

Greek University Graduates' Perspectives on Assessment During their Undergraduate Studies: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Students' views on their assessment play a pivotal role in shaping their learning experiences and trajectories. This qualitative study aimed to explore the views of Greek university graduates regarding their assessment during their undergraduate studies. The sample consisted of 30 graduates, and data were collected through written narratives in response to a given prompt. Qualitative content analysis revealed key categories, including assessment methods and frequency, interpersonal relationships with professors and peers, advantages and disadvantages of assessment, feedback, and objectivity. The findings suggest that, although assessment was primarily traditional, graduates' interpretations and expectations align with contemporary trends in higher education assessment, such as sustainable assessment and assessment for learning. Furthermore, there were indications that graduates' views on assessment influenced their learning approaches. **Keywords:** assessment, higher education, assessment of learning, feedback, learner-centered assessment, university students.

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INTRODUCTION

The assessment of learners constitutes a fundamental element of the educational process and, at the same time, a subject of intense reflection and debate within a country's educational policy, regardless of the level of education (Stravakou, 2024). In higher education, assessment holds particular significance not only from a technical and administrative perspective — through quality assurance procedures in the context of the growing demand for university accountability (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010)— but also as a mechanism that determines students' academic progress and professional certification (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). In parallel, universities, as agents of social development and transformation, are expected to contribute to society by producing graduates who are capable professionals, well-rounded individuals, active citizens, and lifelong learners equipped to meet the demands of the 21st century (Ibarra-Sáiz *et al.*, 2020; Stravakou, 2024; Suresh Kumar, 2017).

Within this context, assessment in higher education is recognized as a key pillar for enhancing the

quality of teaching and learning. This is clearly presented in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, which emphasize that assessment, should align with the principles of student-centered learning and promote the active engagement of students (European University Association [EUA], 2020). Likewise, in contemporary literature, the conceptualization of assessment in higher education is shifting away from its traditional approach of assessment of learning toward more modern, student-centered approaches such as *assessment for learning*, *assessment as learning*, and *sustainable assessment* (Ahmad, 2023; Boud & Soler, 2016; Ibarra-Sáiz *et al.*, 2020; Pereira *et al.*, 2015; Pitt & Quinlan, 2022; Quinlan *et al.*, 2025; Sambell *et al.*, 2013; Stravakou, 2024). To achieve these new objectives, the implementation of *authentic assessment and learning*, the value of *formative assessment and feedback* as a collaborative process involving multiple actors, the *active participation* of learners in the assessment process, as well as the use of *self-assessment*, *peer assessment*, and *alternative assessment methods* are increasingly

promoted (Ahmad, 2023; Boud & Soler, 2016; Pereira *et al.*, 2017; Rawlusk, 2018).

The assessment system constitutes a fundamental factor -often even more influential than teaching itself- in shaping students' learning behavior and the strategies they adopt, ultimately affecting their experiences and the quality of learning outcomes they achieve (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). Thus, any attempt to improve the quality of university education requires a redesign of the assessment system (Stobart, 2008).

Higher education institutions worldwide are therefore called upon to modernize their student assessment system and their respective policies, in order to meet new demands, gain a competitive advantage, and enhance students' long-term learning outcomes by preparing them for the 21st century (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Boud, 2020; Brown & Knight, 2005). Despite existing recommendations and the rich body of contemporary research, various challenges persist in breaking away from traditional modes of assessment (EUA, 2020). However, the literature clearly demonstrates that students' perceptions of assessment play a decisive role in how they learn and the learning outcomes they achieve, regardless of any reforms or changes in the assessment system (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).

This qualitative study seeks to highlight the views and reflections of Greek university graduates from diverse departments regarding their experience with assessment during their undergraduate studies. The findings are expected to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the role of assessment in learning as well as enhance the understanding of students' views, which are considered crucial for the effectiveness of the educational process (Struyven *et al.*, 2005). Such understanding can help academics and universities meet students' expectations and improve their learning (Lynam & Cachia, 2017).

The specific research question articulated in this study was formulated as follows: What are the views of Greek university graduates regarding their assessment during undergraduate studies, that is, regarding methods used the frequency and objectivity of assessment, its positive and negative aspects, the feedback received, and the interpersonal relationships with professors and peers that influence the learning process and outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student assessment in higher education serves multiple functions and fulfills various purposes, highlighting its pivotal significance. The diversity of these functions gives rise to different approaches, principles, and interpretations of assessment (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Boud, 2020; Stobart, 2008).

Traditionally, assessment has primarily focused on evaluating student performance through established criteria, assigning grades, classifying learners, and certifying knowledge, skills, and professional qualifications. In this context, assessment also acts as a mechanism of social selection, distribution, regulating access to professional and educational opportunities. At the same time, it addresses the demands of accountability and quality assurance, serving as an indicator of institutional effectiveness. These two functions are collectively referred to as assessment of learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Boud, 2020; Stobart, 2008).

However, new trends in contemporary educational discourse prioritize assessment as and for learning, which aims to enhance learning, promote self-regulation, and motivate learners. Within this paradigm, assessment acts as a catalyst for improvement, empowerment, and learning, fostering students' skills, self-esteem, and self-awareness, while also providing meaningful feedback to both students and educators (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Stobart, 2008; Stravakou, 2024). In this evolving framework, assessment is increasingly recognized as: a) a collaborative and empowering practice, b) a process that ensures equality, social justice, as well as respect for individuality, but also as c) a means of equipping assesseees with skills that are necessary for the long-term enhancement of autonomy and lifelong learning (self-regulation, self-assessment, metacognitive skills) (Ahmad, 2023).

Furthermore, sustainable assessment, a term that has more recently emerged in academic literature, encapsulates the orientation toward lifelong learning. Building on the logic of assessment for learning, it extends further to prepare learners for the learning that goes beyond the short-term learning outcomes of an educational context, focusing instead on long-term learning goals. Its purpose is to cultivate the skills that will enable learners to become effective lifelong learners (Boud & Soler, 2016).

Moreover, assessment of learning is often represented as similar to summative assessment, whereas assessment as and for learning correspond to formative assessment (Boud, 2020). A central issue in both the literature and educational practice concerns the distinction between formative and summative assessment. It is generally agreed that summative assessment takes place at the end of the educational process or course, while formative assessment occurs throughout the duration of the learning process as it unfolds (Rawlusk, 2018). According to Brown and Knight (2005), the distinction of these two modes lies not in the methods applied, but in the purpose they serve, for which the feedback about the outcome plays a crucial role. Specifically, summative assessment aims to simply evaluate the overall performance of the learner by expressing that performance in a grade. In contrast,

formative assessment focuses on evaluating performance with the aim of improving the learner's performance through the feedback provided. In this context, a method functions as formative assessment when it is accompanied by constructive feedback that helps the student improve their learning outcomes, while it functions as summative assessment when feedback is absent or inadequate, and the assessment is applied solely for the purpose of assigning a grade (Brown & Knight, 2005; Rawlusk, 2018). Additional methods that are gaining prominence in higher education include continuous assessment, self-assessment, and peer assessment (Pereira *et al.*, 2015).

Additionally, feedback is considered a decisive factor in the assessment process, with its significance having long attracted the interest of scholars (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Boud & Soler, 2016). According to Ibarra-Sáiz *et al.* (2021), feedback involves the provision of detailed and specific information to learners regarding the quality of their work by others, with the aim of improvement. However, contemporary literature reflects a paradigmatic shift in how feedback is conceptualized in relation to learning. Once regarded as a one-way process that concerned the transmission of information from the instructor to the students, it is now redefined as a co-constructive process involving the active and meaningful engagement of both the learner and others (Boud & Soler, 2016).

Understanding and using feedback are considered necessary conditions for its effectiveness. Feedback is seen as more effective when it is systematic, occurs prior to summative assessment, encourages reflection and dialogue, and takes place within close interpersonal relationships between faculty and students. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of feedback is marked by complexity, as it depends on the specific context in which it occurs and is subject to conflicting views and divergent perceptions between educators and learners (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022).

Assessment is therefore linked to students' learning (Pereira *et al.*, 2017). The system of assessment shapes students' views and perceptions and influences their decisions, indicating what they have to learn, how much time they should devote to it, what learning strategies they will adopt, and how they will demonstrate their learning achievements (Aguayo-Hernandez *et al.*, 2024; Sambell *et al.*, 2013). Depending on the nature and the demands of assessment, students adopt either a deep or a surface learning approach. When assessment requires memorization and recall of information, the surface approach is encouraged, with students focusing on rote learning and demonstrating limited understanding and personal engagement, which leads to low-quality learning outcomes. In contrast, high-quality learning is achieved through the adoption of a deep approach, where students actively connect new with

prior knowledge and experience, search for meaning, identify structures and general principles within the learning material, and aim for deep understanding (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). In fact, summative assessment has been associated with the surface approach to learning, whereas formative assessment has been associated with the deep learning approach (Lynam & Cachia, 2017).

Assessment methods and techniques carry significant weight, as they form the basis for evaluating learners' performance (Ibarra-Sáiz *et al.*, 2021). Examinations and written tests are the assessment methods traditionally used in academic settings (Pereira *et al.*, 2015). These methods have been found to elicit negative perceptions among students and raise concerns among academics regarding the extent to which exam results reflect the quality and depth of learning. In addition, the literature highlights the adverse impact of these methods on learning, as they are often described as passive experiences for students (Rawlusk, 2018; Struyven *et al.*, 2005). On the contrary, within the context of a shift toward student-centered approaches, scholars emphasize the need to implement a variety of assessment methods that are integrated into the learning process, are more authentic and valid, actively engage students, prioritize formative rather than summative assessment, promote collaboration between faculty and students, and help academic staff better understand how learning unfolds (Pereira *et al.*, 2015; Pitt & Quinlan, 2022).

Assessment practices that fulfill the needs of assessment as learning and empowerment promote reflection through self-assessment and peer-assessment, motivate learners to activate higher-order skills and achieve high-level performance, while being organically integrated into the broader learning context (Ibarra-Sáiz *et al.*, 2021). As a result, alternative assessment methods have emerged as promising for student learning and development. However, it has been stressed that these methods should be further examined in terms of their relevance and effectiveness, since they do not guarantee a shift in students' views regarding assessment (Pereira *et al.*, 2015). In general, each assessment method/technique has specific potential, advantages and disadvantages, and, in order to be effective, it has to be aligned with the teaching methods, the intended learning outcomes, and the broader goals of higher education (Lynam & Cachia, 2017; Pereira *et al.*, 2015; Vaessen, 2021).

Finally, beyond assessment practices, the quality of the relationship between faculty and students proved to be crucial. A climate of respect, trust and belief in students' capabilities boosts learners' self-confidence and favors the adoption of deep learning strategies (Boud, 2000; Lynam & Cachia, 2017).

The context and methodology of the study

The context of the study

The legislative framework in Greece stipulates that students' assessment in universities can be conducted through various ways and methods, such as through written or oral exams, written assignments, clinical or laboratory exercises, mid-term progress tests, as well as other forms aligned with the nature of the educational program, or combinations thereof. Final examinations are conducted at the end of each semester for undergraduate studies, with the possibility of a resit after the end of the academic year. When written or oral examinations are used, the integrity and impartiality of the process must be ensured (Law 4957/2022, Article 65). Moreover, from a review of the official course descriptions published on the websites of Greek universities, it can be concluded that both summative and formative assessments are currently encouraged.

METHODOLOGY

The present study utilizes the qualitative research approach, aiming to explore in depth the views held by Greek university graduates regarding their assessment during their undergraduate studies, in order gain a deeper understanding on the phenomenon of student assessment in higher education (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). After the review of the relevant literature, the research sought, on the one hand, to determine the extent to which key issues highlighted in the literature about students' assessment in higher education were reflected in the research material (descriptive design), and, on the other hand, to identify related themes emerging directly from the research material that reflect students' perspectives (exploratory design) (Mayring, 2014).

Sample

The sample consisted of thirty (30) graduates from various Greek university departments who, during the winter of 2024—when the data were collected—were enrolled in a postgraduate program in the field of Educational Sciences, offered by the Department of Primary Education at the Democritus University of Thrace. A key criterion for the recruitment of graduates was their reflective capacity with regard to assessment and the educational process in general. Meanwhile, this choice allowed for a certain degree of homogeneity and comparability in the participants' views and experiences. Finally, the sample was conveniently accessible, making the conduct of this research feasible (Patton, 1990).

Prior to the commencement of the study, all participants were informed about the purpose and rationale of the research, the terms of their participation, their right to withdraw from the research anytime they desire, as well as about the full protection of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their personal data (Cohen *et al.*, 2008).

The research tool and method

Written narratives (texts) were used as the research tool. Participants were asked to write anonymously and voluntarily a text on the topic: «*My assessment at the university during my undergraduate studies*», referring to the applied methods, the frequency and objectivity of the assessment, its positive and negative aspects, the feedback received, as well as interpersonal relationships with professors and fellow students. No further instructions or restrictions were given regarding the length of the text (Stravakou, 2024; Stravakou & Lozgka, 2022). The collected texts were numbered from 1 to 30 and coded from D1 to D30 in preparation for analysis.

For the systematic analysis, summarization and description of the research material, qualitative content analysis was applied. This mixed-method approach includes both quantitative and qualitative steps of analysis. The main categories were formed deductively, based on the literature review and reflected in the research question. In contrast, the subcategories emerged inductively, namely directly from the research material (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). After multiple readings of the written narratives, the research material was coded based on the unit of analysis, which was defined as a relevant word, phrase, or sentence, and the subcategories were subsequently constructed. Each category was assigned a code from K1 to K8. All relevant references were considered important, regardless of their frequency in the research material (Stravakou, 2024). The total number of references were 225 and the basic categories derived were eight:

- K1. Assessment methods/techniques
- K2. Frequency of assessment
- K3. Interpersonal relationships with professors
- K4. Disadvantages of assessment
- K5. Feedback
- K6. Objectivity
- K7. Interpersonal relationships with fellow students
- K8. Advantages of assessment

The following section presents the analysis, which includes both the frequency of occurrence of the (sub-) categories and the interpretation of the categorization system (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2022).

FINDINGS

Quantitative analysis

Table 1 presents, in descending order, the frequency of occurrence of the main categories that emerged after multiple readings of the participants' written texts. These texts included various verbal expressions, references, and descriptions related to assessment.

Table 1: Overall distribution of references across main categories

A/A	Main categories (K)	Number of references	Percentage %
K1	Assessment methods/techniques	70	31.11
K2	Frequency of assessment	32	14.22
K3	Interpersonal relationships with professors	27	12
K4	Disadvantages of assessment	24	10.67
K5	Feedback	22	9.77
K6	Objectivity	20	8.89
K7	Interpersonal relationships with fellow students	15	6.67
K8	Advantages of assessment	15	6.67
Total		225	100

As it can be concluded from Table 1., the most frequently mentioned category -standing out significantly from the rest- was that of the methods and techniques used in the assessment process (K1), accounting for 31.11% of all references. This was followed by the frequency of assessment (14.22%, K2) and interpersonal relationships with professors (12%,

K3). Next, with smaller differences, came the disadvantages of assessment (10.67%, K4), feedback (9.77%, K5), and the objectivity of the process (8.89%, K6). The lowest-ranked categories were interpersonal relationships with fellow students (6.67%, K7) and the advantages of assessment (6.67%, K8), which were mentioned equally.

Table 2: Assessment methods/techniques

A/A	Assessment methods/techniques (K1)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Written examination (K1a)	27	38.57%
2	Assignments (K1b)	21	30%
3	Oral examination (K1c)	15	21.43%
5	Laboratory exercises (K1d)	4	5.71%
6	Workshops exercises (K1e)	2	2.86%
7	Portfolio (K1f)	1	1.43%
Total		70	100%

The first main category concerns the methods/techniques that participants indicated to had been applied during their undergraduate studies to assess and monitor their academic performance and progress (Table 2., K1). Written exams appeared to be the dominant and most used method (38.57%, K1a),

followed by assignments (30%, K1b) and oral exams (21.43%, K1c). Students reported to a much lesser extent that they were assessed through laboratory (5.71%, K1d) and workshop exercises (2.86%, K1e), whereas the method of portfolio accumulated only a single reference (1.43%, K1f).

Table 3: Frequency of assessment

A/A	Frequency of assessment (K2)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Once – at the end of the semester (K2a)	16	50%
2	Formative and summative assessment (K2b)	10	31.25%
3	Multiple mid-term assessments (K2c)	6	18.75%
Total		32	100%

As far as the frequency of assessment is concerned, Table 3 shows that the prevailing form was the final exams, conducted once at the end of the academic semester (50%, K2a). This was followed, to a lesser extent, by a combination of summative and formative assessment, where participants were assessed

not only at the end but also during the semester (31.25%, K2b). Lastly, only a few references were made to frequent and regular midterm assessment tasks in which students were involved while the learning process was still ongoing (18.75%, K2c).

Table 4: Interpersonal relationships with professors

A/A	Interpersonal relationships with professors (K3)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Positive relationships (K3a)	18	66.67%
2	Negative or neutral relationships (K3b)	9	33.33%
Total		27	100%

Analyzing the third category that emerged, we observe that the participants stated they had, to a large extent, positive relationships with the academic staff

(66.67%, K3a), while to a lesser extent, their relationships were described as either negative or neutral (33.33%, K3b).

Table 5: Disadvantages of assessment

A/A	Disadvantages of assessment (K4)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Intense anxiety and time pressure (K4a)	9	37.5%
2	Final written and oral exams act as a barrier to the development of certain higher-order skills (K4b)	5	20.84%
3	Final written and oral exams restrict the learning process (K4c)	3	12.5%
4	Final written and oral exams promote rote memorization of the learning material (K4d)	3	12.5%
5	Lack of guidance (K4e)	2	8.33%
6	Multiple choice items permit luck as an influencing factor (K4f)	2	8.33%
Total		24	100%

In Table 5 the participants' views on the disadvantages they identified regarding the assessment process during their university education are depicted. These disadvantages were, in most cases, associated with particular forms and methods of assessment used. The primary disadvantage reported was the intense anxiety and time pressure caused by the process (37.5%, K4a). Participants also noted that the selected assessment methods did not foster the development of higher-order

skills (20.84%, K4b), limited meaningful learning (12.5%, K4c), and encouraged rote memorization of examinable content (12.5%, K4d). To a lesser extent, participants referred to the lack of guidance from professors during both the preparation and the conduct of the assessment (8.33%, K4e), as well as the possibility that closed-ended questions sometimes allowed chance to influence the outcome (8.33%, K4f).

Table 6: Feedback

A/A	Feedback (K5)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Yes (K5a)	11	50%
2	No (K5b)	11	50%
Total		22	100%

Regarding the feedback that students received about their performance in their assessment tasks, participants appeared divided. Half of them (50%, K5a) stated that they had received relevant information about

their performance and their learning, whereas the other half (50%, K5b) stressed the absence of pertinent information (Table 6).

Table 7: Objectivity

A/A	Objectivity (K6)	Number of references	Percentages %
1	Yes (K6a)	16	80%
2	No (K6b)	4	20%
Total		20	100%

In contrast to previous findings, Table 7 shows that the majority of participants' written responses (80%, K6a) expressed the view that the assessment during their undergraduate studies was objective and impartial. To a

lesser extent (20%, K6b), participants expressed reservations and objections regarding the objectivity of the process.

Table 8: Interpersonal relationships with fellow students

A/A	Interpersonal relationships with fellow students (K7)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Positive relationships (K7a)	12	80%
2	Negative or neutral relationships (K7b)	3	20%
Total		15	100%

By the same token, participants mentioned that their relationships with their peers were almost positive

(80%, K7a), while only few references depicted negative or neutral relationships (20%, K7b) (Table 8.).

Table 9: Advantages of assessment

A/A	Advantages of assessment (K8)	Number of references	Percentage %
1	Skills development (K8a)	7	46.67%
2	Development of interpersonal relationships and collaboration through group assignments (K8b)	3	20%
3	Less workload and an overall picture of performance through interim assessments (K8c)	3	20%
4	Adoption of deep learning approach and development of academic skills through assignments (K8d)	2	13.33%
Total		15	100%

Finally, by observing Table 9., where the advantages of the applied assessment are presented, it is evident that the advantage that prevailed in the participants' written texts was the fact that diverse skills were cultivated and developed with assessment (46.67%, K8a). The rest of the advantages mentioned were associated with specific methods and forms applied. Particularly, it was noted that group assignments helped build interpersonal relationships in the educational team as well as foster collaboration (20%, K8b). At the same time, it was noted that formative assessment lessened their heavy workload, while also providing a more holistic picture about their progress (20%, K8c). Last but not least, assignments promoted the adoption of deep learning and developed certain academic skills (13.33%, K8d).

Qualitative analysis

Through the multiple and in-depth analyses of the participants' written responses, it became evident that the dominant form of assessment during their undergraduate studies was written examinations, typically conducted at the end of the academic semester. According to the participants, in the vast majority of courses across their department and faculty, students were expected, upon the completion of each course, to respond to a series of questions—primarily open-ended and multiple-choice—that covered the entire syllabus. These assessments aimed to evaluate their knowledge and skills and to assign a numerical grade reflecting their performance. This assessment method was noted in nearly all participants' responses, indicating the near-universal application of traditional assessment, which places strong emphasis on final performance.

In the written texts, the following excerpts are indicative:

"As far as assessment is concerned, it was conducted in written form at the end of each semester" (D3)

"During my undergraduate studies, the primary mode of assessment was, for the most part, written exams with open-ended questions" (D15)

"Written exams were held at the end of each semester, lasting approximately two hours and covering the entire course syllabus" (D17)

"The way our professors assessed us was traditional, mainly based on a final written examination" (D21)

"The exams were always written, conducted with either open-ended or multiple-choice questions" (D26)

"During my undergraduate studies, assessment was carried out in various ways, mainly through written exams at the end of the semester" (D29)

Furthermore, from the students' written texts, it is inferred that they themselves consider this assessment method to lead to objective assessment, as well as to a more comprehensive appraisal of the range of knowledge and skills they possess: *"In the undergraduate courses, assessment was conducted in various ways, which allow for a more thorough and objective assessment of students' knowledge and abilities. The most common methods of assessment include written exams"* (D30).

In certain courses, as mentioned by some participants, oral examinations were either used as an alternative option offered that students could choose if they wished, or as the sole method of assessment, within the context of summative assessment. In other cases, oral examinations were conducted in conjunction with written exams at the end of the semester.

Specifically, some students reported:

"In the course of the Sociology we assessed orally" (D3)

"A few times there were oral exams, mostly in elective courses" (D12)

"Moreover, in some courses we had oral exams or a combination of oral and written exams" (D25)

"Another mode of assessment I encountered was oral examination, which is a more subjective method compared to written exams" (D27)

As can be concluded from some of the participants' responses, oral examinations were regarded as less objective than written ones and were perceived as particularly challenging and pressure-inducing — mainly due to the difficulty level and the breadth of the

material being examined. Consequently, students systematically avoided this assessment method. According to Participant D16: *“Unless a student explicitly requested to be examined orally — something extremely rare — as oral exams were exceptionally difficult due to the breadth and difficulty of the material covered.”*

According to the participants, in several courses, there was a different approach involving a combination of formative and summative assessment. Whereas summative assessment was usually conducted through written exams, formative assessments were carried out either through a mid-semester written test to determine students' learning progress or through assignments, which were sometimes performed individually and other times in groups. In other cases, the assignment was the sole method for the assessment of students' performance and academic progress. The above reveals a variety of applied techniques, highlighting the diverse experiences students had with assessment.

Specifically, some students wrote:

“Many courses, however, provided the opportunity to complete an assignment in the middle of the semester” (D9)

“There was also a combination of written tests and group or individual presentation of assignments” (D15)

“Occasionally, in order to have some grade enhancement during the semester, the supervising professor assigned an assignment, which was optional and related to the course content” (D20)

“As for the timing of the exams, in most cases, they were conducted once per semester during the exam period, but for those courses with midterm exams (progress tests), they also took place in the middle of the semester” (D26)

On the contrary, a regular and continuous assessment throughout the academic semester was applied alongside the final written examination in only a few undergraduate courses attended by the participants. This assessment mode was implemented through a variety of exercises, which, as the participants themselves stated, contributed to their ongoing monitoring and feedback concerning their progress and development, as well as to a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of their learning.

Two participants specifically described:

“One instructor, in addition to the final written exam, had created a group where each student uploaded a mini assignment every week” (D9)

“Finally, in some courses, continuous assessment was applied through participation in progress tests and quizzes, and the submission of smaller assignments during the

semester, offering a more complete picture of students' performance” (D27)

In a similar vein, in only a few courses, students were engaged—either as part of summative or formative assessment—in workshop and laboratory exercises, in certain subjects such as physics and computer science. Relevant excerpts from the students' written texts are the following: *“Elective courses, such as Electromagnetism experiments, were assessed in the Physics lab through experiential methods”* (D3); *“In addition, in some courses, there were workshops to participate”* (D22). However, although the portfolio was not a widely used assessment technique, when it was used, it made the assessment process more enjoyable: *“In only two courses, we were assessed through a portfolio. From my point of view, it was the most pleasant assessment method.”* (D25).

The graduate students admitted that assessment generally helped them to develop a variety of skills, such as time management skills, communication skills, and analytical thinking. With Participant's D28 words:

“The advantages of assessment mainly include the development of skills, since assessment helped me cultivate critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills (both written and oral).”

Particularly, group assignments contributed to the development of positive interpersonal relationships with other group members as well as collaboration. Moreover, individual and group assignments helped the participants cultivate critical thinking, deepen understanding of the material, and engage in thorough content processing, while also gaining experience in research and academic writing.

According to two participants:

“Even though exams ensured a direct measurement of knowledge, I believe that assignments contributed to delve deeper into specific topics, developing critical thinking and communication skills as well.” (D2)

“The group assignments that we had helped in developing interpersonal relationships with the rest members of the group.” (D9)

At the same time, when assessment was not limited to the end of the semester but was conducted throughout it, students could better understand their overall performance and progress, as well as manage the curriculum more effectively, reducing their workload. Specifically, Participant D27 described:

“Finally, in the case of continuous assessment, where we participated in progress tests and quizzes and had to submit smaller assignments throughout the semester, we gained a more comprehensive picture of our performance.”

Furthermore, this significantly reduced the workload."

In spite of the benefits that the participants in the study gained from their assessment, they emphasized largely the disadvantages of the process. These drawbacks mainly related to the widely used traditional practice of summative assessment through written and/or oral exams. More specifically, they found assessment to have been a source of intense anxiety and pressure. Although some attributed this feature to the assessment process in general, in several texts it was specifically associated with the method of final and written exams. This form and technique of assessment appeared to have intensified the psychological pressure felt by students and prevented them from achieving meaningful learning outcomes. These disadvantages primarily explained by the fact that final exams were demanding and there was strictness in grading. Some also added that summative assessment reflected their performance at a given moment and did not capture their overall learning outcomes and progress. Additionally, the time pressure that accompanied the assessment process, which had to be managed along with the multiple academic obligations, was burdensome.

In the students' written texts, we read specifically:

"A source of intense stress especially during the exam period" (D4)

"In theoretical courses, where assessment was only once per semester, the exam was more stressful" (D10)

"But the strict grading and high expectations in the written exams added a high level of performance anxiety for all students during the exam period" (D16)

"This sometimes created stress, because there were cases where the largest percentage of the final grade depended on a single exam" (D29)

The participants also repeatedly underlined that final written and oral exams promoted rote learning and simple mechanical memorization of the material, depriving them of the opportunity to develop higher-order skills they deemed to be useful and necessary for their future.

The following excerpts from the written texts are indicative:

"This approach made us treat knowledge as something to be temporarily memorized, without actually developing skills that would serve us in the long run" (D8)

"Just a quick reading at the end of the semester and that's it. Much of that knowledge was eventually forgotten over time" (D21)

"On the contrary, written exams had the drawback of not being able to highlight critical

thinking, as they focused on memorization" (D26).

Two participants stressed that closed-ended questions allowed the factor of chance to influence the assessment outcome, thereby undermining the reliability of assessment:

"As for the disadvantages, I would point out that it's only in multiple-choice questions that luck plays a role—and a significant one—for both the well-prepared and the unprepared student" (D1).

Finally, regarding the drawbacks of assessment, some participants mentioned the lack of guidance from instructors as a significant negative factor, which adversely affected their experience and shaped their perceptions of the assessment process, particularly in relation to fairness. Participant P28 illustrates this in the statement:

"Moreover, I felt unfairly treated by certain assessment methods in cases where there was no clear guidance or support, or when the feedback provided was limited."

Nevertheless, the vast majority of the relevant references regarding the objectivity of assessment showed that students, despite their concerns about some of its negative aspects, had not internalized a perception of bias or unfairness, particularly in the case of written assessments. By contrast, most of the students appeared to express trust in the assessor's judgment.

For example, some participants wrote:

"However, I am inclined to believe that all professors assessed us objectively." (D1)

"It was a fair objective process since we all examined to the same questions at the same place and time." (D7)

"Regarding impartiality and objectivity, I do not have anything specific to mention, since I believe that faculty always assessed us as such." (D9)

On the other hand, there were some cases where students questioned the objectivity of the process, attributing the reasons to personal favoritism, the absence of clear assessment criteria, and the nature of oral examinations or written assignments—methods perceived as more vulnerable to subjective judgment. These perspectives reflect the diversity of student experiences.

According to some participants:

"But there were also specific affinities between faculty and students to the point where you wondered whether objectivity really existed" (D21)

"In any case, we can talk about subjectivity when there were oral exams or assignments" (D27)

"For example, when there were no clear criteria for the assessment of an assignment, this allowed room for misunderstandings and feelings of unfairness" (D29)

The diversity of students' experiences was even more evident in the findings concerning the feedback they received after assessment regarding their performance. From the students' relevant narratives, it can be concluded that feedback was often linked to daily interactions with academic faculty and more direct forms of communication, as well as to specific assessment techniques that foster communication and cultivate interpersonal relationships, such as assignments or oral exams, where instructors provided comments and encouragement. In these circumstances, feedback is perceived not only as informative but also as supportive and motivational, promoting improvement, sustained effort, and enhancing students' self-confidence.

Some relevant descriptions from the written texts are given below:

"There was feedback because all courses were held on campus with daily contact with professors" (D19)

"In relation to feedback that it is regarded necessary for the enhancement of learning and the development of students, as well as for adjusting the educational process, in some cases there was such positive and constructive feedback, encouraging me to continue learning and to identify areas in need of improvement (D28)

"Oral exams, on the other hand, provide the opportunity for a more open dialogue with the professor, allowing students to develop and deepen their knowledge in a more direct and personal way" (D30)

In opposition, the overcrowded classes, insufficient communication channels, and, most notably, the predominant use of written exams as an assessment method explained the absence of feedback, where students received a grade without further explanation or the opportunity for dialogue. In this case, students admitted having an experience of confusion, disorientation, and uncertainty, as the students lacked the necessary tools to identify their mistakes, understand the expected learning outcomes, improve, and enhance their performance. Some participants commented:

"The lack of feedback was one of the main obstacles to our improvement. When we failed a course, there was no effort from the professors to explain our mistakes. Consequently, we felt lost and didn't know where to concentrate to get better" (D8)

"Among the drawbacks, one can include the inconsistency in feedback, which causes students not to understand the course or its learning objectives." (D18)

"What is more, for a student to make progress, timely and constructive feedback is of paramount importance, which is often not the case, limiting the student's ability to meaningfully strengthen and advance" (D27)

The participated students in the study drew particular attention to the interpersonal relationships they cultivated with their professors and peers as a critical aspect of their assessment experience, emphasizing in a greater extent the former. In most cases, students evaluated their relationships with instructors positively, justifying their favorable views based on the professors' availability and accessibility, their personality traits, their open-minded attitude, and their strong willingness to support them. Some students described professors as role models and sources of inspiration, positively influencing their commitment to learning, while others noted that the small class sizes facilitated the development of positive interpersonal relationships.

In relevant descriptions, we read:

"Our professors were approachable and very supportive of us, guiding and advising us" (D20)

"Nevertheless, the relationships with professors and classmates were quite good because they weren't impersonal. The audience was small and we all knew each other" (D21)

"In general, the majority of professors were there to help us and answer our questions. They always responded to our messages and offered face-to-face office hours for additional assistance" (D25)

"There were professors who were approachable, supportive, and open to dialogue, which made us feel more comfortable reaching out to them" (D29)

On the contrary, the testimonies regarding negative or neutral relationships depicted impersonal interactions and communication difficulties, which were sometimes attributed to the professors' attitudes or their chosen method of assessment (written exams).

For example, it was specifically mentioned:

"Relationships with professors were impersonal and, often, communication was quite difficult" (D3)

"Although some professors were willing to help, the majority were unapproachable and showed no intention of devoting time to students' questions or guidance" (D8)

"Courses that were assessed through final written exams did not foster the development of

interpersonal relationships with professors or provide opportunities for feedback” (D9)

On the other hand, although participants placed less emphasis on the interpersonal relationships they had built with their peers compared to those with professors, they highlighted more strongly that their relationships with fellow students were positive, which supportively influenced their overall assessment experience. These positive relationships were strengthened through group assignments, while the small number of students in the courses also had a beneficial impact. Conversely, when the student audience was large and collaborative assessment techniques were not applied, these conditions contributed to negative or neutral peer relationships.

The following quotes from students' reflections are particularly insightful:

“As I previously wrote, it was a department with a large number of students, and inevitably, our relationships with fellow students were limited” (D6)

“Furthermore, in this context, there was a complete lack of interpersonal relationships with peers and professors —relationships that might have developed through oral exams, projects, presentations, or group work with classmates” (D24)

“Peer relationships, as I illustrated before, can be strengthened through group activities that help a spirit of collaboration to be developed” (D27)

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study sought to explore Greek university graduates' experiences regarding their assessment during their undergraduate studies. Data analysis yielded a wealth of findings, highlighting the centrality of assessment in students' higher education experience. This underscores that assessment is a multidimensional and complex process (Stravakou, 2024) that not only concerns the measurement of achievement but also plays a crucial role in shaping students' educational experience.

Assessment methods/techniques and frequency emerged as the most influential factors in shaping the students' experiences. These factors are directly associated with their views on the distinct aspects of assessment, such as objectivity, reliability, scope, challenges and demands of the process, quality of feedback, interpersonal relationships with professors and fellow students, workload, levels of anxiety and pressure, as well as the quality, range, and strategies of learning. Students' views on their assessment seem, therefore, to directly influence their learning, as previous research has demonstrated (Lynam & Cachia, 2017; Pereira *et al.*, 2015; Vaessen, 2021). In fact, Struyven *et al.* (2005) draw attention to the dynamic and reciprocal relationship

between assessment and learning: the way that students perceive learning shapes their stance towards assessment practices, whereas their experiences from assessment influence the way they approach future learning.

According to the participants' opinions, the dominant mode of assessment, regardless of the type of course, was summative assessment through written (mostly open-ended and multiple-choice items) and/or oral exams. At the same time, as stipulated by the accredited syllabi of Greek universities and reported in previous studies (Stravakou, 2024), assignments and a combination of formative and summative assessment are also used, while other alternative techniques (lab and workshop activities, portfolio) and continuous assessment appeared to be underutilized (Stravakou, 2019). Nevertheless, if we consider received feedback as a defining element of formative assessment and interpret the related findings of the study with this lens (Brown & Knight, 2005), then a more balanced view emerges in relation to the application of formative and summative assessment in the students' undergraduate studies. Of course, for feedback to serve its purposes and positively contribute to students' learning —so that one can truly speak of formative assessment— students must engage with it meaningfully to improve their learning (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022).

The findings display that Greek universities primarily adopt a traditional assessment orientation, focusing on summative assessment of learning through traditional methods (assessment of learning) (Stravakou, 2019) a trend that also observed internationally (Baartman & Quinlan, 2023; Boud, 2020; Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). The continued reliance on summative assessment as the main mechanism for verifying achieved learning outcomes is to be expected, since it satisfies the need to certify graduates' competence for either academic or professional purposes. Meanwhile, this adherence to summative assessment reflects both the challenges in transitioning to alternative systems and the administrative demands of managing large student populations within the context of universal access to higher education (Boud, 2020; Khuzwayo, 2018), as well as the consequences of modularization of study programs (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). In light of the above, such assessment practices are likely to maintain a prominent role in the future as well.

However, traditional assessment has received criticism internationally from both academics and students, since it does not seem to substantially enhance and support learning (French, Dickerson, & Mulder, 2023; Rawlusk, 2018). In various studies, students have characterized traditional methods as superficial, burdensome, arbitrary, and irrelevant, expressing a desire for assessments that support their learning progression through alternative methods (e.g., self-assessment, case studies, portfolios, peer-assessment), which foster

understanding and creative application of knowledge (Jankowski & Teitelbaum, 2021; Struyven *et al.*, 2005). Similar views were identified in the present study. Participants showed a negative stance towards traditional assessment methods, associating them with high levels of anxiety and pressure, superficial learning outcomes, and limited development of higher-order skills such as creativity and collaboration.

Although earlier research has related multiple-choice exams to superficial learning and open-ended questions to a deeper learning approach, the participants in our study generally linked both oral and written exams to superficial learning. This finding may be attributed to the heavy workload, volume of information, anxiety, and pressure they faced—factors that, according to the literature, influence students' learning approaches (Lynam & Cachia, 2017; Struyven *et al.*, 2005). Another feasible explanation is the comparison students made with other more active and supportive forms of assessment. In spite of these reservations, participants acknowledged that through existing assessment methods they developed skills such as analysis, management of information and time *e.t.c.* (Stravakou, 2024).

Regarding students' views on the specific assessment methods applied, it is identified that students preferred written over oral examinations, considering them a more objective method of assessment, less demanding and difficult, and effective in offering an overall estimation of the learning outcomes accomplished. In contrast, multiple-choice questions were acknowledged as not ensuring the reliability of the assessment (Pereira *et al.*, 2015), while the use of portfolios was identified as a pleasant process. The completion of assignments was associated with a deep approach to learning as well as with the cultivation of critical thinking and academic skills (Lynam & Cachia, 2017), whereas group assignments, in particular, were said to foster collaboration and develop positive interpersonal relationships within the educational group. Similarly, in Stravakou's (2024) study, which also concerns the Greek context, participating students indicated assignments as the preferred form of assessment. One reason for this student preference might also be that they help them develop self-assessment and peer-assessment skills (Khuzwayo, 2018).

Considering the rich and diverse research findings concerning assessment techniques and methods, the need for large-scale quantitative studies becomes apparent, aiming to capture a comparison regarding students' preferences for different assessment methods as well as their consequences for learning.

Based on the above, it is significant and optimistic that attempts are gradually being made in the country's universities to move away from traditional assessment methods and to incorporate student-centered

approaches and authentic assessment methods, which respond to contemporary trends and enhance learning. The students themselves confirm the value of these approaches, which prepare them for the challenges of the learning society (Stravakou, 2024). However, despite these advances, only a limited number of these alternative methods are currently in use, although literature abounds with a variety of such methods that present various advantages (*e.g.*, Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). Notably, there is a lack of methods such as peer- and self-assessment, which are recommended for use due to their benefits and are widely employed in higher education internationally (Boud, 2020; Struyven *et al.*, 2005).

An interesting finding of this study is the fact that the students mainly focused on objectivity as the most significant criterion of assessment, overlooking all the other elements of assessment, which are also crucial, such as validity and reliability. This may be explained by the students' lack of familiarity with the technical terms of assessment, since, although participants were studying during the research in a postgraduate program in education sciences, not all held undergraduate degrees from departments of education. The focus on objectivity may also be associated with the students' anxiety about the fair reflection of their progress and effort through assessment, suggesting either an emotional or grade-targeted stance that is promoted by traditional assessment methods.

The students underlined the need for clear criteria for assessment to be fair and impartial, especially in the case of oral exams, albeit the general opinion for the objectivity of assessment, which was attributed not only to the academic staff's efforts but also to the method of written examinations (Burger, 2016). This runs counter to another research where it was concluded that students considered written examinations to be non-objective and unfair (Struyven *et al.*, 2005). Once again, students' different opinions are evident, demonstrating that the issue requires further exploration (Vaessen, 2021).

In general, the students who participated in the study did not seem to be satisfied with the mode of assessment during their undergraduate studies, as the drawbacks of assessment overrode the benefits, which is indicative of their negative views and stance towards traditional assessment. This may be attributed to the stressful nature of the process. However, this finding diverges from the study conducted by Stravakou (2024), in which Greek postgraduate students referred to more advantages than disadvantages concerning their assessment during their undergraduate studies. Given that in Stravakou's (2024) research, the findings about the applied assessment methods were almost consistent with ours, this incongruence may be explained by the difference students' views on assessment (Vaessen, 2021).

Contemporary literature highlights a shift in focus to a student-centered approach to feedback, emphasizing its importance for learning as well as the sociocultural dynamics of the interactions that take place within this context (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). This trend is echoed in students' expectations and descriptions, describing the feedback they received as dialogical, explanatory, and not merely corrective. Within the framework of formative assessment, this type of feedback was facilitated by specific assessment techniques (assignments and oral exams) and resulted in building interpersonal relationships between academic staff and students, as well as supporting their learning.

On the contrary, it was also stressed that there was a significant absence of feedback, hindering the enhancement of learning outcomes, because of the traditional method of written examinations and the lack of communication with professors. The latter can be easily understood given the increased workload of academic staff in recent years, both due to bureaucratization in universities and the universal access to higher education. Nevertheless, the current trend in many countries nowadays is toward strengthening feedback to improve student satisfaction. In this context, academic staff are encouraged to provide faster, more detailed, and higher-quality feedback (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). These recommendations appear to be strengthened by the overall findings of this study as well.

Finally, students emphasized the significance of positive interpersonal relationships with professors and peers in the educational process and assessment, considering the former more decisive. It seems possible that these findings are due to the institutional role of the professor in grade assignment, as well as the fact that assessment is a bilateral system involving both the assessor and the assessed (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Moreover, research has demonstrated that constructive and positive relationships between instructors and students affect how students approach learning (Lynam & Cachia, 2017), and in the present study, such relations were associated with the quality of feedback.

Positive determinants in these relationships included professors' availability, openness, and willingness to support students, personality, and openness, as well as a few members of educational groups. The ease with which students felt they could approach their professors was identified by Vaessen (2021) as one of the factors forming students' perceptions of assessment. These findings underscore the importance of fostering positive relationships within the educational process, especially when assessment—and particularly feedback—is viewed not only as a means of measuring performance but also as a chance to enhance learning through collaboration and dialogue. Nonetheless, the positive climate was not fully leveraged due to the assessment techniques and methods applied.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are not generalizable and should be interpreted with caution. However, they highlight the contrast between the traditional assessment methods adopted by universities and students' expectations for alternative assessment approaches that promote learning. The students themselves expressed a desire to "transition" from knowledge consumption to knowledge creation (Lynam & Cachia, 2017).

Notably, the participants' views align with contemporary trends in the literature about higher education assessment, such as sustainable assessment and assessment for learning. The findings emphasize the importance of feedback and students' perceptions of assessment in influencing study approaches and the quality of learning outcomes, stressing the need for long-term learning outcomes that prepare them for the demands of modern society and professional life (Baartman & Quinlan, 2023; Boud, 2020). In light of this finding, as well as the strong interest demonstrated by the students in the issue, we propose the need for their active participation both in the assessment process during their studies (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022) and in shaping relevant assessment policies in higher education.

Overall, the study highlights the urgent need for a reorientation of assessment practices in universities, emphasizing authentic, student-centered learning and meaningful feedback. University administrations and academic staff are requested to place student satisfaction at the core, deeply understanding their needs and expectations within the knowledge society framework.

Even though abolishing summative assessments is neither a feasible alternative nor a desired one—since they serve both the certification of professional and academic qualifications and the evaluation of large numbers of students—, there is a necessity for a beneficial balance. Summative, formative, and sustainable assessments must coexist, without the function of final certification overshadowing the role of assessment as a lever for promoting learning and enhancing the student experience (Boud, 2020; French *et al.*, 2023; Lynam & Cachia, 2017).

Finally yet importantly, there is a need for large-scale quantitative studies that systematically investigate the correlations between students' perceptions of different assessment practices, specific learning outcomes, and the factors influencing this relationship. Deepening knowledge in this field is critical for developing more effective assessment policies and further improving the quality of higher education.

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