STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON DIVERSIFYING ASSESSMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Diversifying Assessment Survey: Report to the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) May 2021

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CAMBRIDGE SU

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the findings from a survey co-designed by Cambridge Students' Union (Cambridge SU) and the Cambridge Centre of Teaching and Learning (CCTL), which was disseminated to all students across the University in February-March 2021. It received a total of 475 respondents and included a range of quantitative and qualitative questions/responses. The focus of the survey was on gauging student perspectives about exams and assessment, collecting information about students' experiences of the changes to assessment that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the UK from March 2020 onwards, and gathering student insights about what diversified assessment practices might look like in their disciplines and courses. The findings of the survey contain substantial evidence of students' keen interest in enhancing assessment practices, in particular their appetite for non-exam assessment opportunities. The qualitative data in particular will be useful to justify and support the diversification of assessment at the University of Cambridge, and the report concludes with a range of recommendations that arise from the data. The key recommendation is that **Faculties and Departments should be encouraged or otherwise incentivised to undertake a more focused investigation of their assessment practices across their whole course/Tripos**, to ensure that the pattern of assessment includes 'authentic' and discipline-specific experiences, is inclusive, and is well structured with clear guidance and information about expectations and marking practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Previously, the University of Cambridge has explored the idea of diversifying assessment practices away from the traditional three hour examination, which continues to dominate. For instance, the *Examination Review Final Report* (2017) reviewed the range of recommendations for updating assessment practices and noted that there was increasing recognition that "the traditional examination approach is not a strait-jacket and innovation should be encouraged". However, the report also acknowledged that many of the changes they considered during the review were rejected "as either being incompatible with the University's educational mission or standing little chance of being accepted". Overall, although the Pro Vice Chancellor made a strong case for Faculties and Departments to be creative and innovative in their consideration of other discipline-specific modes and methods of assessment, there seemed little appetite for significant changes to examination as the dominant mode of assessment.

Since 2017, a few things have changed the University's assessment landscape. There has been a stronger focus on inclusive assessment practices, largely driven by the Disability Resource Centre's reporting of the work and time costs to the collegiate University of making reasonable adjustments for increasing numbers of disabled students. There has been more recognition of a lack of alignment between the personalised learning and formative assessment experienced by students in supervision, and the summative assessment design by Faculties and Departments, as discussed in networking events facilitated by the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL). The Office for Students has required that Universities not only identify their awarding gaps, but that they develop an action plan to narrow or eliminate them: in Cambridge, the awarding gaps are experienced most by Black British undergraduates and disabled students with declared mental health conditions, where both are less likely than their peers to get a First-class degree. And, most significantly, the Covid-19 pandemic led to major institutional changes to assessment practices as the University.

The changes to assessment which have necessarily occurred as a result of the temporary pivot to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic have reignited interest and discussion about the benefits of long-term and sustainable diversification of assessment at Cambridge. In particular, the shift to remote and online submission of exams has required alterations to normal exam conditions, which previously had been provided only to students with declared disabilities after a lengthy application process, such as increased time frames, typed scripts and open book exams. It also included some shifts from exams to other modes of assessment such as essays or coursework.

Anecdotally, the pandemic changes to assessment practices away from face-to-face handwritten in-person three-hour exams were received very positively by both students and staff in the first pandemic year, 2019-20. As a result of this initial response, Cambridge SU and CCTL decided that a more thorough investigation of the student perceptions of assessment was warranted. This study therefore sought to gather deeper insight into two aspects of the assessment debate:

1. Students' reflections about the pandemic-related changes to assessment conditions (online, timed etc) and what they would like to carry forward.
2. Students' level of interest in further diversification of assessment methods (moving away from traditional exams).

In late 2020, the SU and CCTL collaboratively devised a survey for current students to capture their perspectives on this topic, with the responses forming the foundation of this report. This survey built on and extended a pilot survey that was designed by student researchers in the first cycle of the *Access and Participation Plan Participatory Action Research Project* (the *APP PAR* Project, 2020). This pilot survey was focused on disabled students' perspectives of assessment and the impact on their mental health, concluding that diversified assessment would positively affect their academic performance and awarding gaps (Bateman and Bharghava, 2020). Findings from the students' small research project were reported at the Diversifying Assessment Symposium (March 2020) and the Directors of Teaching/Senior Tutors Annual Meeting (September 2020). The students' presentations were compelling and well-received at these staff events, and laid the groundwork for a more thorough survey of student perspectives from across the collegiate University.

The survey provides robust qualitative data about the students' perspectives about assessment practices at Cambridge. It investigates and challenges a range of assumptions that are common in staff discussions about assessment: that Cambridge students largely prefer exams, as this is what they are used to in school; that they are discomforted by changes to assessment; that they come to Cambridge expecting the 'traditional' approach to assessment; that they are put-off by discussions of 'work readiness' and prefer to focus on their learning experiences while at university.

1.1 Clarifying Terms

In the Cambridge context, diversifying assessment is sometimes understood as simply changing the conditions of examinations, rather than changing the examination to another assessment mode altogether. However, more generally diversifying assessment refers to a movement away from using high-stakes end-of-year summative exams as the primary mode of assessment and towards an educational experience that includes a variety of different assessment modes and methods by which students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of course learning outcomes. As these course learning outcomes are necessarily different depending on the discipline, it follows that the 'one size fits all' examination is not able to provide these opportunities to students.

Given the confusion about terminology relating to assessment across Cambridge, versions of the following definitions were provided at the start of the survey:

Conditions and modes of assessment:
- This study investigates the impact of both changing the *conditions* and changing the *mode* or type of assessments. Common exam conditions, for example, would be in-person, handwritten and timed, or coursework might be individual or group tasks. Relatively familiar diversified assessment modes might include oral exams, presentations, group work and coursework-style assignments.

Remote/online examinations:
- Remote assessment refers to practice where exam papers are hosted and submitted online, most often via Moodle, rather than in-person. This does not mean that the assessment task itself has been diversified - it is still an exam - but that the conditions of assessment have changed.

Summative and formative assessment:
- *Summative* assessments are those tasks which are managed by Faculties and Departments (e.g. coursework, end of year exams) and 'count' towards your academic results. *Formative* assessments are the learning tasks that you are required to submit, generally in your College, but which don't formally count towards your marks, class or grade (e.g. supervisory essays, activity sheets).

2. METHODS

This study brings the student voice to the discussion and planning for diversified assessment. Where previous investigations at Cambridge have largely focused on academic and professional staff opinions about assessment practices, relatively little attention has been paid thus far to the student perspectives of discipline-specific assessment tasks. However, the student voice is very powerful: "'Change based on what students say' is more influential and challenges long-held notions of teaching and learning practice" (Brooman et al, 2015). To that end, qualitative methods were selected to allow a variety of student voices to be documented.

To gather a wide range of student voices from across the collegiate University, it was determined that a survey would be the most appropriate method of data collection: not least because of the difficulty of convening focus groups or other methods of qualitative data collection during the pandemic years. The data in this report was therefore collected via a Qualtrics survey that was collaboratively created by Cambridge SU and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the draft questions were reviewed by the Examination and Assessment Committee (December 2020). The survey received ethics approval from the Cambridge Higher Education Studies Research Ethics Committee (CHESREC) prior to its circulation to current Cambridge students via SU channels (e.g. bulletins and social media). The survey was then distributed in February 2021 for a two-week period.

Overall, there were a total of 475 respondents. However, the number of responses for each question varies because there were some questions where respondents could choose more than one option, or not to answer at all before progressing.

The survey asked a range of different questions relating to students' opinions and experiences of assessment at Cambridge generally, and also their experiences of the pandemic shift to online remote assessment more specifically. While the survey was anonymous, we gathered some demographic information through targeted questions at the start of the survey to allow us to correlate responses to questions about students' opinions and experiences about assessment to factors such as year group, subject, ethnicity, or disability.

We particularly asked students to disclose information about their ethnicity and whether they had a mental health condition so that this data could also potentially contribute to research into the awarding gaps which disproportionately impact Black students and disabled students at Cambridge. This research is currently being undertaken by the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning as part of the *Access and Participation Plan Participatory Action Research Project* (The APP PAR Project), which is a collaborative project between staff and student researchers. Diversifying assessment has been one of the suggested methods of remedying awarding gaps and in this report we explore the experiences of Black students and disabled students in particular, whilst also investigating the potentially universal benefits of diversified assessment for all students.

2.1 Respondents by Targeted Characteristics

The following table (Figure 1) presents a breakdown of the 475 student survey respondents.

First Year	171 (36%)
Second Year	136 (29%)
Third Year	110 (23%)
Fourth Year	40 (8%)

Postgraduates	18 (4%)

Black	13 (3%)
Other Racialised Minorities	80 (17%)
White	360 (76%)
Prefer Not to Say	22 (4%)

Mental Health Condition	184 (39%)
No Mental Health Condition	217 (46%)
Prefer Not to Say	74 (15%)

Figure 1: Survey-generated data about respondents

We were interested to compare the profile of our survey respondents with the profile of students across the University. The table below (Figure 2) therefore indicates the pattern of student characteristics in the most recently available University-held data found about numbers of Black undergraduate students (Undergraduate Admissions Statistics 2019, p28); numbers of undergraduate students with declared mental health conditions (MHCs) (Undergraduate Admissions Statistics 2019, p31). The table also compares the overall numbers of all undergraduate students at Cambridge in 2020-21 (Student Numbers Summary, 2021) with the current total of all registered with the Disability Resource Centre (DRC Annual Report 2020, p14).

Data set	Type of student	Number	% of total
Undergraduate home students accepted in 2018-19 cycle	Black	96	4%
Undergraduate students accepted in 2018-19 cycle	Disclosed mental health condition (MHC)	53	2%
All students in 2020-21 year	Registered with Disability Resource Centre with a MHC only	1296	5%

Figure 2: University-generated data about student characteristics

As a comparison of the two tables illustrates, the proportion of our survey respondents who are Black home students (3%) is in line with the proportion of undergraduate home students accepted in the 2018-19 cycle (4%). However, the proportion of survey respondents who consider themselves to have a MHC (39%) is significantly higher than either the undergraduates accepted in 2018-19 who had disclosed on application (2%) or students in 2020-21 who had disclosed by July 2020 (5%). This may be due to the self-selecting nature of those engaged with student union research, a lack of access to official diagnosis among the student population, or low rates of disclosure to the central University from those with a MHC diagnosis.

2.2 Respondents by Discipline/Course

As we aimed to gather student perspectives from across the University, we asked respondents to select their course from a pre-formatted list. The only course that did not have any respondents was Veterinary Medicine, while courses with the largest representation were Modern and Medieval Languages (MML) and Natural Sciences, which had 80 and 67 responses respectively.

This broad pattern of responses across disciplines indicates that the survey findings are relevant to and provide insight into the perspectives of students from across the University. This is particularly important as we later asked students to consider what kinds of assessment tasks would be 'authentic' to their discipline or course, and would allow them to demonstrate their acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills.

While it was not possible to break down survey responses by subject in detail to provide this information for Faculties and Departments, who may have an interest in knowing more about the perspectives of students in their discipline, the report consistently includes quotes from students studying a range of subjects to give an idea of the breadth of opinion, as well as discipline-specific suggestions. More extensive student consultation on a local level within Faculties and Departments should be undertaken as a crucial part of the process of moving towards more diversified assessment.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following sections present the findings from the survey, accompanied by brief commentary. This analysis does not strictly follow the order of the questions, but is organised around the themes that emerged during the initial thematic content analysis undertaken by the three researchers.

3.1 Assessment Pre-Pandemic

At the start of the survey, respondents were asked whether they had experienced a form of assessment that was not an exam whilst at Cambridge. This initial question was intended to gauge the variety of assessment formats currently included in Cambridge Triposes. The results were as follows:

Yes	220 (48%)
No	197 (43%)
Unsure	39 (9%)

Of those who had experienced an assessment that was not an exam, students most commonly indicated that they had experienced long essays or dissertations, coursework, essays and vivas. Some respondents also cited lab work, reports and presentations, assessed practicals, oral exams for languages, mapping projects, online portfolios, music compositions or performances, and the CATAM, which is a computational project.

A further 43% of the 43% of students who answered that they hadn't experienced a form of assessment which wasn't an exam indicated that they were aware that their course offered these options later on in their degree, most commonly in the form of dissertations, long essays or coursework. Considering the significant number of respondents in their first year at Cambridge, many of these are likely to be students who have not yet reached the stage in their degree where they complete non-exam assessments.

Generally, there are certainly non-exam assessment elements already incorporated into Cambridge Triposes. Even those students who expressed that they hadn't experienced a form of assessment that was not an exam indicated that this would happen at some point during their degree. This information is useful to understand the range of assessments currently undertaken at Cambridge and the extent to which students have experienced these, as students' experiences of these different kinds of assessment no doubt informs the opinions they go on to express about the efficacy of exams in comparison. Currently, exams remain the most dominant form of assessment at the University.

3.1.1 Student Perspectives on 'Traditional' Exams

Students were asked about their opinions on the use and benefits of exams through questions that asked how far they agreed with a couple of statements.

Statement 1: *'I believe that the types of assessment used across my degree develop and measure useful skills and capabilities that will serve me beyond university.'*

Strongly Agree	36 (8%)
Agree	144 (34%)
Neutral	98 (23%)
Disagree	122 (28%)
Strongly Disagree	28 (7%)
Total	**428**

The results here are relatively split, as 42% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed and 35% either strongly disagreed or disagreed, with 23% neutral. This invites further speculation about the students' attitude to their educational experiences at University: do students recognise and value the skills and capabilities they are acquiring through the course of the degree, or does the combined 58% of respondents who remained neutral or disagreed with the statement indicate, at the very least, a lack of awareness of the skills they are developing during their studies, and at the worst, a significant level of dissatisfaction about the perceived relevance of their course to help them develop skills and capabilities that will serve them beyond their years of study?

We can however conclude from the responses to this question that the majority of students are not convinced that Cambridge assessments currently develop and measure useful skills and capabilities. This may be because of the assessment tasks themselves, or because students are not explicitly guided to recognise the skills and capabilities that are being developed and evaluated. However, as the next set of results show, students are not convinced that end-of-year exams (which comprise the main assessment component of most Triposes) are accurately reflective of their abilities.

Statement 2: *'The results from my end-of-year exams are an accurate representation of my learning, skills and capabilities.'*

Strongly Agree	18 (4%)
Agree	118 (28%)
Neutral	106 (25%)

Disagree	126 (30%)
Strongly Disagree	56 (13%)
Total	**424**

Again, the results were relatively split. Only 34% of students either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement and 43% respondents answered that they either strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement, combined with the 25% neutral this meant that the majority of students (68%) were either not sure or did not agree that the results from their end-of-year exams were an accurate representation of their learning, skills and capabilities.

Ideally 100% of respondents would agree with this statement. Fundamentally, the aim of assessments is to secure an accurate representation and understanding of students' capabilities, and to evaluate their performance to meet the learning outcomes of a course, which should be clearly outlined. This is not only to ensure the best possible degree outcomes for students but also to enhance their learning experience throughout the degree itself. Teachers and staff at educational institutions are required by the UK Quality Assurance Agency's guidance on assessment to be able to accurately identify areas of strength and weakness, with strength and weakness being considered in a more holistic sense; the university should use metrics that encompass a range of different indicators and value a variety of useful, meaningful skills (UK QAA, 2019). These skills might include verbal communication, undertaking fieldwork or independent research, working in a group, analysing data, writing a literature review etc. Altering and varying the format of assessments is certainly one way to achieve this. Later in the report, we analyse students' various interesting suggestions about how assessments might be modified or enhanced to meet these requirements.

3.1.2 Exams and Mental Health

There are undoubtedly a range of reasons why students might feel as though the results from their end-of-year exams are not reflective of their abilities, as seen in the previous section. However, the disproportionately negative impact of end-of-year exams on students' mental health could partially account for this. This factor is evident from the survey findings, with the following results displaying students' responses to a question about the impact of end-of-year exams on their mental health:

Very Positive	5 (1%)
Positive	24 (6%)
Neutral	130 (32%)
Negative	179 (44%)
Very Negative	73 (17%)
Total	**411**

Only 7% of respondents answered that the impact was positive or very positive, with a 62% majority of respondents indicating that the impact was either negative or very negative.

A degree of worsened mental health around exams is certainly to be expected, but it is clear that the current end-of-year exam model does have a disproportionately negative impact on students' mental health. End-of-year exams are alarmingly high stakes and, as already established in the

previous section, a majority of students do not even think they are accurately representative of their skills. These do not seem to be the ideal conditions for assessment and peak performance, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that such a high proportion of students have indicated that there is a negative impact. Tackling the concentration of stress and pressure by diversifying assessment could be a conceivable solution to this issue.

3.2 Assessment During the Pandemic

This section explores students' experiences of assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required all assessment elements to be moved online. While some assessment elements already had a virtual component prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (e.g. dissertations being submitted online via Turnitin as well as being handed in as a physical copy to the faculty or department), this was the first time that exams had been sat virtually by all students.

Staff and students worked phenomenally hard to adapt to new teaching, learning and exam conditions, and the experience has prompted questions about whether any of the changes that were necessarily imposed might be worth sustaining in the long-term. Our survey focused on students' experiences of assessment during the pandemic in particular, with a view to determining which changes to the format and conditions of assessment might inform the future of improving assessment practices at Cambridge.

3.2.1 Student Perspectives on the Shift to Remote/Online Assessment

Students were asked whether the pandemic shift to online, remote assessment improved, worsened or had no change on their experiences of exams.

Improved	202 (51%)
Worsened	92 (23%)
Unchanged	103 (26%)
Total	**397**

Interestingly, just over 50% of respondents answered that their experience of exams was improved, with significantly fewer students responding to the contrary. In the next subsections, we analyse the follow-up responses to understand the underlying factors which caused these results.

Many of the respondents who said that their experience was unchanged offered qualifying explanations in the accompanying text box. Some explained that they were first years who had not sat exams yet and others explained that their exams had been cancelled or they were on their year abroad. A couple weighed up the difficulty of the circumstances (the context of the pandemic) against the better exam format to explain why they thought that on balance their experience was unchanged, concluding that it was still a stressful time on the whole. One individual similarly commented that exams being open book made their experience better, but that this was evened out by the negative experience of remote invigilation and their sense that they lacked knowledge due to the disruption to their learning – on balance, they concluded that assessment experience was still stressful.

It is also worth noting that a few individuals commented that they weren't sure that moving exams online completely solved the problems caused by exams, drawing attention to the nature of the tasks themselves. One in particular commented, *'in a lot of ways, the challenges stayed the same and I felt limited, like I'd 'pointlessly' learnt a lot of content – which of course isn't true – but it felt like I couldn't demonstrate the breadth and depth of my learning.'* This speaks to the results relating to students'

perceptions of the usefulness and accuracy of exams as a measure of ability that we observed in a previous section. In particular, this quote importantly points out the need to explore changing the format and nature of assessments, as opposed to just the conditions.

3.2.1.1 Benefits

Students who answered that their experience had been improved by the pandemic shift to online remote assessment gave indications as to which elements contributed the most to this improvement. Students could select multiple options for this question, which affects the total number of responses.

Typing Scripts	103 (23%)
Open-Book Exams	163 (37%)
Longer Time Frame	150 (34%)
Other	25 (6%)
Total	**441**

The 6% of respondents who selected the 'other' option gave various examples of changes to the exam format which impacted them positively.

Students who filled in the free text box most commonly welcomed the replacement of exams with coursework. A total of seven respondents made this point, with one student expressing that they felt a portfolio *'more accurately reflects [their] capabilities'* than an exam.

Responses that related to the exam mitigations put in place by the University were similarly common. A total of seven respondents referenced these measures; four mentioned the shift to formative from summative assessment, one mentioned the benefit of having fewer questions, one mentioned that not having to sit exams allowed them precious extra time for their dissertation, and one mentioned that automatic progression to the next academic year significantly alleviated pressure.

Six respondents referred to the changed exam conditions caused by being assessed remotely. Two of these mentioned that they welcomed being able to take breaks, one that they enjoyed not being completely silent, one that they appreciated not having a proctor, and two that they preferred sitting an exam in a more comfortable and familiar environment (e.g. a bedroom at home). It should be noted that not all students have access to an exam-suitable environment at home, and this should not be assumed to be appropriate for everyone. This is explored in the next section.

Separately, four responses mentioned that having a longer time frame improved their experiences of assessment. Another three responses stated that it was the online element of assessment which benefited them, with two of these mentioning the relative ease of online submission (e.g. of the CATAM) and one mentioning that typing exams was preferable to handwriting them.

3.2.1.2 Drawbacks

Students who answered that their experience had been worsened by the pandemic shift to online remote assessment gave indications as to which elements contributed the most to this. Students could select multiple options for this question, which affects the total number of responses.

Typing Scripts	28 (22%)
Open-Book Exams	16 (13%)
Longer Time Frame	28 (22%)
Other	53 (43%)
Total	**125**

The 43% of respondents who selected the 'other' option gave various examples of changes to the exam format which impacted them negatively.

The most commonly cited factor was the different exam conditions, with 17 submissions varying on the theme of finding it difficult to sit exams in a setting that was not an exam hall. Many explained that it was difficult to replicate the usual exam conditions whilst sitting the exam remotely. For some, this was a result of sharing space with others, meaning that silence and privacy were not an option. At least two responses pointed out the unfairness of this, as this variation in students' exam environments ensured that some were at a disadvantage – particularly in the subjects where students are then graded directly against their peers.

For other respondents in this category, it was the lack of adrenaline caused by sitting the exam alone in a room that worsened their experience, as they mentioned ordinarily relying on this energy to propel them successfully through the assessment. At least two respondents mentioned this, with one in particular commenting, '*I do far better in in-person exams [on account of my](ADHD) so taking exams sitting in my room was much harder than just showing up to an exam hall and getting "in the zone".'* Another two mentioned feeling more stressed as a result of being alone and in the dark about what to expect.

The next most commonly cited factor was the format of assessment. The issue varied depending on the student; four responses expressed concerns about other students cheating in online closed book exams, two expressed that the new online format was distracting and more difficult to engage with, and one mentioned that their experience was disrupted by preparing for an open book exam that ended up being closed book. Separately, although related to the changed assessment format, five students commented upon the lack of clarity about what was expected of them. Two of these referenced the uncertainty around remote invigilation in particular, with one commenting that they found ProctorExam '*intrusive*'.

The time frame of exams was another popular theme of students' free text responses in this section. A total of seven respondents mentioned this in their comments, with four of these complaining that the time frame wasn't extended and that this didn't adequately compensate for the fact that students were sitting the exams in abnormal circumstances and conditions. One mentioned that some exams were scheduled at inconvenient hours and another offered their perspective as a disabled student who suffered from the lack of extra time provided specifically for them – they pointed out that during 24-hour exams, a disabled student might only be able to focus for more than six hours a day, whilst their non-disabled peers would likely be able to use much more of the time to work on their assessment. Separately, although on a related point, three respondents expressed their frustration about exams being moved back to September, which negatively impacted their experience of the summer.

Of the remaining responses, three mentioned that they suffered from a lack of access to resources (e.g. for dissertations) and three referenced difficulties with scanning.

On the whole, considerably fewer students found that open book, typed, longer exams worsened (as opposed to improved) their experience. Some of the factors which were written in the free text box are related to the very specific circumstances which arose as a result of the pandemic, meaning that a lot of them are theoretically solvable if students are able to prepare coursework and sit exams in

university accommodation, with access to all the necessary resources. During the period from March-June 2020, very few students were resident in Cambridge due to the March lockdown which meant that they were not accommodated on the university site. As such, students undertook their exams in wildly varying environments, circumstances and conditions. Looking forward, these factors are much more manageable.

3.3 Assessment Post-Pandemic

The University of Cambridge is already forging a path towards a more diversified model of assessment. Notably, the University's *Framework for Assessment 2021-22* has been significantly revised to allow Faculties and Departments greater flexibility of choice about the kinds of assessment that they offer to their students in the coming academic year 2021-22 (*The Cambridge University Reporter*, 19/5/21, p661). This alteration to the Framework comes in light of the positive responses from both students and staff to some of the changes that were made as a result of the pandemic, which were received anecdotally or via local surveys in different disciplines such as Law, and is also accommodating of concerns about next year's finalists who might be negatively impacted by a shift back to 3 hour invigilated in-person exams, of which they have had no experience. Faculties and Departments will now be able to offer a range of different types of assessment to their students, including online exams.

Perhaps most importantly, however, this new revised Assessment Framework marks the first step in a transition towards diversified assessment. The University has also recently approved a programme for the Future of Assessment, which sets out a five-year plan for moving towards the incorporation of different kinds of assessment in each Cambridge Tripos. The vision of the programme involves 'enabling *fairer and more creative assessments that are delivered efficiently and effectively',* with these approaches designed to '*close our awarding gaps between different student groups and promote positive wellbeing.'* As part of this programme, Faculties and Departments will be invited to make more permanent changes to their assessment practices which build on the more flexible options provided for the upcoming academic year. Evaluation of the impact on student outcomes and awarding gaps will be part of this process as the University moves towards a more creative, inclusive and efficient assessment model.

In addition to this approved vision and strategy regarding the immediate and long term future of assessment at Cambridge, valuable student-staff partnership research is underway in collaboration with CCTL. Building on the *APP PAR* Cycle 1 (2020) findings mentioned earlier in this report, a follow-up student project was conducted in the recent *APP PAR* Project Cycle 2 (2021) with a team of students from Geography, English and Psychology who reviewed the instructions and guidance that they were provided by their Department about assessment and marking practices. Their findings indicated that there was considerable inconsistency across Departments, with students finding it more or less difficult to access guidance or to receive clear information about marking criteria; this was found to be particularly stressful for students with mental health conditions, who additionally needed to self-advocate for adjustments to assessment and to manage formative assessment expectations with their supervisor (report to be published shortly). CCTL's strand of work supporting interventions to address awarding gaps, where diversifying assessment is considered a key factor, is also ongoing.

This section explores students' suggestions and visions for the future of assessment at Cambridge. Only three students made comments with concerns that diversifying assessment would make exams '*easier'* or '*devalue the Cambridge degree,'* with the survey findings making it clear that students have many valuable opinions which should be incorporated into the work already underway at the University to transform assessment practices.

3.3.1 Student Interest

Following the earlier questions about their experiences during the pandemic, students were asked about their preferences for the future of assessment at the University. The following results are students' responses to the question, 'which of the following are you most interested in?' Students could

select more than one option for this question, which affects the total number of responses. The percentages are calculated according to the maximum total number of respondents, which is 475, to give an indication of the proportion of those who were interested in each option.

Return to traditional in-person, timed and invigilated exams	90 (19%)
Retaining online/remote conditions of assessment (e.g. online open book exams)	211 (44%)
Opportunities for more variety (e.g. some non-exam summative assessment as well as exams)	282 (59%)
Other (please explain)	40 (8%)
Total	**623 responses, max. 475 respondents**

The responses here speak for themselves: students are keen for the future of assessment at Cambridge to depart from the status quo that has previously been upheld.

Evidently there is a strong interest in maintaining some of the conditions of online/remote assessment alongside introducing more opportunities for variety. It is clear from the responses analysed in earlier sections that exams do work for some students, so the answer is seemingly not to do away with them completely. What we need to acknowledge, however, is that having more diverse modes of assessment on offer benefits a much wider range of students. There is a need to abandon the conviction that there is a one-size-fits-all model of assessment, and introduce many more options for students.

The optional free text box on this question produced a range of answers from students specifying exactly which exam elements they were most interested in. Some related to the conditions of assessment, and others to the format and type of assessment.

There were a range of responses relating to altered conditions of assessment. There were seven responses that mentioned their interest in having a longer time frame to complete exams, five that mentioned keeping exams online, and four that mentioned having the option to type rather than hand write exams. One response pointed out that having a longer time frame for exams ensures that it is '*a test of skill, not just speed under pressure.*' This importantly highlights how the short time frame of exams means that certain qualities (such as speed and performance under pressure) are valued more highly than other skills which are more useful and beneficial to students in the long-term.

Many of the free text responses also focused on substantial changes to the format and type of assessment. It is worth noting that in some cases, changed assessment conditions necessarily result in changes to the assessment format — for example, seven responses mentioned an interest in open-book exams and one response mentioned take-home exams. Depending on the subject, having an open rather than closed book exam can require changes to the exam format itself, e.g. changes to the kinds of questions asked. Translation exams for language students are a good example, as having access to a dictionary opens up opportunities to shift the emphasis of the exam more heavily onto the critical processes involved in translation, rather than simply memorisation and recall. This can be seen as a productive shift that encourages the development of more valuable skills.

There were thirteen responses which explicitly stated that they would prefer to replace exams with other assessment elements, with suggestions including the introduction of more coursework, more opportunities for dissertations, essays and group assessments. There were at least two responses which called for an overhaul of current assessment practices; for a large-scale reconsideration of the kinds of skills that teaching should develop and assessments should measure. One response stated:

> *'[There should be] an analysis of what competence standards are actually being measured in present modes of assessment, and what competence standards should be measured! E.g. Why is it useful for humanities students to be able to write fast or memorise quotes? When will this serve us? Disabled students, including those with mental health conditions, are severely negatively impacted by unfair and irrelevant competence standards in assessment setting.'*

Overall, there is clearly a desire amongst students for the retention and development of more varied assessment modes, in line with the work that the University is currently doing, as part of a radical rethink and evaluation of assessment practices.

3.3.2 Student Perspectives on Variety and Choice

The previous section indicated that there is significant appetite amongst students for assessments to be fundamentally reimagined and restructured, but comments from students throughout the survey also emphasised the need for greater choice and variety. Responses showed that individual choice between the traditional and diversified options is important to students. Just as exclusively testing by 3 hour exam is not appropriate for many students, moving to a different model with no element of choice would also be negative. Students argued that changes to the assessment framework at Cambridge should not produce an alternative one-size-fits-all model: inbuilt options for students should be foundational to any new system. As one respondent concisely commented, *'success should not be measured with a singular framework.'* Additional student testimonies in favour of choice and variety are included below:

> *'I have answered this survey from a personal perspective - which is that I would prefer timed, in-person, closed book exams - because this suits my style of working. That said, I would still support the university adopting more flexibility as I am completely aware that my style of working does not work as well for others - I would fully support a model that offers two different options for assessment, considered separately.'*

> *'I think the most helpful thing would be to have more diverse assessments available but by choice - so any given student could choose to take only traditional exams, or only coursework - essentially for students to decide which of the assessment styles best reflects their work. If any assessment style is applied to all students in a blanket approach then it will never give students their best chance to prove themselves.'*

> *'One form of assessment is quite restricting and limiting when not everyone performs well in exams, it's not always an accurate representation of their work throughout the year, suits a specific type of student and can be difficult for neurodiverse students. Diversifying assessment practices allows more students to excel in a way more suited to them.'*

> *'I think that choice and variety are really useful principles because they allow people's learning experiences to be more tailored to their interests, abilities and preferences.'*

> *'I think a very important thing to do is, if exam formats change, offer students sufficient practice runs - it can be hard to judge the efficacy of a new exam format if students cannot prepare and do mocks.'*

The responses indicate a desire for multiple forms of assessment that students can choose between, with no barrier (e.g. medical evidence requirement or other justification) to accessing a specific kind of assessment. It is clear that we should not replace the 3 hour exam system with a similarly hegemonic new system. There should also be adequate time to prepare and practice for the new types of assessment once chosen.

3.3.3 Discipline-Specific Approaches

In their free text responses throughout the survey, some students made the distinction between humanities and STEM subjects in how relevant diversifying assessment would be. These views varied from individual to individual, confirming the need for choice and variety for students. The diversity in these responses also highlights the importance of local student consultation within each discipline as part of the process of changing assessment practices.

'I would give anything to have another assessment methods available to all, including STEM students.'

'I think that the 3 hour exam length that is standard across many subjects (including my own experience with Natural Sciences) is ridiculous.'

'I don't think [diversifying assessment is] necessary or helpful in STEM subjects.'

'It may be of greater value in humanities, but I think in STEM it's vital to retain at least some major element of traditional examination.'

'Moving away from largely exam-based assessments will be especially beneficial for arts and humanities subjects because it will be a better way to test knowledge, rather than making students revise endlessly only to regurgitate a minority of the information they've spent so long learning.'

'Engineering employers don't just want to see a first. They want someone with the skills required for future success. Exams at Cambridge in Engineering don't adequately test this nearly enough, and it's a tough job attempting to juggle extracurriculars that can evidence these skills alongside the demanding Tripos-related work.'

It is evident that changes to assessment must involve in-depth consultation with students, and that both traditional exams and diversified assessment are retained as an option rather than an obligation. It should not be assumed that diversified assessment is not appropriate for an entire department, although there will undoubtedly be students who could benefit from it. There are certainly students in both humanities and STEM subjects who have a range of ideas about how assessments can be made more relevant to the real-world tasks that they might be expected to complete beyond university, and we explore these in the next main section of the report (3.4).

3.3.4 Mental Health Impact

Students were asked to forecast the impact of more diverse modes of assessment on their mental health, provided that this change was accompanied by clear instructions and marking expectations. The results were as follows:

Very Positive	130 (35%)
Positive	169 (45%)
Neutral	51 (14%)
Negative	19 (5%)

Very Negative	4 (1%)
Total	**373**

80% of respondents replied that this would have a positive or very positive impact on their mental health, an overwhelming majority of the students who filled out the survey. This is notable considering the high proportions of students who were reporting that end-of-year exams had a negative or extremely negative impact on their mental health.

Students were also asked to forecast the introduction of more diverse modes of assessment on their overall academic performance or degree outcomes. The results are as follows:

Very Positive	112 (30%)
Positive	165 (44%)
Neutral	69 (18%)
Negative	21 (6%)
Very Negative	6 (2%)
Total	**373**

74% of respondents answered that they thought that more diversified assessment would have a positive or very positive impact on their performance and outcomes. This indicates a significant level of interest and appetite in a range of assessment practices, which is at odds with the staff assumptions that students are generally happy to remain with exams as the main mode of assessment.

3.4 Assessment and Life Beyond University

This section focuses on exploring students' perspectives on the real-world applicability and usefulness of assessment tasks. An early question in the survey asked students to respond to the statement *'I believe that the types of assessment used across my degree develop and measure useful skills and capabilities that will serve me beyond university'* (see 3.1) and less than half of the respondents (42%) agreed with this statement.

Students at Cambridge are selected on account of their passion as well as their talent, so are likely on balance to enjoy studying for the sake of the pursuit of knowledge and enjoyment of the discipline itself, but one of the key reasons that many young people pursue higher education is because they are told that it is one of the primary ways to develop their skills and enhance their future prospects. This was true in today's competitive job market even before the situation was made significantly more challenging as a result of the pandemic, with recent figures suggesting that around 12.3% of people aged 18-24 are unemployed and that there have been considerable increases in the number of people in this category claiming unemployment benefits (UK Parliament, 2021). Just having a degree does not set people apart; it is fundamental for graduates to be able to distinguish themselves by demonstrating a wide range of skills. Inherent in Cambridge's reputation and prestige is the promise that a degree from the university is uniquely valuable, so if the forms of assessment which Cambridge degrees use to structure their teaching are not perceived by a significant number of surveyed students to be instrumental in usefully developing their capabilities then this is a concern.

A further two questions were asked in the survey:

- *In the activities beyond University which are most closely related to your field of study, what tasks might you be expected to do?*
- *Do you have any suggestions for different modes of assessment, or more 'authentic' assessment tasks, which could be introduced in your course of study?*

The sections below explore the responses to these two questions.

3.4.1 Real-World Skills

Students expressed a clear interest in developing skills that would be applicable to them after graduating, and we received 277 open text responses to the first question about what kinds of tasks they might be expected to undertake beyond university. A large number of responses referred to research skills, and the expectation that the student would go on to require in-depth research skills regardless of career, with students in a variety of disciplines describing in-depth research or fieldwork. Additionally, another very popular response was to describe report or document writing of some kind. Students expect that they'll be analysing data and creating documents, reports or speeches based on it. Many emphasised that they didn't feel that this type of writing was reflected in essay based assessments. One response said:

> *'I'm a politics student hoping to go into policy around urban planning but probably likely to work in local government as a new graduate. I think essays are a bit of a weird thing to be good at. They're not like a report that you might be expected to write up. They're not like a speech you might be expected to write and deliver. They're equally often too limiting and don't force you to interrogate your own perspective enough. I feel like lots of humanities grads are unprepared for real-world discussions by writing essays alone. You get more practice for this in supervisions obviously - but I often leave supervisions feeling as though the discussions were ten times as helpful to me as writing the essay was. I'd like to be able to read for longer and discuss for longer.'*

Another theme that emerged from the responses was that a number of students indicated that they expected to end up teaching as a career, whether they were in Education or gaining a degree in other disciplines. To that end, they recognised how useful it would be to be capable of communicating their discipline to students, with one describing this as a need to *'deliver sessions for specific types of audience.'*

Other responses cover a range of practical skills like translation (which was mentioned by Classicists and English students as well as MML students), editing, interviewing and performance. A high number of responses refer to activities like *'product development'*, *'project management'* and event delivery as likely activities, showing that lots of students expect to be involved in the creation of a product or event as part of a future career.

In response to the second question, students had a range of ideas for more 'authentic' assessment tasks which could be introduced into their course, with this optional free text question receiving 233 responses. Significantly, many respondents identified the changes brought about by the pandemic as ones which improved the authenticity of assessment - authenticity in this context referring to the relevance of assessment to real-world tasks and life beyond university. Only four of the 233 respondents were in favour of traditional exams, saying simply *"I like exams"* - which may be because they had previously done very well in exams. The following subsections explore these responses in more detail.

3.4.2 Coursework and Continuous Assessment

The most popular response to the question about more authentic assessment tasks that could be incorporated into their courses, was that coursework constituted a more authentic mode of assessment, with 72 respondents mentioning this explicitly. Students gave examples of coursework that they found useful, which ranged from long essays to lab reports, and broadly advocated either for the introduction of more coursework elements or more options for students to substitute exam elements for coursework. In the more extreme cases, a couple of students even argued for the abolition of exams and their complete replacement with coursework.

Students' responses convincingly described how coursework is a more authentic and useful mode of assessment. A Part I student commented, *'I'm writing a long essay for one of my papers and I think it's allowed me to understand the texts better'*, adding that, *'even if you do go on to academia, you'll have days or months to write something and access to the texts about which you are writing.'* This sentiment was reflected in many of the responses, making it evident that students perceive coursework to develop more useful and relevant skills, as longer assignments allow them to practice a greater depth of thinking and analysis. Coursework also allows students to perform better: one student even quoted a report for the Cambridge Part I History exams in 2019, in which external examiner Mark Knights wrote that *'the standard of work in the Themes and Sources paper was generally much higher than that produced in the exams.'* Knights apparently also noted that Cambridge was *'out of line with other UK institutions where at least 50% is assessed coursework'* and advocated *'moving towards a more mixed economy of assessment patterns.'*

There were a range of ideas about what this coursework could look like in different disciplines, particularly those which currently have very few (if any) coursework elements. There were multiple suggestions that coursework could be more data-related, constituting lab reports or data analysis for example, or could even take the form of a literature review in some science-based subjects. A Maths student suggested *'long form coursework essays to communicate areas of mathematics'* which would *'help teach us how to read mathematical papers'.* A Law student suggested the introduction of coursework-style assessment *'based on providing an answer or argument in response to a case bundle similar to the sort of work that is actually completed by working lawyers',* a type of assessment which they explained that the University of Bristol Law Faculty currently uses. The desire for coursework is evidently not limited to humanities subjects which already have a few (but perhaps not enough) coursework elements, as students have ideas about how more long form assessment could be incorporated into a range of different disciplines.

A related but slightly distinct suggestion from students was that there should be more continuous assessment. This suggestion departs slightly from just focusing on submitting more long form assessments to include the additional incorporation of supervision essays, supervisor reports, shorter and more regular tests, assessed practicals throughout the year, and other productive measures of participation or engagement into an overall assessment of students' academic performance. 28 responses made suggestions of this nature, with one student arguing that this way of assessing progress and performance allows for a productive focus on students' *'natural demonstration of skills needed within the degree.'* In addition to spreading the workload and pressure throughout the year, this approach also promotes more consistent use and development of different skills rather than putting an emphasis on cramming, which is a considerably less valuable or sustainable skill. As one student commented, *'it would be better to do more extended work. For instance, longer exam periods (over say a month) where you write a collection of a few essays (with like a week for each essay) would be a much better skill as it sets you up way more for being an academic (or any job for that matter), as you must be able to research, take on that information and craft it into an argument.'*

3.4.3 Open Book and Longer Time Frames

Another of the most common answers to this question was that open book exams (often paired with a longer time frame) were a more authentic mode of assessment. 59 responses contained the suggestion of open book exams and 25 mentioned a longer time frame (with many of these overlapping). The main argument which featured in these responses was that exams with a limited time frame and no access to resources do not replicate the actual conditions of pursuing those

disciplines in the real world, whether in an academic or practical context, and are therefore unhelpful and impractical. As one student concisely commented, '*testing how quickly a student can write an essay, and how good their memory is, can detract from truly examining how well a student can understand material, draw their own connections between information, and formulate an argument - which has nothing to do with how long it takes a student to write or whether they do or don't have access to their own resources.*'

Interestingly, these responses came from students studying a range of disciplines; the suggestions made cases for maintaining or introducing open book exams in STEM and humanities subjects alike. In this broad context, an open book exam could mean access to a range of different resources depending on the discipline, including (but not limited to) dictionaries, formula booklets, or students' own notes. A Medicine student commented, '*in the medical profession, all work is open book. Memorising lots of facts is pointless as we inevitably forget them again and will always have access to computers or textbooks in the future if we need this information.*' An MML student similarly pointed out that '*professional translators will always have access to dictionaries*', with another student from the same subject corroborating that '*in literally no [real-world] scenario ever would you be presented with a text, devoid of context, and be expected to translate it in an hour. It's more practical to be able to have access to dictionaries and a larger window of time in order to simulate real-life translation experience.*' Evidently, many respondents felt as though changing these conditions of assessment would ensure that the tasks corresponded better with those that they would go on to perform in their lives beyond university.

3.4.4 Other Options

Students also mentioned a range of other assessment tasks which they perceived to have a greater real-world applicability and usefulness. Some of the most popular responses were presentations (26 responses), oral exams (12 responses), group projects (7 responses) and research projects (7 responses).

Students suggested that presentations could be either conference-style or designed to be delivered to small groups of peers. One student expressed, '*I think this is a key skill in order for scientists to portray their work to both the scientific community and the general public in a clear and understandable manner.*' Another similarly emphasised the importance of presentations to improve '*communication and public speaking*' skills, which are useful in a range of contexts.

It was suggested by one student that group projects would '*improve teamwork and collaborative skills […] and finding solutions with all knowledge available, which is much more helpful than learning a book by heart.*' Another respondent pointed out that the second-year project in the Computer Science Tripos is a good example of an existing group project - a model that could be adopted elsewhere.

There was some interest in independent or individual research projects, too. One student commented, '*independent projects where we could research a special interest would be great! [They] could include independent reading outside of the course material, a presentation and some written work. I think this would really widen student skills and inspire interest in and a love for the subject.*' Another student commented that '*research projects and literature-writing in chemistry could help to teach skills needed beyond university, such as science presentation and independent design of a project.*' At least two students expressed an interest in incorporating literature reviews into science disciplines.

Students also made various suggestions of more specialist assessment tasks which could be introduced in their disciplines, with eleven respondents giving answers of this type. Law students responded with a range of suggestions, one of which being that '*moots could count towards credits for exams like they do at other universities to ensure we have advocacy skills.*' Others mentioned that '*negotiation tasks*' or '*contract drafting skills tests would be useful*', as would '*face to face client advisory where you have the opportunity to outline ways to help [them with] their problem [and] give advice.*' It was also suggested that essays could be altered to be made '*more about advising people rather than discussing abstract concepts of law which are only useful if you want to go into academia.*'

Students in other disciplines suggested assessments that focus on *'experimental methods or practical exams for topics that focus on practical skills (e.g. psychology, computational, etc.),' 'policy work for politics and international relations,'* or *'some kind of curation project (like they do at the Courtauld).'* One in particular suggested introducing opportunities to complete *'practical archaeology tasks, [e.g.] write a set of museum labels and display text or plan an exhibition.'* There were also two mentions of assessing fieldwork, such as assessing a fieldwork interview or archaeological fieldwork.

In conclusion, it is evident that students have a range of ideas for how their courses at Cambridge could be altered to include more diverse modes of assessment that are more relevant to the real-world tasks that they are likely to complete beyond university. There seems to be a broad interest in degree study being a means to develop a variety of skills which extend beyond memorisation and quick work under pressure to encompass other skills that are applicable in many different academic and practical contexts. As a step towards either further academic study or employment, a degree should have some industrial relevance and equip students with skills that they can apply and develop further beyond university. Currently, it seems as though Cambridge courses are not effectively designed to fulfil this important aim - and that students are in fact well-placed to offer productive ideas for change and development.

3.5 Diversifying Assessment and Awarding Gaps

3.5.1 Black Students

13 respondents indicated that they were Black. These students spanned 10 courses, including a mix of STEM and Humanities subjects. This is a very small number - albeit representative of the small number of Black students at Cambridge - and therefore any conclusions from this sample should be taken cautiously. This demonstrates that qualitative analysis of the experiences of this particular group will be especially important going forwards, especially as Cambridge seeks to significantly improve the representation of Black students at the University. The ongoing research undertaken by CCTL and the work of the newly-established Black Student Advisory Hub will be crucial to addressing the awarding gaps suffered by Black students.

3.5.2 Disabled Students

Respondents were able to indicate that they have a mental health condition (MHC) and they were also able to disclose disabilities in the free text fields if they wished. Students who disclosed a MHC covered 28 out of the 32 course options given, and showed a similar academic year distribution to the whole cohort, with the first 3 years of undergraduate study being the most represented (32%, 30% and 25% of MHC respondents respectively). They had a similar distribution of ethnicity to the whole cohort (MHC 74% and whole cohort 76% white, 3% Black for both), and a similar likelihood of having had a non-exam summative assessment (MHC 53% yes, whole cohort 48% yes).

This section will compare the responses from students with a MHC to the overall cohort of responses in significant areas. It also includes some free text responses from these students which offer their broader opinions on diversifying assessment. Students were asked to indicate on a Likert scale:

What impact, if any, did end-of-year exams have on your mental health?

	MHC students	Whole cohort
(Very) positive	2%	7%
Neutral	20%	32%

(Very) negative	78%	61%

These statistics suggest that the average student with mental health conditions has a more negative experience with end-of-year exams than the average student does. Care is needed when changing assessment practices, to make sure that new formats do not further exacerbate the negative effect on MHC students.

One of the questions about the impact of assessment practices on mental heath asked:

During the pandemic shift to online/remote assessment, was your experience improved, worsened or unchanged by the way exams or other summative assessment tasks were delivered (e.g. online submission of typed exam scripts)?

Responses from MHC students were comparable to the whole cohort – both had 51% improved, 23% worsened and 26% unchanged. This suggests that the measures taken during the pandemic did not impact MHC students differently to non-MHC students. As such, these changes do not appear to have had a specific benefit to students with a mental health condition.

A follow-up question then asked respondents to indicate:

What impact do you think that the introduction of more diverse modes of assessment, along with clear instructions and marking expectations, would have on your mental health?

	MHC students	Whole cohort
(Very) positive	96%	80%
Neutral	2%	14%
(Very) negative	2%	6%

The MHC respondents were almost entirely positive about the potential impact of diversified assessment on their mental health, even more so than the whole cohort. Again, this suggests that there needs to be a clear step towards genuinely diversifying assessment rather than, as during the pandemic, mostly having only one assessment method available at one time. This question also highlights the need for clear instructions and expectations, which can be key in reducing anxiety and uncertainties.

The following question asked about the effect of diversified assessment on attainment:

What impact do you think that the introduction of more diverse modes of assessment would have on your overall academic performance or degree outcomes?

	MHC students	Whole cohort
(Very) positive	87%	74%
Neutral	11%	19%
(Very) negative	2%	7%

The MHC responses had a smaller range and tended to be clustered towards the (very) positive end of the range. Importantly, this question links to the University's *Access and Participation Plan* aim to reduce the awarding gap for students with declared MHCs, and follows from Cycle 1 of the *APP PAR*, which recommended diversifying assessment as a way to reduce the awarding gap for these students.

Diversifying assessment is overwhelmingly supported by students generally at the University of Cambridge, but the benefit would be especially felt by some of the students most affected by the awarding gap, as seen by these results. It is imperative that this become a real priority in the coming months and years, rather than fade away after the pandemic.

In the free text responses, students importantly testified to the fact that different assessment options affect disabled students differently, and that we needed to be cautious about assessment design without consulting students.

Some students indicated that they found exams particularly difficult:

> *'I have a specific learning difficulty - quite significant dyspraxia - and I got to Cambridge despite exam performance by working harder than some who did better than me. […] Is it not enough that I try hard all throughout the year in everything I do, only to be measured by performance on a few exams that reflect an old way of doing things?'*

> *'Take-home exams are a double-edged sword. I really value open book assessments because my working memory is poor as a result of my SpLD and I feel the memorisation required for exams does people like me an injustice. However, I feel disadvantaged in that extra time calculations (I'm allowed an additional 25%) aren't applied in exams that are over 24hrs, aka take home/remote exams.'*

> *'In my case, i.e. a person with severe depression, it's very difficult to function in a structured way: I experience periods of absolute inability to produce work in a short period. […] [Exams] create the risk of me just unable to represent my skills accurately, due to the condition of my psyche at that specific moment of assessment. All of this, however, should also remain optional, and personalised to student's needs, as they vary across individuals.'*

> *'Diversifying assessment would help students significantly who suffer from mental health conditions/disabilities that make conventional assessment extremely difficult.'*

> *'As someone with ADHD I actually do really well in standard 3-hour exams or similar high-intensity/time-constrained tasks. However, I […] have seen firsthand in friends how negatively they can impact someone that isn't so well-disposed.'*

> *'I have severe generalised anxiety disorder and often have anxiety attacks around exams. I currently have permission to write my exams in a separate room in college and have rest breaks during the exam but writing exams is still an incredibly stressful process for me […] when you put me in an exam hall and I have to spend the whole 3 hours trying not to hyperventilate, I can't help but struggle to keep up with my peers.'*

Another student crucially noted that changing from exams might create other unexpected disadvantages:

> *'I would have had huge difficulty for health reasons if there were more smaller assessments in place of a few large exams […] Timed in-person exams were probably the most accessible*

assessment to me given health conditions. All I would have wanted diversified is some option other than DDH if I were too ill to take an exam'

One particularly compelling student quote is copied in full below:

'Students' needs are not homogeneous, and it should be noted that current conventions for exams and summative assessments may also have benefits. For example, for students with ADHD and similar conditions, coursework as a form of summative assessment can aggravate issues with motivation and organisation, and increasing the proportion of coursework without providing adequate support for disabled students (through increased DRC funding, proactive rather than reactive support, and potentially using a basic SpLD screening questionnaire for all incoming students as is common at other unis) might have detrimental effects on mental/emotional health and lead to worsened academic outcomes for a significant minority of students.'

These quotes foreground the message from students that while diversifying assessment should be considered a priority for all students, but that disabled students including self-identified students with mental health conditions be meaningfully consulted and considered when Faculties and Departments are exploring assessment options.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following concluding statements have been drawn from the overall trend in student responses to questions about assessment practices:

1. Traditional exams may remain one of the main modes of assessment, but should not be the only opportunity provided to students across their course/Tripos. There should be a movement away from a one-size-fits-all model, with choice and variety available for students.

2. Diversified assessment should be about designing in a range of thoughtful and discipline-specific assessment tasks, rather than simply replacing one traditional assessment style with one other (e.g. from exams to essays, or 3 hour in-person exams to 24 open book online exams).

3. Where new modes of assessment are introduced, students should be prepared with clear instructions and opportunities to practice or develop their skills.

4. Choices between different modes of assessment should be made available to all students, and not just disabled students. Where there are options for alternative modes of assessment, students should be able to choose without having to provide justification for their choice (i.e. through an onerous reasonable adjustment process).

5. Constructive consideration must be given to disabled students, including those with mental health conditions, and other marginalised groups. What is in their 'best interest' must not be assumed but disabled students' voices should be factored into a review of current practices, and in the evaluation of any future changes to assessment.

6. Student consultation is essential to the process of diversifying assessment in Faculties and Departments.

7. The alignment of assessment with teaching practices means that more communication needs to be factored in amongst Department and College teaching staff, and between formative and summative assessments.

This report provides ample quantitative and qualitative data to support the case for diversifying assessment.

Our key recommendation is that **Faculties and Departments should be encouraged or otherwise incentivised to undertake a more focused investigation of their assessment practices across their whole course/Tripos**, to ensure that the pattern of assessment includes 'authentic' and discipline-specific experiences, is inclusive, and is well structured with clear guidance and information about expectations and marking practices. Optimally, there should be a stronger connection between formative and summative assessment practices, which will involve clearer communication about course learning outcomes and assessment between Colleges and Faculties and Departments. Overall, the aim is to provide opportunities through summative assessment that ensure that all students are given a fair opportunity to demonstrate and be evaluated on their acquisition of knowledge and skills, and not just their ability to perform in an examination setting.   The next step should be for Faculties and Departments to map out their assessment tasks across their course/Tripos, to evaluate how their students are experiencing assessment, and to rationalise how their assessment is aligned with teaching and learning outcomes.

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