



Assessing Assessment at The University of Bolton

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Abstract

An analysis of the types of assessment within the University as recorded on the validated module database against the highest weighting level revealed a wide variety of imaginative approaches to measuring student engagement reflecting the commitment and professionalism of staff in providing an educational context that is varied and meaningful. Whilst acknowledging this strength, it is argued that further flexibility is required to more exactly measure the abilities of a diverse student body both in assessment timing and form, the emphasis presently being very much upon tutor-led modes with insufficient attention given to recognising the potential of students to contribute to the assessment process. Assessment is an integral part of the learning and teaching experience and by creating a more fluid approach it is suggested that it is possible without compromising academic rigour to more exactly celebrate and recognise achievement which will further enhance retention and HEFCE funding. It is also suggested we over assess by occasionally repeating the measurement of learning outcomes and more diagnostic initial assessment to help understand developmental needs should be applied.

Keywords; initial, diagnostic, formative, summative assessment; timing, retention, measurement.

Introduction.

Every facet of our lives is shaped by our ability to assess. In every waking moment we make decisions based up measurements informed by experience (you are assessing this text as you read it). This paper explores how the University of Bolton organises, delivers, and categorises assessment as a measure of student attainment and invites debate as to its effectiveness. The specific focus will be to examine whether refining the models of assessment can more effectively celebrate student achievement and enhance retention without compromising academic rigour and standards.

Defining educational assessment

In very general terms, assessment falls into the three broad bands of initial (at the start of learning), formative (during learning) and summative (at the end of a section of learning). Such terms only provide a very superficial context, for example, when does one define the conclusion of learning (end of module/year/degree?) and that a formative measurement might inform the level classification via summative grading. Sadler (1989, p.120) captures succinctly the difference,

“Formative assessment is concerned with how judgments about the quality of student responses (performance, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the student’s competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning.....The primary distinction between formative and summative assessment relates to purpose and effect, not to timing”

A bizarre example of the blurring of summative and formative status are HEFCE funding regulations which stipulate that if a student does not submit the last item of assessment the University loses all the funding for the student’s course that year. How we make work more effectively within this funding assessment framework is explored later but it should be noted the **last** assessment stipulation does not mean the **final** assessment.

Assessment should be viewed an integral part of the teaching and learning experience, not something ‘tacked on’ (Rust, 2001, p.1). It should also of course be reliable, in education this is how consistent a measure is in recording a level of attainment (McMillan, 2008: Heywood, 2000) and should have a high level of validity, that is it measures what it is purports to measure (Brown *et al*, 1997: Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

Tutors create the assessment criteria, albeit sometimes under the remit of a professional body, and by a variety of means measure the extent the criteria have been achieved and tutors record

the assessment. In this study I found minimal evidence of tutors asking students how best they would like to be assessed. Assessment therefore would appear to be a tutor-led activity but there is much research highlighting how integral and important it is to students who crave if not ownership but at least a full understanding and it is not a new phenomenon. Snyder (1971) and Miller and Parlett (1974) found that what influenced students the most was not the teaching, but the assessment. They wanted to gauge how best they could be graded as successful and this was at least as important as the educational experience. Some of these student quotes from Snyder's study are extremely revealing:

From the beginning I found the whole thing to be a kind of exercise in time budgeting.... You had to filter out what was really important in each course ... you couldn't physically do it all. I found out that if you did a good job of filtering out what was important you could do well enough to do well in every course. (p.62-63)

I just don't bother doing the homework now. I approach the courses so I can get an 'A' in the easiest manner, and its amazing how little work you have to do if you really don't like the course. (p.50).

Miller and Parlett discovered similar traits:

I am positive there is an examination game. You don't learn certain facts, for instance, you don't take the whole course, you go and look at the examination papers and you say 'looks as though there have been four questions on a certain theme this year, last year the professor said that the examination would be much the same as before', so you excise a good bit of the course immediately (p.60)

The student quote from Gibbs (1992) below highlights the conundrum of the purpose of assessment and how its purpose can be circumvented:

"If you are under a lot of pressure then you will just concentrate on passing the

course. I know that from bitter experience. One subject I wasn't very good at I tried to understand the subject and I failed the exam. When I re-took the exam I just concentrated on passing the exam. I got 96% and the guy couldn't understand why I failed the first time. I told him this time I just concentrated on passing the exam rather than understanding the subject. I still don't understand the subject so it defeated the object, in a way.” (p101)

Rowntree's (1987, p.1) comment that, “if we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures” is revealing but perhaps unsurprising. What I did find surprising when talking to colleagues about assessment was that a small minority felt that in part first year assessment was useful to filter out the ‘weaker’ students which at best is errant nonsense as illustrated by Thomas (2000, p.434) who in a study of a university succeeding in retaining students whilst widening participation notes a key point, the relationship between assessment and student performance is guided by staff attitudes:

“A central aspect of the academic experience of students relates to assessment. In one focus group for example, the students thought it was difficult to fail as long as you put the work in. This can be attributed to the fact that the staff are supportive and work through academic difficulties with students: ‘I don't know many people who have failed. It isn't hard as long as you put the work in’. This statement suggests that success is seen to be within the grasp of all students (as long as they put the work in), and that cultural capital (such as language, style and other symbols) does not dominate the assessment process.”

Assessment clearly then is more than selecting out those with the greatest developmental need. The key perhaps to its intrinsic purpose relates to the earlier point, does assessment measure what it is intended to do and significantly is there a relationship between students' learning styles, staff teaching approaches and the recording (the assessment) of the whole process? Studies by Säljö, (1975) and Marton and Säljö, (1997) suggest there is a positive correlation in successful attainment of learning outcomes when the assessment mirrors the learning styles adopted by students. Ramsden (1997) found that surface learning can result from inappropriate assessment types, the intended learning not being sufficiently addressed by the assessment requirements. The midway point in the conundrum is ensuring the learning activities and module learning outcomes closely align with the tasks and assessment methods (Joughin and Macdonald (2002). The following section begins to address some of these complex issues.

The University of Bolton assessment profile

Table 1 below provides an overview of how we assess our students. The 1743 validated modules as recorded on the University database were examined and the type of assessment recorded against the highest weighting. Where two or more assessments had an equal weighting, each was recorded separately which equates to 2139 items of assessment.

Table 1. Profile of University of Bolton validated modules. Numbers indicate frequency of occurrence as the highest assessment weighting.

ESSAY/PAPER	540	GROUP ASSIGNMENT/ROLE PLAY/PRESENTATION/PEER REVIEW/COACHING SESSION	34	INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATION INCLUDING PEER ASSESSED POSTER AND SEMINAR PAPERS	79
JOURNAL/REFLECTIVE LEARNING LOG/DIARY	91	INTERVIEW/VIVA	10	PRACTICAL OR CREATIVE PROJECT/RESEARCH OR WORK BASED ASSIGNMENT	376
PERSONAL PROGRESS REPORT/PLAN/RECORDED BOOK	44	SCRIPT/OUTLINE/PLAY/SHORT STORY/POEMS/REWRITE TEXT/FILM/VIDEO/BOOK REVIEW/SOUND TRACK ANALYSIS/REHEARSAL/LISTENING TEST	30	RESEARCH PROJECT OR DISSERTATION PROPOSAL OR PLAN/ COST INFORMATION	25
DATA ANALYSIS	10	BUSINESS /MARKETING PLAN	5	EXHIBITION/POSTER PRESENTATION	16
EXAMINATION/TEST	279	CRITICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH PAPER/PRIMARY SOURCE	8	TEACHING OBSERVATION	9
CASE STUDY	100	DISSERTATION/THESIS	51	LISTENING, SPEAKING, READING AND WRITING TASKS *	33
REPORT/CRITICAL REVIEW	212	PORTFOLIO/PRACTICAL FOLDER/WORKBOOK	207		

*language courses only

Findings

- 1743 modules are listed as validated but there was no way of ascertaining how many of them were actually delivered. However, any presently not utilised are unlikely to represent a particular type of assessment which would skew the results so it is a fair assumption they do largely reflect how we as a university assess our students.

- The 10 categories can be viewed as occasionally overlapping in their interpretation but there is still an impressive and imaginative range. However, where two assessments have an equal highest weighting (50/50) the majority adopt the same format twice such as two portfolios.
- The terms Case Study and Report are occasionally used interchangeably and somewhat vaguely. Some case studies could be construed as a report and vice versa and each even possibly viewed as an essay. The recording of the frequency of the terms reflect what is listed on the module database.
- The figures represent highest weightings which suggest perhaps finality in the assessment mode. However, for a student reaching this stage might mean actually achieving several smaller assessments. Portfolio building was the strongest indicator of layered assessment, one module requiring 24 separate assessments to be completed successfully to meet all of the learning outcomes.
- It was not always absolutely clear how an assessment was to be conducted, measured and applied. When in class assessment (ICA) and class work (CW) were listed as the mode it was not always stated clearly what assessments are intended. This is not to say they had no merit but from the information it was difficult to ascertain how achievement was to be verified. This gives rise to questions of standardisation across a programme. Similarly, 'individual assignment' is occasionally listed as the intended form of assessment but this was too vague a term to arrive at a conclusion as to what is intended. This means that issues of assessment reliability possibly rest with an individual and their expertise. How would someone else deliver the module assessment given unstated criteria?
- It was not unusual for a presentation to have lower weighting than an essay even though similar aspects of learning were being assessed. This brings into question issues of validity in why assess a student more than once to similar criteria via different types of assessment?
- The module database in parts remains incomplete in that some modules had a zero weighting throughout which obviously is impossible. My understanding is that the process of updating continues.
- To become accredited as a member of a professional body sometimes requires the successful completion of a written examination. However, this form assessment can be seen as essential in many modules without the need for outside agency corroboration. Later in this paper the efficacy of such an assessment is debated.
- It was interesting to note lower weighted assessments whilst scrutinizing the module database and occasionally a Reflective Journal (a very strong measure of attainment) was weighted as a zero. In such cases it is unclear as to its purpose.

- Very revealingly, there were only four examples of negotiated assessment. This suggests assessment is prescribed for the majority of modules to an unchallengeable format. Once a module is validated to include a certain type of assessment this is what has to apply, no matter what the learning needs of the students are. Such a format implies an annual homogenous group of students which clearly is not the case. This lack of flexibility in how we sometimes approach assessment is also explored later.
- No examples of peer assessment were uncovered suggesting assessment is almost entirely tutor-led.
- There were very few examples of study skills being taught as an accredited module and recorded as a final assessment.

The findings present a complex and varied picture of how we measure student learning. Appendix 1 illustrates the student achievement profile for last year but what this doesn't show is that approximately a third of our students did not achieve an award, they were not retained. Student retention is a multi-faceted area and there are a huge range of correlated factors which shape the student experience and impact upon retention. The following illustrates just a few of the strands; an inclusive curriculum supported by networks and relationships with fellow students is seen by Crosling *et al*, (2007) as very influential whilst modes of study and entry level qualifications (National Audit office, 2007) are major determinants (e.g. a part time student studying a degree in a further education college is 6 times more likely to compete than if they attended a university). Early intervention significantly improves retention and should occur before difficulties become problematical or even insurmountable (Attwood, 2008), whilst pedagogical innovations and experimentation such as enhanced virtual learning environments (Heaton-Shrestha *et al*, 2009) might engage the student populace further. As Yorke (2003a) states, there is no magic bullet only sustained professionalism in approach. But is changing ways of assessment one such factor within this maze that could enhance the student experience and improve retention? The data collated in this report suggests the answer is a definite 'yes'. An almost guarantee of withdrawal is unsuccessful completion of study. If we create more flexible approaches to assessment, which might mean assessing less as well as introducing new modes, it is entirely feasible we could reduce failure which would improve retention whilst not compromising academic rigour. This theme is explored in more detail later.

We clearly assess in a variety of ways but perhaps not to the extent suggested by Brown and Smith (1997, p.23) that "multiple methods are necessary to assess multiple talents for multiple audiences." My study suggests we have not included a debate with students as how they would like to be assessed. Why does a module of learning have to have a prescriptive genre (type) when what we are concerned with is the evidence (content)? For example, why couldn't students have a choice between say a portfolio and an essay? We have this flexibility at doctorate level (traditional 80,000 word research study/PhD by Publication/PhD by Practice), why not at all levels? Why do we need to assess all students on a module in the same way? It would make more sense to provide choices, the same learning outcomes could be measured (insight, engagement, appreciation, theoretical perspectives etc) but in a way which reflects

students' strengths. As Segers and Dochy (2001) point out, asking students about their learning and assessment is likely to improve how lecturers organise learning and assessment. So why not negotiate assessment modes which reflect preferences?

Is it possible too that we repeat assessments and create an unnecessary workload for students? As listed as the highest assessment weighting on the module database, individual presentations including peer assessed poster and seminar papers account for only 79 entries. Looking at the content of the modules against the learning outcomes, much seminar work complements essay writing. Whilst clearly there are significant presentation skills in a seminar the chances are the essay following will cover much of the same ground. Could the seminar have as a learning outcome the inclusion of a critical commentary instead of an essay? If so, this would mean engagement could be confidently measured to learning outcomes reflecting the necessary academic requirements by one assessment instead of two. The seminar would be presented within the module, not at the end, which would remove some of the difficulties of assessment timing which is undermining retention and reducing the funding we receive in that if a student misses an end of module summative assessment exercise listed as a HEFCE last item of assessment we don't receive the final funding for all of the year's modules. Take away that final assessment and replace it with a formative model such as a seminar and the chances are the majority of students would have the chance to present and achieve; the nightmare of the final submission date and frequent ensuing panic would be removed, a continuous but more efficient process than the end of semester 'sink or swim' scenario we presently largely adopt.

Within the module database there is evidence of a small amount of peer assessment but in terms of the assessment profile it is insignificant. There is perhaps an understandable reticence in devolving assessment responsibility to students, perhaps an unintentional reflection of Freire (1972) who saw education as oppressive with the teacher manipulating control to maintain the *status quo*. Falchokov and Goldfinch (2000) found where assessment was based on well understood and formulated criteria peer assessments reflected teacher judgments. Dochy *et al* (1999) in an analysis of 63 studies concluded peer assessment was seen to encourage students to be more responsive and reflective. Race (2001, p.7) correctly notes peer assessment is a natural part of the learning process because,

“Students learn a great deal from each other, both in classes and outside classes. They naturally compare what they have achieved with each other, and use this to reflect on their own learning progress. Including student self assessment and peer-assessment in our assessment profile legitimates what students already do spontaneously, and can help them to do it much more effectively.”

There is much evidence that peer assessment produces reliable and valid outcomes, (Topping 1998; Hughes 2001) but it is not easier or some sort of kop out of responsibility because though it involves less tutor marking it necessitates very careful planning and scrutiny (Langam and Wheater, 2003). Assessment should not be something done to the students but rather done by

students (Harris and Bell, 1990). In a study of self and peer assessments, Brown and Dove, 1993, p.3) found, 'students using higher levels of reflection, developing a questioning and self analytic approach to their professional practice and engaging in deep rather than surface learning.'

There are strong arguments then for adopting some self assessment, perhaps the fear being the loss of tutor control and the possibility of lowered standards. It is a courageous act to 'let go' but this is not what the approach means. It is closely monitored, involves tutor scrutiny, with refined and specific assessment criteria reducing subjectivity and is of course moderated both internally and externally. Peer assessment by its nature would likely to be largely formative but would be part of summative assessment grading. It would in part remove the mad scramble of say 3 essays following 3 seminars in 3 modules having to be completed by the final submission date which have to be marked and tutor graded for the exam board with hurried and possibly delayed feedback. Students are engaged, active in their learning, receive prompt feedback, are able to gauge their progress and set goals, and have an opportunity to reflect *during* learning rather than at the end of a module. All it takes from us is the confidence to try it. There are so many positives that it is highly likely it would improve retention.

Assessment at entry or commencement of study

The first assessment filter at the application stage for undergraduate study is the calculation of points based upon qualifications. It is interesting to note the correlation between highest entry qualification and withdrawal from study suggesting certain awards are problematical as revealed in Table 2 below for 2008/09:

Table 2. Numbers withdrawn cross-referenced to highest entry qualification.

Qualification Description	No.	% of total	Qualification Description	No.	% of total
Higher degree of UK HEI	62	3.5%	Foundation course at HE level	5	0.3%
PgD/Cert exc. PGCE	30	1.7%	Other HE qualification of less than degree standard	6	0.3%
PGCE with QTS	10	0.6%	A' level equivalent not specified elsewhere	7	0.4%
PGCE without QTS	17	1.0%	NVQ/SVQ level 3	324	18.5%
Other postgrad qual not specified elsewhere	4	0.2%	ONC/OND	92	5.3%
First degree of UK HEI	282	16.1%	Foundation course at FE level	10	0.6%
Graduate of EU Institution	4	0.2%	Accredited ACCESS course (validated by QAA)	45	2.6%
Graduate of other overseas institution	56	3.2%	Unaccredited ACCESS course (not validated by QAA)	3	0.2%
Foundation degree	11	0.6%	Baccalaureate	1	0.1%
Graduate equivalent not elsewhere specified	1	0.1%	ACCESS course prior to 2001	2	0.1%
OU Credits	1	0.1%	GCSE 'O' level/SCE 'O' grades only	122	7.0%
Other credits from UK HEI	9	0.5%	Other non-advanced qualification	157	9.0%
Cert/Dip of education	22	1.3%	Mature student admitted on previous experience	3	0.2%
HNC/HND	148	8.5%	Other non-UK Qualification level not known	138	7.9%
Dip HE	27	1.5%	Student has no formal qualification	35	2.0%
GNVQ/GSVQ level 4	7	0.4%	Professional qualifications	104	5.9%
NVQ/SVQ level 4	3	0.2%			
			TOTAL	1748	

There could be a multitude of reasons for this apparent correlation but one factor might be the form or type of assessment on the degree programme might not reflect the strengths of past learning and the modes of assessment students previously experienced. In conversations with colleagues there was the occasional view that some of our students are not yet ready to undertake study but I would suggest this is based largely on supposition or subjective appraisal frequently after study had commenced because there had been little or no formal assessment of developmental need other than interview and/or assessed eligibility and suitability via the UCAS process. It was interesting to discover too that many programmes did not require candidates to be interviewed and so there was no opportunity to provide even a rudimentary initial assessment. A small number of programmes conducted diagnostic assessment, particularly for non-standard entry applications, and were able to highlight issues which might possibly undermine potential. Where students declared at entry to study a disability a diagnostic assessment followed, the categories against numbers for 2009/10 being:

Table 3. Numbers and categories of assessment

Disability	Students at UoB Campus 2009/10	
	Number	Percentage
No Disability	7659	91.55%
SpLD (Dyslexia)	292	3.49%
Blind/Visual Impairment	12	0.14%
Deaf/Hearing Impairment	39	0.47%
Wheelchair/Mobility Impairment	31	0.37%
Personal Care Support	1	0.01%
Mental Health Difficulties	56	0.67%
Unseen Disability	104	1.24%
Multiple Disabilities	55	0.66%
Other Disability	102	1.22%
Autistic Spectrum Disorder	15	0.18%
Total Disabled Students	707	8.45%

As a group facing some difficult challenges one might expect lower levels of achievement but this is not the case, Richardson (2009, p.123) found “In overall terms, disablement *per se* does

not play a significant role in predicting attainment” which can be partly explained by support systems being organised to reflect learning needs as a result of diagnostic assessment. The National Audit Office (2007) notes that those students receiving a Disabled Students Allowance are more likely to continue their course as a proportion of the student body than non-disabled peers. Rigorous assessment and an organised response would appear here to be enhancing retention. To provide such a system for all students would sadly prove impossible simply because of the logistics but initial assessment is feasible. Across the University, where initial assessment is conducted (and on some programmes there appears to be none) there are two systems. Some programmes will insist during the interview process a short piece of work is produced, typically an essay, and others will organise a similar exercise during induction. Even if such exercises only provide superficial data they can act as an indicator and in a few cases might highlight a particular need to be investigated further by diagnostic assessment via the disability support team. The personal tutoring scheme also provides an opportunity to confidentially provide initial assessment and guidance. It is at the end of the first year of study that retention is the biggest issue for us, and an early assessment of need has the potential to provide a more supportive learning environment.

Formative assessment feedback.

York (2003b) and Boud (1986) both emphasis the need for students to be given the ability and opportunity to utilise feedback to self reflect on performance and understand how to make adjustments to meet assessment norms. Black and Wiliam (1998) make the obvious but perhaps too frequently overlooked aspect of assessment that students need to understand if they are to respond to the tutor’s perceived criteria. I have suggested earlier we perhaps should reflect upon the extent and type of assessment presently utilised but for any change to be effective this needs to be accompanied by feedback which guides, clarifies and informs. The end of the first year of study is crucial to students and is a time when developmental needs, largely determined by assessment, become apparent. The type of feedback in this delicate period becomes crucial. It was good to see highly effective practices of students being invited in after exam boards to discuss their progress and to be invited to set new targets, a strategy which almost certainly will enhance learning and retention, though the emphasis tended to be towards those receiving ‘refer’ or ‘defer’ grades. The extent of this strategy appeared uneven. Feedback from marked scripts was sometimes delayed until after the summer vacation in some instances and occasionally scripts were not collected by students. There were some examples of completed scripts with feedback being posted to students though I couldn’t be sure how widespread the practice was.

Conclusion.

Learning should not be driven by assessment but increasingly within all sectors of education the measurement of attainment is a significant determinant of institutional success. It is revealing

therefore, as Boud and Falchikov (2007) point out, that the major influence on student learning is not so much teaching but rather assessment. If we therefore assess incorrectly or inappropriately we risk having our performance measured against other HEIs unfavorably and more importantly we might be undermining student potential which inevitably will impact negatively on retention.

This report has deliberately taken a critical stance with the aim to enhance assessment practice. It should not be interpreted as a negative appraisal, there is strong evidence of really excellent practice reflecting the dedication and professionalism of staff. The University attracts a diverse student body and we should be proud of our achievements in widening and sustaining participation. The recommendations that follow therefore should be viewed as an attempt to further enhance good practice and improve student retention:

1. It would be useful to reflect on whether we over assess. There is evidence that similar skills are assessed more than once.
2. Summative assessment creates enormous pressures by filtering the final assessment into a short time period. A more formative (continuous) model where assessment is spread over a semester reduces this focus and creates opportunities for a more reflective model.
3. The points system of suitability for undergraduate study is at best a crude measure. This should be supplemented by initial assessment, preferably by interview following application, but if not then certainly during induction.
4. Following on from point 3, students revealing a developmental need should be identified as requiring additional support very early in their studies.
5. Consideration should be given as to what constitutes the last item of assessment as a measure of HEFCE funding. A more creative approach, a seminar say rather than an exam being identified for the HEFCE return, could significantly improve retention and enhance funding without undermining standards.
6. Peer assessment as a model complementing tutor-led assessment would provide a more meaningful context and enhance student engagement in the whole learning experience.
7. Feedback should be provided more efficiently to guide future learning.

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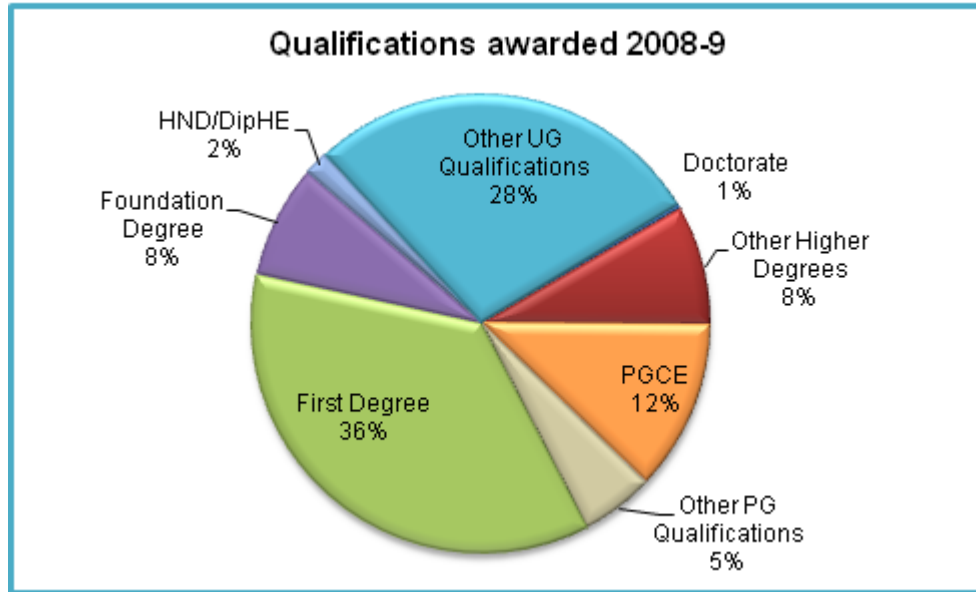
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Appendix 1

Student achievement profile. Qualifications awarded 2008/09



Classifications of first degree qualifications 2008/9

Classification of first degrees awarded 2008-9

