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## Higher Education Marking in the Electronic Age: Quantitative and Qualitative Student Insight

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### Abstract

Assessments play a key role in university student experiences. Reflecting the continuing change in higher education student experiences in particular consideration of the electronic age, this paper reports quantitative and qualitative findings from a survey given to undergraduate social science students ( $N = 99$ ) on comparing their experiences of submitting and accessing work online versus doing so in hard copy. The obtained survey results show an increasing trend in preference for both submitting assignments and accessing feedback electronically, which is partly in line with the current literature scope but also establishes new trends. Additional qualitative data further help identify key barriers in this process, particular the depersonalization of feedback. These contribute to evaluating the usefulness of the electronic assignment approach. Further in-depth data from focus groups will be used to supplement these discussions. Overall, the present research adds to the discussion around electronic marking by making particular use of the student voice in the decision making process.

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**Keywords:** Assessment; online marking; student voice.

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### 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions across the globe are increasingly engaging with a student body that forms part of the so-called net generation (Manuguerra & Petocz, 2011) and universities are increasingly dealing with students who

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“expect to be able to work, learn, and study whenever and wherever they want to” (Gosper, Malfroy, & McKenzie, 2013, p. 278). Staff and institutions need to seize opportunities to reflect this changing demographic and rely on more strategies that enhance the student experiences. A key element of the higher education experience is assessments, which are integral to student achievement of educational goals and motivation (e.g. Grieve, Padgett, & Moffitt, 2016; Heinrich, Milne, & Granshaw, 2012).

Technology has increasingly found a solid place within higher education, which is also reflected in the assessment process in particular (Ambler, Breyer, & Young, 2014; Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin, & Thorpe, 2011). One particular tool is Grademark®, embedded within the plagiarism software Turnitin®. This has already been recognized to be an “innovative assessment and feedback tool [...] which benefits both academics and students pedagogically” (Chew & Price, 2010, p. 687). Research indicates that online marking is just as valid as marking hard copies (Shaw, 2008). Particularly from the staff viewpoint, technology is seen as beneficial in the process of assignments as it helps to reduce plagiarism (Baker, Thornton, & Adams, 2008; Batane, 2010), since software such as Turnitin® provides this information whilst also allowing to mark the work. It is seen as easier to use, allows for faster marking and therefore reduces the overall workload (Buckley & Cowap, 2013). However, staff also see benefits for students, indicating that the quality of feedback provided to students is more targeted and more effective (Ambler et al., 2014).

Yet a top-down approach in higher education is not always beneficial. It is crucial to actively involve students in the decision making process around learning, curriculum and change, and to make use of their insight into whether approaches are appropriate – this call is increasing (e.g. Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Hast, 2015; Kay, Dunne, & Hutchinson, 2010; McCulloch, 2009; O'Neill & McMahon, 2012; Robinson, 2012). In giving students a stronger voice in order to identify issues and needs the sense of community in achieving success can become a more realistic and much needed goal (Sandover, Partridge, Dunne, & Burkhill, 2012). Therefore, although universities prefer electronic submissions from an administrative and from a pedagogical perspective, how do students respond to such an approach? This is particularly important since student engagement is impacted by feedback format preferences (Ferguson, 2011).

Preferences for using electronic means of submitting assignments vary throughout the literature but appear to have been increasing over time, from less than a quarter (Bridge & Appleyard, 2005) to one half (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008) and then up to two thirds (Ambler et al., 2014) of students. This change in student views requires a continual examination of whether there is still room for improvement to encapsulate the remaining one third of students. Numbers for preferences regarding electronic feedback, on the other hand, seem to have remained stable over time, at around half of students (Ambler et al., 2014; Bridge & Appleyard, 2008). Again, this is not a particularly large proportion and cannot serve as sufficient argument for implementing an electronic marking approach. In particular the barriers are not sufficiently examined; there are various indicators around the benefits such as ease of access (Grieve et al., 2016), legibility of comments (Ambler et al., 2014; Bridge & Appleyard, 2005) and saving travel and printing costs (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008). However, with improved technology services, are technical issues still a problem (Bridge & Appleyard, 2005; Buckley & Cowap, 2013), and how significant are issues around depersonalization (McCabe, Doerflinger, & Fox, 2011; Parkin, Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, & Thorpe, 2012)?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 99 undergraduate students from a higher education institution in the Greater London area took part in this study. Of these, 55 (87% female) were in their second year and 44 (89% female) were in their final year of a social science degree programme. All had previous experience of submitting work in hard copy and at the time of the survey completion had just completed their first round of electronic submissions and accessing feedback using Grademark® via Turnitin®. Although students had already been required to submit assignments to Turnitin® for plagiarism purposes, feedback had until this first round only been provided on hard copy submissions rather than using Grademark®.

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