

## Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast

### **A Student's View on Assessment**

Hello and welcome to Episode 13 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast. My name is Ben Steel. I'll be your host for this episode. With the assessment period on the horizon, we thought we'd take this opportunity to speak to you about assessments here at Newcastle University. It's going to be a short series of a few episodes about assessments. And in this episode we're going to look primarily at the student voice. In the first section, we've got Emily and Josh talking about their experiences with assessments at university, especially that jump from A-levels into university assessments. In the second half of the episode, we hear from Liv Jansson from Liaison on Services Liv is an academic skills development manager. And hopefully this is the first event many articles that she's going to provide for the podcast over the next few months. In this first article, we look primarily at assessments, Liv talks to three students about what they wish they had known before they joined the university. And she has a bit more content from herself and Helen Webster about what the library services can do to support you as a student in your assessments at university.

So first, let's hear from Emily and Josh, just as a reminder for context. Emily is a student in zoology and Josh was a student in chemical engineering. I caught up with them recently to talk about assessments and their experiences assessments at university.

And the first thing I ask them to do is give a general overview of how they felt about assessments.

Assessments at university. They are drastically different between different courses and they also change considerably within the same course from module to module.

So I'm going to talk very generally about my experience with ChemEng and probably the median module. And that was seventy five percent of the module will be exam based. And for the most part, this will be a single exam and it'll be at the end of the first semester about January time or by the end of the second semester, which will be May. And it would be anywhere from an hour long to three hours long depending on the size of the module. And you would go in and most of them, you would have a number of questions. We wouldn't have to answer every single one. So you'd have, say, a paper that had eight questions on it and you have to answer five in each of these five questions should take you say like half an hour. And they've got multiple stages to them. So you have a read through. You decide which of these questions you prefer to answer and then you crack on with it. And you just go through it. It's those not drastically

different from A-level exams, but they don't spoon feed it to you as much as they like to throw in some curveballs, test your actual knowledge, especially towards the higher value questions. And they also ask you questions that you might not have seen before. The Adapt questions quite a bit. So they do try and make them quite different.

Whereas A Level, you could learn what the questions were going to be. And then just kind of spool them off. You can't quite do that the same. And then the other 25 percent would be coursework based.

So for me, A-levels, I did maths, physics, chemistry, economics, only physics and chemistry had any coursework and it wasn't actually a percentage of my overall market just pass fail. At uni Twenty five percent is coursework based. And this comes in many different forms. You've got group projects which you can work on. You might have presentations. You might be set a piece of work that might be too lengthy or too difficult to do an exam. So you need software to solve it or an extended period of time or a lot of research. And you might have a number of lab reports which you'd have to do. And the number of methods of assignment assessment comes goes on and on and on. And some of them will be the full 25 percent. And some of them, they'll be broken down. And I've had modules have been 100 percent assignment and I've had some there've been like 60 percent with about eight different types of assignments going on and some other stuff like posters before. So. So it's an interesting way to assess people. But it is my preferred way of being assessed. I always enjoy these assignments more than the exams. And my favourite method was the projects that they gave you, especially in groups or as an individual, because they kind of utilised and drew your skills from multiple modules to actually produce something which was quite enjoyable.

My course is zoology, so it's mostly practical. So for me, it was a lot of lab reports and then doing questions based on those lab reports that would sort of test your wider reading. So in a levels like Josh was saying, it's a lot of you read from the textbook, can you learn that? And then you regurgitate that when you go to do exam. But in uni, you can't just be relied on lecture material. You need to go out and do your own wider reading. And that's what they actually look for when you're answering questions, evidence that you have found references or further information on something that they didn't actually provide for you.

Next, I asked them how they felt leading up to their first assessment period, knowing that it is a jump from a levels and it is something new. But how did they feel after actually going through that process and was as bad as they actually thought?

I just sort of made sure that I did my reading and I did all I could, and when it got two days before the actual exam, I just said to myself, look, I've done all I can. So how I do is how I do? And that's all you can do. And then you do it. And afterwards you sort of have a sigh of relief because it's never as

bad as you think. And it's like there's always those first few questions that are hard that will haunt you for the next couple weeks. But after that, it's done anyway. And then you get your grade back and that's it.

I think first I might cover a little bit of assignments and my first assignments was very early on in first year. So this is about two weeks and we were given it. But they had a really good way of transitioning it, which was that I gave you a pass fail assignment. So it didn't count towards your Mark, for the year at all. And they made it a group one. So they put you in a group of six. And for this module and another module, you'd stay in this group of six or the whole first year. So it was a good way to get to know the people that you will be working with. And the knowledge that it was pass fail was quite nice because you didn't you just worried about getting it done rather than how good it's going to be, especially if you first one. So they put us into a group of six and they set us some questions, which was nothing like the stuff we were doing in lectures because the whole point of this assignment was to get used to all the other assignments where sometimes a lot of stuff you'll do is related to previous lectures and stuff like that. But it does tend to be a lot of independent research. And they were generous with the time with the assignment and rather than what they do later on in uni, which is just leave you to do in your free time. They actually designated some slots to do it as well. So it was a nice transition to bring you into doing something completely new. And that helps later down the line doing other assignments.

Exams are a different beast. They feel completely different to assignments. You know, exactly when the in because the exam week doesn't change each year. And depending on the module, sometimes they'll have given you legacy papers, sometimes they'll have given you a mock paper. But my initial step to learn for exams was to go for the lecture material again, especially if you do end of year exams as opposed to semester one exams. Sometimes you might not covered that sort of subject for about six months if you might have been refreshed him up in the first week of lectures. So I always go back over all the old lectures to try to understand what's going on, to refresh my memory. And then I then go into tutorials. So within engineering we have these things called tutorials and they give you a tutorial sheet, which is kind of a list of questions. And some of them are just questions to test your knowledge. And some of them are set up to be similar to exam questions and they'll have tutorials sheets set out in sections related to different sections of the module. So you can work through these the five tutorial questions from week one and go through and through. And you might have done these tutorial sheets throughout the year. You might not have, but they are really valuable to go over because they are probably one of your best resources to getting through your exam because your lecturers will actually give you the answers to those eventually. And they are sometimes set out like exam questions. And then depending on whether you do have papers or

whether you have papers and questions or not. Sometimes you'll work with your friends to try and find the answers and then compare to check that you've actually got it right because of the validation I feel is really important. Some people less so, so you don't want to do a question wrong and not realise it. So you do have to work together. All you have to actually speak to your lecture about the question. I don't understand how it can help me through it. And they do. They just don't always make the information available to you straight away because this is some of the stuff to try and test you on. And so it's extremely different to a level on how they how you can prepare for it.

But as I said earlier, when you're actually in the exam, it's a similar feel. They do test more expansive knowledge that they might have taught you, might not taught you, and they might ask it in a different way than you might expect. You have to adapt to that. But it does feel kind of similar to an A-level exam. What you do quite often have to select what questions have to do. You have to be a bit smarter about how you answer to get the highest marks.

One of the big things with assessment and exam periods, etc. is what support you can get. So supported Emily and Josh lean on in that lead to assessments and throughout.

When you're in first year, you should do everything you can to make sure you're prepared because obviously, like Josh was saying, it's something that, you know, at least to before. So revising with friends and sort of bouncing ideas off each other is very helpful. When somebody doesn't understand a concept and you actually teach them that concept, it helps you like it helps ingrain that into your memory. So that's a great way of doing it. Reaching out to lecturers and asking for wider reading material is very helpful because usually they'll already have that saved and then it will be relevant to the exam that you're going to be doing. Obviously you get your course textbook and buy it. Don't just go to the library have your own copy. You can make notes in there as well.

At GCSE bite-size. At a level. You've got an excel or an AQA textbook. At university you don't have resources quite like the that. You can't go to an exam board and see what they've set out because university is your exam board and quite a lot of the time these subjects are kind of niche anyway and you might be assessed very differently to a different university if it's a different lecturer and you might be told different stuff.

So Google is not a resource which is as helpful as you might imagine because it is niche work. You're not getting up to the oppressions of education and there isn't millions of year 9 students doing GCSE maths. For there to be resources out there. So you have to find them in different ways. And the three biggest resources that I've had at uni have been my lecturers, my friends within my year group and people who are in the years above. So your lecturer's obviously teach you your actual content,

they give you tutorial sheets, if there are legacy exam papers, they'll help you out. If you do encounter any issues, they'll always try and catch you up to speed or explain a particular section. But. You, the lecturer, is one person and you might be in a tutorial session with maybe a couple of p\_h\_d\_ students that might help you. The best way for you to learn is, as Emily said, asking your friends on your course. And it's also the best way to learn for yourself when you're teaching it to one of your friends. So everyone has areas that are better off than others. So I might understand something about safety and designing a pressure valve, whereas someone else might be much better at reactive engineering. And I'm looking at this differential equation with me mind exploding until James explains it to me and he might be struggling to size this pressure relief valve into I take him through the process. So explaining it to the people around you is extremely useful.

So thank you Emily and Josh, that was a great insight into your experiences and assessments here. The next part of this episode we'll hear from Liv. Liv put together this section for us. And in it, you hear a quick introduction from Liv, followed by some student voice with James, Zoe and Vicky. We'll then here a bit more from Liv about the writing process for assignments. And finally, we'll hear from Helen Webster, who talks about exam techniques. So over to you Liv?

Welcome to the short slot brought to you by the Academic Skills Team based in the University Library. Today, we want to talk to you about assessments and we're going to have a chat about written assessments such as reports and coursework, as well as thinking about more exam based assessments. First of all, we ask some of the university's outreach ambassadors, but their tips with regards to assignment tasks.

Hi. I think that the best bit of academic advice I could have been given sort of in the lead up to task assignments would have been that sometimes it just takes a little bit of time. So sometimes you sort of sit down you and start writing immediately. But it takes a while for the brain to sort of take over a little bit and it takes a while for ideas to build up. And as a result, you can kind of feel like you're doing nothing or you're not really getting work done. I'm not being productive, which can actually feel quite negative and can be a bit stressful. And then eventually all of a sudden, you're suddenly break down some barrier and then everything will be starting to come really, really quickly. So be all these ideas. And that's when ideas will really start to flow. And I think the main issue for me was that I wouldn't I'd be nervous before that point. I'd feel like I wasn't getting much done. Actually, the thinking say that actually a really valid point and it's a really important but it's not something to fear.

Say something. I wish that I'd learnt about assignments before I started at Newcastle University, was about this referencing system called Zotero, I

discovered it finally in my third year, and it would have made my life so much easier if I had actually known about it before. So it's basically a referencing system where you put in each reference and at the end of your essay you just pass paste and your whole bibliography is done for you. And this would've made my life a lot easier because it was very daunting coming to university and learning about referencing for the first time. And you get the hang of it really quickly. But with something like zotero. That would have helped me a lot.

So something that I wish that I had been told when I came to university about assignments is to always actually read the module guide. So at the end of it, quite often is all the details you need to know about your assignments and the questions. And I didn't really read them until like two weeks before the assignment day. But I think it's really good when you start a module that you like, start thinking about the question that you want to answer so you can start getting all the research you need to discover on it. And it's not all a big stress at the end of it.

So some really useful advice there. I also wanted to share some tips about approaching a piece of written work. So I want to talk about the writing process. If you're feeling a bit overwhelmed with how to begin a piece of assessed written work, it's worthwhile thinking about writing as a process as opposed to a final product. Thinking about it in this way means that you break the task down into smaller, manageable chunks. But you can also review, reflect and edit your work as you go along, which will help you meet the marking criteria.

It is important to remember that although we do call it a process, you are likely to move back and forward between stages reviewing, evaluating, revising and editing as you go along. The first stage in the process is planning and this includes looking over the marking scheme as well as the questions. This will give you a clear idea of what the marker is looking for. So you can then begin generating ideas and that will help you begin the research process. After the planning stage, you'll move on to the composition of the assignment. Here, you'll use rough plan as a guide. You'll begin formatting ideas and incorporating references to support your points. You'll think about how to structure the composition of each paragraph and then add the appropriate references. Remember, it is really important to integrate sources when you're writing, not just simply summarise one text pre idea. And then you'll go over what you've written and review it. You should evaluate what you've written. Thinking about the evidence you've found and your argument throughout the essay. And as you look through your work, you're likely to revise an edge of what you've got. And this process will continue until you've completed your assignment. This process is likely to occur in several cycles and eventually you'll have a completed draft. At this stage it's worth ensuring that you read the whole piece of work to ensure flow throughout. You can also check for any language, structural referencing style or grammar issues.

If possible, take a break from the writing so that when you do your final checks, you're looking at your work with fresh eyes and therefore will be more likely to spot any potential errors.

Now we're going to chat to Helen from the WDC about exams, and she's got some really useful advice about tackling these.

So we see students quite regularly in the writing development centre for advice and guidance on exams and revision. And one of the issues that students often bring to us is a sense of overwhelm that they feel a bit swamped by all of the material that they feel they have to learn from the lectures and the reading for their exam. And they don't know where to start. They don't know what to leave out in case something happens to be in the exam. So the guidance that we give is actually around assessment. Literacy is helping students to understand a bit better what exams test and how that's different to coursework so they can be a bit more selective in what they choose to learn to revise. So we use the metaphor of cooking, actually. We teach them about how a piece of coursework is more like a dinner party where you know in advance what the occasion is going to be. You can choose the menu. You can find a suitable recipe. You can spend time finding exactly the right ingredients for that meal. You probably won't use them again because they were very specifically chosen for that one thing that you probably don't cook very often, but that an exam is much more like your friend turning up at your door out of the blue and they're hungry and you want to feed them. So your job is to keep a well-stocked store cupboard with the basics, with the tins of tomatoes, the pasta, the rice, and a range of spices and other ingredients that you could throw in there to give you options to keep it flexible so that if they turn out to be vegetarian or they tend not to be allergic to something, then you can be quite flexible in what you can offer them. The other thing that we suggest that they do is actually think like the examiner, if you were setting this exam. What questions would you set? How would you phrase them to test that level of knowledge? And students find it really helpful to kind of demystify it and put themselves in the lecturer's shoes. And they start to realise that it's less about ticking off certain bits of knowledge necessarily as problem-solving under pressure and using the resources that you have. The other thing that we talk to students about is evidence based guidance on learning, because I think learning is often quite counterintuitive what work. Students find that they are reading and rereading material and it feels like it's working because it feels easy and they feel that they recognise it.

It's familiar, but actually it's not going in. So we talk to them about things like desirable difficulty, about things like pre-testing, so that you're testing yourself right at the beginning, partly to find out what you need to learn, but also because that is in fact part of learning that actually testing yourself primes your brain to retain that knowledge later on and makes it more memorable, gives it a purpose. So pre-testing is another of the really

effective strategies that we use. Distributed practice is another one leaving, increasing gaps to give your brain time to forget in between learning things so that you can actually learn it more effectively. That way it feels like hard work, but actually it's much more effective than just rereading or learning it once and then hoping that you've retained it.

Overall, there are lots of strategies you can use for both written assignments and exams. We've got lots more information about this topic and many other academic skills, the academic skills kit. As well as this, you can book a short 20 minutes drop in slot with the academic skill team. If you've got any quick questions about exam revision writing or even time management or a longer 50 minute slot with the WBC, if you'd like to more in-depth discussion. For all our details, go to the library page and book a slot.

Thank you very much Liv. We hope to hear from you more about the services that you can provide and we'll look at different aspects of your role over the next few episodes. So thank you again to Emily and Josh Liv. James Zoe, Vicki and Helen, for your input into this episode.

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Thank You for listening. Remember to tell anyone who you think might be interested in this. Get the word out past the pod on like subscribe, download and like I always tell your friends. Thank you again.

We'll see you in two weeks time. Bye Bye