

Students' Perspectives of Assessment at the Tertiary Level of Education

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report to the School of Human and Community Development in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

University students worldwide regularly encounter assessments in their courses and the results obtained are used to make important decisions about their movement from one year of study to the next. This makes students vital stakeholders in the assessment practices of institutions and illustrates how issues related to the topic of assessment and assessment practices are critical to students. Many authors and researchers advocate the idea that the perspectives of students' themselves are important wherever questions of assessment arise. Furthermore, assessments take on various forms and are understood and therefore utilised in a particular manner depending on their context. This study thus aimed to describe assessments used at a specific South African university from the students' perspective. Seventeen third year level Psychology students participated by completing a demographic questionnaire and taking part in one of four focus groups which were transcribed. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis.

The research yielded results pertaining to many different aspects of assessment. Participants perceived the purposes of assessment in the same manner as described in the literature, namely to measure knowledge, ability to cope and institutional standards. They viewed each form of assessment (multiple choice tests, open-ended test and examinations, essay assignments and group work) as having a specific purpose and different advantages and disadvantages and indicated that they prepared for each type of assessment using different strategies, depending on the form. Participants understood assessments in terms of the types of task that each required them to complete but were more concerned about the conditions under which they were expected to complete them. The time constraint element in particular was viewed as detracting from performance rather than as part of the assessment task. Other individual and contextual factors were perceived as important but were often not accounted for or able to be accounted for in assessments. Participants appeared motivated to succeed by achieving high marks rather than by achieving the intended course outcomes and assessment purposes and time management was identified as an important aspect of coping. In general, the participants seemed to perceive assessment and the various forms thereof in a similar manner and in line with literature.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At the tertiary level of education, students regularly encounter assessments in their courses. The results obtained from these assessments are used to make important decisions about them, such as whether or not to retain some students in their current level of study, to promote them to the subsequent year or level, or to allow them to graduate (Gipps, 1994; Izard, 1991; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991; Wise, 2006). This makes them vital stakeholders in the assessment practices of institutions and illustrates how issues related to the topic of assessment and assessment practice are important to students as well (Wilson & Perrine, 2005).

Many authors and researchers advocate the idea that students are important stakeholders and that a student-centered voice should be present when discussing matters pertaining to education. For example, Brown, Race and Smith (1996) argue that student organisations or unions should be involved when developing and discussing assessment of students and Astin et al. (2005) argue that questions of assessment can only be effectively answered when student input is included in the responses. Donald & Denison (2001) concur and propose that students' views on assessment issues are just as important as those of institutional administrators and faculty members. All of this suggests that there may be both similarities and inherent differences in the students' point of view as compared to that of other stakeholders.

From a constructivist perspective, the students' experiences, how they think and feel about assessments, is as unique as that of the administrators and faculty members. Donald & Denison's (2001) study supports this as they found that educators and students differed in their views pertaining to issues of assessment and in their perceptions of the marks or grades obtained from assessments. These and other findings imply that the students' point of view is singular and should therefore be investigated primarily because of this. This may bring to light issues thought to be mundane by administrators and faculty members but felt to be crucial by students.

Furthermore, Norton (2006) argues that it is equally important for institutions to know how the students perceive the various methods or forms of assessment used, since this allows for better informed practice regarding which forms of assessment to use and when. Astin et al. (2005) also argue that although it is important for institutions to obtain information regarding where the students

'end up' in terms of the course outcomes through assessments, it is just as important to know about their experiences as they move to this final place. They argue that this information should inform institutional practice and should be used to assist with the improvement of the students' learning. This also illustrates the value of understanding the students' point of view.

The lecturers' point of view regarding student assessment is adequately documented in the literature (cf. Biggs, 2003; Beard, 1972; Gibbs, 1994; Lubisi, 1999) and student assessment has been well examined and investigated from the perspective of assessment developers and users (such as educators) (Wise, 2006). It therefore seems logical to assume that educators are generally well informed about various aspects of assessment, such as the purposes, advantages, disadvantages and the preparation required for each form of assessment, since they are often the ones who create them or collaborate with assessment developers to do so (Green & Mantz, 2002; Lubisi, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002, Wise 2006). The students' perspective on this matter, however - how they think and feel about assessment - is less well established in the literature (Donald & Denison, 2001), in spite of the fact that educational theory and past research suggest that both students' cognitive and affective understandings of their educational tasks, including those related to assessment, play a vital part in determining or influencing their performance (cf. Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl (Eds.), 1956; Heikkilla & Lonka, 2006; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964; Ramsden, 1979; Spencer, 2004; Zhang, 2002).

The small amount of research that has been conducted in this area from the students' point of view has mostly occurred overseas (cf. Barfield, 2003; Cho, Schunn & Wilson, 2006; Sambell & McDowell, 1998; Segers & Dochy, 2001). However, South Africa has a unique history and context where one finds a rich mixture of languages and cultures. At the end of the Apartheid era, South African universities had to deal with a rapid increase of students from educationally disadvantaged communities and the immense gap between the level of skill and knowledge obtained from educationally disadvantaged schools and the level needed to cope with university, while at the same time ensuring the maintenance of high university standards through assessment. As a result of the unique South African context in which they study, the South African student population may then differ in their views and experiences from students of other countries (Hartshorne, 1992; Taylor, 1993). Thus, an investigation into students' perceptions of assessments in this unique context is important so as to add to the knowledge base which may be used for the positive development and

improvement of the country's educational practices. This research therefore hopes to contribute to a growth in South African literature regarding students' perspectives of assessment and tertiary educational issues in general by investigating how South African students think and feel about assessment and the various forms thereof used at a particular South African university.

It is also worth noting that South Africa has a very large undergraduate failure rate (Gouws & Wolmarans, 2002; Nicholson, 2004; USSAS, 2004). Different perceptions regarding assessment among students could potentially play a role in this issue (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996). If a student is unaware of or has the wrong idea about some issues regarding assessment, such as the different purposes of or preparation required for the various forms used by institutions, then their performance may be affected in a negative manner. Investigating the students' opinions may therefore shed more light on understanding what it is that students regard as important for preparing for and completing various assessment activities. Therefore, the results of this study may also be used to help improve how lecturers prepare students for assessments which could lead to improved pass rates generally.

This research essentially aimed to provide a description of assessment and its various forms used at a South African university. Specifically, its objective was to investigate the students' thoughts (cognition), feelings (affect) and general experiences of assessment so as to gain a better understanding of their views, since there is scarce research conducted in South Africa which focuses on the students' perspective. Thus, qualitative methodology was used to achieve this objective.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Student assessment in the context of higher education is a fairly new focus area (Peterson & Einarson, 2001). The topic received a great deal of attention when the need for improvement of assessment practices emerged in the 1980s and is currently a pervasive issue in the context of higher education around the globe (Schuh, Upcraft et al., 2001; Wilson & Perrine, 2005). For example, Sedlacek (2005) questioned the fairness of using the same test on students from completely different backgrounds. The same question can be asked within a South African context given the rich diversity that exists both ethnically and socio-economically among the population. Peterson and Einarson (2001) argue that rich prescriptive literature exists on this topic, such as the many books and guidelines on assessment methods and practices that test developers and users have published (c.f. Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1996; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Schuh, Upcraft et al., 2001). However, the same cannot be said about empirical literature on this topic, specifically that which focuses on the experiences of students in the South African context.

There are numerous definitions for the term assessment used in the literature. The evaluation literature describes it as the gathering, analysis and interpretation of evidence for the purposes of making some judgment (Lubisi, 1999). According to Schuh, Upcraft et al. (2001), the use of assessment in student affairs involves first and foremost the measurement of learning outcomes, so as to provide students with feedback regarding personal growth and improvement, as well as other important outcomes. These include cost effectiveness, stakeholder satisfaction and comparisons between institutions (Schuh, Upcraft et al., 2001). This study focused on assessment practices in terms of student learning outcomes.

2.1. Purpose of student assessment

Rowntree (1999) argues that assessment occurs whenever an educator, in either direct or indirect interaction with a student, consciously obtains information about the students' knowledge or ability. It involves all activities used when judging students' performance (Gibbs, Habeshaw & Habeshaw, 1988). This suggests that the primary purpose or reason for the use of assessment is to allow students to demonstrate their gains in knowledge and ability, and to assess how much or to what extent students have improved in terms of the intended learning outcomes and skills of a course (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gipps, 1994; Lubisi, 1999; Nuttall & Barnes, 1981; Potterton & Parsons,

1994). Thus, assessments are used as a measuring device for knowledge and ability or learning outcomes.

For Gipps (1994), assessment has a wide range of purposes in the context of tertiary education, such as: to support teaching and learning, to provide information about students' needs, to act as a selection or certification tool and to serve as an accountability procedure. Donald and Denison (2001) argue that in order for assessment to be useful, it needs to "meet the needs of the people whom it is intended to benefit" (p. 13), i.e. the students as well as the institution, in terms of issues of retention and quality evaluation. An important connection therefore exists between student assessment and accountability of both institutions and the students themselves (Heywood, 2000; Napoli & Raymond, 2004; Wise, 2006). Regarding institutional accountability, the American College Personnel Association (1994, p.2, as cited by Schuh, Upcraft et al., 2001) argues that "...if learning is the primary measure of institutional productivity..., what and how much students learn must be the criterion by which the value of student affairs is judged." Regarding student accountability for their own learning, Brown, Race and Smith (1996) argue that answering a test question or completing an assessment activity adequately is the principle skill needed by students to succeed in higher education.

The literature also suggests that assessments are used to determine whether or not good teaching has occurred since teaching is considered to be effective if the students have obtained or gained in the intended learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003; Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Nuttall & Barnes, 1981). Deciding whether or not this has occurred typically involves the use of student assessment since assessment is "the engine that drives learning" (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996, p. 30). The wide range of purposes mentioned above illustrates the important role played by assessment in the teaching and learning experience (Biggs, 2003; Blackmore, 1988; Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gibbs, Habeshaw & Habeshaw, 1988; Gipps, 1994). Student assessment is thus firstly used to measure the students' knowledge and ability and secondly, the results of measuring these attributes are then used to make judgments about the students themselves and the quality of the institution.

2.2. Assessment of learning outcomes

Schuh, Upcraft et al. (2001) describe seven different types of learning outcomes. These are: complex cognitive skills, knowledge acquisition, intrapersonal development, interpersonal development,

practical competence, academic achievement and persistence. There is some dispute in the literature as to whether assessments actually measure such outcomes accurately. For example, Astin (1991) argues that a learning outcome can only be properly measured if the various personal attributes, background, educational characteristics and experiences of students once enrolled at university are taken into account. In a context where there is great diversity among students who enroll at universities, such as in South Africa, this criterion is difficult to meet.

Some authors and researchers also argue that contextual characteristics or assessment conditions have an important effect on student performance and should also be taken into account. For example, Zumbo, Perlini and Lind (1998) conducted a study in which they investigated the effects of time, item order and item difficulty on student performance. They found a significant effect regarding time where students who completed the assessment task in the morning performed significantly better than those who completed it in the afternoon. Additionally, students who completed the task in the evening did significantly better than those who completed it in the morning. This suggests that one may perform differently depending on the time of day at which the assessment task is completed bringing into question the general reliability of assessments.

Napoli and Raymond (2004) conducted a study in which they compared the reliability of data obtained from two different assessment conditions. The same 20 multiple choice question task was given to two different groups of first year Psychology students. In one condition, the “graded” condition, the students were made to believe that the results would count towards their final year mark. The assessment was placed within the pre-scheduled end-of-term final examinations. In the other “non-graded” condition, students were given the task as a separate assessment and were told that the results would not count towards their course marks. The researchers found that the graded condition group produced significantly higher scores for the assessment task compared to the non-graded condition group. They also found that under the non-graded condition, the task had unacceptably low internal consistency reliability while the graded condition produced a substantially higher reliability within the acceptable range (Napoli & Raymond, 2004). They concluded that when assessment results are linked to course outcomes, students will be motivated to perform at their highest level “...and their scores can serve as reliable indicators of learning or mastery of the curriculum,” i.e. of learning outcomes (p. 926). These findings suggest that the students’ perceptions of the assessment task influence how they perform.

These findings also support those of an early study by Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968, as cited by Ramsden, 1979) who looked at the experiences of college students at Kansas University. They found that the ways in which students approached learning "...became dominated by the 'grade-point average perspective'" (p. 414) and that success at university is viewed as the achievement of high marks in the quantitative sense rather than on the quality of the learning. In other words, for students, it is more important to achieve high marks, which does not necessarily mean that they understand or are able to retain and apply the knowledge or abilities gained.

Additionally, Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995) compared the performance of two 'types' of students (those with high statistics test anxiety and those with low statistics test anxiety) who completed a statistics examination under two different testing conditions, namely timed or untimed. They found that both high and low anxiety students performed better under the untimed condition. Similarly, LeBlanc and Bandiera (2007) found that junior resident medical students' perceptions of how stressful the assessment conditions were had a significant effect on their performance. These studies demonstrate that personal, contextual and conditional factors, such as the students' perceptions of the assessment task, their motivation and the time of the day at which the task is completed, have an influence on performance and thus on the measurement of learning outcomes. However, these matters are rarely taken into consideration when marking assessments. The strong influence of these personal, contextual and conditional factors does have implications for the assessment strategies used by institutions and results in further questions regarding the accuracy of assessment to represent the learners' knowledge and ability.

2.3. Cognitive and Affective Domains of Learning

Several studies, such as those already mentioned as well as Gibbs (1999, as cited by Segers & Dochy, 2001) and Sambell and McDowell (1998), have shown that students' perceptions of the learning and assessment environment affect the way in which they tackle and perform in the learning or assessment task. In addition to contextual issues, the students' individual cognitive and affective characteristics, or their thoughts and feelings, are also said to play a vital role in their teaching and learning experience (Bloom, et al, (Eds.) 1956; Heikkillä & Lonka, 2006; Ramsden, 1979; Spencer, 2004).

Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives was created to classify educational goals or objectives and to place them in a hierarchy of categories where each category is assumed to gain in complexity compared to the previous one (Bloom, et al, (Eds.) 1956; Bloom, Madaus & Hastings, 1981). The hierarchy is illustrative of how the acquisition of knowledge takes place in small steps. As a person progresses through the categories, knowledge becomes constructed by integrating new information with what has already been learnt in the previous category (Biggs, 2003). These goals or objectives are classified into three domains: the cognitive, affective and manipulative domains. The first two domains, the cognitive and affective, are utilised when faced with various learning tasks, such as assessment activities, and play an important role in the achievement of the learning goals or objectives and thus in how students perform and achieve in assessment.

According to Bloom, the cognitive domain includes intellectual abilities or tasks such as thinking and knowledge recollection (Bloom, et al, 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964). Examples of such tasks include problem-solving, critical thinking, and searching for and making good use of relevant information (Segers & Dochy, 2001). These behaviours are associated with the different strategies employed by students when completing a learning or assessment task. The cognitive elements of student learning are often and typically measured "with tests of maximal performance with 'right' and 'wrong' answers" (Zhang, 2002, p. 332). The affective domain, on the other hand, focuses on the students' emotions and feelings and their "changes in interest, attitudes, and values, and the development of appreciations and adequate adjustment" (Bloom, et al, 1956, p. 7). This domain includes behaviours associated with students' motivations for completing a learning or assessment task, such as the instrumental motive behind the use of the surface learning approach or the intrinsic motive behind the use of a deep learning approach (Biggs, 2003). Stiggins (2007) argues that assessment should aim to enhance the students' learning and that "the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the point of view of the students" (p. 22) need to be taken into account in order to achieve this aim. This illustrates the importance of this domain in relation to how students are assessed.

Research has been done in the area of cognition in relation to learning and assessment performance, such as Marton and Säljö (1976a & b) Zhang (2002). However, little research has been done on the affective domain of learning and assessment. Since both domains play a crucial role in how students' tackle and perform in assessment tasks, this study investigated both how students think (cognition)

and how they feel (affect) about assessment and its various forms, as well as what circumstances might affect these thoughts and feelings.

2.4. Forms of Assessment

Currently there is a wide range of forms of assessment in use at the tertiary level in South African institutions including essays, tests and examinations, peer assessments, practical assessments, oral assessments, computer based assessments, group work and portfolios (Biggs, 1999; Gipps, 1994). Despite this variety, however, more than 80% of university assessment worldwide is made up of essays, reports and traditional time-constrained tests or examinations (Brown, Race & Smith, 2000). Mehrens and Lehmann (1991) argue that different skills are used by students when writing a test and when completing an essay suggesting that each form of assessment is used for different reasons. For example, to allow students to demonstrate their sculpting skills one might use a practical sculpting assessment, to measure the extent of students' knowledge about a certain subject one may use a standardised test or examination, to evaluate their argumentative, critical or research skills one might use an essay. Gipps (1994) argues that it is important for the various forms of assessment to be used in an appropriate manner. This is also because the reasons for using a particular form are closely tied to the functions of that form, again supporting the idea that each has different uses (Biggs, 1999; Brown, Race & Smith 1996). In other words, each form is used to determine something different about a person, and this can vary across contexts.

An essay is a short literary piece of writing on a particular theme or subject area and is generally analytic or interpretive. It assesses one's ability to supply rather than select an answer and "is so central that it seems impossible to imagine assessment without it" (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991; Clyne 1996, p.105). They are "not distorted by time limitations, or by the need to rely on memory" (Biggs, 1999, p 170). The main purpose or function of an essay is to allow students the space to demonstrate their argumentative and/or structuring skills (Meiers, 1996). An essay is thus marked according to whether a well organised and structured argument has been presented (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). Gipps (1994) argues that an advantage of an essay is that students take on an active role in their learning leading to better learning since students are required to seek out relevant information rather than depending on a lecturer to tell them all of the necessary information. This allows for deep rather than surface learning to occur since students need to negotiate what information to include and exclude in an essay which requires critical thought and understanding.

Essays also help students to structure their own writing and develop their own thinking, writing and study skills (Bray, 1999). This is attested to by Biggs (1999) who further argues that this form allows students to use the deep approach to learning, make use of multiple resources and, “with that deep knowledge base, synthesize more effectively” (p. 170). The disadvantages of this form are that it is time-consuming and is a difficult task for students who are poor writers (Bray, 1999; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). Additionally, the space provided by an essay for one to organise and express an answer in one's own words allows both the students and the markers to be individualistic making it a difficult task to mark objectively (Biggs, 1999; Mehrens & Lehman, 1991). They also have “low reader reliability”, and the questions asked in essays are not always fully understood by all students possibly leading to poor performance (Biggs, 1999; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991, p. 85).

Another form of assessments is the *time*-constrained test or examination made up of a standardised set of tasks or questions which one is required to complete in a set and limited amount of time (Biggs, 1999; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). The standard nature of this form, which are usually invigilated and administered under formal assessment conditions, assume that one can produce answers that can be marked objectively since students are exposed to the same standardised testing or examination conditions (Biggs, 1999). The time constraint element allows for standardisation of assessment conditions to occur and “creates a target for students to work towards” making this aspect an important element of this form (Biggs, 1999, pp. 169). In terms of education, the purpose or function of tests and examinations is to measure, in an objective manner, how much students have gained in their skills or knowledge about a course or subject (Lubisi, 1999).

An advantage of this form is that the same test or examination can be given to a very large number of students at the same time which is especially useful for universities in South Africa with large student numbers at the undergraduate level. They are also argued to give both lecturers and students a good indication of how the students are progressing in the course (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gipps, 1994; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). Disadvantages of this form are that their over-use makes learning routine; if they are poorly designed they may be invalid; they are said to be poor at assessing cognitive skills; they provide little information regarding learning styles and further learning potential; and they are said to be useless for the assessment of creativity (Bray, 1999). Gipps (1994) argues that test and examination procedures assess “at the lower rather than the higher thresholds of performance” (p. 9) and that tests support a model of knowledge that sees knowledge

as bits of information and demands quick responses from students without allowing time for reflection. Unlike essays which assess one's ability to supply an answer, multiple choice tests (MCQs) in particular, require students to select from a set of someone else's answers resulting in rote and surface learning and in the use of memorisation when preparing (Biggs, 1999). Additionally, students often feel disadvantaged due to the time constraints placed on them when completing tests or examinations resulting in anxiety which then leads to ill-performance (Biggs, 1999; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). Another danger is that "students can succeed on 'objective' tests without necessarily understanding the material they are learning" by using a surface approach to learning, especially where test or examination questions are purely multiple choice in nature (Gipps, 1994, p. 23). Biggs (1999) writes strongly against the use of this form of assessment and argues the following:

In sum, time constraints in the examination room [or examination situation] cannot easily be justified educationally. The most probable effect is to encourage memorization, with or without higher-level processing. In fact, time constraints only exist for administrative not educational reasons. They are convenient, and they make cheating more difficult. Whether these gains are worth the educational costs is a good question (Biggs, 1999, p. 170).

The descriptions of the assessment forms mentioned above apply in the general sense. However, different contexts and universities use these differently and each form is understood and therefore utilised in a particular manner depending on the context in which it is used. The same form may even be used differently within a single department or faculty. This brings to the surface an important implication for research conducted in the area of assessment, namely that it is important to explore how the various forms are understood in specific contexts, and suggests that each context may elicit different results. The same form of assessment may also be viewed differently by lecturers as compared to students. Brown, Race and Smith (1996) argue that "students are quick to notice any discrepancies or differences in how assessment works for them from one module or course to another" (p. 1) which illustrates how students, as suggested by Mehrens and Lehmann (1991), may adapt their learning approach when preparing for a particular assessment.

An early study by Marton and Säljö (1976b) supports this argument as they found that students adapted their learning approaches to *their* perceptions of what they thought would be required of

them from the particular assessment task which they were asked to complete. In this study, students were required to prepare for an assessment task about which they were not given any information and were not told which form of assessment would be used prior to the task. They were asked different types of questions pertaining to three textbook sections which they were required to read and study. The researchers argued that the type of test and test questions which students expected, such as a test made up of multiple choice questions, one made up of open-ended essay type questions or an oral examination, affected the type of cognitive processing that students used in order to prepare and complete the assessment and thus affected how the students performed in the assessment task. This illustrates how the type of test and test question, or the form of assessment and the assessment task, dictates the kinds of answers given by students and affects their performance. They concluded that the way in which students perceived and, therefore, understood the assessment task, played a role in how they went about preparing for and completing it.

Lubisi (1999) and Brown, Race and Smith (1996, p. vii) argue that lecturers need to remember that how one assesses students, i.e. which forms of assessment one chooses to use, “has a profound effect on the ways in which they learn” suggesting that each form of assessment will have a different effect on learning. When choosing an assessment form, lecturers thus need to think about the reasons for the assessment, for example, to evaluate the students’ application skills via a practical assessment, to measure the extent of the students’ knowledge about a certain subject via a standardised test, or to assess their argumentative skills by using an essay (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gibbs, Habeshaw & Habeshaw, 1988). This also implies that each form of assessment is used for specific reasons and has its own unique purpose.

The students’ success in various forms of assessment is attributed to two parties in the literature. As already suggested above, the first party is the lecturer who communicates the relevant information needed to complete the assessment to the students (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gipps, 1994). This is because “...achievement data arise as the direct result of instruction and are therefore crucially affected by teaching and teachers” (Gipps, 1994, p. 9). Biggs (2003) argues that a good teaching system is one which aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities declared in the objectives. He also argues that students should be informed about the method of marking to be used in assessment activities so as to “calculate their own risks” (Biggs, 1999, p. 170). This view is also supported by Donald and Denison (2001). Brown, Race and Smith (1996) argue that preparing

students to succeed in assessment is “central to the purpose of teaching and learning” (p. 36). They also argue that lecturers need to help students prepare for assessments and that helping students to understand different forms of assessment, their process and intention, is very important for their performance and therefore success.

Findings from past studies such as Dzakiria (2005) and Centra (1976, as cited by Ramsden, 1979), for example, support this notion. Dzakiria (2005) found that the lack of a lecturer’s presence in a distant learning situation added to students’ feelings of being ill-equipped for dealing with assessment activities. Participants felt that guidance by way of having more regular lectures allowing for direct interaction between the lecturers and the students so as to discuss important issues would have helped (Dzakiria, 2005). Quantitative studies, such as Centra (1976, as cited by Ramsden, 1979), have also found that students’ ratings of teaching effectiveness positively correlate to student achievement in assessments.

The second party is the students themselves who make the necessary preparations for and complete the assessments (Brown & Atkins, 1990). Often students are unsure about how to complete a test or write an essay assignment effectively. Marton and Säljö’s (1976a) qualitative study about students’ approaches to learning found that students respond to a task by using one of two learning approaches, either “deep-level or surface-level processing” (p. 7). Gipps (1994) and Biggs (1999) argue that different forms of assessment encourage the use of different learning approaches in students. For example, when preparing for time-constrained tests, especially MCQs, students tend to make use of surface approaches to learning, while written essay assignments are usually completed using a slightly deeper approach (Gipps, 1994). In their early study already mentioned, Marton and Säljö (1976b) discuss the findings of several empirical studies that looked at the effects of the type of test and test questions on student learning. These studies also found that when students expected an objective test, which required students to recall pieces of information, they made use of “a more superficial level of processing i.e., focusing attention primarily on ‘signs’” (Marton & Säljö, 1976b, p. 115). In other words, students employed a surface approach to learning (Biggs, 2003). When students expected an essay or an oral test they focused their attention on the general principles and main points of the text, “thus suggesting a deeper processing” (Marton & Säljö, 1976b, p. 115). This further illustrates that students approach different assessment tasks in different ways depending on the assessment task itself.

The qualitative work of Marton and Säljö (1976a; 1976b) on student learning was further developed quantitatively by researchers such as Entwistle and Ramsden in the UK and Biggs in Australia into the ‘approaches to learning’ perspective (Biggs, 2003). Entwistle and Ramsden (1983, as cited by Heikkila & Lonka, 2006) and Biggs (1987, as cited by Heikkila & Lonka, 2006) also introduced a third learning style in addition to surface and deep approaches, known as the achieving approach (Heikkila & Lonka, 2006). The three learning approaches in the ‘approaches to learning’ perspective concern the cognitive strategies used by students and the affective characteristics of students, such as their motivation, regarding learning tasks such as assessments (Biggs, 1986; Heikkila & Lonka, 2006).

The motive behind the surface approach is instrumental where the students use “low-cognitive-level activities...when higher-level activities are required to do a task properly” (Biggs, 2003, p. 14). In this situation, students aim to adopt memorisation strategies to repeat the information to be learnt, rather than understanding the information (Biggs, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Heikkila & Lonka, 2006). In the deep approach, the students’ motivation is intrinsic as they “adopt the active problem-solving and thinking skills that are needed in order to deeply understand the material” (Heikkila & Lonka, 2006, p. 100). In the achieving approach, students are driven by competitive motivations in order to obtain the highest marks and adopt learning strategies that will maximise their chances of academic success (Heikkila & Lonka, 2006). The research above suggests that students will employ one of these three learning approaches when preparing for and completing assessment tasks and that some utilise a combination of two or three, depending on the form of assessment which they are expected to prepare for and complete (Gipps, 1994; Heikkila & Lonka, 2006; Marton & Säljö, 1976b).

Similar results to those of Marton and Säljö (1976a; 1976b) were found in a study by Tang (1991, as cited by Biggs, 1999). He found that students used rote learning, question spotting, going through past papers, underlining and memorising of information when preparing for an examination and used copying sources, reading widely, searching for information and relating questions from past papers to own knowledge when preparing for an assignment. Thus, “exams tend to elicit memorization-related activities, assignments application-related activities” (Biggs, 1999, p. 167).

2.5. The Students' Perspective.

The students' perspective on educational issues is at times viewed to be of little use. However, others have argued that their perspective is of value since they have direct experience with various forms of assessment (Donald & Denison, 2001). Students' perspectives and perceptions have been used in other educational areas as well, such as a study by Nkusi and Shunbaga (2006), which looked at students' perceptions in order to elicit suggestions for the improvement of a particular course curriculum. They argue that student input is particularly valuable since they have direct experience with the curriculum in that they are on the receiving end whereas curriculum developers and users (i.e. educators) are not.

Similarly, Sambell and McDowell (1998) investigated students' perspectives about and experiences of newer forms of assessment in a UK University. The study focused on the hidden curriculum – the distinction between 'what was supposed to happen', that is, the curriculum officially stated by the educational system or institution, and what teachers and learners actually did and experienced in a practical sense (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). They argued that the students' perspective was significant because it was their direct educational experience with such forms of assessments that allowed for a better understanding of how they constructed the hidden curriculum in terms of the assessments. In this light, exploring students' direct experience with various assessment forms at a South African university may allow for a better understanding of how they understand and experience assessments.

Dey, Astin and Korn (1991, as cited by Donald & Denison, 2001) found that students perceived some of the most important decisions regarding their careers as dependent on assessment results or marks as they are becoming more preoccupied with career concerns and value criteria such as the ability to get a job. This often creates tension in the students towards assessment and may be why students view assessment as being there "to catch them out rather than to allow them to demonstrate their achievements" (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996, p.36). A result of this tension, which may be produced by other circumstances as well, is that the assessment process may have an unintentional consequence of hindering rather than assisting learning. This is because "students come to perceive a conflict between learning and grades and speak of using strategies to get good marks at the expense of understanding the [course] material" (Ramsden, 1979, p. 414). Students' perceptions about how to properly tackle assessment situations and what is required from them in these situations may thus

differ from the formal academic requirements necessary for top performance or, more importantly, the intended learning objectives.

It may be helpful for lecturers (and educators in general) to know how students think and feel about various forms of assessment and their functions because assessment is so often used and is a crucial part of the education system (Biggs, 2003; Blackmore, 1988; Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gibbs, Habeshaw & Habeshaw, 1988; Gipps, 1994; Nuttall & Barnes, 1981). It is also important to know how students view or think and feel about various forms of assessment since they are the ones who complete them. With this knowledge, educators can adapt or change their assessment techniques to better suit the views of students in order to improve their learning experience and to aid in their success.

This study therefore aims to investigate various forms of assessment from the students' point of view and to explore their experiences of and their perspectives regarding the purposes, advantages and disadvantage of and preparation required for various forms of assessment at the tertiary level of education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the research was planned and implemented. In this chapter, the context of the study, the research paradigm, the sample, the research procedure and instruments used are discussed. Limitations of the research methodology are addressed in the final chapter of this research report.

3.1 The Natural Context of the Study – University of the Witwatersrand

Peterson and Einarson (2001) argue that the observed variations between tertiary educational institutions regarding their student assessment practices are related to differences in the broader characteristics of the institution's contexts. The content of and approaches to student assessment thus differ by institutional type (Steele & Lutz, 1995; Steele, Malone & Lutz, 1997). The forms of assessment used at this level of education also differ between institutions, between the faculties within the institutions and even between and within individual departments (Gibbs, Habeshaw & Habeshaw, 1988). The University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter referred to as WITS), where this study was conducted, is one of the top three leading universities in South Africa (USSAS, 2004). This institution is research-focused meaning that it has a great investment in maintaining high research outputs. It is also a contact university whereby the teaching strategies used involve direct contact between lecturer and student. This influences the assessment practices of this institution in general and thus the forms of assessment used by WITS lecturers.

The Department of Psychology at WITS attracts many students resulting in a very large undergraduate student population. Large student numbers often influence the choices made by lecturers regarding the forms of assessments that they use (Biggs, 1999). For example, this department makes use of multiple choice examinations for assessing more than one thousand first year students during mid-year and end-of-year exams. As student numbers deplete at second and third year level, so too does the frequency with which lecturers use this form of assessment.

Riddle (1997) argues that more research which places the student experience at the centre of educational change and reform is needed. In terms of assessment practice and policy, WITS conducts revisions of these on a regular basis. However, those involved in these revisions consist of education specialists and faculty members suggesting that students, who are vital stakeholders in

these issues, have very little to no say in the matter. It is thus of great importance that some space be made for students to share their opinions regarding assessment practices at the tertiary level of education. Hence, this study sought to create such a space and utilised a student-centered approach that placed the students' experience at the heart of its aim in order to contribute to research on teaching and learning from a student perspective at the tertiary level of education in South Africa.

3.2. The Research Paradigm

Qualitative research methodologies aim to allow "those who are studied to speak for themselves" (Sherman & Webb, 1995, p. 5). It involves the use of quotations from people regarding their experiences, beliefs, attitudes and thoughts (Schuh, Upcraft et al., 2001). The focus of this type of research is thus on the subjective experiences of the participants rather than on making predictions about or investigating relationships between the variables under study. In other words, the aim of this paradigm is to capture the thoughts, feelings and experiences of those who are being studied rather than to measure one or more variables in some manner. Thus, it was decided that this paradigm was suitable for this study as its objective was to allow the sample to voice their own experiences and opinions in their own words regarding the topic of assessment.

This paradigm also takes into account the natural contexts in which the issues of enquiry operate and includes details about the environment in which the issues under study are located (such as the geographical, historical, physical and political context). In other words, this paradigm is naturalistic and also emphasises the importance of the participants' background information. Qualitative methodologies attempt to capture deeper meaning and explore representations of a particular issue where the researcher is central to the interpretation of the findings (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). They are also used to determine whether similarities exist between the responses of participants in interviews or between (and within) groups of participants in focus group interviews. In this study, focus group interviews were used to capture and describe students' thoughts, feelings and experiences of assessment.

In research, assessments are often described "in quantitative terms as a total number of correct answers to a test" (Marton & Säljö, 1976a, p. 4). From a learning perspective, however, past research conducted by Marton and Säljö (1976a) found evidence against the adequacy of the traditional quantitative method for describing what students learn, i.e. their learning outcomes. This implies that

a more descriptive and qualitative inquiry regarding assessment is needed, since assessments are used to determine the learning outcomes of students. In their research, Marton and Säljö (1976a) adopted a phenomenological approach to investigating learning outcomes and processes of learning that was based on the notion that students' perspectives defined what they learned, rather than what the educator intended to be learnt (Biggs, 2003). The current study wished to investigate the method by which such learning outcomes are measured, i.e. various forms of assessment. It therefore seems appropriate for a similar approach and qualitative paradigm to be used to achieve this goal of exploring the phenomenon of assessment as experienced by students.

3.3. Participants

This study used purposive volunteer sampling to obtain seventeen Psychology student volunteers (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). The participants took part in one of four focus groups, each of which consisted of either four or five volunteers – an acceptable amount according to Morgan (1998). Participants were in the third year level of their undergraduate study, since students in lower levels of study may still have perceived assessments as they understood or viewed them in high school. These students also had more experience with assessments and the various forms used at the tertiary level of education than students in the lower levels.

The Department of Psychology has a very diverse undergraduate student population in terms of race and home language. At the third year level of study, students are typically 21 years of age or more, although some of the students are younger than this and most (approximately seventy to eighty percent) are female. In this study, of the seventeen participants all but one were female and most were between the ages of 19 and 23 with one participant being 25 and another 26 years old. The participants were also diverse in terms of their ethnicity and first or primary language, and thus the sample utilised was somewhat representative of the broader group of students. Table 1 below represents a summary of other demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1

Frequencies for the demographic characteristics of the sample

Demographic Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Gender	
Male	1
Female	16
Ethnicity	
White	8
Black	6
Indian	2
Asian	1
First Language	
English	10
Polish	1
IsiNdebele	1
Setswana	1
Sesotho	2
SiSwati	1
Setswana	1

3.4 Procedure and Instruments:

3.4.1. Research Procedure:

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Internal Ethics committee (Ethics Protocol Number: MPSYC/07/006 IH). The researcher first approached the third year level Psychology course coordinator to ask if she might approach the relevant lecturers for permission to address the students in order to request volunteers. The researcher then approached the relevant lecturers and those who agreed allowed the researcher to invite the students to participate either during the first or last five minutes of a lecture period.

The researcher introduced herself to the students, gave them a brief description of the study and invited them to volunteer by taking part in a focus group discussion. The students were told that volunteering was completely optional, that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any time during the focus group, and that choosing to participate or choosing not to do so, or withdrawing from the study, would have neither positive or negative consequences for them.

Those interested were asked to meet after the lecture in order to organise a suitable time for them to take part in the focus group discussions. These took place in the Psychology Research Masters room, Umthombo building, WITS East Campus. Each focus group discussion took between an hour and an hour-and-a-half. A semi-structured focus group interview schedule was developed by the researcher who facilitated the discussions according to the questions of interest.

A participant information sheet, explaining who the researcher was, what the study was about, and what would be done with the data, was given to participants. Consent forms for taking part in the study, and for obtaining the participants' permission to tape-record the focus group discussions and for the purposes of confidentiality between and among the participants and the researcher, was also given to the participants. They were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, all of which took place before the commencement of the focus group discussions. A scribe was also present, who did not participate in the discussions. The function of the scribe was to jot down comments with an appropriately assigned symbol for each participant in the order in which they spoke during the discussions. The purpose of this was to help the researcher transcribe the focus group discussions accurately. The scribe was asked to sign a consent form agreeing to keep all participants and the data gathered anonymous, and their participation and comments made in the study confidential.

3.4.2. Instruments

3.4.2.1. Students' Demographic Questionnaire (SDQ)

A SDQ was developed by the researcher so as to capture some demographic and other details about the participants, such as their age, gender, ethnicity and the different forms of assessment that they had been exposed to during their years at university (refer to Appendix A). The purpose of this

questionnaire was to allow the researcher to describe the sample in more detail since qualitative research calls for thick description and a strong contextual understanding of the research setting, including characteristics of the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1983).

3.4.2.2. Focus Groups

The participants were interviewed by using focus groups. A focus group is an interview with more than one participant at a time and is a collaborative research method that focuses on the participants' opinions on a limited number of issues (Madriz, 2000; Morgan, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) define focus groups as "an exercise in group dynamics and the conduct of the group" where the "interpretation of results obtained must be in the context of the group interaction" (p.7). In focus groups, the researcher often draws up a list of questions which are pre-arranged in themes which are used to generate discussion among the participants (refer to Appendix B for Focus Group Interview Schedule).

Advantages of focus groups are that they allow access to participants who are uncomfortable with one-on-one interviews and allow participants "a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people" who are similar to them in some manner (Madriz, 2000, p. 835; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The participants in this research all studied a common subject at a common institution, namely Psychology (3rd year level) at WITS and all had a minimum of three years experience of being an undergraduate student undergoing various forms of assessment in different subjects. Focus groups also provide quite a rich body of data that is expressed in the participants' own words and are not expensive to administer (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Additionally, the main advantage of this data collection method is that through discussions among the participants, one group member's ideas "may set off a string of related thoughts and ideas in another person in the group" or may cause disagreement among the group members which creates "an opportunity for the whole group to explore their differences, thereby producing a much deeper understanding of the problem" (Kajee, 2006, p. 34).

The main concern when using focus groups, and qualitative research methodology in general, is that its small number of participants may not be representative of the larger population (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). However, this study was naturalistic and descriptive in nature and aimed to be idiographic and exploratory. The naturalistic paradigm which this study falls into assumes that

knowledge is best captured by describing specific and individual contexts and also assumes that there are multiple and subjective realities, therefore prediction is not the objective of inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1983). Other concerns are the open-ended nature of responses which makes summarising and interpretation of results time consuming (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Additionally, participants may be hesitant to talk and by knowingly or unknowingly providing cues regarding desired types of responses, the focus group facilitator may bias the results (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This is why constant awareness and self-reflection on the part of the researcher is such a central tool in the focus group data collection method and why the “success of the focus group rests on the shoulders of the researcher” (Kajee, 2006, p. 35).

The researcher is commonly a primary data collection instrument allowing for greater insightfulness, more flexibility and responsiveness and more emphasis on a holistic perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1983). In this study, the onus was on the researcher to manage the groups and the dynamics in such a manner that all group members were given a chance to voice their opinions so as not to bias the results in favour of those “who contribute more to the discussions by virtue of their educational backgrounds, linguistic skills and general self confidence” (Kajee, 2006). Thus, in order to ensure the credibility and transferability of the study, the researcher managed the groups by restraining those participants who tended to dominate the discussions in a polite manner and by encouraging those who did not dominate the discussion to share their thoughts. It is also the responsibility of the researcher to pay careful attention to the composition of the group, although it is not always possible for the group composition to have similar background characteristics. In this study, the composition of all four focus groups could not be controlled due to differences in availability among the participants.

The interpretive qualitative methodologies have been criticised and their reliability and validity doubted (Kelly, 1999). In terms of the four criteria for naturalistic enquiry, the researcher increased the credibility of this study and ensured the confirmability of the data by discussing her interpretations with her supervisor and by contacting those participants who provided their contact details and indicated their willingness for the researcher to contact them so as to clarify what they meant by some of their responses (Guba & Lincoln, 1983; Kelly, 1999). Ethical permission to do so was obtained before the commencement of the study. Kelly (1999) also calls for researchers to provide an accurate description of the research processes, to justify adequately their choices of

methodologies used and to give thick descriptions of the research context, issues addressed throughout the research report. The researcher also made a great effort to monitor her thoughts and feelings regarding the focus group discussions by keeping a self-reflexive journal and an audit trail throughout the research process in order to enhance the dependability of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1983). The focus group discussions were tape-recorded to ensure confirmability and the researcher kept a full account of how the data was produced and interpreted in order to increase the dependability of the study, again through the keeping of a self-reflexive journal and audit trail throughout the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1983).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The research design and research procedures used in this study were non-intrusive to participants and the questions in the SDQ were those that are commonly asked of participants for statistical purposes. Participation was completely voluntary and it was made clear to the participants that their participation in the study would have neither positive or negative consequences of the foreseeable nature for them and that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any time during the focus group if they chose to. They were guaranteed that their responses would only be viewed by the researcher and her supervisor in written form and would be kept as confidential as possible. They were also guaranteed that all identifying information would be removed from the final research report or published transcripts. The participants were given a participant information sheet which contained both the researcher and her supervisor's contact details (refer to Appendix C) and signed consent forms granting the researcher permission to tape-record the focus groups and in which they agreed to participate in the study and keep all other group members responses confidential (refer to Appendix D). A scribe was used in this study who jotted down the order in which the participants spoke in each focus group to ensure accuracy in the researchers' transcriptions. The scribe also signed the consent forms to ensure that she would keep all responses confidential and the identity of the participants anonymous. The results from the analysis were summarised and this summary was made available to those who desired feedback. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Internal Ethics committee prior to the commencement of this study (Ethics Protocol Number: MPSYC/07/006 IH, refer to Appendix E for copy of Letter of Confirmation of Acceptance of Proposal).

3.6. Method of Data Analysis

Focus group interviews typically result in data that is qualitative in nature (Babbie & Mouton, 2004). The more common type of analytical technique used to interpret such data is content analysis, an analytical procedure which involves objectively and systematically “decomposing messages (or discussions) and then evaluating and classifying their contents” (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991, p. 171). Content analysis is a research technique that allows for replicable and valid inferences to be made from the data to the context of enquiry (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Weber, 1985).

3.6.1. Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis is an interpretive application of content analysis (Kajee, 2006). It involves the decomposition of content by extracting recurring themes, concepts, issues and ideas from the participants’ responses, which are then summarised, organised and interpreted. According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), this type of analysis is one of many ways in which one can analyse narrative material such as that obtained from focus group discussions. The recorded responses from the four focus groups were transcribed and the content of the discussions was subjected to this method of analysis.

Boyatzis (1998) defines thematic content analysis as a process used to encode qualitative data. This encoding requires explicit ‘codes’ or themes, that is, “a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). Krippendorff (1980) uses the concept of categories which are created by grouping similar themes. The themes and categories may be generated in one of two ways: a) inductively or empirically derived from the raw data obtained or b) deductively or theoretically derived via theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998; Eagle, 1998). In the case of this study, themes and categories were largely predetermined by the interview schedule used.

3.6.2. Steps in the Analysis

In this study, the thematic content analysis approach described and outlined by Babbie & Mouton (2004) was used. According to Babbie & Mouton (2004), there are eight steps to this type of analysis which are listed below. These steps do not always occur in the sequence mentioned below and this process is often cyclical where the researcher needs to revisit previous steps in the analysis already taken. They are:

1. Deciding on the level of analysis
2. Deciding how many theme or concepts to code for
3. Deciding on whether to code for the existence or the frequency of the theme or concept
4. Deciding how to distinguish between themes or concepts
5. Developing coding rules
6. Deciding what to do with irrelevant information
7. Coding the transcripts
8. Analysis

Initially, the researcher listened to all of the focus group recordings several times and also read and re-read the transcribed responses several times while taking extensive notes in order to decide on the level of analysis. The themes or concepts to code for, as well as the number of themes to code for, were largely predetermined by the focus group interview schedule. The themes were grouped into several categories. However, these themes and categories evolved as the data analysis was conducted. This is because, as Eagle (1998) explains, in order to ensure strictness in coding or in the selection of themes, categories need to be as inclusive and exhaustive as possible. The researcher had to continuously evaluate the suitability of the chosen categories as new themes emerged that either called for completely new categories to be created or for existing categories to be further divided.

The researcher chose to code for both the existence and the frequency of the various emergent themes so as to investigate the dominance of these within and between the focus group discussions. Decisions regarding how to distinguish between the themes were preliminarily made. However, these also evolved as the data was further analysed due to the emergence of themes which at first related to one category but later appeared to be more appropriately represented in separate categories. Once the final categorisation of themes was settled on, several coding rules were developed. Irrelevant information was ignored but was kept for contextualisation purposes while the rest of the transcribed responses were encoded and examined for both convergent and divergent content trends. Increased weight was given to similar thoughts or ideas found in the four focus groups otherwise referred to as dominant themes.

3.7. Themes Identified

A variety of aspects of assessment were commented on by the participants in all of the focus groups resulting in an abundance of rich data being collected. This research yielded results of four different kinds. Firstly, it yielded results about the common forms of assessment that the participants were exposed to. Secondly, it yielded results pertaining to the participants' understandings or perceptions of assessment. Thirdly, it yielded results about how the participants went about preparing for assessments and lastly, this study yielded results about the participants' opinions and experiences of assessment. Numerous themes emerged in each of the four result types which were collated into the following eight general categories:

- a. Common forms of assessment
- b. Assessment as measurement
- c. Purpose, advantages and disadvantages of different forms
- d. Preparation
- e. Motivation and time management
- f. Fairness of assessment use
- g. Ability of different forms to measure knowledge and/or ability accurately.
- h. Best and worst experiences

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to provide a description of assessment and its various forms used at a specific South African university from the student's point of view. Specifically, this study aimed to investigate the students' thoughts (cognition), feelings (affect) and general experiences of assessment so as to gain a better understanding of their views, since there is scarce research conducted in South Africa which focuses on the students' perspective. For a more valuable and comprehensive presentation and discussion of the results, this chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study within the context of the literature reviewed according to the eight categories of themes mentioned above. Quotations extracted from the focus group transcripts are used as supportive descriptions of the identified categories and themes.

4.1. Common Forms of Assessment

The researcher wished to concentrate the focus group discussions around forms of assessment that all or most of the participants had experience with. In order to elicit this information from the participants, the researcher did two things. Firstly, before the commencement of the focus group discussions, each participant was required to complete a demographic questionnaire which, along with demographic details such as age and gender, asked them to list the different forms of assessment that they have been exposed to during their time at university. The participants listed fourteen different forms. Table 2 below contains these results:

Table 2

Frequencies of responses given for the different forms of assessment that the participants had been exposed to

Forms of assessment	Frequencies
Essay assignments	12
Test	12
Group work	10
Multiple choice tests/questions	10
Exams	8
Assignment	8
Research proposal/report	7
Presentation	5
Orals	3
Short essay questions	2
Practical assignment	2
Open book	2
Fieldwork	1
Case Study	1

Secondly, during the focus groups, the researcher asked the participants to name different forms of assessment which they had completed during their time at university. The researcher expected to hear the same list of forms as shown in table 2 above. The analysis of the responses, however, revealed that the participants only mentioned the following seven forms: multiple choice tests or questions, essay assignments, exams (these were mentioned in all of the focus groups by all of the participants), group work (mentioned in two of the groups by six participants in total), tests (mentioned in one group by two participants), practical assessments and a research proposal (each mentioned by one participant).

It is interesting that the participants, as a group, listed twice as many different forms of assessment in their questionnaire responses compared to those mentioned in the focus group discussions. Some participants mentioned certain forms in the focus groups that they did not list in their questionnaires. This may suggest that the participants prefer the seven forms listed above. This may also suggest that these seven forms are more common than the others mentioned in the questionnaire responses, especially essays and time-constrained tests or examinations which supports findings such as Brown, Race and Smith's (2000), who found that 80% of university assessment is made up of these two forms of assessment as well as reports. The data gathered from the questionnaires and focus groups supports these ideas especially since some participants listed or mentioned research reports as well.

When discussing the various forms further it was found that within all of the focus groups the participants made the same distinctions regarding what constitutes and differentiates the various forms of assessments. This pointed out two major and very dominant themes: 'type of task' and 'conditions of completion'. A third dominant and emergent theme was 'assessment forms suitable for undergraduate students'.

Type of task: The participants differentiated between forms of assessment depending on the type of questions or tasks which they consisted of. For example, one participant stated the following:

"I think the difference, there's a difference between an essay task and an assignment, and I mean an assignment is a much better like reflection [of a person's knowledge and/or ability], cuz it's more detailed. You get a description of what you're being asked. You get a guideline. You get sections and that for me is much easier than answering one essay question cuz the assignment is made up of different tasks" (participant 3.2).

Furthermore, the participants spoke about time-constrained tests or examinations of two different kinds, multiple choice tests or examinations and open-ended tests or examinations, depending on the task that each required them to do. They also mentioned assignments, specifically essay assignments, which they also described in terms of the task required to complete them. This differentiation is illustrated in the following quotes:

“Well you get the kind where you have to answer a bunch of multiple choice questions and you get those that you get asked questions where you need to give an answer rather than pick an answer. Multiple choice tests are much easier cuz they give you the answers and all you gotta do is pick one as opposed to exams when you have to write out three or four essays in like three hours.” (participant 1.3)

“...I’ve written multiple choice tests which speak for themselves and exams where they ask you to write essays about a specific topic...” (participant 2.4)

“When you get an essay assignment you are required to go to the library and read up on what other people have done and said about what ever topic the essay is on and you are expected to find as many bits of information to construct your argument and write out your essay” (participant 4.5)

All of the participants had written at least one test or examination where they were required to answer a set of multiple choice questions. This form of assessment requires the students to pick an answer out of various possible answers as described by Biggs (1999). All of the participants had also written at least one open-ended test or examination where they were required to write out their answers as short or long essays as described by Biggs (1999) and Mehrens and Lehmann (1991) while some participants had written tests or examinations with a combination of both. Additionally, they had all written at least one essay assignment where they were given an essay topic or question, generally at the beginning of the course, which they were required to research through the use of various resources as described by Biggs (1999), Bray (1999), Mehrens and Lehmann (1991) and Meiers (1996). Some, but not many, had completed assignments of a more practical nature with guidelines and sections, as mentioned by participant 3.2 above.

In one of the focus groups all four of the participants had completed a group work assignment of some sort. The participants described this form as follows: students are either placed in a group or have to form their own groups and are required to complete a task as a team. Similar to the essay assignment, they are able to complete the task with the help of resources. Data obtained from the demographic questionnaire revealed that a vast number of the participants (10 in total) had had some experience with group work assignments (refer to table 2). However, only half of the participants

(1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 and 3.1) mentioned this form of assessment in the focus groups. It was later revealed through this particular focus group discussion that this form is unpopular and disliked by the participants. This could account for the other groups' reluctance to talk about this form of assessment.

These findings support the definitions given in the literature in terms of the different forms of assessment used at the tertiary level of education. However, the participants also understood each form according to the conditions under which they are required to be completed as illustrated below.

Conditions of completion: In general the participants spoke of tests and examinations which require the students to learn the material beforehand, to answer a set of questions without the use of resources such as books or the Internet and to complete the assessment at one location during a set period of time. Interestingly, the data collected in the demographic questionnaire revealed that participants viewed tests and examinations as two different forms of assessment that they have had to complete. However, in the focus group discussions, participants seemed to use these two words interchangeably when describing the same situation under which they had to complete the assessment. For example, "...a test is more stressful than an essay assignment because in exam situations, you don't get time to really think about your answer so that you can give a smart answer..." (participant 1.2) and "I much prefer tests or exams compared to essays..." (participant 4.3).

The participants also spoke of assignments such as essays where the students are given a much longer period of time to complete and which require that they go out and do the relevant research using the help of resources such as books, the Internet, classmates and lecturers. The following quote illustrates the difference between tests or examinations and essay assignments:

"...you got time at home to give your input in your essay and they test you that way and then in your exam you must obviously come and you can't have notes with you, so that's two different ways of testing you..." (participant 3.3)

These descriptions are similar to those mentioned by Biggs (1999) but highlight the central points of differentiation which the participants made in their responses. What differentiated these forms of

assessment (tests or examinations and essays) for the participants was the time which they were given to complete them as well as the ability to use resources when completing them. In a test or examination situation, the students only see the questions or tasks when given the assessment activity and are required to complete it within a limited allocated amount of time and with no resources to help them. With an essay assignment, the students are given the assessment task in advance and are given much more time to research and formulate their answer. Their time is also limited when completing this form of assessment, however, the longer length of time given allows the students to work at their own pace and the time to consult various resources for information.

Important to note is that several participants (1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 4.2 and 4.5) made comments suggesting that the conditions under which each assessment form must be completed affected their performance either positively or negatively. This is attested to in the literature. However, it was also found that particular forms are favoured by different participants because these allow them to be assessed under conditions that permit them to perform efficiently while other forms do not. This is illustrated in the following quotes and suggests that students perceive the conditions under which they are expected to complete the assessment activity impacts on their performance to a great extent:

“I’m not sure which form I prefer but all I know is that I hate test or examinations. No matter what’s being asked in it, if it’s multiple choice or essay questions, I don’t care. I just freak out every time I have to write an exam cuz I know that there is nothing in there [the examination venue or situation] that I can turn to if I don’t remember some piece of information. That’s why I prefer essay assignments, cuz I’m able to go out and get a bunch of books and stuff and read them and put together an argument and for me that really shows whether I know my work and can apply what I have read and learnt in the lectures.”

(participant 4.5)

“I totally agree, I mean I’m not good with exams. I much prefer an assignment where I can take my time and go ask for help if I’m stuck. It gives me a chance to show how much effort I have put into completing the assignment and that I can do the work and can find information about an essay topic for example, and ya. That says more about me than making me write a test where I forget half of what I studied just because I’m so nervous”

(participant 4.2)

This supports findings such as those of Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995) and LeBlanc and Bandiera (2007) who found that the conditions of assessment affect students' performance. If students perceive that particular forms are not suited to them since these do not allow them to perform at their best, this may cause one to question a number of things. Firstly, is it fair to assess all students under generic assessment conditions when it is clear from the data presented here that each participant prefers a particular form of assessment because they perceive this particular form as aiding or even enhancing their performance thus allowing them to demonstrate their true potential? And if not, what does this mean for standardised testing in education since one cannot allocate a mark to students based on their performance on a particular form of assessment only? Secondly, are the assessments methods, i.e. the various forms of assessment used, good indicators of a person's knowledge and ability, specifically if the person does not perceive the method of assessment used in a favorable manner? The participants shared their views on some of these issues and their responses are presented and discussed in the categories entitled 'fairness of assessment' and 'ability of different forms of assessment to measure knowledge and/or ability accurately'. These are issues which the participants felt assessment users such as lecturers should take into account.

It is interesting to note how the literature goes about defining and describing forms of assessment in terms of the tasks that they require students to complete. For example, Meiers (1996) argues that the main purpose or function of an essay is to allow students the space to demonstrate their argumentative and/or structuring skills. An essay is thus marked according to whether a well organised and structured argument has been presented (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). Time-constrained tests and examinations are described as made up of a standardised set of tasks or questions which one is required to complete in a set and limited amount of time (Biggs, 1999; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). The participants in this study recognised this and distinguished the various forms of assessment according to these, although they do not seem overly concerned about them. What they do appear to be concerned about, however, is what the conditions under which they are required to complete the various assessments are and what they are allowed to do (such as the allowance to use resources or not) to demonstrate their ability. This illustrates a slightly different point of view as that found in the literature supporting the idea that students view issues of assessment somewhat differently to other stakeholders.

Assessment forms suitable for undergraduate students: The objective of this study was to describe assessment and forms thereof that all or most of the participants had direct experience with and so the majority of the focus group discussions focused on the following four forms: multiple choice tests, open-ended tests or examinations, essay assignments and group assignments. The participants were all third year level Psychology students and since this discipline is one that is offered by all five faculties of the university, it was expected that they would have been exposed to a wide range of assessment forms. This was found to be true in the data collected from the demographic questionnaire. Psychology is the only subject that all of the participants had in common thus suggesting that this department utilises a few forms of assessment compared to the many forms available to institutions. This is evident in that the participants mentioned being exposed to many of the other forms in their other subjects and is supported by their responses regarding alternative forms of assessment that they would suggest be used in this particular discipline.

While one group disliked the idea of using group work at university, the other three groups felt this form of assessment to be a good alternative to use on undergraduate Psychology students. For example, “I like group assignments. It takes the load off and there’s less pressure” (participant 2.3). Of particular interest to the researcher was that the only group who disliked the idea of using group work at university and who did not suggest this form as a good alternative or addition to the forms of assessment already used, was the same group that discussed this form within their focus group discussion. Of further interest was how this particular group started out with a fairly positive view on group work assignments and then expressed negative feelings in relation to this form towards the end of the focus group discussion. This could have resulted from the rich debates that occurred within this focus group around issues pertaining to this form of assessment, such as the advantages and disadvantages of this form of assessment (which are discussed further under the category ‘purpose, advantages and disadvantages of different forms’). It would have been interesting to know whether the same shift in thought would have occurred in the other groups had this form of assessment been discussed to the same extent as it was discussed in this particular focus group.

Aside from one particular participant in one of the three other groups, the rest felt that group work teaches team work which for them was an important skill to learn. For example, “Um group work definitely because someone may be an excellent researcher and someone else can have excellent ideas and then if you work together you can do amazing things” (participant 3.3) and “And you’re

learning from each other” (participant 3.2). Furthermore, “Perhaps a bit more group work because I mean outside, we, you’re always gonna have to work with people” (participant 4.3). Interestingly, the one participant who felt that group work does not necessarily teach team work was a participant who mentioned being exposed to this form in the focus group. This participant also viewed this form negatively much like those participants in the focus group where all four participants had mentioned being exposed to this form. This suggests that over-exposure may detract one from a particular form of assessment. Regarding group work assignments, one participant felt that there should be a group mark as well as an individual mark that is given to each of the group members. This would eliminate issues arising from situations where one group member contributed more to the work and where another member contributed very little or not at all to the work. Biggs (1999) and Gipps (1994) make mention of peer assessments which serve this function and would be appropriate for this particular suggestion made by the participant.

Another convergent idea found within three of the groups was that practical assessments should be used in their Psychology courses. The participants believed that assessment forms which allow one to apply the theory learnt in a practical manner were very beneficial, as illustrated in the following quote:

“I love practicals. Don’t make me sit and read a book for 5 hours or 10 days and then expect me to throw back something at you because chances are it’s gonna bore me. I don’t like textbooks. We just don’t mix. So if it was more hands on where I can actually see the stuff and engage with it, then cool. I can do that, shit I’d pass with flying colours! But when it’s a whole, ok book, read, regurgitate, I don’t do that well” (participant 2.2)

One participant (2.1) disagreed with this form of assessment and felt that there was too much work involved, such as writing out reports on top of having to read the other material taught in the course. Interestingly, participant 2.1 had been exposed to this form of assessment on many occasions whereas participant 2.2 had not. This also suggests that over-exposure to a particular form of assessment may result in a dislike for that particular form. Regarding the responses about group work, this may also explain why the participants in the one group ended up feeling negatively about this form since many of them had been asked to complete a group work form of assessment before.

One group felt that tutorial assignments or mini-assignments were a good assessment, especially when a number of these assessments counted towards one final mark thus spreading the pressure to perform well over a number of assessments. However, when asked if they felt that more assessments were necessary, the general consensus was no, that time management regarding all of the assessments they would be required to complete would become problematic. This issue is further elaborated on under the theme entitled ‘time management’. One final idea given by participant 4.4 was to make use of presentation or oral type assessments. This participant felt that this was also an important skill to acquire.

It is interesting to note that this was one of the final questions asked or topics brought up by the researcher in the focus groups. This is interesting because all of the forms mentioned above were listed in the questionnaires by the participants. It is difficult to say why the participants chose to mention these as alternative forms to be used on undergraduate Psychology students. One can only deduce that they felt these forms would work for this particular discipline since they have had positive experiences of them in other disciplines perhaps, or little experiences of them in the case of group work. To explain what is meant by this further one needs to look at the results which indicate that very few participants who mentioned group work as an alternative had some form of experience with this form while the rest who mentioned this form did not.

4.2. Assessment as measurement

The researcher began all of the focus group interviews by asking the participants what they thought or felt the reasons were for institutions such as WITS using student assessments. The ideas given by individuals were concurred with by the rest of the group members. In general, the participants felt that assessments were used to elicit some information about the students. For example, six participants (1.1, 2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3 and 4.5) used one of the following phrases in their responses “to test”, “to assess” or “they test you”. A look at the responses revealed three primary and convergent themes, all of which pertain to the measurement of some characteristic of the students, mainly for the purpose of comparison. When responses from all the groups were examined collectively, a trend was found in terms of the three primary and convergent themes in that the responses from all or most of the groups contained these themes.

Measurement of knowledge: In total, six participants (1.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 4.2) in three of the focus groups responded that they perceived WITS as using assessments to determine or measure the students' knowledge. In other words, assessments were used to determine how much knowledge or information students had learnt or how much of the material taught during lectures they had grasped and understood. Phrases used by participants included "how much you understand" (participant 1.4) and "how much people are taking in" (participant 3.4). One group was particularly preoccupied with this idea as illustrated in the following quotes:

"To see, I mean, if what you're studying and what you're being taught is being absorbed, you know, how much people are taking in" (participant 3.4)

"To test their intellectual capacity as students, like participant 3.4 said 'absorb' is a very good word to describe it I think...what they've absorbed in the lectures and in readings, how much effort they're putting into um learning work, researching the work..." (participant 3.3)

"I think that they're like, looking for very specific knowledge because they they test you on just certain things, right, and um, they want to see that that you have that specific knowledge" (participant 3.2)

Participant 3.3 felt that this measurement allowed for a comparison between students regarding the amount of knowledge that they had acquired: "...then you can compare who's doing, who's really grasping the concepts and who's not." The other participants in this focus group agreed with this view. The idea of institutions using assessments to compare students was found in all three themes.

These responses support the argument put forth in the literature that student assessment is used as a measuring device to elicit how much or to what extent the students have gained or improved in terms of knowledge or the content of a course (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gipps, 1994; Lubisi, 1999; Nuttall & Barnes, 1981; Potterton & Parsons, 1994). It also supports the idea that assessments are used to make judgments about the students. For the participants of this study, these judgments are used as a manner of comparing students against each other.

Measurement of coping ability: Interestingly, participants differentiated between the use of assessment as a measure of knowledge and ability. For example, "...I think they also want to see your mental ability. Like, not necessarily what level are you at in terms of thinking and how much you know, but are you able to do the work that they assign to you" (participant 2.4). These participants perceived institutions as using assessments as a tool to measure the students' ability to cope with their current workload or "level" of work. Their responses also support the idea in the literature that student assessment is used as a measuring device to gauge how much or to what extent the students have improved in their ability in terms of the intended learning outcomes and skills of a course (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Gipps, 1994; Lubisi, 1999; Nuttall & Barnes, 1981; Potterton & Parsons, 1994).

The participants also felt that this measurement then informed whether or not the students are able to move into the subsequent year of study as mentioned by Gipps (1994), Izard (1991), Mehrens and Lehmann (1991) and Wise (2006). In total, four participants in two of the focus groups mentioned this theme. One participant responded as follows: "To see what level we're at and that we can actually do the work, I suppose" (participant 4.4). Participants in another focus group made similar comments:

"Um... cuz it's very hard for them to move you to um...second year or third year if...like... the university doesn't know what level the person is at" (participant 2.3)

"...I think that it's just to know that you can do the work you're supposed to do, that they can trust you with the next level. If you complete this level then they know that you can cope with the next level" (participant 2.1).

These responses support the general belief in the literature that results obtained from assessments are used to make important decisions about whether or not to retain some students in their current level of study, to promote them to the subsequent year or level, or to allow them to graduate (Wise, 2006; Gipps, 1994; Izard, 1991; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). This suggests that students perceive a strong connection between how they perform in assessments and how quickly they progress through their studies which illustrates the stakeholder status of students regarding assessment.

What is of interest in these responses is the fact that the participants perceived assessments as being used to assess or measure their coping abilities in terms of workload rather than their general ability as defined by the learning outcomes of their courses. This suggests that students perceive ability as being able to deal with the work in terms of content difficulty and work load and also suggests that students perceive a positive correlation between the level or year of study and the level at which the workload and assessments are set. This idea supports Bloom's taxonomy in which he argues that learning occurs in small steps where each step increases in difficulty compared to the preceding steps and so knowledge is built by integrating new information or skills with already existing knowledge and ability (Bloom, et al, (Eds.) 1956; Bloom, Madaus & Hastings, 1981). This illustrates that students are aware of the teaching model used by the Psychology department at WITS, and more importantly, that students agree with this model since no negative responses of a similar nature were given in any of the focus groups.

Also interesting is how none of the participants understood the time constraint aspect of assessment as being part of what particularly tests and examinations assess, whether they consist of multiple choice questions or essay questions. In other words, these forms are purposefully limited to a certain amount of time in which students are required to complete them so as to assess the students' ability to include only relevant information in their responses and to exclude irrelevant information. This finding suggests that students seem to overlook the time factor as a measurement of their skills and perceive it more as functioning to reduce their performance. Time allowances are an important factor for distinguishing performance among large groups of students and are also part of the assessment objectives (Biggs, 1999). This study revealed how this is seldom recognised by students who feel that the time limitation detracts from them demonstrating their ability which is particularly interesting since this suggests that the participants understand assessments as measuring their general ability but not their coping skills in terms of assessment tasks which are set in a time constrained manner.

Measurement of institutional educational standards: The other common and dominant theme mentioned by three participants from two of the focus groups (participants 2.2, 2.4 and 3.1) was that student assessments are used to provide a measure for the standard or quality of education that institutions are producing. In other words, they felt that assessments are used as a measure of university accountability, a standard that is determined by the marks obtained by the students from

the various assessments that they are required to complete. Thus, the participants felt that institutions aim to measure the students' knowledge and ability to cope with the level and load of work (i.e. whether or not the students pass) in order to evaluate their own progress in terms of the standard and status held by them in society. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

“I think in a way it could also be to know what they're putting out there, once you graduate, once people graduate... So it's kinda to like assess you know, where do Wits graduates kinda fit into the whole scheme” (participants 2.2)

“... sometimes they can give you the assessment and things like that, and whether you can do it or not, it doesn't mean that you'll degrade their [the university] standard because they have a very high standard. So you have to work extra hard to reach up to they're standard so that by the time you are a graduate, they know that these people did everything we required. We didn't have to decrease the standard but they had to reach up to the WITS standard” (participants 2.4)

Although this study did not explicitly seek out to describe student assessment as a form of institutional accountability, which Gipps (1994) argues is one of the many purposes of assessment, the responses elicited from the participants in this study supported the idea that an important connection exists between student assessment and accountability of the students themselves and the institutions from which they come (Heywood, 2000; Napoli & Raymond, 2004; Wise, 2006). This suggests that students are aware of the more politically-oriented reasons behind why institutions such as WITS make use of student assessment. It also suggests that they are aware of how the public perceives the institutions where they study, which could have influenced their choice in attending WITS over other universities in the country.

It is interesting to note that only one participant (3.3) explicitly stated that their performance in assessments would determine whether or not they were able to obtain a job once their studies were complete. This idea illustrates the perception that some students hold regarding the connection between their performance at university and their likelihood of succeeding in the real and work worlds. The literature argues that students perceive some of the most important decisions regarding their careers as dependent on assessment results, as they are becoming more preoccupied with career

concerns and value criteria such as the ability to get a job (Dey, Astin & Korn, 1991, as cited by Donald & Denison, 2001). This often creates tension in the students towards assessment and may be why students view assessment as being there “to catch them out rather than to allow them to demonstrate their achievements” (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996, p.36). Interestingly, this particular participant later described assessment in this manner as a means for lecturers to “trick you instead of letting you show them that you actually do know your work” (participant 3.3).

This particular response supports Ramsden’s (1979) argument that this tension may result in the assessment process having an unintentional consequence of hindering rather than assisting learning because “students come to perceive a conflict between learning and grades and speak of using strategies to get good marks at the expense of understanding the [course] material” (Ramsden, 1979, p. 414). The current study found that students still make use of such strategies and once again, this particular participant goes on to discuss how they prepare for assessments in a manner that will allow them to recall as many facts as possible in order to get the maximum amount of marks possible rather than in a manner that will allow them to fully understand the work. This response is discussed in more detail under the category entitled ‘preparation and motivation’. What one can infer from this, however, is that the students’ perceptions about how to properly tackle assessment situations and what is required from them in these situations sometimes differ from the actual and formal academic requirements necessary for top performance or the intended learning outcomes of the task.

4.3. Purpose, advantages and disadvantages of different forms

As already mentioned, the participants perceived assessments as tools used by institutions to measure some attribute about the students. The results from the thematic content analysis demonstrate that students perceive different purposes, advantages and disadvantages for each form of assessment used by institutions. The participants also felt that some forms are able to measure knowledge and/or ability in a more accurate manner compared to others (this will be discussed under the category of themes entitled ‘ability of various forms to measure knowledge and ability accurately’). The findings thus suggest that the participants perceived each form differently and as independent from each other.

Multiple Choice Question Tests or Examinations (MCQs)

Purpose: The majority of the participants (1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.2 and 4.5) understood this form of assessment as requiring them to pick out an answer from a variety of options given as mentioned in the literature by Biggs (1999) and others. They felt that this was the easiest out of all the forms discussed, although one participant did not feel this way. However, this participant seemed to struggle with all forms of assessment discussed. Interestingly, in three of the groups the initial response given by some participants was that they did not know what the purpose of MCQs was. As the discussions went on, more ideas about this issue were given and there was much debate regarding two main ideas given. Firstly, some participants (1.1, 1.3, 2.2, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2. and 4.3) understood this form of assessment as being used to determine whether they had studied the coursework in an in-depth manner. This was illustrated in the following quotes:

“... maybe one reason is they [the assessment administrators] wanna know like do we really study in-depth because in multiple choice they all look the same, they all look right. So they want to see, did you really study so much that you can differentiate between the three [options of answers] that they have there. So I think that could be one reason”
(participant 2.4)

“If you can tell which answer is most right I suppose. If you’re given a set of options, can you accurately decide? They can tell how well do they know [the work]” (participant 1.1)

However, other participants (2.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2 and 4.5) disagreed with the idea that this form of assessment was used to determine whether one had studied the course material in great detail. These participants rather understood this form as one that tests a broad scope of the work and that the questions asked in MCQs primarily pertained to the key concepts, facts, ideas etc... of the course material. For these participants, studying in-depth was not as useful as concentrating on these key concepts. This is illustrated in the following quote:

“I think, also with what she said (participant 2.4 above) um, with multiple choice they, they examine um, more things. Like they can, um, ask you more questions on a topic. Um, with an essay, um I mean they can only ask you so much like to compare and you know, and I think also ya, um, with multiple choice um, you have to know what like, the key words mean, you

have to know what um, certain words or certain phrases mean you know to, get the question right. I think, ya, um to basically see where you are and examine um, a broader part of the course” (participant 2.3)

The idea that MCQs are able to test a wide scope of coursework is mentioned in the literature by Biggs (1999). In both cases mentioned above, the participants perceived the function of this form of assessment to test their content knowledge since some of participants understood that MCQs determine whether one knows the coursework in detail and others understood that this form determined one’s knowledge about a variety of topics pertaining to the coursework.

The second convergent idea that emerged out of the responses was that MCQs are standardised thus serving the function of a sifting mechanism which separates students into those who are high achievers from those who are not so high achievers. The participants understood MCQs as a standardised form of assessment because there is only one right answer and the option which one picks is either correct or incorrect with no grey areas in between. However, several participants (1.1, 2.2, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.3 and 4.4) disagreed with the idea that MCQs make good sifting mechanisms since they feel that one could memorise or learn the work in a parrot-learning fashion and recognise the correct answer. This is also similar to Biggs’s (1999) argument about how the use of time constraint assessments should not be used in education since they promote the use of memorisation. For these participants, recognition did not demonstrate whether or how much a participant knew but rather how much they were able to remember. For one group in particular, this idea was greatly agreed upon. This is illustrated by the following quotes and is discussed in more detail in the theme entitled ‘ability of various forms to measure knowledge and ability accurately’:

“I guess that it’s like multiple choice is for knowing not understanding” (participant 3.2)

“Um I think that the essay tests your knowledge a lot more because not everyone can give you like this amazing argument that they’ve integrated all these things together, I think that you’d have to be quite a bright person and they’d see that. I think with multiple choice as I said anyone can do it as long as they read the information enough times and then they recognise the answer in the question. They do word it in a way that it’s most correct which

makes it a bit harder, but um, it doesn't it doesn't sift out who's the best from the worst kind of thing..." (participant 3.3)

"... when we learnt memory I think it was last year, there was a difference between I cannot remember the second one, recall and something else and they were saying that that's different forms of testing. It's like MCQ's as opposed to says, one is when they giving you (the answers), so you don't have to remember the answer you just have to like recognise it through cues as opposed to coming up with the whole thing like an essay" (participant 3.4)

The quotes from participants 3.3 and 3.4 above contain examples of another convergent idea that emerged from the data, that forms of assessment such as MCQs differ to a great extent from other forms such as essay assignments.

Advantages: The participants mention the same advantages regarding MCQs in all of the groups. Firstly, and one that was strongly agreed upon, is that the participants perceived that students need not produce an answer when completing MCQs but rather need to pick one option out of a variety given. This was seen as an advantage because there is less pressure to study resulting in the use of rote or surface learning when preparing for the assessment (Biggs, 1999; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991). Secondly, some participants also felt that recognising and picking out the right answer is much easier than having to think about and produce an answer such as in an open-ended essay test or examination. Thirdly, this form is relatively quick to complete and one does not get tired as compared to the open-ended essay test or examination. The following quote illustrates these:

"It takes the pressure off. It feels like it will be easier when you even...just by looking at it, like the placebo effect kinda thing. You just look at it and you're like, ok good I've got some multiple choice (questions) to get some marks from and you actually feel better...It doesn't feel like, when you've come out of a multiple choice exam it doesn't feel as intense as when you've written three four essays. You feel much more calm and relaxed after wards and... They're easier to get through I think" (participant 3.3)

Disadvantages: For a few of the participants some of the advantages mentioned above were viewed as disadvantages. Firstly, for one participant, having the answer given was not a good thing as there

is little time for gathering one's thoughts and for making an informed decision regarding the correct answer, as illustrated in the following quote:

“I find that that's not an advantage because like it's much easier to get marks when you waffle when you like, you just you think oh my goodness what on earth is this essay even about, lets just write something and then suddenly it comes together. Whereas when you've got a multiple choice question you've just got a question and then you've gotta... You can't, you don't have the time to let it all come together and your thoughts organised in your mind. You've just got four answers” (participant 4.4)

This participant also felt very strongly against MCQs because of the use of parrot-learning and memorisation when preparing for this form of assessment. She felt this type of learning was not beneficial, was a waste of time and places students at a disadvantage in the long run. She found application questions such as those asked in open-ended essay tests or examinations to be more beneficial to the students because one gets more out of an application type task such as essays and is able to remember the information used to answer the application questions. Another participant agreed with her on this point as illustrated in the following quote:

“I just wanna say also with the remembering thing I don't remember any of my, anything I've answered in a multiple choice test. Like if you ask me any of my MCQ tests I've ever written. I don't remember anything cuz it's just hundreds of questions and you just go through them and when you walk out you can't remember what the questions are, you never ever learn anything from them... but once you've written a whole essay you have to think about it, you really have to and then that information stays with you” (participant 4.3)

A third dominant and convergent idea regarding the disadvantages of this form was that one can often guess which option is correct, provided there is no negative marking involved. This means the participants felt that this form of assessment does not accurately measure the students' knowledge which will be further discussed under the category of themes entitled 'ability of various forms to measure knowledge and/or ability accurately'. Negative marking is a technique used in marking MCQs where if the student chooses an incorrect answer then they lose a mark or a part thereof for doing so. An overwhelming response was found in that all of the participants felt very strongly

against the use of negative marking and perceived this to be a disadvantage because there is more pressure on them to prepare and perform well when negative marking is involved. The following is an extract from one of the groups that illustrate the participants' frustration with this issue:

“Oh my word, I've left out so many cuz it's was negative marking and I just didn't want to answer them” (participant 1.2)

“Ya, [a particular lecturer] said to us, we all did so badly, she goes, 'ok I'll take off the negative marking'. So she didn't have to put it in in the first place and we said we left half of them out because it was negative marking” (participant 1.3)

A fourth convergent idea regarding the disadvantages of this form of assessment was that the answer options given to choose from are often very similar, so much so that students felt unable to tell which one is correct. Interestingly, this was mentioned by participants who disagreed with the idea that MCQs are used to determine whether or not the students had studied in an in-depth manner thus allowing them to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge. Regarding the answers to this form of assessment, either one gets it correct or not thus leaving no opportunity for some marks to be gained if an incorrect answer is chosen. This was perceived as a disadvantage because MCQs do not allow students to motivate for why they have chosen a particular option resulting in either getting it correct thus gaining marks or getting it incorrect thus not gaining any marks, or in the case where negative marking is used, thus losing marks.

Open-ended Tests or Examination:

Purpose: While the participants understood MCQ's as functioning more to measure recognition of information and good memory, they believed that the purpose of an open-ended essay test or examination is different in that this for was used to assess and determine whether the students are able to apply the coursework learnt in the lectures and through prescribed readings. This idea was mentioned by Lubisi (1999) in the literature and emerged in all of the focus groups. This idea was closely tied to the second idea that emerged from the data, that this form of assessment was also used to assess the students' knowledge and understanding of the coursework by giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to structure their knowledge in a manner that demonstrated

their understanding of that knowledge. This view is similar to that of Biggs (1999), Bray (1999) and Gipps (1994) and is illustrated in the following quotes:

“Well, I think it’s firstly to test um, how you think and whether or not you understand um, the work you’ve been doing and whether you can compare to um, other um, whether you can compare um, different approaches, and ya, I think it’s more about understanding than it is anything else” (participant 2.3)

“It’s more than looking to see if you can regurgitate whatever in the text book or what they’ve given you in class. They wanna see, do you have the right tools and knowledge to put this back in a logical manner and make sense...” (participant 2.2)

“I think it’s the like a balance between um like understanding and skill” (participant 3.2)

“My theory would be like that to see to to have that that band between knowledge and understanding... if you really know yours stuff then you can like spurt out all this knowledge and you’d still get the marks and ... I mean I suppose there would be some sort of understanding of like putting that knowledge in some specific order ...” (participant 3.1)

“Um, I think that with the essays, when you write essays and its time constraint it forces you to think quickly you know and, I think it’s a good ability to have you know like when you’re in that situation and you have this pressure on you and you have to like basically write about everything you know” (participant 4.2)

The third dominant and convergent idea found was that this form of assessment also tested the students’ ability to interpret the essay questions asked, as illustrated in the following exemplar:

“... Here, they’re giving you the opportunity to actually write and they want to see how you interpreted the question. If they say critically discuss, can you actually critically discuss that, you know? That’s what they’re for I think” (participant 2.4)

Interestingly, two participants in one of the groups felt that like MCQ, this form of assessment merely tested ability to remember the relevant coursework. This supports Biggs's (1999) argument about this form being unsuitable for use in education. One participant went on to rethink their opinion and brought up a question which she did not have an answer for:

“Um now that I think about it, now I don't know if they're testing the way you structure essays or the stuff you put in essays. I don't know, I mean what they're looking at?”
(participant 3.3)

It is clear from the data that the participants perceived this form of assessment as testing their ability to apply what they know, to interpret the questions correctly and thus to give an answer in a structured manner in order to show that they understand the topic in a relatively short amount of time compared to the essay assignment. Many of the same ideas emerged regarding the purposes of an essay assignment. In general, the participants found longer essay tests or examinations to be the toughest of the lot. Most of the participants disliked this form of assessment while one found it to be the most fulfilling due to the amount of work that one needs to do in order to prepare for this form of assessment.

Advantages: One convergent idea that emerged from the data was that in this form of assessment the students can communicate their way around an issue or explain an issue even if they are unable to name it or do not know the correct answer to give. The participants perceived this as an advantage since, unlike MCQs, they are able to motivate their answer. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

“Even if you, if you you cant really remember the exact word, it's not like a test where you have to have that word or no mark. If you can basically explain yourself in a round about way, they give you the marks” (participant 1.1)

“It's not like you have to have like give this information and only this information”
(participant 1.4)

“I think if you don’t know the answer like in MCQs, it’s bad. It’s bad when you don’t know. Essay you can kind of um, you know, kinda talk your way, you know and then they’re like, ok she knows something” (participant 2.3)

Secondly, the participants believed that there is no right or wrong answer for this form of assessment and that it is thus easy to gain marks by writing a lot of things rather than giving or picking one short answer that could be incorrect. The idea is that the more information one writes as their answer the more marks one will obtain which was perceived to be an advantage by the participants.

Disadvantage: The main disadvantage of this form found in the data is that the participants felt that they are often asked questions that pertain to a very small amount of coursework compared to what they were instructed to learn in preparation for this form of assessment. Interestingly, at least one participant (1.2, 1.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.1, 4.3 and 4.4) in each group mentioned a particular Psychology examination where this happened. This is illustrated in the quote below:

“Um especially with Psychology cuz there’s so many chapters that the lecturer wants you to study but in the exam they only give you a certain amount, but only, with that I find it with that with psychology. All the other courses they test you on everything that they taught you but psychology you have to study like 10 chapters and then they ask you on like 4...”
(participant 4.1)

Some participants also responded that they are often unsure about how much they need to write or how long their answers should be and thus perceived this as a disadvantage. This probably explains why the participants feel that the more information they give in their answers, the more marks they will receive. Another disadvantage given is that they experienced this form as tedious due to the great deal of time pressure to complete it and to answer all of the questions effectively and sufficiently. This resulted in them including irrelevant or unnecessary information in their answers especially when they take on the form of short or long essays as illustrated in the following quote:

“... the problem that I have with this [form of assessment] is um, I tend to babble. Like I can’t, I can’t go straight to the point I’ll like write a whole lot of stuff and then there’ll be

like one sentence there which kinda summarizes everything but I don't realize it cuz I'm so rushed for time I'm just writing" (participant 4.2)

However, the time pressure is seen to be an advantage for one participant who felt that the lecturers do not mark the essays in a very strict manner because of the time constraints placed on the students. The lecturers know that the students' essay answers will not be as structured and as well thought out compared to an essay assignment situation when they are given more time. Another disadvantage given by one participant is a result of their perception of how this form of assessment is designed, that each essay question was set by a different lecturer and that since all of the lecturers have different requirements for their essays, it becomes difficult to know what each one expects in the answer. This suggests the possibility of a halo effect in that the participants' responses imply that they consciously answer a particular essay question according to how the lecturer who set out the question would want it to be answered. This is illustrated by the following quote:

"I think that different lecturers would expect different things, like one will expect more theory so she'll expect 7 pages of theory and you're like, I gave it to you in a nutshell, one page, I know this stuff. Why do I have to go into detail and mention that ladiblابلابل...? It gets so tedious, and another lecturer you go into detail and give all the theory, and they're like, I don't want all the theory, I know all the theory... It gets confusing you're like, um, what do you want from me exactly?" (participant 2.2)

Additionally, one disadvantage found to be important for all of the participants is that often the test or examinations count towards a large proportion of the students' marks (between 40% and 60%) resulting in the students' entire year mark being greatly dependent on how they perform during one single stretch of time as illustrated in the following quote:

"It's not just that um, they count to much but it's just 1 exam that counts 60 % for your whole year mark and it's one shot, one 3 hour stretch" (participant 4.3)

Essay Assignment

Purpose: There was general agreement that this form of assessment was used to test one's application skills, one's ability to integrate as well as interpret information and to show one's

understanding of the topic, just like an open-ended essay test or examination. This is similar to how Meiers (1996) described this form in the literature. The major difference between these forms of assessment was the amount of time which the students were given to complete them. Essay assignments allow for more time and the students are required to go out and research the topic (Biggs, 1999). The idea of the essay assignment being used to test research skills was a second convergent theme among the responses. Regarding this idea, the participants felt that the purpose of an essay assignment was to allow the students the opportunity to consult various resources. This resulted in the students furthering their knowledge, as illustrated in this exemplar:

“Ya, it’s just for extra knowledge from the class, you just go and research and know more than you’re been told in that class” (participant 1.4)

Thirdly, whereas the longer essay test or examinations test knowledge and understanding regarding the coursework material taught in lectures, an essay assignment was seen as going a little further to include knowledge and understanding about issues not discussed in lectures. Thus the main focus of this form of assessment was seen as gathering outside information, interpreting this information and integrating this with information given in lectures, as illustrated in the following exemplars:

“...you don’t get much information on that essay topic in your lectures. They don’t really give you anything so you have to go to books and look for information” (participant 1.2)

“Ya, to see if you can interpret what authors are saying, what other people are saying and then after that, after quoting it put it into your own words. Did you really understand or are you just writing it cuz its there?” (participant 2.4)

“I think that they’re testing your ability to um sort of when you’re looking at the topic you’ll be able to understand what they’re asking um and to be able to sort of structure an argument that’s based on your opinion as well as others” (participant 3.2)

“It analyses your ability to to how analytical you are, how in-depth you can get into the subject how much time you can be bothered to spend on it by researching, you know how, you know how interested you are in the topic” (participant 4.4)

One divergent idea came from one participant who believed this form of assessment tests ability to do the work on your own without the help of the lecturers. This idea is divergent because most of the participants agreed that one is able to go out and make use of any resources, lecturers included. This is interesting as it suggests that this particular participant does not view lecturers as a resource and may be a view shared by many other students, a view that could be rectified by lecturers if they so wished.

Advantages: The results of the analysis reveals that the participants held mixed feelings about this form of assessment and generally speaking, the thing that they liked the most about it was the large amount of time that they were given in which to complete the assessment. They also perceived the fact that they were able to go out and look for help, be it from books, the internet or from lecturers as an advantage compared to other forms. One participant felt that the time given was too much and that it felt as though nothing else could be done until they had completed the assignment. One agreed advantage was that students are able to understand the theory or the topic better through the research that they need to do, a view that supports that of Bray (1999).

Disadvantages: One convergent idea was that there is too much information available on the theory or topic. One participant expressed her frustration regarding the difficulty she has in finding relevant research for her essay question or topic:

“I think the main disadvantage is actually finding the research, cuz lot of the time when you go to the library, I mean you can like, no matter what you try you can look up, you you look up the shelf number and you go there and you, you wont find your book and you sit and search for books that relate to your topic, and most of the time you end up using journal articles because the books don't get returned when they should be” (participant 1.3)

Also, the essay questions or topics were often thought to be vague and some participants felt as though the lecturers did not narrow the scope of the essay down enough. One participant (4.3) disagreed with this view and felt that researching among so much information is interesting and that finding the right material to focus on is part of the challenge of this form of assessment. Another participant agreed with both of these views and stated the following:

“I think the point is that it is a disadvantage because for some people it works and for some people it doesn’t. And like I know that for me I’d rather have a test over an essay any day because an essay like if it doesn’t have enough structure, if they if you get you know like a topic in and they say these are the 3 areas we’d like you to cover that’s perfect but you don’t get that. And for me the big like the biggest disadvantage I found that with every lecturer their expectation changes so, I’m the sort of person that if I know what I’m being asked like the type of thing that I’m being asked I’ll adapt to that. It’s so open to interpretation that you can go very wrong” (participant 2.2)

This quote supports the view of Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995) who found that the assessment conditions affected the students’ performance. This also supports the view of LeBlanc and Bandiera (2007) who found that the students’ perceptions the assessment conditions had a significant effect on their performance. The above quote from participant 2.2 also illustrates another common and dominant idea found in the responses. This idea is that the entire task is too subjective. Firstly, the person who sets the essay questions or topics (often the lecturers) has something specific in mind that, secondly, the answerer (the students) can interpret in so many ways. Thirdly, the answer given can be interpreted in many more ways by the marker who is often, but not always, the person who set the assessment task. This supports Biggs (1999) and Mehrens and Lehman’s (1991) argument that since this form requires students to answer in their own words, this may result in both the students and the markers being individualistic making it a difficult task to mark objectively.

“I think that the disadvantage is that it’s someone’s opinion and like who ever is marking it they can just disagree with you” (participant 3.2)

“...when you spend so much of time working on this essay and you think you did very well. And then you get it back and you get this mark and then you wonder is it because of the person who marked it, if someone else marked it would you have gotten that mark? You know, so I think that’s very disappointing when you work so hard for it and then you just” (participant 4.2)

“I think I agree with that. There’s, it’s just so subjective that, I think there’s bound to be someone who doesn’t agree with your view and also um, I think that if you, if your essay had to be marked by 5 different people I think you would get different marks each time which is one of the problems compared to MCQ’s” (participant 4.3)

Other disadvantages given were that it is too time consuming, that often it is difficult to keep within the word or page limits, that sometimes one is not quite sure what the essay question or topic means and that the rules for referencing have changed so often in the recent past that it is difficult to keep up with these changes. Also, some lecturers are themselves unaware of the changes to the referencing rules and so the students end up losing unnecessary marks. Regarding the lecturers, the participants also felt that the amount of essays which a lecturer was required to mark in a short amount of time disadvantaged them in that the lecturers had to move quickly through their large piles of essays and were thus unable to give each essay sufficient time and consideration to warrant a good judgment and assignment of a mark. For the participants, this often resulted in the lecturers giving marks which they felt were unfair.

Group Assignment

Purposes: This form of assessment was discussed in one of the groups and in the others the participants gave some, but very few, opinions regarding group assignments. The general consensus among the group members was that they dislike this form of assessment and are also somewhat clueless regarding its purposes. The general idea was that this form allows the students to work as a team and to divide up the work among the team members. However, they had major doubts about whether this was indeed the function of group assignments.

Advantages: The participants did feel as though this form of assessment teaches them to work as a team and how to cooperate with other people. It is also an advantage that the work can be divided up into separate parts, but as stated by one participant, this is often a risky thing to do.

“...I had a group project for media. There were 3 of us and we divided the 3 things, for each of us we each gonna do 1. And then we had to hand it in but the one girl just, I don’t know she didn’t do it or just we, she didn’t get it to the person who we were handing it in in time so then we only get the 2 things that were going in and then it was like, you know, ya the whole

project was basically compromised. It only had 2 things, but they needed the 3, so ya”
(participant 1.2)

Disadvantages: As already mentioned the group in which this form of assessment was discussed did not like group assignments. They found that there is always one person in the group who cannot be relied upon, who does not pitch up to the group meetings, who does not put in as much work as the rest of the group members and who ends up getting the same mark as all of the other group members. Unreliable group members are a major disadvantage of this form of assessment. Additionally, the participants found it difficult to manage people in groups and the group dynamic, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“Here, you don’t know that many people. You have maybe a little group of friends but then you get put with this one and that one. And now you’ve got to meet, but now you don’t know anything about the people. You don’t know about their lives, what jobs they have, when they can meet, where do you meet cuz it’s just a bit awkward. You don’t know them. It, I just find it, I don’t like it in university” (participant 1.2)

“...you feel a bit uneasy about you know, telling them what to do for this or if you don’t like what they say” (participant 1.1)

Participants in all of the focus groups perceived tests and examinations (whether they consist of MCQs or short or long essay questions) as tools used to determine how well the students “know” their work, since the students have to rely on their own knowledge regarding the coursework material taught to them and have no resources at hand to assist them in completing these forms of assessment. The participants also perceived that assignments (such as essay assignments) are used to allow the students the chance to demonstrate their knowledge (and understanding) and ability in terms of the coursework and that group assignments allow for this to be demonstrated as well.

The findings of this study support the idea that each form of assessment is unique. Biggs (1999) and Mehrens and Lehmann (1991) argue that different skills are used by students when completing different forms of assessment and Gipps (1994) argues that it is important for the each form to be used in an appropriate manner since the reasons for using a particular form are closely tied to the

functions of that form. The findings demonstrate how different things are understood by each form and each is used to determine something different about a person since the participants perceived specific purposes, advantages and disadvantages for MCQs, open-ended tests or examinations, essay assignments and group work.

It should be noted, however, that the various forms of assessment are structured in such a manner that each performs its relevant function in eliciting some form of information from the students. It should therefore be fair to assume that the above mentioned advantages and disadvantages of each form are taken into consideration by lecturers when marking assessment activities. It appears that a necessity exists for the students, including the participants, to be made more aware of how each form is used in a standardised manner that allows each student a fair and equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities in terms of the course content. However, when a student comes from a disadvantaged background and schooling system who speaks English (the main medium of assessments at South African universities such as WITS) as a second or third language, he or she may not perform as well in an open-ended examination with essay questions compared to one with multiple choice questions. Although contextual and individual factors such as these may have a critical impact on performance, as highlighted above, there seems to be little that can be done to take these into account when assessing students. This appears to be recognised by the participants in the focus groups, particularly in terms of fairness of assessment in general and the forms used to assess students, as well as assessing all students in the same way.

4.4. Preparation

The data collected revealed that most of the participants (1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.3, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1 and 4.2) prepare for the various assessment forms in a different manner and that very few participants (1.1, 2.2, 2.4 and 3.1) prepare in the same manner for all of the assessment forms. This supports Biggs's (1999) view in the literature. It was also found that the participants had various expectations of their lecturers to assist the students in preparing them for completing the different forms of assessments. This resulted in two main and recurring themes: preparation on the part of the student and preparation on the part of the lecturer.

Preparation - students:

The general consensus among all of the groups was that one need not study very intently for MCQs, although two participants (1.2 and 3.2) claim that they do study in-depth when preparing for this form of assessment. Most of the participants (1.1, 1.4, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2 and 4.4) skim read their lecture notes and/or text books a few days before the MCQ and concentrate on learning the keywords or key concepts and their meanings using a rote or surface approach to learning. They do this only when there is no negative marking, as illustrated in the quote below. If there is negative marking involved, however, then these participants felt that more effort must to be put into preparing for MCQs. The strategies utilised by the participants were also found in a study by Tang (1991, as cited by Biggs, 1999) and so the findings of this study support those of Tang's study.

“...Like, you just need to know um, the main things. You don't need to know extra things to add to a body like in an essay or what ever. You just need to know the main things that they can ask you” (participant 2.3)

On quite an opposite thought pattern, the participants believed that in order to prepare for an open-ended test or examination one needs to rely on a number of things. Some participants (1.3, 2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3, and 4.2) relied solely on studying their lecture notes, some (1.1, 1.2, 2.3, 3.1, 4.1, 4.4 and 4.5) solely on studying their text book and some (1.4, 2.1, 3.4 and 4.3) on using both types of resources. The majority of participants (1.1, 1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.3, 4.4 and 3.5) believed it was important to utilise additional resources such as the newspaper and library books. Another convergent idea is that practice makes perfect and that the more one practices how to complete this form of assessment, the better they perform.

One strong and convergent idea that emerged out of the responses was the strategy of using past papers for preparing for MCQs and open-ended tests or examinations in order to become familiar with the way in which the questions are stated in the assessment as well as the content of the questions. A total of 11 participants (1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.4, 4.1 and 4.2) mentioned using this strategy to prepare for MCQs as illustrated in the quote below:

“I think you must...study, maybe get the past question paper, the multiple choi-, the past multiple choice question papers and then get familiar, be familiar with what is happening, how they ask questions and you know” (participant 3.4)

Similarly, the participants all agreed that access to past papers and the use of practice or mock open-ended test or examination questions would also be useful if the lecturers did not do this already. This is particularly important with regards to the belief held by most of the participants that each lecturer has their own manner of setting the questions and so the participants would like the lecturers to give them mock questions in order to see their style of question setting. This strategy is mentioned by Biggs (1999) in the literature as a common one used by students when preparing for any time constraint written assessment.

There were quite a few ideas that emerged out of the data regarding the preparation necessary for essay assignments. The idea that was the most dominant in all of the groups was that in order to do well, the students need to gather and read a vast amount of information that is relevant and related to the essay question or topic. This entails reading information obtained from both the coursework and from other outside sources, such as library books, journal articles and information obtained from the internet. Information from the coursework, especially lecture notes, can only be obtained by attending the lectures which was one idea from one of the groups. Another convergent idea is that one also needs to consult the lecturer thus resulting in a better understanding of the question or topic. The need to break down the question or topic in an analytical manner in order to better understand the task at hand was another dominant idea that emerged from the data. However, some participants felt that the lecturers are not as helpful as they should be. Another convergent idea is to first write out the work as a draft before typing it out and handing it in. By doing so the students are able to improve the draft until they are satisfied and feel as though they cannot add or change anything else. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

“Maybe make a rough copy, like a draft and then you go to your lecturer and say, ‘Could you read this over for me, maybe see like what I can change and what what’s good?,’ and then you just keep going back and change it, you know, what’s bad or if there’s anything that comes up in the lectures then you can just add it in” (participant 1.2)

This particular idea is unpractical, however, given the large number of undergraduate Psychology students found at WITS. One should remember that a lecturer cannot be expected to read through a few drafts from each student and mark each essay as well. This would be too time consuming for both parties since the students would need to wait for feedback before continuing with the assessment activity and the lecturers would have to read twice as many essays if each student was to submit a draft of an essay assignment.

One group felt that in order to do well in essay assignments one needs to ensure that the arguments are well integrated and structured which supports the views of Meiers (1996) and Mehrens and Lehmann (1991). A participant in another group felt that reading and researching is helpful, however, what is most helpful is to talk about the question or topic with fellow class mates or family members in order to gain other perspectives, as illustrated in the following quote:

“Sorry I think the best way of um with essays is to really delve into the topic and talk to people about it. I actually don’t... as much as going into the library and reading books is great, talking to people you’re applying the information straight away so you read the book you read it and then you say to your friend, what do you think of this and then you chat it through, and then you know you have different opinions, but then as you’re forming your argument in the conversation, you really can apply it to your essay and then it really has a better flow and then the argument is well constructed” (participant 4.4)

The most important thing that the participants felt students should do in order to successfully complete group assessments is to have a large number of group meetings and to keep communication ongoing between all of the group members. Regarding the group meetings, the participants also felt that it is not good enough to divide up the work among the group members and let each person go off and work independently due to the risk of unreliable group members. Additionally, they felt that a group assignment needs to flow in a structured manner and should not be made up of separate parts thus illustrating their concern with dividing up the work and letting each group member be responsible for their part. The work done by each group member needs to be integrated in order to look like one complete piece of work.

One participant disagreed with using different methods of preparation for different forms of assessment and believed that one needs to be consistent in their studying. For this participant (3.2), a person should not alter their method of preparing for assessment depending on which form will be used but should rather study the material in-depth using an deep approach to learning. She also stressed the importance of consulting with lecturers, as illustrated in the following quote:

“I feel like if you’re studying a course, you must get all the knowledge that you have about that course, you must attend as many lectures as you can, I mean I personally attend every lecture... its very important to get the big picture, get the idea of what is the essence, what is the basics and you only get that by listening to the lecturer go on about it to writing the lecture notes down to reading the text book, being constant in your studies. So you can open up your text book and learn off by heart a few days before and go into the multiple choice test, I just don’t think that’s beneficial. I think that to prepare for anything [any form of assessment] you’ve got to be consistent in your learning, you’ve got to get all the broad knowledge of that subject in your brain...” (participant 3.2)

Although a few participants (1.2, 2.1 and 2.4) agreed with her, the majority employ different strategies depending on the form to be used. This is concurrent to the early study by Marton and Säljö (1976b) who found that students adapted their learning approaches to *their* perceptions of what they thought would be required of them from the particular assessment task or form of assessment to be used. In their study, students were asked to prepare for an assessment task about which they were not given any information, not even which form of assessment would be used. They were required to read and study three textbook sections and were asked different types of questions pertaining to these sections which required different answers (selecting an answer, providing a short answer or writing an answer as an essay). The researchers argued that the type of test and test questions which students expected, such as a test made up of multiple choice questions, one made up of open-ended essay type questions or an oral examination, affected the type of cognitive processing that students used in order to prepare and complete the assessment. They further postulated that this affected how the students performed in the assessment task. These findings also support those of Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995) who found that the type of assessment that students were required to complete, untimed verses timed, affects how they performed.

The participants in this study described how they prepare for the various forms of assessment. As illustrated in the quotes from participants 1.2, 2.3, 3.4, and 4.4 above, the findings also support the view in the literature that students make use of the surface or deep or strategic approaches when preparing for assessments. They also make use of the achieving approach as described by Heikkila and Lonka (2006). This suggests that students typically employ one of the above mentioned learning approaches and that some utilise a combination of two or three depending on the type or form of assessment to be completed.

Preparation – lecturers: The participants spoke about what they would like their lecturers to do in order to help them prepare for the various forms of assessment. Regarding MCQs, the dominant ideas that emerged out of all the groups were that they would like their lecturers to give them access to past papers if they did not do so already. The fact that the participants expressed this desire further highlights the importance of this particular strategy for preparation as already mentioned above. This was mentioned by one participant in each focus group and a total of 13 participants (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.3, and 4.4) including those who mentioned this idea agreed.

Another dominant idea mentioned by 7 participants (2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.2 and 4.4) was for lecturers to give the students more guidance regarding how they should go about applying the material learnt in the lectures to the type of questions typically asked. One idea given by participant 1.3 which the rest of the group members agreed with is that lecturers should devote an entire lecture (if they do not do so already) to go over the test or examination, to explain why certain answers were marked as correct and others as incorrect and to give the correct answers so that the students are able to learn from their mistakes.

In terms of open-ended test or examinations, one very dominant and convergent idea found was that participants wanted their lecturers to give them more guidance in terms of what material is most important, what they need to concentrate on and what they can ignore. Interestingly, all of the participants also preferred for lecturers to emphasise what is most important in terms of coursework during lectures so as to narrow down the amount of work that they are required to study. This response may be due to the comments made about the one particular Psychology examination where the students were told to learn all 10 chapters of a text book and were only asked questions that pertained to less than half of the chapters. Giving the students the criteria that the lecturers will be

using to mark the essay test or examination before the test or examination is another idea given by one of the participants. One group was preoccupied with the idea that during lectures, one needs to multitask by listening to what the lecturer is saying and by writing the information down. For this group, this is distracting and so they felt that having the lecturers print out the notes for them, and possibly placing them on the internet, would be most helpful as they would be better able to listen to the lecturer and thus understand the work in a better way. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

“But it’s pointless as well when you go to lecture and um, they just speaking and you continuously have to write and, cuz some of us are not skilled in listening and writing at the same time, you know multitasking” (participant 4.5)

“In my sociology lecture um he takes, he prints out all his lecture notes, so, but you have to go to the lectures to get the notes form him. And then um, while he talks like he’ll give examples and stuff so that’s what you’ll write down next to the lecture notes and stuff. It was very useful cuz then you’re actually listening to what he says” (participant 4.2)

One participant in this group also mentioned that lecturers should use a form of assessment that best suits their lecturing style, a view that supports that of Biggs (1999). In other words, if the assessment is interactive, such as an oral or a presentation, then the lecture should also be interactive with more discussion from the students than the lecturer in order to allow the students the opportunity to practice the coursework material in a manner that relates to the form of assessment to be used.

The participants also mentioned that they would like more advice from lecturers regarding a number of issues related to completing essay assignments in a successful manner. The students would like lecturers to advise them on what they would like one to concentrate on when answering the essay question or topic, to explain the topic in quite a lot of detail (e.g. this is an evaluative question so the task is to evaluate this idea/statement), give them some idea of where to start in terms of the research material that is available and to give the students the marking criteria with the essay topic. A very common phrase that emerged in the data regarding the lecturers which sums this all up is “tell us what they want”. This may sound demanding on the part of the participants. However, two of the groups acknowledged that since there are so many students to help, the lecturer cannot help each one

individually which is why they emphasise the need for lecturers to discuss the essay assignment and their expectations during lectures.

The idea that the participants want the lecturers to advise them more may also seem lazy on the participants' part. However, their main concern is that lecturers differ with regards to what they expect out of the students in that some want lots of theory and others do not, as illustrated in the following quote. On the other hand, however, this would make way for a halo effect in the students' answers.

“Tell us what they want us to do. Like if they, um, I want not more than, um, no less than eight references. I want you to focus on these 2 areas and do not, please do not go beyond that, cuz other lecturers want you to go beyond that, and um, do not use your own examples they want research as examples, so just to know what you're really supposed to do”
(participant 2.1)

Additionally, most of the participants felt that if the lecturer does not explain the essay topic and their expectations of the students regarding the topic, then “it leaves the topic too open” (participant 3.2). However, there was one strong opinion against this idea since this detracts from the students completing this form in their own way. This opposing view is best explained by the participant in the following quote:

“I don't think they should do break downs because then its taking away someone's perspective. As soon as you break down the topic that means everyone is gonna follow that path. But the good thing about essays is you've got everyone coming together in a different way, and you've got all these contrasting opinions and you'll see someone's ability to just go with it from not breaking down the essay topic cuz otherwise everyone's gonna follow it this one way of doing it...” (participant 4.4)

The participants felt that it is very important for there to be some sort of supervision from the lecturers in place for group work assignments. For the participants, this would resolve a lot of the concerns that they have with this form of assessment as they feel that being supervised will result in

all of the group members playing their part and not 'slacking off' from the work that they should be doing. Meeting regularly with the supervisor would also ensure that the work is being done.

However, participant 3.4 was particularly adamant about the idea that the students should be left on their own and should not seek the help of lecturers which two other participant in a separate focus group agreed with as illustrated in the following quotes:

“[Lecturers should do] Absolutely nothing. We’re in university. Um we should not be spoon fed at this stage of our lives... All you have to do is just learn the work, there’s no application just learn the work, that’s all. Lecturers shouldn’t do anything for MCQs”
(participant 4.3)

“I don’t like it when people spoon feed you because then I find that like its not accurate because then everyone just gets these like high marks and then you’re like well, I’ve not achieved anything. Whereas when you get a high mark and then, you know, and you know that everybody found it difficult then you’ve really achieved something and you feel good about yourself as oppose to like across the board 80% or 90% for everyone or something”
(participant 4.4)

4.5. Fairness of assessment use

In all of the focus groups the participants discussed whether or not they felt using assessments on students is just. Two dominant themes emerged from the data

Student Assessment is fair. One trend found within all of the groups was the theme that the use of student assessment is fair. Nine participants in all of the groups (participants 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.2, 2.4, 3.3, 3.4 and 4.4) explicitly stated this and perceived it as true. With the exception of one group, there was a general consensus within the groups regarding the fairness attributed to student assessment. Additionally, three participants, each from a different focus group, stated that the use of assessments is the only manner of determining how the students are coping with their studies, especially when dealing with very large numbers of students, such as those found within the

undergraduate Psychology lectures at WITS. One participant felt quite strongly about this issue, as illustrated in the following quote:

“...I don’t think there is a better way found by people to...test so...to see if someone learnt and grasped the concept. I think that tests, testing and the way WITS tests is the only way...”
(participant 3.3).

This indicates that the participants perceived assessments to be a fair and necessary part of their tertiary education. This finding is of great value since it suggests that some students agree with the use of the various forms of assessment used by WITS to measure particular attributes about them.

Number and Forms of Assessment. While the majority of the participants felt it fair for institutions to assess their students, others in one of the focus groups felt that assessment conditions or contextual issues play a critical role in their performance thus leading them to question the fairness of the manner in which institutions utilise assessments. This was briefly discussed under the theme category of themes entitled ‘common forms of assessment’. For example, participant 3.2, who spent part of their schooling years in Poland, felt that the number of assessments used on students in South African universities was somewhat unfair: “...here [in South Africa] you have two...two things [assessments] that your whole year or like your whole course is dependent on mark wise and like suddenly like there’s this intense pressure of like just doing those two things well...”. Two other participants in the same group (participants 3.3 and 3.4) agreed with this point of view and argued that they felt it was fair for institutions to assess students but only if the entire mark for a course was not determined by using only a few assessment tasks and only one or even two assessment forms. In other words, the participants felt that by firstly giving the students numerous assessment tasks all counting towards a final conglomerate mark and secondly by providing variation in the forms of assessment used, this would result in a more realistic measure of their true knowledge and ability. This is illustrated in the following quotes and is further elaborated on under the category of themes entitled ‘ability of different forms to measure knowledge and/or ability accurately’:

“... It feels like it’s unfair, an exam because of the conditions because you’ve learnt all this work but you might be having a bad day that day or you might go blank or what ever, like something’s happened to you, you know. It’s difficult testing conditions [for an exam] and

um, so that's why we also do an essay. I know for psyc[ology] we always have an essay and a test and I think that that is the fairest way..." (participant 3.3)

"What happens if you get so stressed for exams like you just, you know...? Whereas an essay you do it over a couple of days and you know. If they just marked you on exams people can get very stressed and with that, you know it could easily hamper their performance" (participant 1.2)

"...I think the essay requirement is a good one because you can't base someone's performance just on a test or an exam, because um people work differently under different pressures" (participant 1.3)

The above responses indicate two important ideas. Firstly, students perceive assessment conditions, including the forms of assessment used, as contributing to or influencing their performance. The responses above also support Onwuegbuzie and Seaman's (1995) as well as Zumbo, Perlini and Lind's (1998) studies in which they found that contextual issues and assessment conditions play a role in student performance. Additionally, they support Stiggins (2007) argument that the emotional dynamics of an assessment experience as experienced by the students need to be taken into account as this has an influence over how well or poorly the students perform.

Secondly, these responses indicate that students view forms of assessment as somewhat different from each other and that they view each form of assessment differently in terms of the conditions under which they are required to perform. This highlights a major concern which the participants of this study mentioned, that how well a person performs is predetermined to an extent by the form of assessment used. In other words, the participants perceive an exam, for example, which can include essay type questions, as more stressful due to the time constraints of this assessment form than an essay assignment where they are able to work on it at their own pace. Thus, it seems that students hold the idea that one may perform better in one form of assessment than in another which has important implications for the choices made by institutions regarding the forms of assessment used which aim to elicit an accurate measurement of the students' knowledge and ability.

4.6. Motivation and Time Management

Within all of the focus groups the participants mentioned what sorts of things motivate them to do well in assessments and therefore to prepare more or less thoroughly for them. They also spoke about the strategies used to manage their time in terms of the assessment activities that they are required to complete as undergraduate students. This resulted in two separate yet dominant themes: motivation and time management.

Motivation: The main motivating factor for preparing for and completing any form of assessment given by the majority of the participants, 12 in total (participants 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4), is to pass and achieve high marks in their coursework. Another idea given by some of the participants (1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.3, 3.1 and 4.3) which is closely linked to achieving high marks is that students are motivated to learn their work well for tests or examinations because they know that they only have one opportunity to complete the assessment whether it consists of multiple choice questions or longer essay type questions. In other words, students are not given an opportunity to go back and add to or change their answer once the test or examination period is finished. They are motivated to perform well and to get high marks in their tests or examinations resulting in them studying the material thoroughly. These results support the idea in the literature that students not only make use of the surface and deep approaches to learning, but that they also utilise the achieving approach where students are driven by competitive motivations in order to obtain the highest marks and adopt learning strategies that will maximise their chances of academic success (Heikkila & Lonka, 2006).

Another motivation given by some of the participants (1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4) is that these participants wish to enter postgraduate studies which require a minimum mark of around 65%. This motivational factor is thus also closely linked to the desire for achieving high marks and also supports the use of the achieving approach to learning by students. Another motivation to do well in essay and other assignments is to achieve an increase in their marks particularly if they have achieved low marks in other assessments. This is evident in the following quote:

“I think it also depends on how much the essay is worth, for your mark. Cuz if the essay counts for a lot of marks then you’re motivated to start in advance and do well, because if you do badly then you’re like, oh god I have to work for the exam” (participant 1.3)

The responses mentioned above support the also findings of Napoli and Raymond (2004) and Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968, as cited by Ramsden, 1979) who found that the ways in which students approached learning “...became dominated by the ‘grade-point average perspective’” (p. 414) meaning that success at university is perceived as being dependant on the achievement of high mark.

Some participants (1.1, 1.3, 2.4, 3.1 and 3.2) also felt that if they enjoy the lecturer and the way that they lecture then this can be a motivating factor for preparing for and completing assessments successfully as illustrated in the following quotes:

“Also if you have a good lecturer and you like them...” (participant 1.3)

“Ya, YA that’s very important as well, and then um you you pay more attention in the lectures, you want to do well. You you also, you don’t feel like awkward about approaching them with questions...” (participant 1.1)

Another motivation pertaining to essay assignments is that there is not a lot of time pressure allowing them to complete the assessment at their own pace. This was mentioned by three participants (1.2, 1.3 and 2.3). Additionally the participants mentioned that if the essay topic is of interest to them this will motivate them to complete the essay well. One dominant idea is that this form of assessment allows the students to gain more knowledge on the topic than is given in class which is another motivating factor for some of the participants (3.2, 3.3 and 4.4).

Time management:

Of interest to the researcher was how the participants varied in terms of the degree to which they felt they were able to manage their time in terms of completing all assessments required. In total, nine participants (1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1 and 4.4) reported that they have little to no difficulty with regards to managing their time and completing their assessments on time. Four participants

(1.2, 2.3, 4.2 and 4.3) reported the opposite, i.e. that they were unable to manage their time effectively and usually end up completing their assessment tasks or “doing it the night before” (participant 2.2). Three participants (2.1, 2.2 and 4.5) felt that they are able to manage their time to some extent. For example, “I try hard” (participant 4.5) and “I’m still trying to work that out” (participant 2.1).

These findings suggest that students differ in their needs regarding how they go about managing their assessments. Interestingly, the nine participants who felt they were able to manage their time effectively all mentioned a strategy which they employ in order to keep on track. For example, participant 1.4 mentioned diarising all due dates as soon as she receives them and constantly reminding herself of the assessments by writing the number of days left before each due date on a daily basis. Participant 3.2 creates tables which show the assessment due dates and the order in which they are due in a visual manner for each module making up her coursework. On the other hand, those who felt they were unable to manage their time effectively mentioned no such strategies. One of these participants explained how she relies on a classmate to remind her of upcoming due dates and often completes assignments or studies for tests the day before. These participants require more assistance in terms of effective time management than do those with strategies already in place.

Cramming of assessments into short amount of time:

It is interesting to note that the participants felt it unfair to measure a person’s knowledge and ability using only one assessment task or activity and using only one form of assessment as discussed in the next category of themes. However, when asked if they felt that more assessments were necessary since this would allow for a variety of forms to be used, the general consensus was no, that time management regarding all of the assessments they would be required to complete would become problematic.

One theme that emerged from the analysis which was briefly touched upon under the previous category was the cumulative effect of having many assessment tasks to complete or carry out at the same time. The participants mainly spoke of this idea when the topic of examination timetables was brought up since some had experienced clashes in dates where more than one examination was scheduled for the same date and time as illustrated in the following quotes:

“It’s happened to me two years in a row now where I’ve had three exams in two days, two days that are after each other. I mean, how is anyone supposed to work under those conditions? I mean, you spend most of your time learning for the one exam and then you hardly have time to prepare for the others. It’s obvious that you won’t do as well in the other two as the first one” (participant 1.4)

“I’d like to know who makes up the exam timetable cuz it’s often happened to me that I have like five exams in one week. Or once, I think it was first year...or maybe last year...I don’t know. But anyway, they made me write an exam on the one morning and then two exams the next day. I did not do very well on the last exam cuz I was so busy preparing for the first two...” (participant 2.3)

In these cases, students may have the option of requesting a supplementary examination. However, the participants also spoke about having the same or consecutive due dates for multiple assignments during term time. Additionally, some participants had experienced having to write more than one examination in a short space of time. For example, six participants (1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 3.2, 3.4 and 4.3) had to write three different examinations in the space of two consecutive days at least once during their time at university. This cramming of assessments is perceived to be problematic to students because in these situations, one assessment detracts from how one performs on another since they find themselves concentrating more on one assessment compared to the other when preparing.

It is of great interest to the researcher to note that the participants who found this issue the most problematic were those who did not mention utilising any time management strategies. All of the participants perceived this situation as unfair because one is bound to prepare better for one assessment compared to the rest and thus perform better in that assessment compared to the others. However, those who felt they had good time management skills did not seem as bothered about having many assessments due on or around the same dates as the participants who felt unable to manage their time effectively. These latter participants seemed to display behaviours related to anxiety when speaking about the pressure that they felt due to the cramming of assessments in terms of time as they would fidget, make quick hand movements, giggle and speed up their speech when discussing these experiences. This suggests that time management on the part of the students has

something to do with how well they are able to juggle multiple assessment tasks and cope with the pressure of completing many assessments at the same time.

The onus is on the students to practice good time management strategies. However, lecturers may wish to take more opportunities to help develop these skills in their students, especially first year students who come from an environment where completing an assignment or studying for a test the night before is viewed as acceptable. This is also an environment where they received a great deal of guidance and assistance from their teachers and where they felt little pressure to perform well in assessments. This is evident in the following quotes regarding the participants' experiences of assessment at the secondary level of education:

“I remember my maths teacher she said, don't bother understanding this if you don't understand just don't worry, just write it down you're gonna have to write it down in your exam” (participant 1.1)

“If I like, studied the night before then ya. I did well in assessments. I didn't feel the pressure that much, no” (participant 2.3).

“I loved it, easy sailing (participant 2.2)

“Before I came here I wasn't a reading person. I used to listen in class and I used to understand the, like most of the things. And then if I didn't understand I went to the teacher straight. But then when when I came here I found that you had to study, do the research most of the time and attend lectures” (participant 3.4)

One dominant idea that emerged from the data is that high schools do not sufficiently prepare their students for the challenges that they would face at university. The general consensus is that there was a lot more research involved in completing an assessment at university and that they were not taught how to go about researching topics efficiently. For example, participant 3.3 felt that “In high school I didn't have as many responsibilities and um could work much less. Not have to research...research is a big part of coming to university” This is another reason why students,

especially those in their first year of study, need to receive the kinds of guidance described by the participants in this study already discussed under the category of themes entitled ‘preparation’.

4.7. Ability of different forms to measure knowledge and/or ability accurately.

In the literature one often finds arguments, discussions and even research studies that question the validity of the various forms of assessment. In other words, do the various forms of assessment accurately measure, and are they a fair representation of, the students’ knowledge and ability regarding the coursework taught to them? This study has not set out to answer such a question. Instead, the students’ feelings and opinions regarding this issue were investigated. One participant sums this category of themes well:

“I personally think that it depends on the individual. Like I mean, amongst the 5 of us there’s like people who prefer exams and stuff and, then essays, and some people are good to work under pressure and some people get like, you know they get all panicky. And so that’s not a true reflection so you probably need like you know a variety of assessments and stuff to really get an idea of a persons knowledge and ability” (participant 4.2)

In terms of the four forms of assessment discussed, there was unanimous agreement among all the participants that MCQs do not accurately measure or represent one’s knowledge or ability in terms of the course content and learning outcomes. In the group who discussed group work as a form of assessment, all felt that this too does not accurately measure or represent one’s knowledge or ability. There were mixed feelings as to whether open-ended tests or examinations are an accurate measure of one’s knowledge or ability. A large proportion of the participants felt that essay assignments are a good method for measuring one’s knowledge and demonstrating one’s ability.

Forms of assessment that do not measure accurately:

The majority of the participants, 12 in total (participants 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.2 and 4.4), felt that MCQs do not accurately measure or represent ones knowledge and/or ability. The main idea that emerged and dominated all of the groups is that MCQs only assess how much and whether you are able to memorise and recognise the correct answer. This supports Biggs’s (1999) views on this form of assessment. The following quotes illustrate this idea;

“It’s just you again, um learning your work off by heart so you can just spot it in the answers, you know” (participant 1.2)

“No, um I think that, um, multiple choice tests basically are a, like, how much you can study, like if you didn’t study everything you’ll get 50 percent of however much work there was in the test...” (participant 2.3)

“Ya. Um...ya. If you’ve learnt your work off by heart you can do very well cuz they literally seem to take sentences out of the text book, that’s what they seem to do. But...so...ag I suppose it’s not an accurate reflection” (participant 3.3)

“It’s a good reflection of your ability to like parrot learn” (participant 4.2)

The participants also felt that this form of assessment does not require one to apply any knowledge or theory, to interpret anything or even to understand the work. For example, “It’s not application” (participant 1.3) and “You’re not like understanding it I don’t think, I think you’re just learning ok this is this” (participant 1.2). Additionally, “It’s not interpretive so, when someone’s interpreting what you’ve written and seeing that you’ve really tried. Multiple choice its have you filled in the right circle” (participant 3.3), although one participant disagreed and believes that since the answer options given to the students in this form of assessment are often all very similar it is difficult to differentiate between them and pick out the correct answer. Furthermore, it was generally agreed upon that this form of assessment is too closed-ended compared to open-ended assessments, both in a test or examination situation and in an assignment situation, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“... in terms of where you are and level of intelligence, things like that, um, in an essay you can um see how a person’s writing is and tell that, ok, they might not know a lot but they write really well or, you know. But multiple choice its just, if you didn’t put the effort in then, you know and it doesn’t necessarily mean that you are silly or dumb or whatever or clever” (participant 2.3)

“I don’t think so (that his form of assessment is an accurate reflection or representation of ones knowledge and/or ability) because in essays you write exam, I mean you write what you know. At least they can get something from what you’ve written, like maybe 2 out of 10 or what ever. But then in multiple choice, you get something wrong you get it wrong...”
(participant 3.1)

“... I think that mica in general they just, I don’t know they’re not that useful, you don’t get to really, really get to know the person, what they think and how they think so, MCQ’s...naa. Not a good assessment” (participant 4.1)

“...they aren’t able to see your reasoning skills and your analytical skills, it bases itself in either common sense or obscure fact” (participant 4.4)

The participants felt that the group work form of assessment is not at all an accurate measurement, reflection or representation of your knowledge and/or ability and that group assignments at the university level are unfair and unnecessary.

Forms of assessment that do measure accurately:

Regarding the open-ended tests form of assessment, there were mixed thoughts and feelings about whether it accurately measures knowledge and/or ability. The following quotes illustrate this divergence.

“...you can get some, a clever lecturer who just tries to catch people out which has happened, which does happen. And then it’s not, you could learn really well and just not have focused on one aspect and that’s what your essay question is on. That’s why I think that it’s like it’s not necessarily an accurate description because just like MCQ’s are very detailed, essays can be the exact opposite. So it’s like the other extreme” (participant 3.2)

“I think its like personally for me, um, in my mind it’s the best form of assessment because, its actually the hardest I find it the most difficult but the most fulfilling because um, ... when you get given a question and you actually sit there in the exam and you say oh crap I really should have studies harder because you actually don’t know what to do. And then you really

have to think really hard to get to get your thoughts together, assimilate the information and just, and write something and that process forces you to think a lot harder than anything else does. And that thinking...your brain kicks in and you really start thinking about the question a lot better and you. I think it's a fantastic form of finding out the person's personal ability but also the knowledge they know..." (participant 4.4)

One idea that did emerge from all of the groups is that testing or examination conditions play a great role in one's performance in assessments and since these conditions are somewhat unfavourable for the students, one may not perform at their best and thus the result will be affected by this. This also supports Onwuegbuzie and Seaman's (1995) as well as Zumbo, Perlini and Lind's (1998) studies. Another convergent idea is that this form of assessment is a much better reflection of knowledge and ability compared to the multiple choice question test or examination. This is illustrated by the following quote:

"I think so, um...because...a lecturer can, um see, um what kind of, um ya what level you are at through your writing...I think that peoples writing, um, kinda gives you an insight into, um how they think. So that would actually be, um, an accurate reflection like in an essay test. Ok, not with the testing conditions and the time constraints cuz then you're just writing cuz you just want to get it done with, but I think um, to some extent it kinda does, um show your ability" (participant 2.3)

Fourteen participants felt that essay assignments are a good method. The quotes below illustrate the opinions of two participants who felt it was good:

"I think in psychology it is because psychology is all about understanding. And whereas a test you're just like you're given the notes and basically you have to memorise, the notes and memorise the points even if you don't understand it properly and then you just rewrite what you've what you've learnt, with an essay you have to demonstrate your understanding and I think that better shows what you actually know" (participant 1.1)

"...it's actually, it's quite good, it it shows a lot about you and your knowledge and your skills" (participant 3.3)

The main reason given for why these participants felt this was because one is given more time to complete this form of assessment and one does not have such a short time limit. Another idea is that it is very important for the students to understand the essay question. If one does, then this illustrates the students' ability and knowledge needed in order to give an answer. One participant felt that this form is the most accurate reflection or representation of one's knowledge and ability as illustrated in the following quote:

“...It's the only form of assessment, well compared to MCQs and exams, um that you can go and speak to a lecturer or to like anyone else that you you know to get their help and stuff like that. So then you put in your best effort compared to like you know in an exam situation where you only see the topic in the exam and then you know you can't ask the person for help or go to the library” (participant 4.2)

Not everyone agreed that having the help of various resources results in an accurate measurement of ones knowledge and/or ability. These participants felt that one is merely repeating others thoughts and ideas, albeit in one's own words, and thus that there is no understanding that is required in order to complete this form of assessment. One participant rebutted with the following and was supported by the majority of the participants:

“I think that...I think it does show you something because I mean you can have a quote right, but if you can't interpret it then you can't interpret it. If you don't know what you are really doing, if they give you a topic on what ever chapter that you've done and you don't understand the chapter...you can get a stack of books and gain the knowledge that you don't have...” (participant 2.1)

4.8. Best and Worst Experiences

The participants were asked to share some of their best and worst experiences with assessment since entering university. A variety of experiences were shared and interestingly, many of the participants had experienced similar, if not the same, things.

Worst experiences: One particularly dominant theme was that most of the participants' worst experiences pertained to either tests or examinations which are the forms of assessment where one

has no resources available and where one is required to complete it in a relatively short period of time. In many of these participants' experiences there was the common idea that they either did or felt as though they would fail the test or examination. One participant commented that "I never knew failure before coming to university" (participant 2.2). Many of the participants commented on this being the result of the large workload which they were required to study, their inability to finish the test or examination, their inability to understand their work or their ill-preparedness in terms of too little work studied. These findings also support those of Napoli and Raymond (2004) and Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968, as cited by Ramsden, 1979) who found that students perceive success at university as being dependant on performing well in assessments and the achievement of high marks. The findings also reiterate the use of the achieving approach to learning by students. This is illustrated in the flowing quote:

"My worst experience was when I failed for the first time. I came from high school achieving As and Bs to university where I got like 50s and 60s [percents] and when I failed an essay, I even remember thinking, oh my god, how am I going to tell my parents that I failed? I literally went and pleaded for the lecturer to remark it" (participant 2.2)

Another dominant idea that emerged out of the data is that some of the participants' worst experiences are linked to the weather or the testing or examination contextual and circumstantial issues under which they wrote a particular test or examination. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

"Um...I think it has to be um...my statistics exam last year. I remember, it was raining and um already we were freezing cold and flower hall is cold, so um...that exam ..."
(participant 2.3)

"My worst experience has got to be exams. Especially June exams cuz the weather is cold... Somehow I think they're (November examinations) better, but June is just a crap time of year, its cold it, aaaah the most nauseating experience ever. And everything rests on how much you remember on one particular day. Its like, how about all the times I answered in class I knew what was going on and on this one day you are like, crap...I know I saw that somewhere but it doesn't quite click" (participant 2.2)

Yet another common idea related to some of the participants' worst experiences with assessment was that the examination timetable often results in some students writing two or three examinations in the space of one or two days. This further illustrates the problems caused by cramming too many assessment activities into a short space of time already discussed. Several unique experiences were also given, such as losing one's notes a few days before a test or examination, struggling with assessment during first year due to the under-preparedness of the students by the high schools, not showing up to write the test or examination out of choice and writing examinations through the DSP, the disability unit, in that this unit tends to lose the students' examination answer papers making it a 'big mission' for the student to prove that they did indeed write the examination. Other forms of assessment that were connected to the participants' worst experience with assessments were reports, orals and group assignments.

Best experiences: Regarding the participants best experience with assessment, the most dominant idea was the achievement of high marks, again supporting the use of the achieving approach to learning and findings from Napoli and Raymond (2004) and Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968, as cited by Ramsden, 1979), who found that students perceive success at university as being dependant on the achievement of high marks. For example, participant 1.4 spoke about one assignment in which she achieved a first (75% or more):

“...I was so proud cuz I really worked hard on that essay and I really felt al though I deserved the first. That was my first first (giggling) for an essay...” (participant 1.4)

Also, participants felt that some of their best experiences were connected to their confidence in their knowledge and ability to complete the assessment. The more confident they were and the more they knew what they were doing, the more they identified an experience as a good assessment experience. Other ideas included that the assessment task was interesting and thus the participants enjoyed them and that when the lecturer was interesting, this helped them to enjoy completing the assessment. The participants differed in the form of assessment mentioned in their best experiences. The forms mentioned were MCQs, essay assignments, orals and presentations.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

5.1. INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The research pursued two areas of investigation, namely to describe how students think and feel about assessment and to describe experiences of assessment from the students' perspective. The findings illustrate that all the participants understood the function of assessment as being to measure two particular characteristics of students – their knowledge about a subject and their ability to cope with the apparent difficulty of that subject, in terms of content and skill, at a particular level of study. The study found a link in this regard between how students perceive each level of study as increasing in workload and difficulty and Bloom's taxonomy which views learning as occurring in a sequence of steps, where each step increases in difficulty. The study also found that students understood the function of assessment as being to measure and monitor institutional standards between universities. This is in agreement with the functions proposed in the literature, thus it can be concluded that students agree with the general perspective found in the literature. Interestingly, students perceive that it is fair for institutions to use assessment on students as this is the only manner of determining how students are coping with their studies, especially when dealing with very large numbers of students, such as those found within the undergraduate Psychology lectures at WITS. Thus, students are in agreement with the kinds of assessment practices used by the Psychology department at this particular South African institution.

In terms of the kinds or forms of assessment that students are commonly exposed to at the undergraduate level, within and between the focus groups, the participants had been exposed to four common forms of assessment. These were the essay assignment, multiple choice tests or examinations, open-ended tests or examinations and group work assignments. The results showed that students perceive these four forms to be different from each other. Additionally, the results showed that students perceive different functions for each of these forms and that they view these functions in a similar light to that found in the literature. However, whereas the literature focuses primarily on the types of task that each form requires students to complete, the results of this study show that students were less concerned with the nuances of what the different forms of assessment were for and more concerned about the conditions under which each form required them to carry out the assessments. This not only supports findings such as those Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995) and

LeBlanc and Bandiera (2007) but also suggests that students are motivated in different ways depending on the form of assessment.

Despite this, however, there seems to be little that can be done to take the conditions under which students are expected to perform into account when assessing them. There also seems to be little that can be done to take contextual and individual factors into account as well. This appears to be recognised by the participants in the focus groups, particularly in terms of fairness of assessment in general and the forms used to assess students, as well as assessing all students in the same way. This study highlighted the need to explore issues related to how one can compare equitably between large numbers of students whilst still accounting for each student as an individual. The major question that arises from this is: Should there be one standard that each person should be held to, regardless of their background? Theoretically speaking, a single standard is used by the majority of education institutions when assessing students. However, whether and how one can then account for contextual or individual factors that may affect performance remains an open question. This is particularly relevant in South Africa where, according to the Education White Paper 3 (1997), there is increasing diversity in the composition of the student body at tertiary institutions which is only beginning to reflect the demography of the broader South African society. Furthermore, Apartheid politics resulted in people classified as 'non-White' being exposed to poorer educational opportunities and school systems within harsh political, social and economic conditions. This is attested to by Taylor (1993) who reports that the pedagogy adopted during the Apartheid era had detrimental effects on non-White learners by instilling passive acceptance of authority rather than providing students with the conceptual tools necessary for creative critical and independent thinking. Moreover, living conditions were characterised by extreme poverty and intense political unrest and violence during the Apartheid era (Hartshorne, 1992). During the Apartheid years in South Africa, social and school conditions contributed significantly to the development of surface learning approaches aimed exclusively at preparation for the final school examination and not at the enhancement of intellectual and personal development of learners. Although efforts have been made in the last decade to address many of these issues, ongoing social, economic and historical effects suggest there may be huge differences in both contextual and individual factors for students that may need to be taken into account during assessment.

In terms of motivation, the affective aspect of this study found that students are motivated by the desire to succeed and perform well, which, for the participants in this study, translated into the achievement of high marks in assessments. This has important implications for learning as this suggests that students seem more preoccupied with achieving high marks than with the intended outcomes or purpose of the assessment which, for most authors and researchers, is to facilitate learning. This also results in many students utilising a surface rather than a deep approach to learning, which, according to Marton and Säljö (1976a), limits rather than aids learning. A challenge has thus been unveiled of how to best utilise this perception and the students' feelings about the need to gain high marks in order to achieve what educators set out to achieve - that is to increase the students' knowledge and abilities regarding the courses taught. This is because it seems as though students continue to view assessments as a 'trap' and as a way of holding them back from what they are able to achieve. This is particularly evident in that the participants felt that the time constraint element of tests and examinations in particular was unfair instead of seeing it as an important part of the assessment. The results of this study suggested that students feel as though time constraints detract from assessing or measuring performance in an accurate manner. This perception can be changed by lecturers, if they choose to, by spending some time discussing how each form of assessment is used by them to elicit information about the students and by explaining the different elements of each form, particularly the time constraint element. This could occur during the students' first year of study which may have an added effect of facilitating the students' transition from secondary to tertiary education. Lecturers, however, should not be expected to have these discussions with students following their first year of study as students have a responsibility to take charge of their own learning.

The study not only found that students view the various forms of assessment as different from each other, but also as consisting of specific features which have specific advantages and disadvantages. The features, advantages and disadvantages mentioned by the participants are largely parallel to how the literature discusses the various forms. However, as already discussed, students seem to view contextual factors tied to the various forms of assessment as playing an important role in how they perform in each form. For example, a particularly interesting finding pertained to the cramming of many assessments into a short space of time. The participants felt that having too many assessments due on the same or consecutive dates placed them at a great disadvantage since they could not prepare for multiple assessment activities simultaneously. This means that students felt as though

one assessment activity detracts from the other activities resulting in them performing well in one and poorly in the rest of the assessments. The results suggest that these contextual factors are recognised by students as impacting on their performance, but once again, not much can be done about such factors. What can be done, however, is to develop the skills in students which may help them to succeed in assessments such as time management. This study found that some students felt able to manage their time while the majority did not. Time management may have a huge impact on their performance, particularly when they are faced with multiple assessments being crammed into a short space of time.

Developing these and other skills in the students may alter the manner in which they go about preparing for assessments, no matter what the form. The participants described different strategies used to prepare for different forms of assessment and these strategies were common among the participants in terms of the assessment form. The study found that methods utilised by the participants in this study were similar to those mentioned in the literature, specifically that students make use of surface approaches to learning when preparing for some forms of assessment, such as MCQs, and more deep approaches to learning for others, such as open-ended tests or examinations and essay assignments, although this differs from student to student. A finding of interest to educators and researchers in general is that students use different strategies when preparing for assessments and that the strategies used depend on the form of assessment to be completed.

The study also found that students appreciate some input from lecturers when preparing for assessments. However, these expectations may not be realistic. For example, one student suggested submitting drafts of essays to their lecturer for feedback so as to improve their assignment. Given the large number of students found in undergraduate Psychology classes at WITS, this would not be possible and would result in lecturers having to read twice as many pieces of writing if they were to read one draft from each student. These expectations could be addressed by lecturers as this may result in students taking more responsibility for their studies and depending less on lecturers when preparing for any assessment.

The findings of this study suggest that students think and feel similarly about assessment and assessment practices, although disagreements emerged which resulted in rich debates among the participants. The findings also support those of other studies discussed in the literature and results

section of this report and few things were found which were not mentioned in the literature. These things were more practical and possibly unique to the context, such as the view that cramming assessments into a short space of time, especially examinations during the middle and end of the year examinations periods, detracts from performance. This is because the students pay more attention to preparing for one assessment activity compared to the amount of attention given to the rest. It was also found that the students' ability to manage their time when dealing with multiple assessments due on the same dates or when due dates happen to be relatively close to each other was closely related to their ability to cope with the pressure of completing many assignments and assessment activities simultaneously. Additionally, this study showed that students were more concerned about the conditions under which they are expected to complete assessments than the actual assessment tasks.

Overall, this study achieved its goal of describing assessment and common forms thereof used at the undergraduate level at a particular South African university from the students' perspective. It also demonstrated that their perspective is useful to include when investigating assessment and other issues within the area of education as they view these issues from a unique angle.

5.2. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The primary method of data collection used in this study, namely focus groups, allowed participants to reflect on their own experiences and on what they heard others say. It also allowed a space for rich debate, all of which gave way for meaningful discussion among the participants. This, in turn, allowed for valuable data to be collected. The sample used was diverse in terms of race and first language and was thus representative in this regard of the larger undergraduate Psychology student population found at WITS. The study achieved its goal of describing assessment from the students' perspective. However, it was not without flaws.

The sample size used was appropriate but could have been larger. The sample was drawn by requesting volunteers which may have resulted in volunteer bias. The great disproportion in the sample regarding gender is difficult to overlook since only one male participant took part in this study. This meant that three of the four focus groups consisted of female participants only. Since both the researcher and the scribe were female, this may have affected the results. Findings such as those of Baxter Magolda (1990), Donaldson and Dixon (1995) and Meyer, Dunne and Richardson

(1994) which suggest that students experiences after high school differ greatly in terms of gender highlighting this limitation further. Additionally, the data collected was at times repetitive meaning that participants would make statements such as ‘as we already mentioned...’ and ‘I’ve already talked about...’ This made the analysis of the data rather lengthy and can only be attributed to the manner in which the researcher conducted the focus groups due to her inexperience in this regard. This may have caused some frustration for the participants, although none of the participants mentioned being frustrated or behaved in such a manner. The focus groups were transcribed from audio recordings and some of the responses were inaudible due to more than one participant speaking at the same time. This resulted in data that was of no use and could have been avoided had the researcher managed the group in a more effective manner. Lastly, an in-depth description and contextualisation of assessment practice in South Africa was not provided in this study, although this would be beyond the scope of a study of this size and level.

5.3. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In conclusion, it is apparent from the vast amount of topics discussed by the participants in this study that students’ perspectives of assessment forms and practices warrant further research, especially in South Africa where little research has been conducted in this topic area. In this study, some of the students mentioned making use of different approaches to learning and studying according to the form of assessment that they need to prepare for. This is one area that could be further explored as it may help educators to better understand the way in which students interpret assessment strategies employed by institutions. It may also help to better understand the strategies employed by students when preparing for the various forms of assessment used at the undergraduate level in South African institutions. Furthermore, this study highlighted the need to assist students to manage their time more effectively regarding assessment. The time management strategies employed by students, and lack thereof, could be another area for further investigation.

The findings suggest that the students are driven by the need to achieve high marks for assessments rather than the need to master a skill or understand the coursework material. This may seem detrimental to learning but could be used to the educators’ advantage. Another area that warrants further investigation is how lecturers could use this to achieve their objectives, namely to allow the students to learn, increase in knowledge and improve in skills. Educators in general may wish to

explore further the role of lecturer-student communication in the preparation of students for successful completion of assessments.

Additionally, this study was conducted in one particular context. With necessary and appropriate modification, this study is replicable in other contexts. It would be of interest to do this with many students in a number of different universities across South Africa and contexts worldwide and to examine the results for common thoughts and ideas. This would allow researchers to single out and examine particular issues related to assessment that are viewed in a similar light by students in general for the purposes of informing (to some degree) best practice in the area of student assessment. The results of this study suggest several other avenues for further research as well. The lecturers' perspective would be an important addition to this piece of research as it would allow for a comparison of perspectives (students compared to lecturers). The students' perspective explored using a greater sample size and more equal proportion of male versus female participants would also elicit interesting results since this study describes the views of primarily female students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORMS FOR PARTICIPATION IN
THE RESEARCH AND TAPE RECORDING OF THE FOCUS
GROUPS**

**APPENDIX E: LETTER OF CONFIRMATION OF ACCEPTANCE OF
PROPOSAL**

**APPENDIX A:
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

STUDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

DETAILS ABOUT YOU THE PARTICIPANT:

GENDER:

MALE	FEMALE
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AGE:

(In years) _____

YEAR OF STUDY:

1 st

2 nd

3 rd

FIRST LANGUAGE:

PLEASE LIST A FEW FORMS OF ASSESSMENT THAT YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO DURING TERTIARY EDUCATION.

HOW MANY OF YOUR COURSES HAVE REQUIRED YOU TO COMPLETE THE FORMS OF ASSESSMENT THAT YOU HAVE LISTED ABOVE?

0 – 8	9 – 16	17 - 24	24- 30	31 OR MORE
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APPENDIX B:
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule for the Focus Groups.

Hello, my name is Ilonka. I would like to welcome you and to thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study. This study is about students' perspectives of assessment and the various forms of assessment used at this university. The focus of this group interview will be on the various forms of university assessment that you have had direct experience with. I will be asking the group several questions which I would like your opinions on. The point of a focus group is to allow you, the participants, to give your opinions and to discuss the issues with each other. Please remember that you do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to and that confidentiality is assured. I will begin by asking...

- 1) Why do you feel that institutions such as this university assess their students?
- 2) Do you feel that assessing students is a fair thing to do? Please explain why?
- 3 a) Please describe your worst assessment experience during your time at university.
b) Why was this particular assessment experience bad?
- 4 a) Please describe your best assessment experience during your time at university.
b) Why was this particular assessment experience good?
- 5) What are some common forms of assessment that you have been exposed to during your time at university?

The questions that follow will be asked in relation to the different forms of assessment that participants list in the question 5. Each question (6 - 11) will be asked with regards to each of the assessment forms mentioned separately.

- 6) What do you consider the purpose or purposes of this form of assessment to be?
- 7 a) What do you feel the advantages of this form of assessment are?
b) What do you feel the disadvantages of this form of assessment are?
- 8) Do you feel that this form of assessment provides an accurate reflection of your knowledge and/or ability?

- 9 a) What do you believe you need to do to prepare for completing this form of assessment?
- b) What do you believe lecturers need to do to prepare you for this form of assessment?
- 10) What do you actually do in order to prepare for this form of assessment?
- 11) What motivates you to completing this form of assessment well?

The questions below do not relate to the specific types of assessment, but are broader issues that may be posed to the group in addition to those listed above in the first section.

- 12) How do you manage your time in order to balance all the assessment tasks that you are required to do?
- 13) What other types of assessment do you think might be more suitable at university?
- 14) Why do you feel these other forms of assessment might be more suitable?
- 15) Please describe yourself as a student before entering into tertiary education. In other words, describe how you were in high school.
- 16) How did you feel about assessment before entering tertiary education?
- 17) How do you feel about assessments now?
- 18) Why do you think you feel this way about assessments now?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



School of Human & Community Development

University of the Witwatersrand

Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050

Tel: (011) 717 4500

Fax: (011) 717 4559

Hello, my name is Ilonka Babarovich Diaz, and I am conducting research to obtain my Masters in Psychology by Coursework and Research Report at the University of the Witwatersrand. My research is about students' views regarding assessment and the various forms of assessment used at this university. The research aims to investigate how students' experience assessment as well as what they think and feel about certain issues regarding assessment and its various forms, such as the purposes, advantages of and disadvantages of various forms of assessment.

Participation in this research will involve completing a demographic questionnaire asking certain questions about you, as well as participating in a focus group which will be conducted by me at a time and place that is convenient for you. The focus group will take approximately an hour. With your permission this focus group will be recorded to ensure accuracy. **Participation is completely voluntary and you are assured that choosing to participate in the study or choosing not to participate will have no positive or negative consequences for you or your marks. You have the option of withdrawing from the study at any time during the focus group if you choose to with no positive or negative consequences as well.**

All of your responses will be kept confidential, and no information that could identify you would be included in the research report. As a participant you will be required to sign a consent form agreeing to keep the responses of all the other participants in the focus group completely confidential. The tape-recorded focus groups will not be heard by any person other than myself and the transcripts of the focus groups will have any obvious identifying information removed before they are seen or published in any form by anyone else. Once the data has been transcribed, the original recordings of the group will be destroyed. The transcribed data obtained from you will be analysed and interpreted in relation to all the data obtained from all participants. Therefore, the results of this study will not be able to be traced back to you in any way ensuring your confidentiality. Results from the analysis of all data obtained from all participants will be summarised and published in the final research report. To obtain a brief summary of the results of the study, please log-in to using the password..... and e-mail me and I will send you the results back to the same address. In this way, your request will be anonymous. Alternately, you may contact me or my supervisor as per the details below.

You may refuse to answer any questions you would prefer not to during the focus group, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point during the focus group.

Please feel free to contact me on 072 088 2584 or at vbdfamily@mweb.co.za or Nicky Israel, my supervisor, on (011) 717-4557 or at Nicky.Israel@wits.ac.za if you have any queries or concerns. Your participation would be greatly appreciated. Please keep this page.

Kind Regards
Ilonka Babarovich Diaz

APPENDIX D1
STUDENTS' CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH

Consent Form for Participation in this Study.

Please complete the following consent form granting the researcher your permission to take part in this research:

I _____ consent to being interviewed by Ilonka Babarovich Diaz for his/her study on _____

I understand that:

- Participation in this focus group interview is voluntary.
- I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- No information that may identify me will be included in the research report. Any identifiable information about me from any quotes to be used in the research report will also be removed, and my responses will remain anonymous.
- I undertake to keep the responses of other group members confidential and to respect both my own right and those of others of the group to not be identified in any way.
- The focus group discussion will be transcribed and all information that could identify me will be removed. I understand that direct quotes from these transcriptions will be published in the final research results and that it will not be possible to trace any of these quotes directly to me.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D2:
STUDENTS' CONSENT FORM FOR THE TAPE RECORDING OF FOCUS GROUP

Consent Form for Tape-Recording of Focus Group.

Please complete the following consent form granting the researcher permission to tape record this focus group and therefore your responses to ensure accuracy.

I _____ consent to being interviewed by Ilonka Babarovich Diaz for his/her study on _____

I also consent to having the focus group discussion **tape-recorded** and I understand that:

- I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- The focus group discussion will be transcribed and all information that could identify me will be removed. I understand that direct quotes from these transcriptions will be published in the final research results and that it will not be possible to trace any of these quotes directly to me.
- There will be another person present in the focus group who will be acting as a scribe in order to assist the researcher in conducting this group discussion. I understand that he or she is to be regarded and treated in the same capacity as the researcher.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: LETTER OF CONFIRMATION OF ACCEPTANCE OF PROPOSAL

Faculty of Humanities - Postgraduate

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• E-mail: lushy.konar@wits.ac.za



Student Number: 0303900Y

MS I BABAROVICH DIAZ
2 WINDSOR WILLOWS
EDWARDS STREET
WINDSOR WEST
2194

29 August 2007

Dear Ms Babarovich Diaz

FULL CANDIDATURE FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS BY COURSEWORK AND RESEARCH REPORT

I am pleased to be able to advise you that the readers of the Graduate Studies Committee have approved your proposal entitled "Students' perspectives of assessment at the tertiary level of education." and you have now been admitted to full candidature. I confirm that Ms N Israel have been appointed your supervisor in the Department of Psychology.


The research report is normally submitted to the Faculty Office by 15 February, if you have started the beginning of the year, and for mid-year the deadline is 15 August. All students are required to RE-REGISTER at the beginning of each year.

You are required to submit 2 bound copies and 2 unbound copies (loose pages) of your research report to the Faculty Office. The 2 bound copies go to the examiners and are retained by them and the 2 unbound copies are eventually sent to Archives and to the Library.

Please note that should you miss the deadline of 15 February or 15 August you will be required to submit an application for extension of time and register for the research report extension. Any candidate who misses the deadline of 15 February will be charged fees for the research report extension.

I should be glad if you keep us informed of any changes of address during the year.

Yours sincerely


Maropeng Maake (Mr)
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Private Bag X3
Wits, 2050
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Note to all MA and PhD candidates who intend graduating shortly: All ETD requirements are to be met at least 4 weeks prior to graduation