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## Empowerment Through Research: Bridging Academia and Society

# 'It's overwhelming, looking at an assignment brief...': Promoting inclusive assessment practice through effective assignment brief design

John Knight  
Academic Developer  
Academic Practice and Curriculum Development

Poorly designed assignment briefs exacerbate students' anxiety and impede effective engagement with summative assessment (Walsh, 2021; Knight, 2022). Boud (1995) stressed that while students can circumvent poor teaching, they cannot (if they wish to graduate) 'escape the effects of poor assessment' (p.35). This statement can usefully be extended to include the inescapability of poorly designed and communicated assignment briefs, which must be 'models of clarity' (Sadler, 2015, p.12) if students are to understand how to approach and complete their assessed work to the best of their ability.

A small-scale interpretative phenomenological study conducted at Buckinghamshire New University into students experience of assignment briefs with 5 first year students from Social Work and Business confirmed high levels of student anxiety around summative assessment. The institutional assignment brief template was found to be helpful in providing a consistent, learnable means of engaging with sometimes complex assessment information. In addition, access to friendly, available and supportive staff helped mitigate anxieties and was valued highly. However, students also wanted to engage with their assessed work independently.

Findings suggest that confident, agentic engagement with assignment briefs and assessed work is afforded by:

- **Comprehensiveness** ('One brief to rule them all...')
- **Consistency** and **explicitness** of instructions and practicalities (E.g., identification of required referencing and presentational styles, etc.)
- **Clarity** and **conciseness** (Complexity impedes engagement and heightens anxiety)
- **Progressive scaffolding** of task and content (Brief indicative guidance that provides a way into the task, but does not over-specify and overwhelm)
- Tasks that allow students to engage from a position of strength, drawing on **existing knowledge and identities** as a basis for new learning (Aiken, 2021)

Students from non-traditional backgrounds may be particularly disadvantaged by poorly designed assignment briefs as they may locate problems in the communication of the assessed task in themselves, with subsequent impact upon their confidence, growing identities as learners and sense of belonging. There are also indications that overly proscriptive, monologic approaches to sharing assignment briefs involving unidirectional 'telling' of students about assessment expectations and requirements may serve to disempower and promote feelings of dependency.

**References:** Boud (1995) 'Assessment and learning: contradictory or complementary?', in Knight, P. (ed.) *Assessment for learning in higher education*, London: Kogan Page, pp.35-48; Knight, J. (2022) 'Promoting effective assignment brief design as part of an inclusive approach to assessment', *Advance HE Assessment and Feedback Symposium*, 9 November; Walsh, E. (2021). 'The role of effective communication on students' emotional response to assessment: Written assignment brief', *La Revue LEeE*, 5; Aiken, V. (2021) 'Academic literacies and the tilts within: the push and pull of student writing', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(8), pp. 2104-2120.