/1469787408100190.
- BASW (2018) *Professional Capabilities Framework*. Available at: <https://www.basw.co.uk/social-work-training/professional-capabilities-framework-pcf>.
- Bateson, J. *et al.* (2016) *Different people, different views, different ideas: Widening Participation in Nursing and Radiography Degrees*. High Wycombe. Available at: http://bucks.ac.uk/content/documents/Research/ivlwr/Widening_participation_in_Nursing_and_Radiography_full_report_2016.pdf.
- Baynham, M. (1995) *Literacy practices: Investigating literacy in social contexts*. London: Longman.
- BBC1 (2024) *The Apprentice*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0071b63>.
- Bearman, M. *et al.* (2016) 'Support for assessment practice: developing the Assessment Design Decisions Framework', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(5), pp. 545–556. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2016.1160217.
- Bearman, M. *et al.* (2017) 'How university teachers design assessments: a cross-disciplinary study', *Higher Education*, 74(1), pp. 49–64. doi: 10.1007/s10734-016-0027-7.
- Beasley, C. J. and Pearson, C. A. L. (1999) 'Facilitating the Learning of Transitional Students: strategies for success for all students', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(303–321). doi: 10.1080/0729436990180303org/10.1080/0729436990180303.
- Beaumont, C., Moscrop, C. and Canning, S. (2016) 'Easing the transition from school to HE: scaffolding the development of self-regulated learning through a dialogic approach to feedback', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 40(3), pp. 331–350. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2014.953460.
- Beaumont, C., O'Doherty, M. and Shannon, L. (2011) 'Reconceptualising assessment

feedback: A key to improving student learning?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(6), pp. 671–687. doi: 10.1080/03075071003731135.

BERA (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*. London: British Educational Research Association. doi: 10.1080/00031305.1984.10483191.

Berry, J. and Loke, G. (2011) *Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students*. London and York: Equality Change Unit and Higher Education Academy. Available at: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/improving-degree-attainment-bme.pdf> (Accessed: 18 December 2016).

Biesta, G. (2009) 'Good education in an age of measurement : on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education', *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21, pp. 33–46. doi: 10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9.

Biggerstaff, D. and Thompson, A. R. (2008) 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Qualitative Methodology of Choice in Healthcare Research', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5(3), pp. 214–224. doi: 10.1080/14780880802314304.

Biggs, J. (1996) 'Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment', *Higher Education*, 32(3), pp. 347–364. doi: 10.1007/BF00138871.

Biggs, J. (2003) *Aligning teaching for constructing learning*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/aligning-teaching-constructing-learning>.

Biggs, J. (2014a) 'Constructive alignment in university teaching', *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 1(1), pp. 1–22. doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2923.1999.00431.x.

Biggs, J. (2014b) 'Constructive alignment in university teaching', *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 1, pp. 5–22. Available at: www.herdsa.org.au.

Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2011) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. 4th edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Bletsas, A. and Michell, D. (2014) 'Classicm on campus? Exploring and extending understandings of social class in the contemporary higher education debate', in Brook, H. et al. (eds) *Universities in Transition: Foregrounding Social Contexts of Knowledge in the First Year Experience*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, pp. 77–96.

Bloxham, S. (2009) 'Marking and moderation in the UK: False assumptions and wasted resources', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(2), pp. 209–220. doi: 10.1080/02602930801955978.

Bloxham, S. et al. (2016) 'Let's stop the pretence of consistent marking: exploring the multiple limitations of assessment criteria', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(3), pp. 466–481. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2015.1024607.

Bloxham, S. and Boyd, P. (2007) *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: a practical guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Available at: http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/343/1/Bloxham_DevelopingEffectiveAssessment.pdf (Accessed: 7 May 2017).

- Bloxham, S., Boyd, P. and Orr, S. (2011) 'Mark my words: The role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices', *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(6), pp. 655–670. doi: 10.1080/03075071003777716.
- BNU (2016) 'BA Business and Marketing Programme Specification'. Buckinghamshire New University.
- BNU (2018) 'BA in Business and HRM Programme Specification'. Buckinghamshire New University.
- BNU (2021a) 'BA Business and Management Programme Specification'. Buckinghamshire New University.
- BNU (2021b) *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief Template*. High Wycombe: Buckinghamshire New University. Available at: Institutional Intranet.
- BNU (2022) *Our proud history*. Available at: <https://www.bucks.ac.uk/about-us/our-proud-history> (Accessed: 21 July 2022).
- Boud, D. (1995) 'Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary', in *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page, pp. 35–48.
- Boud, D. (2000) 'Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2), pp. 151–167. doi: 10.1080/713695728.
- Boud, D. (2006) 'Foreword', in *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. xvii–xix.
- Boud, D. (2007) 'Reframing assessment as if learning were important', *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education: Learning for the Longer Term*, (January 2007), pp. 14–26. doi: 10.4324/9780203964309.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. and Sampson, J. (1999) 'Peer learning and assessment', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(4), pp. 413–426. doi: 10.1080/0260293990240405.
- Boud, D. and Falchikov, N. (2005) 'Redesigning assessment for learning beyond higher education', *Research and development in higher education*, 28(January 2005), pp. 34–41. Available at: http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2005/pdf/refereed/paper_398.pdf.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2020) 'Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches', *Counselling and Therapy Research*, 21(1), pp. 37–47. doi: 10.1002/capr.12360.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) 'To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample size', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), pp. 201–216.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2023) 'Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and becoming a knowing researcher', *International Journal of Transgender Health*. Routledge, pp. 1–6. doi: 10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597.
- Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S. and McClendon, S. A. (2004) 'Understanding and reducing

college departure', *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 30(3). Available at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Understanding_and_Reducing_College_Stude/efTzVrjFf3wC?hl=en&gbpv=1.

Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F. and Sullivan, A. S. (2000) 'The Influence of Active Learning on the College Student Departure Process: Toward a Revision of Tinto's Theory', *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(5), p. 569. doi: 10.2307/2649260.

Brimble, M. J. (2015) 'Does entry route really affect academic outcome? Academic achievement of traditional versus non traditional entrants to BN(Hons) pre-registration nursing programmes', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(3), pp. 379–398. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2013.858675.

Brown, A. and Rich, M. (2021) 'Evaluation of Student Learning on Undergraduate Business and Management Courses : Student Feedback', in *European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies*. Kidmore End. doi: 10.34190/ERM.21.009.

Brown, S. and Sambell, K. (2020) *Fifty tips for replacements for time-constrained , invigilated on-site exams*. Available at: <https://www.seda.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Paper-2-Fifty-tips-for-replacements-for-time-constrained-invigilated-on-site-exams-4.pdf>.

Brunton, J. *et al.* (2016) 'Designing and developing a programme-focused assessment strategy: a case study', *Open Learning*, 31(2), pp. 176–187. doi: 10.1080/02680513.2016.1187593.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burke, R. (2020) 'Widening Participation and Linguistic Engagement in Australian Higher Education: Exploring Academics' Perceptions and Practices', *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 32(2), pp. 201–213. Available at: <https://login.proxy.hil.unb.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1286363&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Butcher, J. *et al.* (2010a) 'How might inclusive approaches to assessment enhance student learning in', 2(1), pp. 25–40.

Butcher, J. *et al.* (2010b) 'How might inclusive approaches to assessment enhance student learning in HE?', *Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education*, 2(1), p. 25. doi: 10.14234/elehe.v2i1.14.

Butcher, J. *et al.* (2017) 'Unfit for purpose? Rethinking the language of assessment for Widening Participation students', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 19(2), pp. 27–46. doi: 10.5456/wpll.19.2.27.

Callender, C. (2008) 'The impact of term-time employment on higher education students' academic attainment and achievement', *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(4), pp. 359–377. doi: 10.1080/02680930801924490.

Cambridge University Libraries (2024) *Study Skills: Reflective Practice Toolkit*. Available at: <https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/reflectivewriting>.

- Carless, D. (2007) 'Learning-oriented assessment: conceptual bases and practical implications', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44(1), pp. 57–66. Available at: <http://digilib.unila.ac.id/11478/16/16.BAB.II.pdf>.
- Carless, D. (2009) 'Trust, distrust and their impact on assessment reform', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), pp. 79–89. doi: 10.1080/02602930801895786.
- Carless, D. (2015) 'Exploring learning-oriented assessment processes', *Higher Education*, 69(6), pp. 963–976. doi: 10.1007/s10734-014-9816-z.
- Carless, D. and Boud, D. (2018a) 'The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), pp. 1315–1325. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354.
- Carless, D. and Boud, D. (2018b) 'The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, pp. 1315–1325. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354.
- Carless, D. and Chan, K. K. H. (2017) 'Managing dialogic use of exemplars', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(6), pp. 930–941. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2016.1211246.
- Carnell, B. (2016) 'Aiming for autonomy: formative peer assessment in a final-year undergraduate course', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(8), pp. 1269–1283. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2015.1077196.
- CELT (2023) *Revised Bloom's Taxonomy - Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Iowa State University*. Available at: <https://www.celt.iastate.edu/instructional-strategies/effective-teaching-practices/revised-blooms-taxonomy/>.
- Chan, Z. C. Y. (2013) 'Bracketing in Phenomenology : Only Undertaken in the Data Collection and Analysis Process Bracketing in Phenomenology : Only Undertaken in the Data Collection and', 18(30), pp. 1–9.
- Chandler, P. and Sweller, J. (1991) 'Cognitive Load Theory and the Format of Instruction', *Cognition and Instruction*, 8(4), pp. 293–332. doi: 10.1207/s1532690xci0804_2.
- Chandler, P. and Sweller, J. (1996) 'Cognitive load while learning to use a computer program', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 10(2), pp. 151–170. doi: 10.1002/(SICI)1099-0720(199604)10:2<151::AID-ACP380>3.0.CO;2-U.
- Chen, O., Kalyuga, S. and Sweller, J. (2017) 'The Expertise Reversal Effect is a Variant of the More General Element Interactivity Effect', *Educational Psychology Review*, 29(2), pp. 393–405. doi: 10.1007/s10648-016-9359-1.
- Christie, H. *et al.* (2016) "'It all just clicked": a longitudinal perspective on transitions within university', *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), pp. 478–490. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2014.942271.
- Christie, H., Barron, P. and D'Annunzio-Green, N. (2013) 'Direct entrants in transition: becoming independent learners', *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), pp. 623–637. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2011.588326.

- Clark, I. (2012) 'Formative Assessment: Assessment Is for Self-regulated Learning', *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(2), pp. 205–249. doi: 10.1007/s10648-011-9191-6.
- Coffin, C. *et al.* (2003) *Teaching Academic Writing: A Toolkit for Higher Education*. London: Routledge.
- Colley, H. (2010) 'Time in learning transitions through the lifecourse: a feminist perspective', in Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G., and Hughes, M. (eds) *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*. London: Routledge, pp. 130–146.
- Collier, P. J. and Morgan, D. L. (2008) "'is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations', *Higher Education*, 55(4), pp. 425–446. doi: 10.1007/s10734-007-9065-5.
- Conroy, D. and De Visser, R. (2015) 'The importance of authenticity for student non-drinkers: An interpretative phenomenological analysis', *Journal of Health Psychology*, 20(11), pp. 1483–1493. doi: 10.1177/1359105313514285.
- Cotton, D. R. E. and Nash, P. (2014) 'The Experience of Care leavers in UK Higher Education', 16(3), pp. 5–21.
- Cottrell, S. (2019) *The study skills handbook*. 5th edn. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cousin, G. and Cuerton, D. (2012a) *Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)*. York. Available at: www.wlv.ac.uk/disa (Accessed: 7 May 2017).
- Cousin, G. and Cuerton, D. (2012b) *Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)*. York.
- Cousin, G. and Cureton, D. (2012) 'Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)', *National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) project fund initiative funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and managed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA)*, (October).
- Craddock, D. and Mathias, H. (2009) 'Assessment options in higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(2), pp. 127–140. doi: 10.1080/02602930801956026.
- Crafter, S. and Maunder, R. (2012) 'Understanding transitions using a sociocultural framework', *Educational and Child Psychology*, 29(1), pp. 10–18. doi: 10.5860/choice.51-2973.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. 3rd edn. London: SAGE.
- Crisp, B. R. and Lister, P. G. (2005) 'Walking the assessment tightrope', in Burgess, H. and Taylor, I. (eds) *Effective Learning and Teaching in Social Policy and Social Work*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 82–94.
- Crosling, G., Heagney, M. and Thomas, L. (2009) 'Improving student retention in higher education Improving Teaching and Learning', *Australian Universities' Review*, 51(2), pp. 9–18. Available at: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ864028.pdf> (Accessed: 28 July 2017).
- Crozier, G. *et al.* (2008) 'Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse

institutions – experiences of higher education’, *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), pp. 167–177. doi: 10.1080/02671520802048703.

Crozier, G., Reay, D. and Clayton, J. (2008) *The Socio-Cultural and Learning Experiences of Working Class Students in HE: ESRC Full Research Report, ESRC, RES-139-25-0208*. Swindon. Available at: <http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/grants/RES-139-25-0208/outputs/read/652b5c30-d2c5-4051-9298-e593b2a3d519>.

Cureton, D. D. *et al.* (2017) ‘Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change’, (April). Available at: <http://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/University-of-Wolverhampton-final.pdf>.

Darabi, M., Macaskill, A. and Reidy, L. (2017) ‘A qualitative study of the UK academic role: positive features, negative aspects and associated stressors in a mainly teaching-focused university’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(4), pp. 566–580. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2016.1159287.

Dawson, P. (2017) ‘Assessment rubrics: towards clearer and more replicable design, research and practice’, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(3), pp. 347–360. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2015.1111294.

Derry, J. (2020) ‘A Problem for Cognitive Load Theory—the Distinctively Human Life-form’, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54(1), pp. 5–22. doi: 10.1111/1467-9752.12411.

Devlin, M. *et al.* (2012) *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian Higher Education, Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*. Sydney, NSW: Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Devlin, M. and O’Shea, H. (2012) ‘Effective university teaching: views of Australian university students from low socio-economic status backgrounds’, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(4), pp. 385–397. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2011.641006.

Dewey, J. (1910) *How we think*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Co Publishers. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37423/37423-h/37423-h.htm>.

Dilnot, C., Macmillan, L. and Wyness, G. (2022) *Educational choices at 16-19 and university outcomes*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Dinning, T. M. and Brown, S. (2016) ‘Fostering learning for capability and assessing authentically: a vision for Enterprise Education’, *Experiential Entrepreneurship Exercises Journal*, 1(SI-ETC).

Dismore, H. (2017) *Authentic Assessment*. Plymouth. Available at: https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/10/10105/AUTHENTIC-ASSESSMENT_adapted_.pdf.

Dodd, E., Ellis, S. and Singh, S. (2020) ‘Making the invisible, visible: a twenty-first century approach to tertiary preparation, attainment and access for student equity’, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 0(0), pp. 1–21. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2020.1831629.

DoE (2018) *Knowledge and Skills Statement for child and family practitioners*. Available at: https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_90824-6.pdf.

DoH (2015) *Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers in Adult Services*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411957/KSS.pdf.

Donnell, V. L. O., Kean, M. and Stevens, G. (2016) 'Student transition in higher education: concepts, theories and practices', p. 44. Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-transition-higher-education-university-west-scotland-uws>.

Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. (2018) *Home and away: Social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility*. London: The Sutton Trust. doi: 10.4324/9780203415894-31.

Eatough, V. and Smith, J. A. (2014) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*.

Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G. and Hughes, M. (2010) 'Transitions in the lifecourse: the role of identity, agency and structure', in *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–15.

Edwards, V. *et al.* (2002) 'Fabula: A bilingual multimedia authoring environment for children exploring minority languages', *Language Learning and Technology*, 6(2), pp. 59–69.

Eiriksdottir, E. and Catrambone, R. (2011) 'Procedural instructions, principles, and examples: How to structure instructions for procedural tasks to enhance performance, learning, and transfer', *Human Factors*, 53(6), pp. 749–770. doi: 10.1177/0018720811419154.

Equality Challenge Unit (2016) *Equality Challenge Unit Degree attainment gaps - Equality Challenge Unit*. Available at: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/student-recruitment-retention-attainment/student-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps/> (Accessed: 15 July 2018).

Erikson, M. G. and Erikson, M. (2019) 'Learning outcomes and critical thinking—good intentions in conflict', *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(12), pp. 2293–2303. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2018.1486813.

Esteban-Guitart, M. and Moll, L. C. (2014) 'Funds of Identity: A new concept based on the Funds of Knowledge approach', *Culture and Psychology*, 20(1), pp. 31–48. doi: 10.1177/1354067X13515934.

Evans, C. (2016) *Enhancing assessment feedback practice in higher education: The EAT framework, Underpinning Principles of Evans' Assessment Tool (EAT)*. Available at: https://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/imported/transforms/content-block/UsefulDownloads_Download/A0999D3AF2AF4C5AA24B5BEA08C61D8E/EAT_Guide_April_FINAL1_ALL.pdf.

Ferguson, P. (2011) 'Student perceptions of quality feedback in teacher education',

- Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(1), pp. 51–62. doi: 10.1080/02602930903197883.
- Fernández Ruiz, J. *et al.* (2022) 'Assessment design decisions in practice: Profile identification in approaches to assessment design', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(4), pp. 606–621. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2021.1937512.
- Ferrari, R. (2015) 'Writing narrative style literature reviews', *Medical Writing*, 24(4), pp. 230–235.
- Fielding, A. (2008) 'Student assessment workloads: A review', *Learning and Teaching in Action*, 7(3), pp. 7–15.
- Firth, M. *et al.* (2023) *Optionality in assessment: a cross institutional exploration of the feasibility, practicality & utility of student choices in assessment in UK higher education*. Gloucester: QAA. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/members/final-report-28th-oct-report-a-summary-of-the-project.pdf>.
- Fletcher, R. B. *et al.* (2012) 'Faculty and Students Conceptions of Assessment in Higher Education', *Higher Education*, 64(1), pp. 119–133. doi: 10.1007/s10734-011-9484-1.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982) *Technologies of the self. Lectures at University of Vermont October, 1982*. Available at: <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.technologiesOfSelf.en/>.
- Foucault, M. (2002) *The order of things*. London: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (2017) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin Classics.
- French, A. (2013) "'Let the Right Ones In!": Widening Participation, Academic Writing and the Standards Debate in Higher Education', *Power and Education*, 5(3), pp. 236–247. doi: 10.2304/power.2013.5.3.236.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1979) *Truth and method*. 2nd edn. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Galasiński, D. (2021) 'No mental health research without qualitative research', *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(4), pp. 266–267. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30399-0.
- Gale, T. (2012) 'Towards a Southern Theory of Student Equity in Australian Higher Education: Enlarging the Rationale for Expansion', *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, 114(3), pp. 238–262. doi: 10.4471/rise.2012.14.
- Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2014a) 'Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), pp. 734–753. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2012.721351.
- Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2014b) 'Navigating student transition in higher education: induction, development, becoming', in Brook, H. *et al.* (eds) *Universities in Transition: Foregrounding Social Contexts of Knowledge in the First Year Experience*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, pp. 13–39.
- Gallant, T. B. (2017) 'Academic Integrity as a Teaching & Learning Issue: From Theory to Practice', *Theory Into Practice*, 56(2), pp. 88–94.

- Galvin, J. *et al.* (2015) 'Students' Perceptions of Tuition Fees: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', *British Journal of Education Society & Behavioural Science BJESBS*, 10(102), pp. 1–15. doi: 10.9734/BJESBS/2015/18981.
- Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (2015) 'The CAW approach to supporting academic writing', in Howell-Richardson, C. (ed.) *Designing Assignment Briefs: A Guide for Lecturers*. Coventry: Coventry University, pp. 5–6.
- Garcia, T. and Pintrich, P. R. (1991) 'Student Motivation and Self-Regulated Learning: A LISREL Model', in *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. Chicago, IL, pp. 1–21.
- Gee, J. P. (1989) 'Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction', *Journal of Education*, 171(1), pp. 5–17.
- Gee, J. P. (2003a) 'Assessment in Education : Principles , Policy & Practice Opportunity to Learn : A language-based perspective on assessment', (May). doi: 10.1080/09695940301696.
- Gee, J. P. (2003b) 'Opportunity to learn: A language-based perspective on assessment', *Assessment in Education Principles Policy and Practice*, 10(1), pp. 27–46. doi: 10.1080/09695940301696.
- Gee, J. P. (2010) *New digital media and learning as an emerging area and 'worked examples' as one way forward*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. doi: 10.1016/0168-583X(84)90341-0.
- Gee, J. P. (2011) *Social Linguistics and Literacies: ideologies in discourses*. 3rd edn. Abingdon: Routledge. Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.476.9477&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (Accessed: 10 November 2018).
- Gibbs, G. (2010) 'Using assessment data to support student learning', *Inclusive Education for the 21st Century*, pp. 159–178. doi: 10.4324/9781003116073-10.
- Gibbs, G. (2019) 'How assessment frames student learning', in Bryan, C. and Clegg, K. (eds) *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge, pp. 22–35.
- Gibbs, G. and Great Britain. Further Education Unit. (1988) *Learning by doing : a guide to teaching and learning methods*. FEU.
- Gibbs, G. and Simpson, C. (2005) 'Conditions under which assessment supports learning', *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, (1), pp. 3–31.
- Gilbert, F. (2012) 'Written assignment types in assessment : a varied and healthy diet ?', *BROOKES eJOURNAL OF LEARNING AND TEACHING*, 4(1), pp. 1–19.
- Gilbert, F. and Maguire, G. (2011a) *Optimising student performance in assessment through assessment brief design*, *Brookes Learning and Teaching Conference: Engaging learning through graduate attributes: staff and student perspectives*. Available at: https://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsl/resources/learn_teach_conf/2011/presentations/assignment_brief_design.pdf (Accessed: 7 May 2017).

Gilbert, F. and Maguire, G. (2011b) 'Optimising student performance in assessment through assessment brief design', *Brookes Learning and Teaching Conference: Engaging learning through graduate attributes: staff and student perspectives*. Available at: https://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/learn_teach_conf/2011/presentations/assignment_brief_design.pdf.

Gilbert, F. and Maguire, G. (2014a) *Assignment Brief Design: Dissemination*. Available at: <https://assignmentbriefdesign.weebly.com/dissemination.html> (Accessed: 9 July 2022).

Gilbert, F. and Maguire, G. (2014b) *Assignment brief design guidelines: developing academic communication to enhance the student experience in assessment*. Oxford and York: Oxford Brookes University and HEA.

Gill, A. (2019) 'Student Transition into Higher Education: Exploring BTEC Sport and Exercise Students Forthcoming Transition to Higher Education Taught within a Further Education Setting', *Innovative Practice in Higher Education*, 3(3), pp. 90–112.

Gill, A. J. G. (2020) 'The thoughts, feelings and perceptions of sport and exercise students progressing from vocational education and training to academic education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(6), pp. 795–808. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2019.1605499.

Gill, A. J. G. (2021) 'Difficulties and support in the transition to higher education for non-traditional students', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 26(4), pp. 410–441. doi: 10.1080/13596748.2021.1980661.

Gillett, A. and Hammond, A. (2009) 'Mapping the maze of assessment: An investigation into practice', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(2), pp. 120–137. doi: 10.1177/1469787409104786.

Ginns, P. and Leppink, J. (2019) 'Special Issue on Cognitive Load Theory: Editorial', *Educational Psychology Review*, 31(2), pp. 255–259. doi: 10.1007/s10648-019-09474-4.

Ginty, C. and Boland, J. (2016) 'Supporting the first year experience in Higher Education in Ireland: Impact on Student Engagement, Teaching Practice and Institutional Policy', *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, 5(1), pp. 1–47.

Given, L. M. (2017) 'It's a new year...so let's stop the paradigm wars', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), pp. 1–2. doi: 10.1177/1609406917692647.

Glogowska, M., Young, P. and Lockyer, L. (2007) 'Should I go or should I stay? A study of factors influencing students' decisions on early leaving', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 8(1), pp. 63–77. doi: 10.1177/1469787407074115.

Gravett, K. (2021) 'Troubling transitions and celebrating becomings: from pathway to rhizome', *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(8), pp. 1506–1517. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1691162.

Gravett, K., Kinchin, I. M. and Winstone, N. E. (2020) 'Frailty in transition? Troubling the norms, boundaries and limitations of transition theory and practice', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 39(6), pp. 1169–1185. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2020.1721442.

- Grbich, C. (2013) *Qualitative data analysis: an introduction*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.
- Green, B. N., Johnson, C. D. and Adams, A. (2006) 'Writing narrative literature reviews for peer-reviewed journals : secrets of the trade', *Journal of Chiropractic Medicine*, 5(3), pp. 101–117.
- Gulikers, J. T. M. *et al.* (2006) 'Student perceptions of assessment authenticity', *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 32, pp. 381–400.
- Gulikers, J. T. M., Bostiaens, T. J. and Kirschner, P. A. (2004) 'A five-dimensional framework for authentic assessment', *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 52(3), pp. 67–86. doi: 10.1007/BF02504676.
- Gunn, A. (2018) 'Metrics and methodologies for measuring teaching quality in higher education: developing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)', *Educational Review*, 70(2), pp. 129–148. doi: 10.1080/00131911.2017.1410106.
- Gustafson-Pearce, O. (2009a) 'The Assignment Brief', in *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, pp. 2584–2588. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2009.01.456.
- Gustafson-Pearce, O. (2009b) 'The Assignment Brief', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1(1), pp. 2584–2588. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2009.01.456.
- Haft, S. L., Greiner de Magalhães, C. and Hoeft, F. (2023) 'A Systematic Review of the Consequences of Stigma and Stereotype Threat for Individuals With Specific Learning Disabilities', *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 56(3), pp. 193–209. doi: 10.1177/00222194221087383.
- Haggis, T. (2006) 'Pedagogies for diversity: retaining critical challenge amidst fears of “dumbing down”', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), pp. 521–535. doi: 10.1080/03075070600922709.
- Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M. and De Lacey, S. (2016) 'Qualitative research methods: When to use them and how to judge them', *Human Reproduction*, 31(3), pp. 498–501. doi: 10.1093/humrep/dev334.
- Harland, T. *et al.* (2015) 'An assessment arms race and its fallout: high-stakes grading and the case for slow scholarship', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(4), pp. 528–541. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2014.931927.
- Harris, J. (1995) 'Negotiating the contact zone', *Journal of Basic Writing*, 14(1), pp. 27–42.
- Hartley, J. (1998) *Designing instructional text*. London: Kogan Page.
- Harvey, A., Tree, D. and Rand-Weaver, M. (2018) *Integrated Programme Assessment. A Practical Guide*. London: Brunel University. Available at: <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/awards/integrated-programme-assessment/documents/pdf/IPA-Practical-Guide-0918.pdf>.
- Hattie, J. and Clarke, S. (2019) *Visible learning: Feedback*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. (2011) 'The Power of Feedback', *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), pp. 81–112. doi: 10.3102/003465430298487.

HEA (2012a) *10 Strategies To Engage Students With Feedback*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/10_strategies_to_engage_students_with_feedback.pdf.

HEA (2012b) *A marked improvement transforming assessment in higher education*. York: The Higher Education Academy. doi: 978-1-907207-65-5.

Heidegger, M. (2019) *Being and time*. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books.

HESA (2022a) *What do HE students study?* Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/what-study>.

HESA (2022b) *Where do HE students come from?* Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>.

HESA (2022c) *Where do students study?* Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study>.

Hockings, C. (2010) *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: a synthesis of research*. York. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/inclusive_teaching_and_learning_in_he_synthesis_200410_0.pdf (Accessed: 7 May 2017).

Hodgson, Y. *et al.* (2022) 'Students' perceptions and experiences of assessment and feedback in three years of a biomedicine degree', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, (May). doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2022.2061842.

Hodgson, Y. and Garvey, L. (2020) 'Conceptions of assessment in students and staff teaching biomedical sciences: a pilot study', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(6), pp. 818–828. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2019.1612045.

Holstein, J. A. and Gubrium, J. F. (2004) 'The active interview', in Silverman, D. (ed.) *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE, pp. 140–161.

Hope, A. (2013) 'Foucault, panopticism and school surveillance research', in *Social Theory and Education Research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 35–51.

Hounsell, D. *et al.* (2008) 'The quality of guidance and feedback to students', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 27(1), pp. 55–67.

Howell-Richardson, C. (2012) *DiSA Briefing Paper: Challenges in Academic Writing*. York. Available at: http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Challenges_in_Academic_Writing-Howell-Richardson.doc (Accessed: 7 May 2017).

Howell-Richardson, C. (2015a) 'Design and interpretation of assignment briefs', in Howell-Richardson, C. (ed.) *Designing Assignment Briefs: A Guide for Lecturers*. Coventry, pp. 15–22. Available at: http://www.coventry.ac.uk/Global/03_Study_section_assets/Student_support/academic_support/designing-assignment-briefs-a-guide-for-lecturers.pdf.

- Howell-Richardson, C. (2015b) 'Giving feedback on student writing', in Howell-Richardson, C. (ed.) *Designing Assignment Briefs: A Guide for Lecturers*. Coventry: Coventry University, pp. 23–33.
- Howell-Richardson, C. and Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (2016) 'Mixed metaphors for academic writing development', in *Student attainment in higher education: issues, controversies and debates*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 144–160.
- Huff, J. L. *et al.* (2019) 'Identity in Engineering Adulthood: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Early-Career Engineers in the United States as They Transition to the Workplace', *Emerging Adulthood*, 7(6), pp. 451–467. doi: 10.1177/2167696818780444.
- Hughes, C. (2009a) 'Assessment as text production: Drawing on systemic functional linguistics to frame the design and analysis of assessment tasks', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(5), pp. 553–563. doi: 10.1080/02602930802187316.
- Hughes, C. (2009b) 'Assessment as text production: Drawing on systemic functional linguistics to frame the design and analysis of assessment tasks', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(5), pp. 553–563.
- Husserl, E. (1970) *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Hussey, T. and Smith, P. (2002) 'The Trouble with Learning Outcomes', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3(3), pp. 220–233. doi: 10.1177/1469787402003003003.
- Hussey, T. and Smith, P. (2003) 'The Uses of Learning Outcomes', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(3), pp. 357–368. doi: 10.1080/13562510309399.
- Hussey, T. and Smith, P. (2008) 'Learning outcomes: A conceptual analysis', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(1), pp. 107–115. doi: 10.1080/13562510701794159.
- Huynh, T. *et al.* (2021) 'The Influence of Social Media on Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Reality: Through the Theoretical Perspective of Groupthink', *McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology*, 2(1), pp. 175–208.
- Hyland, K. (2002) 'Genre: language, context and literacy', *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 22, pp. 113–135.
- Jensen, D. H. and Jetten, J. (2015) 'Bridging and bonding interactions in higher education: social capital and students' academic and professional identity formation.', *Frontiers in psychology*, 6, p. 126. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00126.
- Jessop, T. and Tomas, C. (2017a) 'The implications of programme assessment patterns for student learning', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(6), pp. 990–999. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2016.1217501.
- Jessop, T. and Tomas, C. (2017b) 'The implications of programme assessment patterns for student learning', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(6), pp. 990–999. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2016.1217501.
- Jisc (2021) *Student digital experience insights survey 2020/21*. London: Jisc.

- Jisc (2023) *Student digital experience insights survey 2022/23*. London: Jisc.
- Jonsson, A. (2014) 'Rubrics as a way of providing transparency in assessment', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(7), pp. 840–852. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2013.875117.
- Jopp, R. and Cohen, J. (2022) 'Choose your own assessment—assessment choice for students in online higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(6), pp. 738–755. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1742680.
- Jupp, V. (2006) 'Nomothetic', in Jupp, V. (ed.) *The SAGE dictionary of social research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 196–197.
- Kahu, E. et al. (2015) 'Linking academic emotions and student engagement: mature-aged distance students' transition to university', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(4), pp. 481–497. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2014.895305.
- Kalyuga, S. et al. (2003) 'The expertise reversal effect', *Educational Psychologist*, 38(1), pp. 23–31. doi: 10.1207/S15326985EP3801_4.
- Kalyuga, S., Chandler, P. and Sweller, J. (2001) 'Learner experience and efficiency of instructional guidance', *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 21(1), pp. 5–23. doi: 10.1080/01443410124681.
- Kandlbinder, P. and Peseta, T. (2009) 'Key concepts in postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching and learning in Australasia and the United Kingdom', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 14(1), pp. 19–31. doi: 10.1080/13601440802659247.
- Kaur, A., Noman, M. and Awang-Hashim, R. (2018) 'The role of goal orientations in students' perceptions of classroom assessment in higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(3), pp. 461–472. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2017.1359818.
- Kift, S., Nelson, K. and Clarke, J. (2010) 'Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE -A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector', *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), pp. 1–20. Available at: <https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/13/60> (Accessed: 14 July 2018).
- Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J. and Clark, R. E. (2006) 'Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching', *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), pp. 75–86. doi: 10.1207/s15326985ep4102_1.
- Kite, J. and Phongsavan, P. (2017) 'Evaluating standards-based assessment rubrics in a postgraduate public health subject', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(6), pp. 837–849. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2016.1199773.
- Kleiman, P. (2007) *Negotiating assessment: an approach to assessing practical work, including assessment criteria*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: www.palatine.heacademy.ac.uk.
- Knight, J., Rochon, R. and Lee-Price, S. (2014) *You shall go to the ball... Understanding*

and improving students' experience of assessment: exploring the affordances of inclusive assessment design. Available at: [http://collections.crest.ac.uk/9503/2/John Kinght poster_inclusive_assessment.pdf](http://collections.crest.ac.uk/9503/2/John%20Kinght%20poster_inclusive_assessment.pdf) (Accessed: 8 May 2017).

Koh, K. *et al.* (2018) 'Developing the assessment literacy of teachers in Chinese language classrooms: A focus on assessment task design', *Language Teaching Research*, 22(3), pp. 264–288. doi: 10.1177/1362168816684366.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning as the science of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Krause, K.-L. and Coates, H. (2008) 'Students' engagement in first-year university', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), pp. 493–505. doi: 10.1080/02602930701698892.

Kumar, R. *et al.* (2024) 'Academic Integrity and Artificial Intelligence: An overview', in Eaton, S. E. (ed.) *Second Handbook of Academic Integrity*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 1583–1596.

Kvale, S. (2007) 'Contradictions of assessment for learning', in Boud, D. and Falchikov, N. (eds) *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education: Learning for the Longer Term*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 57–71.

Larkin, M., Watts, S. and Clifton, E. (2006) 'Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 102–120. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp062oa.

Larsson, S. (2009) 'A pluralist view of generalization in qualitative research', *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 32(1), pp. 25–38. doi: 10.1080/17437270902759931.

Laverty, S. M. (2003) 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(3), pp. 21–35. doi: 10.1177/160940690300200303.

Lea, M. R. (2020) *Working With Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice*, *Working With Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice*. doi: 10.37514/per-b.2015.0674.

Lea, M. R. and Street, B. V. (1998) 'Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach', *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), pp. 157–172. doi: 10.1080/03075079812331380364.

Lea, M. R. and Street, B. V. (2006) 'The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and Applications', *Theory Into Practice*, 45(4), pp. 368–377.

Leathwood, C. (2005) 'Assessment Policy and Practice in Higher Education: Purpose, Standards and Equity', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(3), pp. 307–324. doi: 10.1080/02602930500063876.

Leese, M. (2010) 'Bridging the gap: supporting student transitions into higher education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34(2), pp. 239–251. doi: 10.1080/03098771003695494.

- Lehmann, W. (2009) 'University as vocational education: Working-class students' expectations for university', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(2), pp. 137–149. doi: 10.1080/01425690802700164.
- Lichtenstein, M. and Rucks-Ahidiana, Z. (2021) 'Contextual Text Coding: A Mixed-methods Approach for Large-scale Textual Data', *Sociological Methods and Research*, 52(2), pp. 606–641.
- Lillis, T. (1997) 'New voices in academia? The regulative nature of academic writing conventions', *Language and Education*, 11(3), pp. 182–199. doi: 10.1080/09500789708666727.
- Lillis, T. (1999) 'Whose common sense? Essayist literacy and the institutional practice of mystery', in Jones, C., Turner, J., and Street, B. (eds) *Students writing in the university: cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 127–147. Available at: <https://epdf.tips/students-writing-in-the-university-cultural-and-epistemological-issues-studies-i.html>.
- Lillis, T. (2001) *Student writing: access, regulation and desire*. London: Routledge.
- Lillis, T. (2003) 'Student Writing as ' Academic Literacies ': Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Student Writing as " Academic Literacies " : Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Critique to Design', *Language and Education*, 17(3), pp. 192–207. doi: 10.1080/09500780308666848.
- Lillis, T. (2017) 'Imagined, prescribed and actual text trajectories: The "problem" with case notes in contemporary social work', *Text and Talk*, 37(4), pp. 485–508. doi: 10.1515/text-2017-0013.
- Lillis, T. (2019) "'Academic literacies": sustaining a critical space on writing in academia', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (15). doi: 10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.565.
- Lillis, T. M. (2014) 'Resonances, resistances and relations: reflecting on the politics of risk in academic knowledge making', in Thesen, L. and Cooper, L. (eds) *Risk in Academic Writing: Postgraduate Students, Their Teachers and the Making of Knowledge*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 237–244.
- Lillis, T. and Scott, M. (2007) 'Defining academic literacies research : issues of epistemology , ideology and strategy', *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), pp. 5–32.
- Lillis, T. and Scott, M. (2015) 'Defining academic literacies research: issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy', *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, 4(1), pp. 5–32. doi: 10.1558/japl.v4i1.5.
- Lillis, T. and Tuck, J. (2016) 'Academic literacies: a critical lens on writing and reading in the academy', in Hyland, K. and Shaw, P. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes Academic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 30–43. doi: 10.4324/9781315657455.ch03.
- Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (2000) 'The only generalisation is: there is no generalisation', in *Case study method: key issues, key texts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 27–43.

- Longfellow, E. *et al.* (2008) ““They had a way of helping that actually helped”: A case study of a peer-assisted learning scheme’, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(1), pp. 93–105. doi: 10.1080/13562510701794118.
- Ma, J. (2017) ‘Semiotising the student perception of learning outcomes in British higher education’, *Social Semiotics*, 27(2), pp. 227–242. doi: 10.1080/10350330.2016.1189234.
- Maguire, G. and Gilbert, F. (2015) ‘Developing academic communication to enhance the student experience in assessment. Enhancing Practice in Assignment Brief Communication’. Available at: http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/resources/files/solent15/1-2-gilbert_maguire.pdf (Accessed: 8 May 2017).
- Mahmud, A. and Gagnon, J. (2020) ‘Racial disparities in student outcomes in British higher education: examining Mindsets and bias’, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 0(0), pp. 1–16. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1796619.
- Marder, B. *et al.* (2019) ‘Smile(y)–and your students will smile with you? the effects of emoticons on impressions, evaluations, and behaviour in staff-to-student communication’, *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(11), pp. 2274–2286. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1602760.
- Marshall, Catharine A. (2016) ‘Stories with a foundation’, in Marshall, Catherine A., Nolan, S. J., and Newton, D. P. (eds) *Widening participation, higher education and non-traditional students: supporting transitions through foundation programmes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 179–188.
- Martin, J. (2018) *Writing in the third person*. Available at: [http://studysupportresources.port.ac.uk/Writing in the third peson.pdf](http://studysupportresources.port.ac.uk/Writing%20in%20the%20third%20person.pdf).
- Marton, F. and Saljö, R. (1976) ‘On qualitative differences in learning: I. Outcome and process’, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46(1), pp. 4–11.
- Marton, F. and Saljö, R. (2005) ‘Approaches to learning’, in Marton, F., Hounsell, D., and Entwistle, N. J. (eds) *The Experience of Learning: Implications for teaching and studying in higher education*. 3rd (Inter. Edinburgh: Universtiy of Edinburgh, Centre of Teaching, Learning and Assessment, pp. 39–58. Available at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/learning-teaching/staff/experience-of-learning>.
- McArthur, J. (2021) ‘Rethinking student involvement in assessment’, *Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper*, (58), pp. 1–29. Available at: <https://www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/working-paper-58final.pdf>.
- McArthur, J. *et al.* (2021) ‘Student perspectives on assessment: connections between self and society’, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 0(0), pp. 1–14. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2021.1958748.
- McDowell, L. (2008) ‘Negotiating assignment pathways: Students and academic assignments’, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(4), pp. 423–435. doi: 10.1080/13562510802169699.
- Mcdowell, L., Sambell, K. and Davison, G. (2009) ‘Assessment for learning : a brief history and review of terminology’. Available at: http://www.shu.ac.uk/_assets/pdf/2331LTAreportinorder.pdf (Accessed: 8 July 2018).

- McDuff, N. *et al.* (2018) 'Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds through institutional change.', *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*. doi: 10.5456/WPLL.20.1.79.
- McGowan, U. (2005) 'Academic Integrity: An Awareness and Development Issue for Students and Staff', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 2(3), pp. 56–66. doi: 10.53761/1.2.3.6.
- McGrath, L., Negretti, R. and Nicholls, K. (2019) 'Hidden expectations: scaffolding subject specialists' genre knowledge of the assignments they set', *Higher Education*, 78(5), pp. 835–853. doi: 10.1007/s10734-019-00373-9.
- McSweeney, F. (2014) "'Moving In": Difficulties and Support in the Transition to Higher Education for In-service Social Care student', *Social Work Education*, 33(3), pp. 317–337.
- Mcsweeney, F. and Mcsweeney, F. (2014) 'In-service Social Care Students', 5479.
- Medland, E. (2016) 'Assessment in higher education: drivers, barriers and directions for change in the UK', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(1), pp. 81–96. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2014.982072.
- Meer, N. M. and Chapman, A. (2014) 'Assessment for confidence: Exploring the impact that low-stakes assessment design has on student retention', *International Journal of Management Education*, 12(2), pp. 186–192. doi: 10.1016/j.ijme.2014.01.003.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002) *Phenomenology of perception*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- van Merriënboer, J. J. G. and Sweller, J. (2005) 'Cognitive Load Theory and Complex Learning: Recent Developments and Future Directions', *Educational Psychology Review*, 17(2), pp. 147–177. doi: 10.1007/s10648-005-3951-0.
- Meyer, L. H. *et al.* (2010) 'An investigation of tertiary assessment policy and practice: Alignment and contradictions', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64(3), pp. 331–350. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00459.x.
- Miller, E. and Konstantinou, I. (2022) 'Using reflective, authentic assessments to embed employability skills in higher education', *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, 14(1), pp. 4–17. doi: 10.1108/JWAM-02-2021-0014.
- Miller, R. (2018) *Delivering Intergrated Care: The Role of the Multidisciplinary Team*, SCiE. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence. Available at: <https://www.scie.org.uk/integrated-care/workforce/role-multidisciplinary-team>.
- Mitchell, S. and Scott, M. (2015) 'How Can the Text be Everything? Reflecting on Academic Life and Literacies', in Lillis, T. *et al.* (eds) *Working With Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice*. Colorado, SC: The WAC Clearinghouse/Parlor Press, pp. 117–124. doi: 10.37514/per-b.2015.0674.
- Monsen, S., Cook, S. and Hannant, L. (2017) 'Students as partners in negotiated assessment in a teacher education course', *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 1(21). Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss21/2>.
- Morris, C., Milton, E. and Goldstone, R. (2019) 'Case study: suggesting choice: inclusive

assessment processes', *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 4(1), pp. 435–447. doi: 10.1080/23752696.2019.1669479.

Mountford-Zimdars, A. et al. (2015) *Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes*, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Causes,of,differences,in,student,outcomes/HEFCE2015_diffout.pdf.

Nesi, H and Gardner, S. (2012) 'Families of genres of assessed writing', in Nesi, H. and Gardner, S. (eds) *Genres across the Disciplines: Student Writing in Higher Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 21–57.

Nesi, Hilary and Gardner, S. (2012) 'Families of genres of assessed writing', in Nesi, H. and Gardner, S. (eds) *Genres across the Disciplines: Student Writing in Higher Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 21–56. doi: 10.1017/9781009030199.

Nicol, D. J. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) 'Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), pp. 199–218. doi: 10.1080/03075070600572090.

Nicol, D. and MacFarlane-Dick, D. (2006) 'Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), pp. 199–218. doi: 10.1080/03075070600572090.

Nieminen, J. H. (2022) 'Assessment for Inclusion: rethinking inclusive assessment in higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education*, pp. 1–19. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2021.2021395.

Noon, E. J. (2018) 'Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: An Appropriate Methodology for Educational Research?', *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 6(1), pp. 75–83. doi: 10.14297/jpaap.v6i1.304.

Nordmann, E. et al. (2020) 'Ten simple rules for supporting a temporary online pivot in higher education', *PLoS Computational Biology*, 16(10), pp. 1–18. doi: 10.1371/journal.pcbi.1008242.

Norman, D. (1988) *The psychology of everyday things*. Basic Books.

O'Donnell, V. L., Kean, M. and Stevens, G. (2016) *Student transition in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-transition-higher-education-university-west-scotland-uws>.

O'Donnell, V. L. and Tobbell, J. (2007) 'The transition of adult students to higher education: Legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice?', *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(4), pp. 312–328. doi: 10.1177/0741713607302686.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M. and Rust, C. (2004a) 'Know what I mean? Enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and criteria', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9(3), pp. 325–335. doi: 10.1080/1356251042000216642.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M. and Rust, C. (2004b) 'Know what I mean? Enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and criteria', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9(3),

pp. 325–335. doi: 10.1080/1356251042000216642.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M. and Rust, C. (2008) 'Developing student understanding of assessment standards: a nested hierarchy of approaches', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(2), pp. 205–217. doi: 10.1080/13562510801923344.

O'Neill, G. (2010) *Choice of Assessment Methods within a Module: Students' Experiences and Staff Recommendations for practice*. Available at: [https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/Interim Inclusive Assessment Report, June 2010 .pdf](https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/Interim%20Inclusive%20Assessment%20Report,%20June%202010.pdf) (Accessed: 28 July 2017).

O'Sullivan, K. *et al.* (2019) 'Academic identity, confidence and belonging: The role of contextualized admissions and foundation years in higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(3), pp. 554–575.

OFFA (2018) *Office for Fair Access [Archived Content]*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/201805111111508/https://www.offa.org.uk/>.

OfS (2018) *Office for Students*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>.

OfS (2020) *OfS Topic Briefing: Local and commuter students*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/local-and-commuter-students/>.

OfS (2021) *Assessment practices in English higher education providers*. London: Office for Students.

OfS (2022a) *About the TEF*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/about-the-tef/>.

OfS (2022b) *OfS sets out plans to crack down on poor quality courses - Office for Students*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-sets-out-plans-to-crack-down-on-poor-quality-courses/> (Accessed: 10 July 2022).

Ofsted (2019) *Research for education inspection framework*. Manchester: Ofsted. Available at: www.gov.uk/ofsted.

Ofsted (2022) *About us - Ofsted - GOV.UK*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about> (Accessed: 11 July 2022).

Oldham, S. and Dhillon, J. (2012) *Student voices: perceptions of learning, assignments and achievement (DiSA Briefing Paper 12)*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: <https://studylib.net/doc/7265530/student-voices--perceptions-of-learning--assignments-and>.

Ormston, R. *et al.* (2014) 'The foundations of qualitative research', in Ritchie, J. *et al.* (eds) *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. 2nd edn. London: Sage, pp. 1–26.

Paas, F. and van Merriënboer, J. J. G. (2020) 'Cognitive-Load Theory: Methods to Manage Working Memory Load in the Learning of Complex Tasks', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 29(4), pp. 394–398. doi: 10.1177/0963721420922183.

- Paas, F., Renkl, A. and Sweller, J. (2003) 'Cognitive load theory and instructional design: Recent developments', *Educational Psychologist*, 38(1), pp. 1–4. doi: 10.1207/S15326985EP3801_1.
- Pallas, A. M. (2004) 'Educational transitions, trajectories and pathways', in Mortimer, J. T. and Shanahan, M. J. (eds) *Handbook of the life course. Volume 1*. New York: Springer, pp. 165–184.
- Panadero, E. and Alonso-Tapia, J. (2017) 'Self-assessment: Theoretical and practical connotations. When it happens, how is it acquired and what to do to develop it in our students', *Electronic Journal of Research in Education Psychology*, 11(30), pp. 551–576. doi: 10.14204/ejrep.30.12200.
- Penketh, C. and Goddard, G. (2008) 'Students in transition: Mature women students moving from Foundation Degree to Honours level 6', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13(3), pp. 315–327. doi: 10.1080/13596740802346522.
- Pietkiewicz, I. and Smith, J. A. (2014) 'A practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology', *Czasopismo Psychologiczne Psychological Journal*, 20(1), pp. 7–14. doi: 10.14691/CPJ.20.1.7.
- Pokorny, H., Holley, D. and Kane, S. (2017) 'Commuting, transitions and belonging: the experiences of students living at home in their first year at university', *Higher Education*, 74(3). doi: 10.1007/s10734-016-0063-3.
- Polanyi, M. (2009) *The tacit dimension*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd.
- Polman, J. L. (2010) 'The zone of proximal identity development in apprenticeship learning', *Revista de Educación*, 353(September-December), pp. 129–155. Available at: http://www.revistaeducacion.educacion.es/re353_05.html.
- Pratt, M. L. (1991) 'Arts of the contact zone', *Profession*, pp. 33–40. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25595461>.
- Price, M. et al. (2012) *Assessment literacy: The foundation for improving student learning*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.
- Prøitz, T. S. (2010) 'Learning outcomes: What are they? Who defines them? When and where are they defined?', *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 22(2), pp. 119–137. doi: 10.1007/s11092-010-9097-8.
- Prøitz, T. S. et al. (2017) 'Learning outcomes in professional contexts in higher education', *European Journal of Education*, 52, pp. 31–43. doi: 10.1111/ejed.12207.
- Putney, L. A. G. and Broughton, S. H. (2011) 'Developing collective classroom efficacy: The teacher's role as community organizer', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(1), pp. 93–105. doi: 10.1177/0022487110381760.
- QAA (2003) *Learning from subject review 1993-2001*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency. doi: 10.1016/j.math.2007.08.001.
- QAA (2011) *Explaining contact hours: Guidance for institutions providing public information about higher education in the UK*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency.

- QAA (2014a) *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*. Gloucester: QAA.
- QAA (2014b) *UK quality Code for Higher Education Part A Framework for Qualifications for UK Degree Awarding Bodies*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf> (Accessed: 2 October 2018).
- QAA (2016) *Social work*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency. doi: 10.5005/jp/books/12647_8.
- QAA (2018a) *The revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. UKSCQA/QAA. Available at: www.ukscqa.org.uk.
- QAA (2018b) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and guidance: Assessment*. Gloucester: UKSCQA/QAA.
- QAA (2018c) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and Guidance: Assessment*. Gloucester. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/assessment>.
- Quinn, J. (2010) 'Rethinking "failed transitions" to higher education', in Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G., and Hughes, M. (eds) *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*. London: Routledge, pp. 118–129.
- Race, P., Brown, S. and Smith, B. (2005) *500 tips on assessment*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rai, L. (2004) 'Exploring literacy in Social Work Education: A social practices approach to student writing', *Social Work Education*, 23(2), pp. 149–162. doi: 10.1080/0261547042000209170.
- Rai, L. and Lillis, T. (2013) "'Getting it Write" in social work: Exploring the value of writing in academia to writing for professional practice', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(4), pp. 352–364. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2012.719157.
- Ramanadhan, S. et al. (2021) 'Pragmatic approaches to analyzing qualitative data for implementation science: an introduction', *Implementation Science Communications*, 2(1), pp. 1–10. doi: 10.1186/s43058-021-00174-1.
- Ramsden, P. (2005) 'The Context of Learning in Academic Departments', in Marton, F., Hounsell, D., and Entwistle, N. J. (eds) *The Experience of Learning: Implications for teaching and studying in higher education*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Centre for Learning and Assessment, pp. 198–216.
- Reay, D. (2003) 'A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education', *Gender and Education*, 15(3), pp. 301–317. doi: 10.1080/09540250303860.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) "'Fitting in" or "standing out": Workingclass students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), pp. 107–124. doi: 10.1080/01411920902878925.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2016) "'Strangers in Paradise"? Working-class

Students in Elite Universities', *BSA Publications Ltd® at Staffordshire University on*, 43(6). doi: 10.1177/0038038509345700.

Reddy, Y. M. and Andrade, H. (2010) 'A review of rubric use in higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(4), pp. 435–448. doi: 10.1080/02602930902862859.

Reid, M. (2010) 'More than just having the right headings: Supporting students' report writing', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (2). doi: 10.47408/jldhe.v0i2.49.

Richards, K. and Pilcher, N. (2014a) 'Contextualising higher education assessment task words with an "anti-glossary" approach', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(5), pp. 604–625. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2013.805443.

Richards, K. and Pilcher, N. (2014b) 'Contextualising higher education assessment task words with an "anti-glossary" approach', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(5), pp. 604–625. Available at: <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/tqse/2014/00000027/00000005/art00003>.

Richards, K. and Pilcher, N. (2018) 'Academic literacies: the word is not enough', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(2), pp. 162–177. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2017.1360270.

Richardson, J. T. E. (2015) 'The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: what we know and what we don't know', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(2), pp. 278–291. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2013.858680.

Roberts, S. (2011) 'Traditional practice for non-traditional students? Examining the role of pedagogy in higher education retention', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 35(2), pp. 183–99.

Robinson, R. S. (2014) 'Purposive sampling', in Michalos, A. C. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 5243–5245. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5.

Robinson, Z. and Pedley-Smith, S. (2010) *A student's guide to writing business reports*. Wokingham: Kaplan Publishing.

Rochon, R. and Knight, J. (2013) 'Improving students experience of assessment: a role for learning developers?', in *Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education 10th Annual Conference*. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/aldinheconference2013/parallel-sessions/wednesday-sessions/parallel-4>.

Rochon, R. and Knight, J. (2015) 'The view from the fence', *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 1(1). doi: 10.21100/jeipc.v1i1.196.

Rochon, R. and Knight, J. (2019) 'Metrification of learning as a risk factor to innovative practice?', in *Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference 2019*, p. 20.

Rodham, K., Fox, F. and Doran, N. (2015) 'Exploring analytical trustworthiness and the

process of reaching consensus in interpretative phenomenological analysis: lost in transcription', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(1), pp. 59–71. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2013.852368.

Rop, G. *et al.* (2018) 'Effects of task experience and layout on learning from text and pictures with or without unnecessary picture descriptions', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 34(4), pp. 458–470. doi: 10.1111/jcal.12287.

Rowntree, D. (1987) *Assessing Students: How shall we know them?* Abingdon: Routledge.

Roy, S., Beer, C. and Lawson, C. (2020) 'The importance of clarity in written assessment instructions', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(2), pp. 143–155. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2018.1526259.

Rust, C. (2005) 'Developing a variety of assessment methods', (December).

Rust, C. (2011) 'The Unscholarly Use of Numbers in Our Assessment Practices: What Will Make Us Change?', *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 5(1). doi: 10.20429/ijstl.2011.050104.

Rust, C., Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2003) 'Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(2), pp. 147–164.

Sadler, D. R. (1989) 'Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems', *Instructional Science*, 18(2), pp. 119–144. doi: 10.1007/BF00117714.

Sadler, D. R. (2005) 'Interpretations of criteria-based assessment and grading in higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(2), pp. 175–194.

Sadler, D. R. (2007) 'Perils in the meticulous specification of goals and assessment criteria', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 14(3), pp. 387–392. doi: 10.1080/09695940701592097.

Sadler, D. R. (2010) 'Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), pp. 535–550. doi: 10.1080/02602930903541015.

Sadler, D. R. (2013) 'Opening up feedback : Teaching learners to see', in *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education: developing dialogue with students*. London: Routledge, pp. 54–63.

Sadler, D. R. (2014a) 'Learning from Assessment Events: The Role of Goal Knowledge', *Advances and Innovations in University Assessment and Feedback*, (July), pp. 152–172. doi: 10.3366/edinburgh/9780748694549.003.0009.

Sadler, D. R. (2014b) 'The futility of attempting to codify academic achievement standards', *Higher Education*, 67(3), pp. 273–288. doi: 10.1007/s10734-013-9649-1.

Sadler, D. R. (2016) 'Three in-course assessment reforms to improve higher education learning outcomes.pdf', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(7), pp. 1081–1099.

- Sambell, K., McDowell, L. and Montgomery, C. (2013) *Assessment for learning in higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Sayers, A. (2008) 'Tips and tricks in performing a systemic review', *British Journal of General Practice*, 58(547), p. 136. doi: 10.3399/bjgp08X277168.
- van de Schoot, R. *et al.* (2013) 'What Took Them So Long? Explaining PhD Delays among Doctoral Candidates', *PLoS ONE*, 8(7). doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0068839.
- Schrivers, K. A. (1997) *Dynamics in document design*. New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc.
- Scott, I. (2011) 'The Learning Outcome in Higher Education: Time to Think Again?', *Worcester Journal of Learning and Teaching*, (5), pp. 1–8.
- Scriver, S., Olesen, A. W. and Clifford, E. (2021) 'Partnering for success: a students' union-academic collaborative approach to supplemental instruction', *Irish Educational Studies*, 40(4), pp. 669–688. doi: 10.1080/03323315.2021.1899020.
- Sehoole, C. T. and Adeyemo, K. S. (2016) 'Access to , and Success in , Higher Education in Post-apartheid South Africa : Social Justice Analysis', 4(1), pp. 57–62.
- Sharples, M. (1996) 'An account of writing as creative design', in Levy, C. M. and Ransdell, S. (eds) *The Science of Writing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.133.
- Shvarts, A. and Bakker, A. (2019) 'The early history of the scaffolding metaphor: Bernstein, Luria, Vygotsky, and before', *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 26(1), pp. 4–23. doi: 10.1080/10749039.2019.1574306.
- de Silva Joyce, H. *et al.* (2014) 'Investigating the literacy, numeracy and ICT demands of primary teacher education', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(9), pp. 111–129. doi: 10.14221/ajte.2014v39n9.9.
- Silverman, D. (2004) 'Introducing qualitative research', in Silverman, D. (ed.) *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice*. London: SAGE, pp. 1–8.
- Singh, G. (2011) *Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' participation in higher education: improving retention and success*. York. Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/black-and-minority-ethnic-bme-students-participation-higher-education-improving>.
- Smith, C. D. *et al.* (2013a) 'Assessment literacy and student learning: the case for explicitly developing students "assessment literacy"', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(1), pp. 44–60. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2011.598636.
- Smith, C. D. *et al.* (2013b) 'Assessment literacy and student learning: The case for explicitly developing students "assessment literacy"', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(1), pp. 44–60. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2011.598636.
- Smith, J. A. (2011) 'Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis', *Health Psychology Review*, 5(1), pp. 9–27. doi: 10.1080/17437199.2010.510659.
- Smith, J. A. (2019) 'Participants and researchers searching for meaning: Conceptual

developments for interpretative phenomenological analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(2), pp. 166–181. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2018.1540648.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. London: Sage.

Smith, J. A. and Nizza, I. E. (2022) *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Smith, J. A. and Osborn, M. (2015) 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain', *British Journal of Pain*, 9(1), pp. 41–42. doi: 10.1177/2049463714541642.

Smith, J. A. and Rhodes, J. E. (2015) 'Being depleted and being shaken: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experiential features of a first episode of depression', *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 88(2), pp. 197–209. doi: 10.1111/papt.12034.

Smith, S., Greenfields, M. and Rochon, R. (2022) 'Gypsies, travellers and Roma in UK higher education: a view from inside the Academy', in Simmons, N. and Podrebarac, J. (eds) *Adults in the Academy: Voices of lifelong learners*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, pp. 101–109.

Stevenson, J. (2012) 'Black and minority ethnic student degree retention and attainment', (October), p. 28. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/bme_summit_final_report.pdf.

Stooke, R. K. and Hibbert, K. (2017) 'Writing Goes Back to School: Exploring the "Institutional Practice of Mystery" in a Graduate Education Program', *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8(3). doi: 10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.3.14.

Street, B. (2003) 'What's "new" in New Literacy Studies?: Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice', *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), pp. 77–91.

Street, B. (2013) 'Literacy in Theory and Practice: Challenges and Debates Over 50 Years', *Theory into Practice*, 52(SUPPL 1), pp. 52–62. doi: 10.1080/00405841.2013.795442.

Struyven, K., Dochy, F. and Janssens, S. (2005) 'Students' perceptions about evaluation and assessment in higher education: a review¹', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), pp. 325–341. doi: 10.1080/02602930500099102.

Stuart, M., Lido, C. and Morgan, J. (2011) 'Personal stories: how students' social and cultural life histories interact with the field of higher education', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 30(4), pp. 489–508. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2011.588463.

Swales, J. M. (1990) *Genre analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sweller, J. (1988) 'Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning', *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), pp. 257–285.

Sweller, J. (1994) 'Cognitive load theory, learning difficulty, and instructional design',

- Learning and Instruction*, 4(4), pp. 295–312. doi: 10.1016/0959-4752(94)90003-5.
- Sweller, J. and Chandler, P. (1991) 'Evidence for Cognitive Load Theory', *Cognition and Instruction*, 8(4), pp. 351–362. doi: 10.1207/s1532690xci0804_5.
- Sweller, J., van Merriënboer, J. J. G. and Paas, F. (2019) 'Cognitive Architecture and Instructional Design: 20 Years Later', *Educational Psychology Review*, 31(2), pp. 261–292. doi: 10.1007/s10648-019-09465-5.
- Sweller, J., van Merriënboer, J. J. G. and Paas, F. G. W. C. (1998) 'Cognitive Architecture and Instructional Design', *Educational Psychology Review*, 10(3), pp. 251–296. doi: 10.1023/A:1022193728205.
- Tai, J. *et al.* (2018) 'Developing evaluative judgement : enabling students to make decisions about the quality of work', *Higher Education*, 76, pp. 467–481.
- Taras, M. (2008) 'Assessment for learning: Sectarian divisions of terminology and concepts', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(4), pp. 389–397. doi: 10.1080/03098770802395892.
- Taras, M. and Davies, M. S. (2013) 'Perceptions and realities in the functions and processes of assessment', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 14(1), pp. 51–61. doi: 10.1177/1469787412467128.
- Tardy, C. M. (2009) *Building genre knowledge*. West Lafayette: Parlor Press.
- Taskan, B., Junça-Silva, A. and Caetano, A. (2022) 'Clarifying the conceptual map of VUCA: a systematic review', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 30(7), pp. 196–217. doi: 10.1108/IJOA-02-2022-3136.
- Thesen, L. (2013) 'Risk in Postgraduate Writing: Voice, Discourse and Edgework', *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), pp. 103–122.
- Thomas, D. *et al.* (2019) 'Elaborating a framework for communicating assessment aims in higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(4), pp. 546–564. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1522615.
- Thomas, L. (2002) 'Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus', *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), pp. 423–442. doi: 10.1080/02680930210140257.
- Thomas, L. (2012a) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change, What Works? Student Retention & Success*.
- Thomas, Liz (2012) *Building Student Engagement And Belonging In Higher Education At A Time Of Change, What Works? Student Retention & Success*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Available at: http://www-new2.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/what-works-student-retention/What_works_final_report.pdf.
- Thomas, L. (2012b) *Building Student Engagement And Belonging In Higher Education At A Time Of Change, What Works? Student Retention & Success*. Available at: http://www-new2.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/what-works-student-retention/What_works_final_report.pdf.

- Thomas, L. and Jones, R. (2017) 'Student engagement in the context of commuter students', p. 64. Available at: www.tsep.org.uk/resources.
- Thomas, S. P. and Sohn, B. K. (2023) 'From Uncomfortable Squirm to Self-Discovery : A Phenomenological Analysis of the Bracketing Experience', 22, pp. 1–12. doi: 10.1177/16094069231191635.
- Thurab-Nkhosi, D., Williams, G. and Mason-Roberts, M. (2018) 'Achieving confidence in competencies through authentic assessment', *Journal of Management Development*, 37(8), pp. 652–662. doi: 10.1108/JMD-12-2017-0413.
- Tibby, M. and Norton, S. (2019) *Essential Frameworks for Enhancing Student Success: Embedding Employability in Higher Education*. York: Advance HE. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/advance-he-essential-frameworks-enhancing-student-success>.
- Tierney, W. G. (1999) 'Models of minority college-going and retention: Cultural integrity versus cultural suicide', *Journal of Negro Education*, 68(1), pp. 80–91. doi: 10.2307/2668211.
- Tight, M. (2010) 'Are academic workloads increasing? The post-war survey evidence in the UK', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64(2), pp. 200–215. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2009.00433.x.
- Tinto, V. (1975) 'Dropouts from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research', *Review of Educational Research*, 45, pp. 89–125.
- Tinto, V. (1987) *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1988) 'Stages of Student Departure: Reflections on the Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving', *The Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), p. 438. doi: 10.2307/1981920.
- Tinto, V. (2011) *Taking student success seriously in the college classroom*. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. doi: 10.2307/1170024.
- Tomkins, L. (2017) 'Using Interpretative Phenomenological Psychology in Organisational Research with Working Carers', in *Applied Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 86–100. doi: 10.1057/978-1-137-35913-1.
- Torrance, H. (2007) 'Assessment as learning? How the use of explicit learning objectives, assessment criteria and feedback in post-secondary education and training can come to dominate learning', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 14(3), pp. 281–294. doi: 10.1080/09695940701591867.
- Torrance, H. (2012) 'Formative assessment at the crossroads: Conformative, deformative and transformative assessment', *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(3), pp. 323–342. doi: 10.1080/03054985.2012.689693.
- Trowler, V. (2010) *Student engagement literature review*, HEA. York. Available at: http://americandemocracy.illinoisstate.edu/documents/democratic-engagement-white-paper-2_13_09.pdf.

Trowler, V. (2015) 'Negotiating Contestations and "Chaotic Conceptions": Engaging "Non-Traditional" Students in Higher Education', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 69(3), pp. 295–310. doi: 10.1111/hequ.12071.

Tufford, L. and Newman, P. (2010) 'Bracketing in qualitative research', *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), pp. 80–96. doi: 10.1177/1473325010368316.

Tuffour, I. (2017) 'A Critical Overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Qualitative Research Approach', *Journal of Healthcare Communications*, 02(04), pp. 1–5. doi: 10.4172/2472-1654.100093.

UK Government (2010) *Equality Act 2010*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents> (Accessed: 25 July 2022).

UK Government (2021) *Widening participation in higher education: Academic Year 2019/20*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2019-20>.

Universities UK (2005) *Survey of higher education students' attitudes to debt and term-time working and their impact on attainment*. London: Universities UK.

University of Birmingham (2024) *Harvard: Reference List and Bibliography*. Available at: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/referencing/icite/harvard/referencelist.aspx>.

University of Derby (2016) *Practical Recipes for Student Success – Guidance for staff responding to the Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME)*. Available at: <https://uodpress.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/press-pack-whole-pdf.pdf>.

University of Greenwich (2022) *Writing effective assessment briefs*. Available at: <https://www.gre.ac.uk/learning-teaching/assessment/assessment/design/writing-briefs> (Accessed: 17 July 2022).

University of Hull (2022) *Academic writing style*. Available at: <https://canvas.hull.ac.uk/courses/371/pages/academic-writing-style>.

University of the Arts Disability Service (2019) 'Creating inclusive briefs'. Available at: https://www.arts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/190148/AEM-Creating-Inclusive-Briefs-PDF-304KB.pdf.

University of Ulster (2018) *Guidelines for Writing Assessment Briefs*. Available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/315060/Guidelines-for-Writing-Assessment-Briefs.pdf.

UUK and NUS (2019) *Black, Asian and minority ethnic attainment at UK universities*. London: University UK. Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf>.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Edited by M. Cole et al. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walsh, E. (2021a) 'Effectively Communicating the Written Assignment Brief:

- Comprehensiveness and Conciseness', *European Conference of E-Learning*, pp. 528–535.
- Walsh, E. (2021b) 'The role of effective communication on students' emotional response to assessment: written assignment brief', *La Revue LEeE*, 5, pp. 1–24. doi: 10.48325/rleee.005.02.
- Waterfield, J. and West, B. (2006) *Inclusive Assessment in Higher Education: A Resource for Change*. Plymouth. Available at: https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/3/3026/Space_toolkit.pdf (Accessed: 22 April 2018).
- Webb, O. J. and Cotton, D. R. E. (2018) 'Deciphering the sophomore slump: changes to student perceptions during the undergraduate journey', *Higher Education*, pp. 1–18. doi: 10.1007/s10734-018-0268-8.
- Weinstein, Y., Sumeracki, M. and Caviglioli, O. (2019) *Understanding how we learn: A visual guide*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Research interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wharton, C. (2006) 'Idiographic', in Jupp, V. (ed.) *The SAGE dictionary of social research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 143–144.
- Wilkinson, S. (2004) 'Focus group research', in Silverman, D. (ed.) *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE, pp. 177–199.
- Williams, K. (2005a) 'Lecturer and first year student (mis)understandings of assessment task verbs: "Mind the gap"', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(2), pp. 157–173. doi: 10.1080/1356251042000337927.
- Williams, K. (2005b) 'Lecturer and first year student (mis)understandings of assessment task verbs: "Mind the gap"', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(2), pp. 157–173. doi: 10.1080/1356251042000337927.
- Willig, C. (2013) *Introducing qualitative research in psychology*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Willis, J. W. (2007) *Foundations of qualitative research: interpretative and critical approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Winning, T., Lim, E. and Townsend, G. (2005) 'Student experiences of assessment in two problem-based dental curricula: Adelaide and Dublin', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(5), pp. 489–505. doi: 10.1080/02602930500187014.
- Wohlin, C. (2014) 'Guidelines for snowballing in systematic literature studies and a replication in software engineering', *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series*. doi: 10.1145/2601248.2601268.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J. S. and Ross, G. (1976) 'the Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17(2), pp. 89–100. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-

7610.1976.tb00381.x.

Yorke, M. (2003) 'Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and the enhancement of pedagogic practice', *Higher Education*, 45, pp. 477–2003. doi: 10.1016/0301-4622(75)80025-1.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2008) *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK*. York. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/fyefinalreport_0.pdf (Accessed: 14 July 2018).

Young, P. and Burgess, H. (2005) 'Dancing on a moving carpet: the changing context', in Burgess, H. and Taylor, I. (eds) *Effective learning and teaching in social policy and social work*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–12.

Young, P., Glogowska, M. and Lockyer, L. (2007) 'Conceptions of early leaving: A comparison of the views of teaching staff and students', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 8(3), pp. 275–287. doi: 10.1177/1469787407081882.

Zepke, N., Leach, L. and Prebble, T. (2006) 'Being learner centred: One way to improve student retention?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), pp. 587–600. doi: 10.1080/03075070600923418.

Appendix 1

Institutional assignment brief template, 2021-

22



Assignment Brief

Academic Year 2021-22

Module code and title:	E.g., AB123 Research methods	Module leader:	E.g., Allen Smithee
Assignment No. and type:	E.g., CW1: Research proposal	Assessment weighting:	E.g., 100%
Submission time and date:	E.g., Before 14.00, 2 nd November 2021	Target feedback time and date:	E.g., Before 14.00, 23 rd November 2021.



Assignment task

Please see section 1 of the *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief Template document*

This assignment has been designed to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your achievement of the following module learning outcomes:

- LO 1: Include text of learning outcomes here, delete rows if not required
- LO 2: Include text of learning outcomes here, delete rows if not required
- LO 3: Include text of learning outcomes here, delete rows if not required
- LO 4: Include text of learning outcomes here, delete rows if not required
- LO 5: Include text of learning outcomes here, delete rows if not required

Task requirements

- Please see section 3 of the *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief template document*

Referencing and research requirements

Please reference your work according to the [name of style] style as defined in *Cite Them Right Online* (<http://www.citethemrightonline.com>). This information is also available in book form: Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2019) *Cite them right: the essential reference guide*. 11th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Copies are available via the University library.

Please see section 4 of the *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief template document*

Internal approval: Name, Date

How your work will be assessed

Your work will be assessed against the assessment criteria which have been provided at the end of this brief.

These criteria have been designed specifically for this assignment and are intended to measure the extent to which you have demonstrated your achievement of its associated learning outcomes (see above). They have been aligned with the institutional grade descriptor appropriate for your level.

The assessment criteria provide a basis for fair and consistent marking and indicate what is expected of you in this assignment. It is strongly recommended that you engage with them while you are working on the assignment and use them in combination with any feedback you receive once your work has been marked to help you plan for future learning and development.

Submission details

Please see section 8 of the *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief template document* for text recommended for use in this section.

- You are reminded of the University's regulations on academic integrity, which can be viewed on the University website: <https://www.bucks.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-07/academic-integrity-policy.pdf>. In submitting your assignment, you are acknowledging that you have read and understood these regulations
- Please also note that work that is submitted up to 10 working days beyond the submission date will be considered a late submission. Late submissions will be marked and the actual mark recorded but will be capped at the pass mark (typically 40%), provided that the work is of a passing standard. Work submitted after this period will not be marked and will be treated as a non-submission.

Before you submit

Please see section 7 of the *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief template document*.

- Please use the provided checklist below to make sure you are 'fit to submit' your work
- We recommend you use this checklist as soon as you get this assignment brief to help you plan your work

Fit to Submit: Assignment Checklist

This brief **assignment checklist** is designed to help you avoid some of the most common mistakes students make in their coursework.

Have you read the assignment brief? If not, do so now!

In it you will find details of the assessment task, word count, the assessment criteria your work is marked against, and the learning outcomes – the basis for the assessment strategy in each module.

Students often lose marks by forgetting some of the more straightforward elements of their assignments. We recommend that you "tick off" each of the points below as you prepare your work for submission. If you need any help, ask your tutor and/or visit

<https://bucks.ac.uk/students/academicadvice/assessment-and-examination>

- Have you read and understood the assessment criteria?
- Have you **met** the learning outcomes? You will lose marks and your work may even be failed if you have not.
- Have you demonstrated you can think and write *critically* in the completed work? This means you have supported your arguments/explanations appropriately e.g. using relevant academic sources and you have offered discussion points which extends your own or others' viewpoints to make reasoned conclusions/judgements.
- Have you maintained an *appropriate tone* throughout your work? Is your work formal, focused, developed and clear?
- Have you checked that the [referencing](#) in your assignment is in line with your programme requirements?
- Have you proof-read your work and used spellcheck software to check your spelling and grammar?
- Have you checked the presentation of your work is as specified by your tutor, for example, are font size, colour, style, line spacing and margins as the tutor specified?
- Have you kept to the word count (or equivalent)? If you are not sure, check with your tutor.
- Can you confirm that the work submitted is your own and maintains [academic integrity](#)?



Please see section 8 of the *Guidance on using the Assignment Brief template document*.

	Fail 0-34 (F) – Fail	Fail 35-39 E – Marginal fail	Pass 40-49 (D)	Pass 50-59 (C)	Pass 60-69 (B)	Pass 70-79 (A)	Pass 80-100 (A+)
	Not successful	Below required standard	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Outstanding
Criterion 1 This should include evidence of: •							
Criterion 2 This should include evidence of: •							
Criterion 3 This should include evidence of: •							
Criterion 4 This should include evidence of: •							
Criterion 5 This should include evidence of: •							

Internal approval: Name, Date

Appendix 2

Assignment brief literature search

Assignment brief literature search results

Database	Search string	Criteria	Results	Relevant	References
DOAJ	"assignment brief"		2	1	(Walsh, 2021b)
	"assignment requirements"		5	0	
EBSCOHost	"assignment brief"		0	0	
	"assignment requirements"		0	0	
	"assessed task"		30	0	
Emerald	"assignment brief"		0	0	
	"assignment requirements"		0	0	
	"assessed task"		4	0	
Ingenta	"assignment brief"		338	0	
	"assignment requirements" + "higher education"		81	1	(Richards and Pilcher, 2014)
	"assessed task" + "higher education"		309	5	(Richards and Pilcher, 2014) (Thomas <i>et al.</i> , 2019) (Kaur, Noman and Awang-Hashim, 2018) (Fernández Ruiz <i>et al.</i> , 2022) (Marder <i>et al.</i> , 2019)
Taylor Francis Online	"assignment brief"		0	0	
	"assignment requirements" + "higher education"		0	0	

	“assessed task” + “higher education”		1	1	(Richards and Pilcher, 2014)
Wiley Online	“assignment brief”		0	0	
	“assignment requirements”		105	0	
	“assessed task”		0	0	

Appendix 3

Research Ethics Panel Application form

For additional guidance, please refer to the Ethics organisation on Blackboard, the University Research Ethics Policy and the Code of Good Research Practice available on the Bucks website <https://bucks.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-policies/policies>

Section 1: Researcher details

1.1 Contact details of researcher					
Title	Mr	Forename	John	Surname	Knight
School: Directorate for Student Success			E-mail: john.knight@bucks.ac.uk		
			Tel. No./Ext 4550		
Status:	Employee	Postgraduate Research	Postgraduate Taught	Undergraduate	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

1.2 Co-applicants (please include everyone who will be involved in the research project, including research assistants)		
Name	Post held	Organisation

Section 2: Project details

2.1 Project title and timescale

Ethical approval is only valid for the time period specified on your application. Extension of period will require further approval.

Title	Exploring the student experience of assessment: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of how the communication of assessment requirements impacts students' ability to engage with the assessment process
Proposed start date:	01/10/2021
Proposed end date: (of data collection)	01/07/2022

2.2 Costs and funding

Please indicate the total costs and source of funding (if applicable):

This research is being carried out as part of my professional doctorate, for which I benefit from the fee waiver for staff engaging on internally administered courses

2.3 Brief project description

The purpose of this research is to address the gap in understanding of how the communication of assessment requirements (e.g., in the form of assignment briefs and related documentation) impacts students' ability to engage with their assessed work. The research intends to focus in on the experiences of first year students, particularly those from diverse and widening participation backgrounds

The impact of the communication of assessment requirements to students in the form of assignment briefs is an area that continues to be underrepresented in the literature on assessment. Gilbert and Maguire (2014) published guidance on assignment brief design which is to-date the definitive work in this area and which has directly informed assignment brief design practices at BNU. The basis for these guidelines, however, has only been partially disseminated (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011a) and the guidelines have not been subject to systematic evaluation, either at BNU or in the wider sector.

An understanding of the complex issue of how students interpret and respond to the communication of assessment requirements can be found at the intersection of numerous overlapping areas of research, not least of all discussions of the process of transition (e.g., Gale and Parker, 2017) and the first year experience (e.g., Harvey and Drew with Smith, 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Hassel and Ridout, 2018) in addition to explorations specifically focussed on assessment-related issues.

Relevant areas of assessment research include, for example, the role of assignment text-types in the development of academic literacies (e.g., Gillet and Hammond, 2009); the experiences of international students (e.g., Carrol and Ryan, 2005); the more general development of academic and assessment literacies (e.g., Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003; Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis and Tuck, 2016) and cognitive load theory (Pass *et al.*, 2003; Van Meerienboer and Sweller, 2005, Weinstein, Sumeracki and Caviglioli, 2019). In addition, work carried out at the Universities of Wolverhampton and Coventry (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Howell-Richardson, 2015; Oldham, 2012; Cureton *et al.*, 2017) has also highlighted the role of assignment briefs in reducing anxiety and promoting confidence in students and pointed to a correlation between enhanced assignment brief design and dissemination activities and a

reduction in the BAME attainment gap. Of relevance, too, is research into the staff experience of setting assessment tasks and the disparity between student and staff attitudes to and understanding of the purpose of assessment (e.g., Williams, 2005; Carless, 2009; Fletcher *et al.*, 2012). A consideration of the affective aspect of the assessment process, particularly the impact of anxiety and stress on students' ability to perform at their optimal level, also provides a useful basis for this investigation (Craddock and Mathias, 2009; Pereira *et al.*, 2017).

This study will have the benefit of drawing together multiple threads and areas of interest in the existing literature to provide a comprehensive account for the impact of how assessment requirements are communicated to students, which is currently missing from the literature on this area. It will also provide a basis for the enhancement of assessment practices at BNU.

The research will be carried out by the researcher via a qualitative research design using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a sample of first year students who fulfil at least one widening participation criterion, drawn on a convenience basis from a range of disciplines, focusing on Social Work.

Section 3: Research Design

3.1 Research design

Describe and justify the methodology (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) and methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, quantitative experiment, observations) you intend to use. Include details of and reasons for your sample selection and size to enable robust outcomes.

This study will use a qualitative ideographic research design using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The complex nature of the area of study along with the absence of a robust existing theoretical framework with which to explore this aspect of the student experience of assessment means it is unfeasible and undesirable to adopt a quantitative approach. For example, while it might be possible to use a questionnaire-based method, there is as yet an insufficient basis with which to frame its questions. A qualitative approach, which aims inductively to explore student experiences and so ultimately arrive at more (carefully) generalisable understandings which might subsequently be tested via quantitative techniques in later research, is therefore recommended.

IPA represents a sound choice as a methodology because it focuses on the individual lived experience of the participants and involves intensive analytical activity in order to develop an understanding of their 'life world' and how they might relate to more general themes emerging from the research (Noon, 2018). Importantly, it also entails a high level of reflexivity on behalf of the researcher, thus making more visible the process of interpretation and analysis of data (Smith, Flowers and Larking, 2009). This is of particular relevance to this study as it provides a means of both explicitly engaging with and bridging the gap between the cultural and educational background of the researcher (white, male, middle-aged, employed by the university) and the participants (or various ethnic backgrounds, male or female, young, students). This is a particular benefit to IPA.

The sample will be drawn from the School of Social Work and Health Care, with a specific focus on BA Social Work students, who are a diverse and populous cohort, and thus likely to yield participants who fall within the proposed parameters of the study. Most recent demographic figures for the ethnicity of students in this School (2018/19) indicate that just under half (49.49%) are white, with the remainder predominantly black (34.13%) and Asian (11.6%). By far the greater majority (92.15%) of students of all ethnicities are classified as mature (the formal measure for which is that they are over 21). There is strong evidence of an attainment gap within this population: 67% of white students received an award of a First or 2.1, while only 36% of Asian, 28% of Black and 50% of mixed students attained the same level. (Data gathered from Tableau Access and Participation dashboard).

A sample of six students is planned. This is a small sample, but is not out of line with the focus on particular cases typical of idiographic research methodologies (Wharton, 2006) and the guidance by the developers of the IPA approach (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The analytical intensity of the IPA approach along with the potential use of multiple interviews with participants is a further factor influencing the sample size. This study will thus involve between six and twelve (or more) interviews (6 x participants, with the potential for at least 6 x follow-up interviews), which is somewhat larger than the four to ten interviews recommended for the purposes of professional doctorate research using IPA by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed and an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) will be conducted. Where relevant and appropriate (and in keeping with IPA methodology), follow-up interviews of some participants may be conducted, along with further analysis, creating opportunities for deeper exploration and understanding of the particular 'lived' experience of participants.

3.2 Ethical implications

Briefly outline any ethical implications of your research and how you propose to minimise these risks.

Although I no longer have direct contact or teaching responsibilities involving students, it is acknowledged that I am still a university employee and, as such, may be perceived as a member of staff by participants. All information relating to the project that is shared with students will underline the fact that I have no influence on the assessment and marking of their work and that their participation will also in no way impact upon the way their work is assessed and marked by their tutors. This will also be repeated at the outset of all interview processes.

It is proposed that interview activities will take place virtually via Teams, thus providing for any concerns that students may have relating to the transmission of Covid-19 and allowing students to participate from a safe environment of their own choosing (e.g., their own homes). Where students prefer, interviews can also be arranged in suitable locations on

campus (e.g., unused classrooms) which allow for appropriate social distancing and anti-Covid measures (such as ready access to hand sanitiser, etc.)

All participants will be recruited on the basis of fully informed consent, with the option to withdraw from the process until such time that their data has been subjected to analysis.

Participants will be anonymised in any written account of the study and care taken to avoid the inclusion of any information that might be used to identify them in any way more specific than as a first-year students at the university.

All data collected relating to students, including their data in the form of interview recordings and associated transcripts will be stored securely on my own password-protected OneDrive directory, which I access and manage via a password-enabled university issue laptop.

For some students, the process of revisiting educational experiences may be stressful. Information providing contact details for relevant support services at Bucks will be made available to all participating students during the interview process.

3.3 Risks to research team

No particular risks are envisaged for the researcher.

In the light of the current pandemic and the need to maintain social distancing measures, virtual interviews are the preferred means of data collection. This also means that both researcher and participant will be able to conduct them from safe, self-selected environments either on campus or from home.

In the event that it is deemed necessary or desirable to conduct interviews in person, appropriate anti-Covid measures will be taken to allow for appropriate distancing, access to hand sanitiser and washing facilities and the wearing of face coverings if it is felt to be appropriate.

3.4 Dissemination

Initially, findings will be presented in the form of my professional doctoral dissertation.

Subsequently, findings will be disseminated locally via staff development events and also indirectly in terms of potential enhancements made to the institutional assignment brief template in the light of results.

Nationally (and internationally), it is intended that findings be disseminated via conference presentations and academic journal articles.

The following lists include indicative conferences and journals to be targeted:

Conferences

- Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education
- European First Year Experience
- SEDA
- Assessment in Higher Education
- Assessment/inclusion-themed Advance HE events

Journals

- Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education
- Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education
- Innovations in Education and Teaching International (SEDA)
- Teaching in Higher Education
- Active Learning in Higher Education
- Higher Education
- Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change

Section 4: Participants and Recruitment

Section 4.1: Participants

IPA generally involves purposive, broadly homogenous samples, thus ensuring the study is both of relevance and or personal significance to the participants and enables the researcher

to capture details on individuals with a shared experience of a given phenomenon (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Participants will initially be drawn from the first year of Social Work courses at Bucks New University. These courses are populous and their cohorts include high proportions of students from widening participation backgrounds and so should provide a sample in keeping with the aims of the study. The following figures are taken from institutional data and refer to averages taken across the years 2016-21. BSc Social Work students are predominantly female (91%) and 100% UK nationals. Around three quarters of students on the course are classed as mature (i.e., over 21 years of age at the point of entry). There are high proportions of students from non-traditional academic backgrounds, with 28% from BTEC/Level 3 qualifications and 18% from A/AS Levels. Just over half (53%) enter from a range of other routes, particularly Access to HE courses. Students coming from A/AS Levels are more likely to receive good degrees (68%) compared to those with BTEC/Level 3 qualifications (60%). Just over half students from other educational backgrounds received a good degree. There was a pronounced gap in attainment of good degrees between White (68%), Asian (64%) and Mixed students (67%) and their Black (39%) counterparts during the period. However, there is an indication that the attainment gap may be decreasing, with most recent figures (2020-21) indicating broadly similar outcomes for Black (60%) and White (56%) students¹⁶.

Over the period 2016-21, just over half students (52%) on the programme as a whole came from areas in quintiles 4 and 5 on the index of multiple deprivation (IMD). White students are more likely to be within these quintiles (78%) compared to Asian (30%) and Black students (37%). POLAR4 (participation in higher education by local area) data for the period shows around 52% of students on the programme come from areas in quintiles 4 and 5, with 35% from quintile 5. Asian students are most likely to be in quintiles 4 (22%) and 5 (33%).

¹⁶ These latter figures may be less reliable due to the impact of COVID-19 and consequent changes to assessment procedures.

White students also tend to be in these quintiles, with 12% in quintile 4 and 41% in quintile 5. Black students are less likely to be in quintile 5 (29%) and quintile 4 (21%).

Potential participants will be invited to submit their details via an online form, which will collect relevant data to allow for the selection of those candidates meeting the following criteria:

- Adult
- First-year students of relevant courses
- Fulfilling at least one widening participation marker:
 - Home address in the bottom two-fifths of areas ranked by proportion of young people progressing to Higher Education (POLAR 4, quintiles 1 or 2)
 - Home address in the bottom two-fifths of areas ranked by general disadvantage (Index of Multiple Deprivation, quintiles 1 or 2)
 - First in their family to attend higher education
 - Care leaver
 - Disability
 - Under-represented ethnic background (e.g., BAME, GRTB, etc.)

Section 4.2: Recruitment method

Provide a brief outline of how potential participants will be approached and recruited into the project (any recruitment materials should be included with the application). Please refer to the Bucks Guidelines for recruitment of participants for research on Blackboard (Ethics, Ethics at Bucks).

Participants will be recruited on a purposive basis via a range of strategies:

- Digital announcements in relevant Blackboard shells
- Announcements in person in cohort and module lectures (with permission from relevant module leads)
- Fliers and posters in the Student and Learning Achievement (formerly the LDU) centre
- Fliers and posters in public areas of the university (e.g., Beats, Pulse, Rusty Bucks and the Students' Union)

Section 4.3: Vulnerability

No participants under 18 years of age will be recruited.

I have no teaching and assessment responsibilities for the student population from which I am recruiting my sample (participants will be informed that I have no influence on the assessment and marking of any of their work on all recruitment literature and reminded of this fact during interview).

Where participants have declared a disability, care will be taken to ensure that any reasonable adjustments are made to enable their effective participation. The precise nature of such adjustments will depend upon the students themselves, so it is difficult to predict what these might be. I will consult with university Disability Services for advice in the event that this is necessary.

Care will in any case be taken to ensure that all recruitment materials are fully accessible via the MS Office accessibility checker and Blackboard Ally and that virtual interviews are conducted inclusively, e.g., with access to live captioning.

Section 4.4: Incentives

If your project will involve offering incentives of any kind, state what the incentives (financial or otherwise) will be and provide a brief justification as to why you feel this is necessary for the project.

No incentives will be offered. Benefits to participating in the research study will be framed in terms of useful opportunities to reflect upon their experience of the assessment process and an opportunity to potentially contribute to the enhancement of assessment practices at the university. This has proved effective in pilot studies.

Section 4.5: Permission / Gatekeeper

Please give details if permission is required for initial contact with participants or to access data (eg Headmaster, NHS R&D committee, Company manager, Head of School, HR). Include any documents for seeking permission or where permission has been granted. Please also explain whether a gatekeeper is required to negotiate that access to participants/data, and if so who would act in that capacity.

Permission to approach students in their respective disciplines will be requested from:

- The Head of School for Healthcare and Social Work

Section 5: Consent procedure

This section will demonstrate how you will obtain informed consent from the participants. Please include all supporting documents (eg Information Sheets, Consent forms and questionnaires). Please answer YES, NO or NOT APPLICABLE (N/A) to **each** of the following:

		Yes	No	N/A
5.1	All respondents will be given an Information Sheet and enough time to read it before being asked to agree to participate.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.2	All participants taking part in an interview, focus group, observation (or other activity which is not questionnaire-based) will be asked to sign a consent form.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.3	All participants completing a questionnaire will be informed on the Information Sheet that returning the completed questionnaire implies consent to participate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

5.4	All participants being asked to provide personal data will have the following statement on the consent form or on the bottom of their questionnaire “I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with current UK Data Protection legislation”. A tick box should be included to allow participants to give explicit consent for the collection and use of such data.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.5	All respondents will be told that they can withdraw at any time, ask for their interview tape to be destroyed and/or their data removed from the project until it is no longer practical to do so (e.g. when the report has been written up).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.6	Where full information cannot be given prior to participation (because it could influence outcomes) participants will be fully debriefed after participation.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.7	If you answered NO to any of the above (or think more information could be useful to the reviewer) please state why here:			

Section 6: Confidentiality, Anonymity & Data and Records Management

This section will show how participants can expect confidentiality and/or anonymity and will show how any research data collected will be managed during and after the study.

Confidential data is not disclosed to other people; Anonymous data cannot be linked to the participant’s personal details. Confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed in the event of disclosure of illegal activity or unsafe practice.

Please answer YES, NO or NOT APPLICABLE (N/A) to each of the following:

		Yes	No	N/A
6.1	Questionnaires will be returned anonymously and indirectly. Please note that questionnaire data cannot then be followed up/clarified.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6.2	Questionnaires and/or interview transcripts will only be identifiable by a unique identifier (e.g. code/pseudonym)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.3	Data will be stored securely and lists of identity number or pseudonyms linked to names and/or addresses will be stored securely and separately from research data	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.4	All place names and institutions which could lead to the identification of individuals or organisations will be changed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.5	I confirm that all processing of personal information related to the study will be in full compliance with UK Data Protection legislation <i>(including the Data Protection Principles)</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.6	Consideration has been given to the limitations of confidentiality e.g., disclosure of illegal behaviour or unsafe practice.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.7	I confirm that processing of all security sensitive information will be in full compliance with the "Oversight of security - sensitive research material in UK universities: guidance (October 2012)" (Universities UK, recommended by the Association of Chief Police Officers)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.8	If you answered NO to any of the above (or think more information could be useful to the reviewer) please state why here:			

Section 7: Authorisation

Authorisation of this application indicates satisfaction that the details are accurate, the proposed methods are appropriate, ethical concerns have been considered and that time and resources are available for the research to take place. The authoriser accepts responsibility for the applicant who is undertaking the work.

For Bucks employees:

Signed:

Line manager

Date

For postgraduate researchers, postgraduate taught students and undergraduate students:

SignedDr Ceri M Sims.....

Supervisor

7th October 2021

Date

If original signatures are not supplied, the applicant must forward an email from the line manager / supervisor including the above authorisation statement.

Section 8: Checklist for Applicant	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The Ethics application form
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The Participant Information Sheet
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The Consent Form
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Letters seeking/granting permission for access to data/participants
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Materials for recruitment of participants
<input type="checkbox"/>	Questionnaire n/a
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Interview schedule
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Authorisation received
<input type="checkbox"/>	Risk assessment n/a
<input type="checkbox"/>	Line manager / supervisor approval

References

- Carless, D. (2009). 'Trust, distrust and their impact in assessment reform', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), pp.79-89.
- Carroll, J. and Ryan, J. (2005) *Teaching international students*. London: Routledge.
- Cousin, G. and Cuerton, D. (2012) *Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)*. York. Available at: www.wlv.ac.uk/disa (Accessed: 7 May 2017).
- Cuerton, D. D. *et al.* (2017) 'Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change', (April). Available at: <http://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/University-of-Wolverhampton-final.pdf>.
- Craddock, D. and Mathias, H. (2009) 'Assessment options in higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(2), pp.127-140.
- Fletcher, R. *et al.* (2012) 'Faculty and students conceptions of assessment in higher

education', *Higher Education*, 64(1), pp. 119-133.

Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2014) 'Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*. Routledge, 39(5), pp. 734–753. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2012.721351.

Gilbert, F. and Maguire, G. (2014) *Assignment brief design guidelines: developing academic communication to enhance the student experience in assessment*. Oxford and York: Oxford Brookes University and HEA.

Gillet, A. and Hammond, A. (2009) 'Mapping the maze of assessment: An investigation into practice', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(2), pp. 120–137.

Harvey, L. and Drew, S with Smith, M. (2006) *The first-year experience: a review of the literature for the Higher Education Academy*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Hassel, S. and Ridout, N. (2018) 'An investigation of first-year students' and lecturers' expectations of university education', *Frontiers in Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02218>.

Howell-Richardson, C. (2015) *Designing Assignment Briefs: A Guide for Lecturers*. Coventry. Available at: [http://www.coventry.ac.uk/Global/03 Study section assets/Student support/academic support/designing-assignment-briefs-a-guide-for-lecturers.pdf](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/Global/03%20Study%20section%20assets/Student%20support/academic%20support/designing-assignment-briefs-a-guide-for-lecturers.pdf).

Lea, M. R. and Street, B. V. (2006) 'The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and Applications', *Theory Into Practice*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 45(4), pp. 368–377. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip4504_11.

Lillis, T. and Tuck, J. (2016) 'Academic literacies: a critical lens on writing and reading in the academy', in Hyland, K. and Shaw, P. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes Academic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 30–43. doi: 10.4324/9781315657455.ch03.

Noon, E.J. (2018) 'Interpretive phenomenological analysis: an appropriate methodology for educational research', *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 6(1), pp.75-83.

- Oldham, S. (2012) *DiSA Briefing Paper: Student Voices: perceptions of learning, assignments and achievement*. York. Available at:
http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Student_Voice-Oldham_and_Dhillon.doc
- Pass, F. et al. (2003) 'Cognitive load measurement as a means to advance cognitive load theory', *Educational Psychologist*, 38(1), pp. 63–71.
- Pereira, D. et al. (2017) 'Student's perceptions of assessment: a comparative analysis between Portugal and Sweden', *Higher Education*, 73(1), pp.153-173
- Rust, C., Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2003) 'Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(2), pp. 147–164.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. London: Sage.
- Van Merriënboer, J.J.G. and Sweller, J. (2005) 'Cognitive load theory and complex learning: recent developments and future directions', *Educational Psychology Review*, 17, pp.147-177.
- Weinstein, Y., Sumeracki, M. and Caviglioli, O. (2019) *Understanding how we learn: a visual guide*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wharton, C. (2006) 'Idiographic', in Jupp, V. (ed.) *The SAGE dictionary of social research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 143–144.
- Williams, K. (2005) 'Lecturer and first year student (mis)understandings of assessment task verbs: "Mind the gap"', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(2), pp.151-73.
- Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2008) *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK: Final report*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Appendix 4

Gatekeepers' permission letters

From: [Ricardo Khine](#)
To: [John Knight](#)
Subject: RE: Request for permission to interview first-year Social Work students as part of doctoral studies
Date: 29 September 2021 09:59:54
Attachments: [image007.png](#)
[image011.png](#)
[image012.png](#)
[image013.png](#)
Importance: High

Hi John,

Thank you for the email and reaching out to me with this request.

Permission granted - I am very happy for you to recruit six Year 1 social work students for your data collection – please kindly liaise with Thomas Toscano who is responsible for this programme.

Wishing you all the best with your studies John.

BWs


Ric

Dr Ricardo Khine PhD, MA, BSc (Hons), SFHEA, MAcadMEd
Associate Head of School – Health Care and Social Work
Associate Professor – Education (CPPD and Partnerships)




BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
NEW UNIVERSITY
EST. 1891


School of Health Care and Social Work
Telephone: +44 (0) 1494 522 141
Ext: 3201

 @bucksnewuni

Pronouns | use: he, him, his

 @bucksnewuni

Buckinghamshire New University
High Wycombe Campus
Queen Alexandra Road
High Wycombe
Buckinghamshire
HP11 2JZ

 BucksNewUniversity

BUCKS.AC.UK

RE: John Knight - EdD ethics amendment: FW: Request for 'access' to first year business students for the purposes of research - Message (HTML)

File Message Help Acrobat Tell me what you want to do

Ignore Delete Archive Reply Reply All Forward Meeting Team Email Done Reply & Delete Create New Taught To Manager OneNote Assign Mark Categorize Follow Up Translate Find Related Select Read Aloud Zoom Share to Teams Viva Insights

Delete Respond Quick Steps Move Actions Tags Editing Speech Zoom Teams Insights

RE: John Knight - EdD ethics amendment: FW: Request for 'access' to first year business students for the purposes of research



Ben Clayton
To: John Knight
Cc: Emma Tomsett

Reply Reply All Forward ...
Tue 14/12/2021 08:21

Hi John,

As you are only seeking to now recruit from an additional school within the university, I can see no sense in you resending an application, even just for framing. The below is sufficient to confirm gatekeeper authorisation, which is all that is required.

Emma – can you note this as a chair's action? John's previous application named a specific school for recruitment, but he now wants to recruit from the Business School also. Simon Jones confirms below that he is happy to support this.

Best
Ben

From: Simon D R Jones <SimonDR.Jones@bucks.ac.uk>
Sent: 26 November 2021 12:57
To: John Knight <John.Knight@Bucks.ac.uk>
Cc: Suzanne Doria <Suzanne.Doria@Bucks.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: Request for 'access' to first year business students for the purposes of research

Dear John
I think I missed this in leaving for Chernobyl. My sincere apologies. I am very happy to support you and would invite you to talk to Suzanne Doria.
My best wishes
Simon

Dr Simon Jones
Dean, School of Business and Law

Windows taskbar with icons for Edge, Word, Teams, Outlook, and other applications. System tray shows 13:09 on 23/09/2021.

Appendix 5

Recruitment poster

GET INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

Interested in participating in a research project to explore students' experience of assessment?

Participants are being recruited for a research project exploring how assignment requirements are communicated impact on students' experience of assessment.

Participation will involve two interviews of around 45 minutes each which will be held separately. Interviews will be held virtually and in private via Teams at a time that is convenient to you. If you prefer, arrangements can be made to hold the interviews in person in a Covid-safe environment on the High Wycombe campus

Participants should be first year full time undergraduates on BA Social Work courses.

The research is being conducted by John Knight of the Academic Practice and Curriculum Development team as part of his studies for a Professional Doctorate in Education.

To register your interest in participating, please complete the (very) short form available via this link, or via the QR code at the bottom of this poster:

<http://grs.ly/a9554n0>

Please contact John for further details: John.Knight@bucks.ac.uk

Ethics Panel Reference Number: UEP2016Nov03



Appendix 6

Participant information sheet

Information Sheet for Participants

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research project is to develop a better understanding of the impact of the way in which assignment requirements are communicated has on your experience of assessment at BNU. This might include the way the assessment task was communicated to you in an assignment brief, any other documentation and guidance you received, or even time devoted to the assignment in sessions.

The reason for developing this greater understanding is to make improvements to this aspect of the assessment process as part of your studies at BNU and for future students.

What is involved in participating?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in at least one, but no more than three interviews, lasting around 45 minutes each. In your interviews, you will be encouraged to discuss your experience of assessment and in particular the impact of the way in which assessment requirements are communicated to you on your experiences as a first-year student at Bucks.

The interviews will be held virtually and in private via Teams or you may choose to attend the interview in person, in which case, a suitable private and Covid-safe location will be booked for the purpose on the High Wycombe campus. No one else will have access to this room during the interview.

Your interviewer and the main researcher in the project will be John Knight, an academic developer and member of the Academic Practice and Curriculum Development team, which is part of the Directorate for Student Success. John is conducting this research as part of his studies for a Professional Doctorate in Education.

Benefits and risks

You will not benefit directly from the research, but indirectly the findings of the research may lead to changes in assessment practices that will have a positive benefit on your life as a student and the experiences of future students at BNU. You may also find participation in the interview process interesting and useful as a means of reflecting on how you engage with the process of assessment as part of your studies.

It is not thought that the interviews will involve any particular risks, but information from the Student Learning and Achievement team, Disability Service and Counselling Service will be available at the interview should any issues arise.

Terms for withdrawal

You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time prior to the analysis of your data without prejudice and without providing a reason.

If you do choose to leave, you may decide to have any existing data deriving from your involvement in the project destroyed, or you may choose to allow it to be used. Again, this is for you to decide at the time, without prejudice and without having to provide a reason.

Usage of data

Your interview will be recorded and transcribed and the transcript used as data for analysis as part of the research. Your data will be anonymised so it is not possible to associate it with you in person and stored in a secure, password protected folder on the researcher's work computer. Back up versions of the data will be stored on the university's secure network.

Extracts from the transcript may be quoted in the research report as part of the written analysis and findings in anonymised form.

Equally, in the event that the project leads to publication, extracts from your data may be included in journal articles, presentations and conference proceedings, also in anonymised form.

Ethical use of data and confidentiality

Your personal data will not be passed on to any other party outside of the research project and will be retained solely for the purposes of administering the research process, arranging interviews, etc.

Details of the research

This research is being carried out by John Knight, academic developer and member of the Academic Practice and Curriculum Development team, as part of his completion of a Professional Doctorate in Education.

It has been approved by the university Ethics Panel (reference number, below)

Ethics Panel Reference Number: UEP2016Nov03

For further information, please contact John.Knight@bucks.ac.uk

Appendix 7

Consent form

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated October 2021 or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason. I can withdraw my data up until two weeks after my interview which is the final date before data is analysed.

I understand that taking part in the study involves participating in virtual or in-person interviews

Describe in a few words how information is captured, using the same terms as you used in the information sheet, for example: an audio-recorded interview, a video-recorded focus group, a survey questionnaire completed, an experiment, etc.].

Interviews will be conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, or, if preferred, in person in a Covid-safe environment on the High Wycombe campus.

COVID-19 safety

I confirm that I have not had any of the following symptoms in the last 14 days: fever, dry, persistent cough or a loss of sense of taste or smell.

I confirm that I am not in the clinically extremely vulnerable category and therefore advised to shield at home by the government.

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge, I have not been in close contact with anyone with confirmed COVID-19 in the last 14 days.

I confirm I am aware of the requirement for social distancing whenever possible, hand decontamination, and use of face-covering during the research and that the researcher may also use further PPE.

I confirm I have been told about the cleaning of the venue and equipment before/after my attendance.

It has been confirmed by the researcher that they have not shown any of the above-named symptoms of COVID-19 nor, to the best of their knowledge, been in close contact with anyone with confirmed COVID-19 in the last 14 days.

Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used in anonymised form as part of the researcher's professional doctorate thesis and that anonymised extracts may also subsequently be used in journal articles, conference presentations and conference proceedings

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team, which consists solely of the principal researcher, John Knight

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with current UK Data Protection legislation.

I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs in suitably anonymised and unidentifiable form

Future use and reuse of the information by others

I give permission for the data that I provide in the form of interview transcripts to be used for future research and learning.

Once the research process has been completed, your data will be completely de-identified and anonymised and your contact details disassociated from your data and destroyed. De-identified and anonymised copies of your data in the form of transcripts from interviews will be retained by the researcher and stored securely in their password-protected institutional OneDrive account

Signatures

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]

Signature

Date

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of signing

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Name of researcher [IN CAPITALS]

Signature

Date

Study contact details for further information

John Knight

John.Knight@bucks.ac.uk

One copy to be kept by the participant, one to be kept by the researcher

Appendix 8

Interview schedule: indicative questions

The interview is structured broadly around three sections.

1. Past educational experiences
2. Current educational experiences (with a focus on the experience of being assessed)
3. Projected thoughts about future educational experiences

Questions are indicative and are intended to provide space and opportunities for the participant to speak freely about their experiences, using a variety of question formats as suggested in Flowers, Smith and Larkin (Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and analysis, 2009, p. 60).

Past educational experiences

- Could you tell me something about your secondary school experiences?
- What was your route into higher education?
- What can you tell me about your experience of being assessed at this time?
- How would you describe these experiences – were they happy? Difficult?
- What do you think your tutors thought about you as a student?

Current educational experiences

- How are things different at university?
- Thinking about your first year, can you tell me something about your experience of being assessed?
- How are assessment requirements communicated to you? Did you look at them on Blackboard or were you given hard copy? Did you access them on a computer or other hand-held device, such as your phone or tablet?

- Did you discuss them in class (or elsewhere) with other students? With your tutor?
- What aspects of the brief did you find easy/difficult/helpful/stressful to engage with?
- Do you understand what all the different parts of the assignment brief mean and how they relate to how you should complete the assignment? Which parts did you not understand and what did you do?
- What sort of things did you find difficult and how did you deal with these difficulties?
- What makes a 'good' assignment brief and what makes a 'bad' one?
- How do you feel about yourself as a student?
- How do you feel about being at university?

Future experiences

- What have you learned that you will take forward with you into future experiences of study and assessment?
- Have you developed an understanding of how to engage with assignment briefs in the future?
- Do you feel prepared and confident that you will do well in future studies?

Appendix 9

Interview schedule: second round

1. Drawing on previous interview
2. Thinking about now
3. Thinking about the future

Questions are indicative and are intended to provide space and opportunities for the participant to speak freely about their experiences, using a variety of question formats as suggested in Flowers, Smith and Larkin (2009, p.60).

Topics for exploration within each section are indicated in bold with broad starter questions indicated as bullet points. Indicative probing questions to provide opportunities for the student to elaborate on their experiences are indicated as nested bullet points in italics. ‘Sometimes giving too much detail can actually mean you’re, you’re given the answer without giving the answer’

Thinking about now

Has the way you think about briefs changed for you? Why do you think this is?

- Some students in the first round of interviews spoke about the anxiety they felt about the brief and finding the information in it overwhelming or confusing.
 - Has this changed?

How have briefs changed since we first spoke?

- Has this made things better? Worse? Different?
- Can you explain?

Many of you in the first interview talked about wanting to be independent and that a well-designed brief helped with this by giving you what you need to engage with the assignment and making you feel confident that you could do so. How do you feel about this now?

- Has the guidance given in briefs changed?
- What aspects of the brief have helped you feel independent and confident and what aspects have not?

Something else that came out of the initial study was the positive impact of allowing students to draw upon existing knowledge and experiences in their engagement with assessed work.

- Can you say something about this now? Do you find that your work on assessment allows you to do this? Can you explain a bit more about this?

One of the things that many of the participants in the first interview discussed was how they felt about accessing support. This related to:

- Their lecturer (sometimes there was a reluctance or shyness about this)
- Other university sources
- Fellow students (e.g., via the group WhatsApp)
- Friends and family
 - Has this changed at all?

One of the things that was inferred from the results of the last round of interviews was the way briefs were shared with you. I'd like to ask about that explicitly now.

How have briefs been shared with you?

- Is this consistent?
- Do different lecturers do different things, or is it consistent?
 - How does the way the briefs were shared with you make you feel?
 - What is the best way for you? Can you explain why?

For individuals, one of the things that you discussed was:

Bridget – the balance between being directive and supportive and overly prescriptive spoon-feeding (you said you were keen to develop your own viewpoint and didn't like being 'given the answer, without giving the answer')

- Can you tell me more about that now that you have had more experience of engaging with briefs and other aspects of your studies?

Thinking about the future

Most participants spoke about feeling confident about the future and their ability to engage with future assignment briefs (provided they were presented in a helpful way).

- How do you feel about this now?

As you are coming to the end of your studies, could you tell me something about your sense of yourself, your identity as a student of your discipline/profession? Has this changed?

- In relation to your studies?
- As a person?
- As a future graduate and professional?

Do you feel that the briefs you have engaged with have had an impact on this?

Appendix 10

Group Experiential Themes (GET)

For concision, the first line of transcript extracts is included.

GET 1: Valuing comprehension and clarity: knowing what to do

1a. Comprehensiveness promotes confidence

Ruth:	When I understood the assignment, I could just get on with it and plan it...
Sara:	Although it's just an introduction main body conclusion but knowing what to...
Bridget:	I can agree with information was communicated well. It had the what was...
Mary:	but when they were good like that one that came with the erm directive, ...
Clare:	If that makes sense because it wasn't clear enough. Whereas with the other...
Clare:	If that makes sense because it wasn't clear enough. Whereas with the other...

1b. Insufficient information causes stress and anxiety (and frustration)

Sara:	No like support or like how to start it. How to write it, what to include, nothing like that.
Clare:	It's stressful 'cause it's very hard when you've got a sentence or few sentences in front of you...
Mary:	There so it says what it is that's expected, but that's, that's just telling us what we needed to do. It doesn't tell us on how we're meant to reflect in an essay...
Bridget (2):	it wasn't made clear to us cause on the assignment brief it only looked like 'what is change and why it's important', but it never actually specified that you...
	Like is so that like for example in my experience with the VUCA environment, I went to my lecturer, that's how I found out to before my

	Yeah. It [VUCA] is like some type of analytical model that the whole presentation should have been based on you analysing. But if you have never asked
	I think it's like they're not even like they're telling you, but they're not telling you what they want. You see? And I'm not asking oh like, 'put in the
Bridget (1):	Sometimes giving too much detail can actually mean you're, you're giving the answer without giving the answer...

1c. Using the brief to scaffold engagement with assessment

Bridget (1):	it will be tucked into the learning objectives... That's the key to the assignment...
	I have a process. First, I think the three LOs. Then the objectives. I take...
	Yeah, the most useful part is that additional reading...
Mary:	I think it depends on how the assignment brief is delivered. I definitely think...
	It was really directive, right? So as long as I've discussed and I've criticised...
	it's, I'm not very good with writing anyway. I, I can speak, as you can tell...
Sara:	OK so with me, I will erm I will write everything down. Like, I'll type it on my...
	And then I look at the learning outcomes after I've written the assignment to...
	So every time we've done something then we can tick it off...
Ruth:	So, I read like all the headings to see like what I need to include and then...
Clare:	It is, yeah. I mean I try and read all. However, what I find myself doing so far
	No, it's [the assessment criteria] not part of the brief at all. To be honest...
	I personally think when I'm looking at it, the assignment brief is quite clear...
	I think it's quite, the template itself, I think it's quite good. One thing that...

1c. Including presentational requirements in the brief is useful...

Mary:	So the information was very relevant in the Lifespan one, so in that 100%...
Ruth:	So, though I'd include those in it as well. And. And obviously any extra...
Bridget:	I would like to be changed is some of the assignment brief have what the...
	It's harder how their lecturer would like to receive the assignment...

1d. Consistency and logic in presentation of briefs is useful

Sara:	I mean, it is sort of helpful the way they've, they've, they've laid out is good...
Clare:	Yeah, but I do think the other ones I found easier and it it was all linking...
Bridget (1):	Yeah, it is helpful because everything gets in our own little square and...

GET 2: Experiencing the brief as a barrier

2a. Experiencing confusion due to misalignment and ambiguity

Clare:	I mean at first because with that module every single session was about a...
	So, this is the, so I've chosen the dementia one, but one of the learning
	OK, I'm just going to open the one I struggled with. I've got it in front of me
Bridget (1):	some of the assignment briefs were really confusing... The LOS didn't match...
	We [with her dyslexia helper] saw that mistake together because I came...

Mary:	It tells us what the activity is. So as far as we were concerned, this tells us...
	Oh, it's [the section on the essay] still. It's. It's tiny, but then you've got. So...

2b. Complexity impedes engagement

Bridget (1):	Yeah, I had an issue with another assignment brief. It was, the assignment...
	I think it would be frustrated and overwhelmed. There would be one of the...
Mary:	but it was definitely in the Preparation for Practice [title of module] because...
Clare:	Erm so far we've had a portfolio that is due in January, but that was the first...
Ruth:	Sometimes I feel like it's all right, but other times it's I find it so confusing...
	I think it's scary [the assessment criteria rubric], I mean. It's about 6 pages...

2c. Insufficient information causes stress and anxiety

Sara:	No like support or like how to start it. How to write it, what to include...
Clare:	It's stressful 'cause it's very hard when you've got a sentence or few...
Mary:	There so it says what it is that's expected, but that's. That's just telling us...

GET 3: Well-judged dissemination provides a basis for effective engagement

3a. Using dissemination to frame learning and understand expectations

Sara:	At the beginning it was different. It's been a while since I've been back into...
-------	---

	Erm. Yeah, I think for one of my modules for Lifespan Development, our...
	No like support or like how to start it. How to write it, what to include, ...
	At last, when he finally like sat us down, talked through everything and...
Mary:	At the start I remember just feeling very overwhelmed. And very confused...
	Get into the learning and then once you've had a couple of, even a couple of...
	So the information was very relevant in the Lifespan one, so in that 100%...
Clare:	But erm at the beginning of the term so we all got like a printout of the...
	And she also during the lectures throughout the whole module, she would...
Bridget (1):	Sometimes giving too much detail can actually mean you're, you're giving...

3b. Use of exemplars can be problematic

Clare:	I mean it was, no. I think that it was more confusing. [Interviewer: Oh, really? [laughs]] ...
Ruth:	...cause I had friends in the in that class, so we used to like read through...

3c. Dissemination activities should align with assignment briefs

Bridget (2):	Like some of the assignment briefs, they're a bit more confusing. Like, yeah, sometimes you read them and you don't know what they want...
	Personally, I think at this point is if the lecturer is giving you the structure of how they want this. I mean what they want included, that's much more suited...
	As you, as they teach it along, they give you opportunity to ask questions. If you're not understanding a few things, but what's been happening, some...
	I think what can make an assignment brief better is the way that they are being purposeful beside the way they're being made, like what's required for you to do in

	Oh, what I mean by that is like to have a clear like understanding on what, it's what, the content that's required to have in the assignment, that's required.
	...what's interesting, it was not mentioned in the assignment brief that you need the VUCA environment, and to me that's an essential part that needs to...

GET 4: Striving for independence

4a. Doing it for themselves and seeking support

Clare:	Actually, I don't know if this is a bad thing or, a lot of times when I said I'm...
	...I was very shocked how supportive the lecturers have been so far erm and...
	I mean, we all have a group chat. The whole of Social Work level one, and I...
Mary:	Absolutely, because it was just because it's so, it's an independent learning, ...
	So, to be given, like the minimal information and then to understand that...
	...today we only just got given advice on assignment writing and and and we...
Ruth:	Sometimes I feel like the language could be simplified, but then at the same...
	...and if I still don't understand it then I'd try and sometimes it's like words...
	it's probably the way the questions are worded because I feel like sometimes...
	Erm. And obviously if you ever get stuck either like trying to ask your peers...
Sara:	I'll message someone else or erm, I'll research, I'll do it myself first. I'll...
Bridget (1):	First, what I will do first is, I will look at it my own and try and find if I...

Bridget (2):	I'm er it can be a bit frustrating to see that [not being given key information in the brief] happening, 'cause you're like, I've did everything with the assignment brief that was given...
	So, I think it created like a dependency on that. I mean, for whatever reason, you cannot attend the lecture due to numerous circumstances...
	I think as of now, ... it's more the way that they allow you to express yourself is through critical analysis. It
	Yeah, I think that the assignment brief is one of the difficulties actually, because the assignment briefs are made on what actually you need to be taught

4b. A supportive environment creates space for independence

Sara:	Yeah, it depends. If people in our cohort are struggling. So for one of our...
	And so, she'll talk through the assignment brief with us, and let us know the...
	Yeah, they give us a lot so we're not, like, struggling with anything. We know...
	...but for that assignment brief, all it had was erm there was a list of...
	Yeah, so I did. I was a little nervous in that sense, but she was happy to help...
Clare:	It's stressful 'cause it's very hard when you've got a sentence or few...
	OK, I'm just going to open the one I struggled with. I've got it in front of me...
	...I was very shocked how supportive the lecturers have been so far erm and...
	But actually, a lot of it was very clear because I know it's not the same as...
Mary:	and he was amazing, the way he explained what was expected from us and...
	it's taught me that they're not going to... Anyone that I have asked and...
	Yes, I'm going to. I I'm going to ask for help when I'm stuck. This is what...

	But yeah, I am still very excited. I feel very committed and I don't commit...
	Uh, so I reached out to them [the Student Learning and Achievement Hub] ...
	There's a, I don't know if I'm allowed to use names, but XXX [a student...
	But yeah, I am still very excited. I feel very committed and I don't commit...
	Uh, so I reached out to them [the Student Learning and Achievement Hub]...
	There's a, I don't know if I'm allowed to use names, but XXX [a student...
Ruth:	I feel like verbal communication for me is better, 'cause then you have the...
	I used to struggle asking like for help, but with the class that I'm in now, ...
Bridget (1):	They talk about them in class. They actually some of them even remind...
	Yeah, supportive and friendly. So there is no shyness with them. They...
	Yeah, I did go and ask for them help when it came to the assignment brief...
	Yeah, I saw that mistakes and I was confused on between those two and...
Bridget (2):	Yeah, I think that has changed now. The last year, the lecturers they were more available compared to this year. Now it looks like there are so much into...
	And I think that the university services they're over saturated. There's too many. There's not enough time and space to fit everyone in, for example, you're...

4c. Taking control and acting with their own power

Sara:	Yeah, for me, I'll just come when we have, when we get an assignment brief...
	Erm either if we it was given to us, that's a lot easier. If not, I'll print anything...

Mary:	...so, the first reflective account I believe, and this is my understanding of
Clare:	Erm, so I kind of... Not that I ignored the assignment brief, but I kind of knew...
	So, when I submitted it, I kind of knew I didn't meet some of the learning...
	Erm the first thing I look up personally is the word count. It's like the first...
	But I do, also for the other one that we weren't given one, I did print it out...
Ruth:	I do, like write notes and stuff but I like to do everything on my laptop 'cause...
	Sometimes I'll take a break, I'll do something like completely different...
Bridget (1):	Read it once and then you put it back. Take a break and then you re-read...

4d. Problems with the brief can negatively impact students' sense of themselves

Clare:	I mean, it's level four. I mean, it's university level so you can't have an actual...
Mary:	It was a bit disheart, disheartening really because I'd gone to do something...
	And because until we got given this, which was a lovely thing. It says, 'the...
Bridget (1):	I think it was something that I was expected to do?
	It's just I understand that sometimes it needs to be detailed enough. But at...
Bridget (2):	I think it's like they're not even like they're telling you, but they're not telling you what they want. You see? And I'm not asking oh like, 'put in the...

GET 5: Building on success and existing knowledge promotes confidence

5a. Success breeds confidence

Bridget (1):	I, I guess, it gave me somewhat of a confidence... It does give you a...
Sara:	Erm, now that I've done a first couple of assignments, I feel, I feel fine...
Ruth:	Uhm, I feel bit more confident 'cause when I when I can. When I confidently...
Clare:	Not that I felt less positive, but I was just worried of not being able to meet...
	I think I can see that the one that I found useful was written by by the lady...
Mary:	I have learned to balance quite well
	Mary: Because we were given all these things and then the learning started, then
Bridget (2):	I do quite well in my studies with the grades that I get. 'cause I'm like if I, as of now, it looks like I just wanna, I just wanna know like, what do you call, pass

5b. Building on existing strengths is empowering

Sara:	'Cause I was brought up in that sort of. I had that sort of like really strict...
	Yeah, like compared to the other people in my cohort. I'm not as stressed as...
Bridget (1):	Yeah, I really took it apart. Broke it down. Each individual point. Mixed it...
	So, I managed in the end. It was a struggle in the beginning. You just need...
Bridget (2):	Yes, there were things that I was being taught in class that were being applied, but there were some things that actually I need to come up with myself to

Ruth:	Some of the things that we speak about I've already done so I'm not. I, I'm a...
Clare:	I've always like, even my introduction and stuff. It was always like erm good...
	Actually, I was very like shocked that you know, I've written assignments all...
Mary:	I think with having the apprenticeship teaching knowledge, I've picked out. I...
	I mean I did for me because I've worked with people that live with dementia...
	it gives you the, you've got your titles that you've got to choose. Great, I...