

Exploring self-assessments in university undergraduate students: how accurate are they?

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Abstract

Self-assessment, whereby students are actively engaged in assessing the quality of their work, has been shown to benefit them. It is not routinely carried out in all institutions. This pilot study aimed to explore the extent to which students chose to engage with self-assessment when invited to do so, and how accurate they were when they did. A short pilot tool including qualitative and quantitative elements, was circulated to students within a school of the largest faculty of Kingston University. Students completed the self-assessment and submitted it with their completed assignments. Actual grades achieved were compared with self-assessments. Qualitative data were analysed using basic thematic analysis. The highest average marks achieved were in the group who correctly self-assessed their work. More students incorrectly self-assessed than correctly assessed their work, and almost a third of students did not engage with the activity. Those who incorrectly over-assessed their work had average marks similar to those that did not engage with the activity, significantly lower than the average marks achieved by the incorrect under-assessors and the correct self-assessment groups. Correct self-assessing students were more specific about the skills they demonstrated and the support they used for their assignments.

Introduction

Self-assessment, involving students in making judgements about the quality of their work, is recognised as an important tool which can be used to support student learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Taras, 2010; Wride, 2017), and an important skill for their future professional development. Self-assessment involves students as active participants in their own learning, which enhances student engagement (Sadler, 2010). It has been shown to improve student performance in their final examinations (McDonald & Boud, 2003). Perhaps more importantly, it contributes towards the development of self-regulation (Pintrich, 1995), and in the sense that graduate attributes require students to be autonomous learners, it can be considered to underpin the development of graduate attribute skills (Nicol, 2010).

A major function of feedback to students is enabling them to do things differently next time, by acting upon feedback given to them (Draper, 2009; Wiliam, 2011). A common complaint by academic staff is that students focus on the marks they are given rather than the feedback itself (Orsmond et al, 2005), while for a variety of reasons students may not understand how to respond to feedback (Weaver, 2006; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Draper, 2009). This may be intensely frustrating for both staff and students. Feedback is often viewed as a one-way activity whereby students passively accept the

feedback given to them (Yorke, 2003; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Sadler, 2010), placing a major burden upon already stretched academic staff. Integrating self-assessment into assignment tasks may help students' bridge the gap between feedback given and understanding what they need to change, and simultaneously help students develop more autonomy in their learning, lessening the burden on academic staff. Active engagement of students in their own learning is now widely accepted and encouraged within the pedagogic literature (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Lea et al, 2003; Evans, 2013). Nonetheless, however potentially useful it may be, self-assessment is not currently routinely carried out within many courses. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the extent to which students engaged in self-assessment of their work, and when they did so, the extent to which they were accurate in their self-assessment.

Methods

Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Kingston University.

Self-assessment tool

A short self-assessment tool was developed and used in this pilot study (see Appendix 1). The tool required students to tick the box corresponding to the grade they thought their summative work should receive. Qualitative data were collected using a text box, allowing students to explain why they thought their work should be awarded the grade.

Staff within the Applied & Health Sciences School in the Science, Engineering & Computing Faculty of Kingston University were sent an electronic copy of the pilot tool and asked to distribute it to their students for every assignment they completed. Typically assignments were completed and submitted online; students copied and pasted the completed self-assessment tool at the end of their work. No personal details were required from students since their unique university number was available through the online submission. Using this, student relevant personal data (age, gender, ethnicity) and course-specific information (year and course of study, type of assignment and whether

students had completed a foundation year or not) were obtained.

At the end of the academic year, self-assessment grades and actual marks were compiled along with qualitative comments, personal and course-specific information. Data were coded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Personal data were collated using descriptive statistics.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS (IBM Analytics). Data were coded into one of four categories: non submission, correct, incorrect over-estimations and incorrect under-estimations. Actual marks achieved were tested for normality using Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilks tests; both were $p < 0.001$. Actual marks were log transformed and one way ANOVA carried out to explore differences in marks by personal and course-specific factors. Where $p < 0.05$, posthoc Tukey's analysis was carried out. In addition, data were cross tabulated to explore possible effects of age, gender, ethnicity, year of study, course of study, foundation year taken and type of assignment on likelihood of correct self-assessment. Pearson's chi-square test was used, and where $p < 0.05$, standard residuals were tested for statistical significance.

Possible differences between incorrect over- and under-assessors by personal or study characteristics were explored using chi-square tests, at a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative comments were collated in an Excel spreadsheet, separated into three categories (correct, incorrect over-estimators and incorrect under-estimators) and coded into specific themes using basic thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to collate them.

Results

Participants

A total of 323 participants took part, of whom 62% were final year students, and 81% were BSc Nutrition students. Three times as many females as males participated, and the majority of participants were aged between 18-25 years of age. Participants were ethnically diverse, with more than half described as Black, Asian,

Gender	Number (%)	Ethnicity	Number (%)
Female	238 (74)	White	151 (47)
Male	85 (26)	Black	30 (9)
Age (years)	Number (%)	Asian	86 (27)
18-21	133 (41)	Mixed	37 (11.5)
22-25	135 (42)	Other	14 (4)
26-29	24 (7)	Not stated	5 (1.5)
≥30	31 (10)		

Table 1 Characteristics of study population ($n = 323$) by age, gender & ethnicity.

Year of study	Number (%)	Foundation route taken	Number (%)
1 st year	64 (20)	Yes	139 (43)
2 nd year	59 (18)	No	180 (56)
3 rd year	200 (62)	Unclear	4 (1)
Course of study	Number (%)	Type of assignment	Number (%)
Nutrition, Exercise & Health (ENH)	110 (34)	Essay	61 (19)
Human Nutrition	151 (47)	Test	18 (6)
Human Biology	4 (1)	Practical	112 (35)
Exchange students	8 (2.5)	Portfolio	132 (41)
Forensic Science	18 (5.6)		
Chemistry	28 (9)		
Course unknown	4 (1)		

Table 2 Characteristics of study population ($n = 323$) by year & course of study, whether a foundation year was undertaken and type of assignment.

mixed or other. Just under half had undertaken a foundation year. Personal characteristics of the participants are shown in table 1, and study characteristics are shown in table 2.

Self-assessment categories & comparison with actual marks achieved

Of 323 participants, 31% chose not to complete the self-assessments. More students self-assessed incorrectly than correctly (43% compared with 26% respectively). Comparing self-assessment categories with average actual marks achieved, the highest average marks were in the correct self-assessment group, and the lowest in the non-submission group (table 3). One way ANOVA of log transformed data showed a significant difference between the three groups ($F(2,319) = 19.315$, $p = 0.000$, as shown below.)

Within the non-submission group, one way Anova tests on log transformed data showed that there were no significant differences in

marks achieved by any of the personal or study characteristics explored.

Within the correct group, there were no significant differences in marks achieved by age, gender, ethnicity, year or course of study and whether or not a foundation year was taken. However significant differences by type of assignment were seen ($F(3,80) = 8.659$, $p = 0.000$). Posthoc analysis by Tukey's test showed that the marks achieved for the essay and the portfolio were significantly higher than those for the practical ($p = 0.003$ and $p = 0.000$ respectively).

Exploring the incorrect self-assessors

Further analysis of those who incorrectly self-assessed their work showed that more students incorrectly over- than under-assessed their work. Average marks achieved by students who incorrectly over-assessed their work were similar to those who did not complete the self-assessment at all. Average

Group	Number (%)	Average grade (mean % ± SD)
Correct	84 (26.0)	72.5±11.5 ^{a,b}
Incorrect	139 (43.0)	62.3±17.5 ^{a,c}
Not completed	100 (31.0)	55.2±20.0 ^{b,c}
Totals	323 (100)	62.8±18.2

Table 3 Actual marks achieved by self-assessment category (correctly self-assessed, incorrectly self-assessed or did not complete self-assessment). ^aCorrect vs incorrect; Tukey's posthoc, $p=0.000$; ^bCorrect vs not completed; Tukey's posthoc, $p=0.000$; ^cIncorrect vs not completed; Tukey's posthoc $p=0.008$

Group	Number (%)	Average grade (mean % ± SD)
Correct	84 (26.0)	72.5±11.5 ^{a,b}
Incorrect <u>overestimations</u>	78 (24.1)	51.0±13.1 ^{a,c}
Incorrect <u>underestimations</u>	61 (18.0)	76.9±9.9 ^{c,d}
Not completed	100 (31.0)	55.2±20.0 ^{b,d}
Totals	323 (100)	62.8±18.2

Table 4 Average marks achieved by students who correctly self-assessed, did not self-assess and both groups of incorrect self-assessment. One way ANOVA of log transformed data showed significant differences between the groups ($F(3,318) = 36.806$, $p = 0.000$). ^aCorrect versus overestimations; Tukey's posthoc, $p = 0.000$; ^bCorrect versus no response; Tukey's posthoc, $p = 0.000$; ^cOverestimations versus underestimations; Tukey's posthoc, $p = 0.000$; ^dNo response versus underestimations; Tukey's posthoc, $p = 0.000$.

marks for those who incorrectly under-assessed their work were similar to those who correctly self-assessed; both achieved significantly higher average marks than those who incorrectly over-assessed or who did not self-assess (table 4).

One way ANOVA on log transformed data was used to explore if marks differed by personal or study characteristics. Within the incorrect under-estimators, those who had not taken a foundation year had significantly higher marks than those who did ($F(1,59) = 4.831$, $p = 0.032$). Within the incorrect over-estimators, there were significant differences by course of study ($F(5,72) = 3.154$, $p = 0.012$). Posthoc analysis using Tukey's test showed that marks for ENH and Human Nutrition students were significantly higher than from those of exchange students ($p = 0.008$ and $p = 0.003$ respectively).

There were no significant differences in marks achieved by age, gender, ethnicity, year or course of study or type of assignment in either category.

Comparing the correct self-assessors, incorrect over-assessors, incorrect under-assessors and no-submissions groups, using two way ANOVA on log transformed marks differences by type of assignment were seen ($F(3) = 2.726$, $p = 0.044$). Posthoc Tukey's test showed that marks for the practical were significantly lower across the four groups compared with marks for the test ($p = 0.001$) and the essay ($p = 0.000$). No significant differences were seen by gender, age, ethnicity, level or course of study, or whether or not a foundation year was undertaken.

There were no significant differences between numbers incorrectly over- and under-assessing their work by gender ($p = 0.31$),

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Examples</i>	Correct (84 comments; 288 theme mentions)	over (69 comments; 222 theme mentions)	under (58 comments; 190 theme mentions)
Skills	Referencing; addressed question; writing skills; time management; specific; relevant; used evidence; added detail	116 (40)	40 (18)	50 (26)
Resources	Assignment guidance; feedback/forward; lectures; statistics; support; practicals; resources	69 (24)	48 (22)	27 (14)
Preparation*	Research; revision; did my best	49 (17)	50 (23)	24 (13)
The work	Word limit; calculations	19 (7)	25 (11)	9 (5)
Emotions	Enjoyment; confusion; unsure; hopeful; struggle; confident; interesting; happy; pragmatic	22 (8)	37 (17)	23 (12)
Problems	Rushed; lack of detail/flow; difficult; my ability; priorities; engagement; personal issues	3 (1)	3 (1)	32 (17)
Misc.	Not as good; experience	10 (3)	19 (9)	25 (13)
	<i>*'I did my best'</i>	14 (29)	17 (34)	18 (75)

Table 5 Themes identified from qualitative comments. Numbers of comments and themes identified within correct, incorrect under-assessor and incorrect over-assessed groups.

ethnicity ($p = 0.05$) or year of study ($p = 0.83$). However significantly more students over-assessed than under-assessed practical assignments ($p = 0.03$) and those who had not taken a foundation year were significantly more likely to over-assess than under-assess their work ($p = 0.03$).

3.4 Qualitative data

A total of 211 comments were made and six major themes were identified. Theme categories are shown in table 5, along with examples within each category.

Those who correctly self-assessed their work made more comments than either of the incorrect self-assessor groups (table 5). Their comments were more specific, particularly in terms of the specific skills identified (e.g.

referencing, writing skills) and resources used (e.g. assessment guidance, use of feedback & feedforward sessions). By contrast, those in the incorrect groups mentioned emotions more frequently and incorrect under-assessors highlighted problems more than any other group. The subjective statement 'I did my best' (classified under the 'Preparation' theme), was mentioned by all groups, but more frequently by both incorrect self-assessor groups compared with those who correctly self-assessed their work.

Discussion

Overall, within this small pilot study, students were more likely to incorrectly assess their work than to correctly assess it. Those who could correctly self-assess their work achieved

significantly higher marks on average than those who could not, or who chose not to attempt self-assessment. This may not be surprising, since students who achieve high marks are also likely to be those who understand what they need to do to achieve high marks. The qualitative data suggests that correct self-assessors were aware of the specific skills they had demonstrated through their work, and able to identify specific support they had used in the assignment. Their mention of the use of feedback and feedforward sessions in relation to that and previous assignments suggests that this group were already well able to self-regulate their work and their learning. It is suggested that all students are already actively engaged in self-assessment to some extent (Sadler, 1989; Andrade & Boulay, 2003; Andrade & Du, 2005; Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2005; Andrade et al, 2008) but that some are more able in this regard than others (Butler & Winne, 1995). Part of the role of feedback is to support students in further developing their ability to self-regulate including self-assessment (Boud, 2000; Yorke, 2003; Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2005). This is a key skill since most learning in higher education happens outside the classroom, so self-regulation is an important determinant of academic attainment (Draper, 2009). In addition self-assessment has been shown to contribute to self-efficacy (Schunk 1983, 1996; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999); the belief that one is able to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1999). Student self-efficacy mediates several aspects of student performance (Schunk & Pajares, 2001; van Dinther et al, 2011).

Approximately one third of students invited to participate in self-assessment in this pilot chose not to do so. There may be a number of reasons for this. They may have been unclear how to attempt to self-assess their work, or not engaged enough to do so, given that there were neither rewards nor penalties attached to the pilot. It is also possible that since this is not usual practice, they may have intended to participate but forgotten to do so. It is unknown to what extent different members of staff encouraged students to engage with this pilot. However it is striking that those who chose not to attempt self-assessment achieved significantly lower marks than either of the

groups that did, regardless of whether they were correct or not in their self-assessment. It suggests that students who did not attempt self-assessment were less able to meet the learning outcomes for the specific assignments, for whatever reason. Working with students to engage them with self-assessment may help them to clarify what they need to do for assignments, to meet the learning outcomes. Facilitating self-assessment is suggested to help students develop self-regulation in their learning (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2005). In order for students to improve their work they must understand what good work is, how their current work relates to good work, and how to close the gap between the two (Sadler, 1989). The latter two points require that students have some of the necessary evaluative skills (Sadler, 1989). Good practice in feedback suggests that students are given opportunities to develop these skills through engaging in regulation of their work and reflecting upon their progression towards learning goals (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2005). Effective self-assessment involves clearly articulated task expectations, active student self-assessment and use of feedback to guide revision (Andrade et al, 2008; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009).

Within the incorrect self-assessment group, two distinct phenomenon were identified. Students were more likely to incorrectly over-assess than under-assess their work, and those who incorrectly over-assessed their work achieved average marks which were significantly lower than the correct or incorrect under-assessment groups. Average marks for those who over-assessed their work were not significantly different from marks of those who did not engage with self-assessment at all; yet this is a group who chose to engage with the activity. Clearly they are motivated to engage but they are unclear about how their work relates to the learning outcomes. Qualitative data showed that they were less specific in identifying the skills and resources used to complete the work, and more likely to use non-specific and highly subjective terms such as 'I did my best'. Nonetheless this is a priority group to identify and work with, since they are currently engaged but may not remain so if they continue to receive work with lower marks than they expected or hoped for.

This work suggests that there are distinct groups within the student body, some of whom are already able to self-assess their work accurately, others who are less able to and a third group who chose not to. The pilot did not identify specific personal or study characteristics which could identify which students are most likely to fall into each category. However the work suggests that self-assessment is a useful tool to help identify students' expectations; if there is a gap between what students achieve and what they expect to achieve this will not necessarily be apparent to staff unless students articulate it. If students complete routine self-assessment however, they can be identified and worked with, to ensure that they are clear about the strengths and weaknesses of their work.

Some students appeared to be less able to self-assess accurately than others, in particular exchange students. These are typically students from other countries who attend the university for a semester or an academic year. These differences may reflect cultural differences between expectations, assignment guidance, marking criteria and standards between different countries and institutions. In addition these students are effectively in transition throughout their time on placement. Overt discussions about task expectations and clear identification of what constitutes good work (Sadler, 1989), is likely to be particularly beneficial for this group.

Practical assignment marks were significantly lower than those for other tasks, and students who incorrectly over-assess their marks were more likely to do so for the practical write-ups than other tasks. This suggests that there may be a gap between what they think is required and what actually is. Similarly to exchange students, clearly articulated expectations and exposure to examples of good and less good work may help students understand what is needed.

This pilot study was limited in scope and students were not given support with self-assessment, nor detailed instructions on how to complete the self-assessment tool. Nonetheless, these results suggest that continued use of self-assessment is warranted. The literature also supports this (Schunk 1983,

1996; Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2005). Future use of the tool will be supported within assignment tutorials, helping students relate the learning outcomes required within the assignment, to the self-assessment tool and encouraging them to be specific in their feedback. It should be noted that self-assessment may be seen as wholly formative in scope, allowing students to reflect on the quality of their work, assess the extent to which it meets assessment criteria and revise it in line with this (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). Using that definition, this self-assessment activity could more accurately be described as self-evaluation, an approach in which students grade their work. However ideally self-assessment is part of an iterative process whereby students reflect upon their work as it develops, revising it as they go along. Students in this pilot were not asked whether they had evaluated their work as they went along, but to indicate the grade they thought the finished product should be awarded and why. Future work is intended to align more with the formative definition, so that students are encouraged to actively reflect upon their work throughout the time that they are doing it, and supported in doing so by dialogues with academic staff.

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Exploring self-assessments in university undergraduate students: how accurate are they?

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Appendix 1

Pilot self-assessment tool

Before submitting your work, please complete the following questions.

Looking at the assessment criteria and considering the work you are submitting, how would you rate it? Please tick ONE option.

I think my work for this assignment is:	$\geq 70\%$	60-69%	50-59%	40-49%	$\leq 39\%$
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Please explain your answer.