

Meeting Students Where They Are: A Flexible Approach to Progress Assessment

Abstract

This case study examines the transformation of an assessment component in a level 6 final year research project module. The original assessment format involved a poster presentation conducted in a large group setting at the end of the first semester, which created numerous challenges including logistical complexity, student anxiety, and limited time for meaningful feedback. The revised approach implements a more flexible presentation format with options for face-to-face or online delivery. This case study documents the rationale for change, implementation process, and the positive impacts observed, including reduced administrative burden, improved student experience, and more meaningful feedback that directly informed dissertation improvement. The findings suggest that building flexibility into assessment design while maintaining a focus on formative feedback can lead to improvements in both student outcomes and staff.

Background and Context

The level 6 final year research project module involves over 100 students each year (sometimes up to 150) and consists of three assessment components:

- Research proposal (5% weighting)
- Progress presentation (10% weighting, the focus of this case study)
- Dissertation (85% weighting)

In its original format, the progress presentation was delivered as a poster presentation held at the end of the first semester. Students were required to prepare a poster and deliver a three-minute pitch in a large communal space with multiple presentations occurring simultaneously.

As Dr. Muradov described, this format created significant challenges:

"It was quite chaotic. We had over 100 students gathered in one location, resulting in significant noise and considerable frustration for both staff and students. Some students were visibly shaking due to nerves"

Challenges with the Original Format

The original assessment format presented several key challenges:

- **Environmental Challenges:** Overcrowded spaces with insufficient equipment. Multiple presentations occurring simultaneously creating excessive noise. Limited physical space for posters and presentations. Difficulty for staff to hear and assess presentations
- **Student Experience Issues:** High anxiety levels among students "Some students would be actually shaking and they wouldn't want to present anything in front of other people, although they would only have the first and second marker." Comparisons between posters leading to confidence issues "If they see someone else's, 'Oh my God, that poster is great, amazing, mine is really bad'". Limited time (3 minutes) to present their work
- **Timing and Content Issues:** Early timing in the project lifecycle meant students had little progress to report on, focusing on the production of the poster itself: "Instead of collecting data, doing any analysis, the majority of students would just work on that poster... and the majority of students wouldn't have any results to demonstrate or to talk about."
- **Administrative Challenges:** Difficult to coordinate large numbers of staff and students. Challenges in organising physical space and equipment. High volume of complaints and logistical problems

The Revised Approach

The revised assessment approach introduces several key changes:

- **Timing:** The presentation was strategically moved from December (end of first semester) to March, positioning it five weeks before the dissertation submission deadline. This revised timing allows students to collect and analyse meaningful data before their presentation, giving them something substantive to present, and subsequently provides adequate time for students to incorporate the valuable feedback they receive before finalizing their dissertation.
- **Format:** The assessment was transformed from brief poster presentations to more comprehensive slide-based presentations that allow students to showcase their work more effectively and reduce fixation on poster design.

Presentation time was significantly extended from just 3 minutes to a full 10 minutes with an additional 5 minutes for questions and feedback.

- **Delivery Mode:** Students were offered flexible options to deliver their presentations either face-to-face or online via Microsoft Teams, accommodating different circumstances and preferences. While scheduled during a designated week, there was built-in flexibility for timing, and importantly, the audience was limited to only the student, their supervisor, and the second marker, creating a more supportive and less intimidating environment. Note that the option of video submission which was previously explored was dropped in order to capitalise of real-time feedback, and possibilities of questioning the students' depth of knowledge. As Dr. Muradov explained, it was important "for us to ask questions, engage in discussion, and most importantly, to provide timely feedback before students submit their dissertations."
- **Logistics:** The new approach emphasized self-organization between the student, supervisor, and second marker, allowing them to arrange mutually convenient meeting times. This decentralized scheduling operated within a defined timeframe but with built-in flexibility.

Implementation Process

The implementation of the new format focused on clear communication and flexible scheduling:

1. **Communication strategy:**
 - a. Detailed announcements on Canvas for students
 - b. Direct communication with all staff members involved
 - c. Clear guidelines on scheduling and format options
2. **Scheduling approach:**
 - a. Designated one-week period for presentations
 - b. Flexibility to extend into following week if needed
 - c. Staff and students arranged mutually convenient times

Observed Benefits and Impacts

The revised approach has yielded multiple benefits:

Improved Student Experience

- Reduced anxiety with smaller audience

"Because we didn't have many people in here, it felt safer to present."

- More time to present their work comprehensively
- Opportunity to receive immediate, actionable feedback
- Time to implement feedback before dissertation submission

Enhanced Feedback Quality

- More in-depth discussions about project progress
- Identification of critical issues or gaps

"During the presentation, students would sometimes realise they were missing something critical. In some cases, even the supervisor might suggest that they request a one-week extension."

- Focused feedback on improving the final dissertation

Reduced Administrative Burden

- Dramatically reduced complaints and queries

"I did not receive a single email or phone call. Previously, as mentioned, the process was quite chaotic, with numerous complaints. This time, however, there were none "

- Self-organization reduced central coordination requirements
- Easier to manage extensions when necessary

Improved Project Outcomes

- Students have time to incorporate feedback
- More strategic use of extensions when needed
- Better preparation for final submission
- Improved overall quality of dissertations (preliminary observation)

Lessons Learned

The key insights from this assessment transformation include:

1. **Strategic timing matters:** Positioning assessment components to align with the student's research journey provides more meaningful opportunities for feedback and improvement.

2. **Format should serve purpose:** The assessment format should enable students to effectively demonstrate their progress and understanding, rather than creating unnecessary barriers.
3. **Flexibility enhances experience:** Providing flexible options for delivery reduces unnecessary stress and accommodates diverse student circumstances.
4. **Focus on feed-forward:** Assessments are most valuable when they provide actionable feedback that can be implemented.
5. **Consider the wider context:** Assessment design should consider impacts across the entire module, not just the immediate logistics of the assessment event.

"By considering the wider efficiency across the module and even the programme we see greater benefits."

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates how a thoughtful, yet minimal redesign of an assessment component can significantly enhance both the student experience and the effectiveness of the assessment. By moving from a chaotic, high-stress, mass presentation format to a flexible, focused, individual approach, the module leader was able to transform what was previously a problematic assessment into a valuable learning opportunity that directly contributes to improved final outcomes.

When designing assessment changes, it's essential to consider the entire student assessment journey throughout the module and program, rather than focusing exclusively on optimizing individual assessment components in isolation.