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# Assessing assignments on interdisciplinary modules: an institutional study

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# 1-year project

- Study funded by the University of Birmingham
- Project team: Abigail Bellamy-Carter, Adam Matthews, Tim Jackson, and Simon Scott
- Object: to understand how students are assessed on inter- and transdisciplinary modules



# Method

- We used module titles (on the university's Module Catalogue)
- Checked module descriptions and crosschecked them with module webpages (where possible)
- Created a survey
- Contacted module leads directly
- Held one-hour focus groups



# The research process (vs. final essay)

- Most modules use an essay assignment
- A few have only a single assignment at the end of a module
- What are the transferable skills on an interdisciplinary module?
- The need to assess the process as well as the result
- Key aspects of the process typically assessed are:
  - Communication skills
  - Reflection
  - Critical reflection of disciplines.

# Disciplines

- The identity of students (e.g. as musicians, as engineers).  
But not as interdisciplinarians
- Interdisciplinarity is often used to make students more reflective within their own discipline
- But interdisciplinary modules require an adequate understanding of multiple disciplines
- A common assessment used is critically reflecting on a student's home discipline
- Students have expressed scepticism about other disciplines

# Marking criteria

- The need for clarity: to explain to students how interdisciplinarity is being defined and why it is being used
- If these are not reflected in the marking criteria, is the assessed work separate from interdisciplinarity?
- Typically, integration is not accounted for in the marking criteria

# Marking criteria: interdisciplinary literature review

4 categories of assessment:

1. Content
2. Interdisciplinarity
3. Organisation
4. Writing style and referencing

Interdisciplinary category (highest class):

“The disciplinary perspectives are clearly defined and an excellent rationale is provided for the approach used. Literature is analysed and evaluated to form an integrative understanding of the topic.”

# Marking criteria: interdisciplinary essay

4 categories of assessment:

1. Disciplinary grounding
2. Integration
3. Critical awareness
4. Professionalism

Integration category (highest class):

“Has created an exceptional hybrid form that leads to a deeper understanding of the topic. Uses an appropriate balance of perspectives and integrates them coherently. Opportunities to advance the argument are not overlooked.”



# Determining the quality of interdisciplinary writing

## Veronica Boix-Mansilla:

“when probed to address the substance of their assessment – that is, the actual markers or characteristics of a good piece of interdisciplinary work – they expressed concern. Their shift to metaphoric language – “when the whole is more than the sum of its parts” or “when it all clicks together,” for example – revealed their lack of a conceptual language to describe core qualities of sound interdisciplinary work.” (p.18)

Mansilla, V.B., 2005. Assessing student work at disciplinary crossroads. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 37(1), pp.14-21.

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## Two further challenges

- How can we achieve consistency and fairness across a cohort?
- The 'switch-cost'

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