

Student Experiences with Continuous Assessment in DCU Futures at Dublin City University

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the arrival of generative AI have accelerated a shift towards Continuous Assessment (CA) in higher education. This paper uses data from a broader evaluation of the “Futures” initiative in Dublin City University (DCU) to explore student experiences of different forms of CA. DCU Futures aims to transform the undergraduate experience, in part by a much stronger focus on CA. Survey data from 546 DCU students were used to examine how different models of undergraduate programmes related to student satisfaction with CA. Compared to traditional exams, CA was perceived to be fairer, comprehensive, and less stressful, but a minority viewed it as less accurate. For most forms of CA, increased exposure was associated with higher satisfaction levels. Exceptions were CA formats that required groupwork. The outcomes show the importance of sharing detailed assessment rubrics with students, and of providing ongoing guidance on groupwork.

Keywords: *Continuous assessment, assessment approaches, higher education.*

1. Introduction

Continuous assessment (CA) and traditional exams have long been the two primary methods of evaluating student learning in higher education. CA involves ongoing evaluation of students' knowledge and competences *throughout* the academic year, using different methods such as written reports, quizzes, presentations, and group projects (Ariza et al., 2013; Bengoetxea & Buela-Casal, 2013), while exams typically occur at *the end* of the semester or academic year. There has been a growing movement towards adopting CA as an alternative or complement to traditional exams (Combrinck & Hatch, 2012). This shift is driven by the recognition that CA can provide a more comprehensive and authentic assessment of student learning, promote active learning, and enhance student engagement (Holmes, 2018). While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards online learning in higher education, it also exposed some limitations of traditional exams and highlighted the need for flexible and adaptable assessment

methods. This, coupled with the subsequent advent of generative AI, has contributed to the shift towards CA (Łodzickowski et al., 2023; Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021). While AI offers potential benefits for improving written communication skills (Osorio, 2023), concerns exist regarding its misuse for plagiarism in assessments (Rudolph et al., 2023). AI's ability to solve problems raises the possibility of students misusing it not only for essays and written work but also for different assessments formats, such as online quizzes. This paper examines CA from the student perspective, linking perceptions to the relative emphases placed on CA, as well as the implementation of CA and implications for academic integrity.

2. DCU Futures

In 2020, Dublin City University (DCU) launched the DCU Futures initiative, designed to transform undergraduate education. It is the largest innovation in teaching and learning in the history of DCU and aims to use educational innovation, industry engagement, and digitalisation of learning to transform *what* students learn and *how* they learn it, embedding Transversal Skills into all aspects of the student experience. A key change in *how* students learn is a much stronger emphasis on CA and on relevant and authentic forms of assessment of student learning, including Challenge-Based Learning.

DCU Futures is funded by the Human Capital Initiative (an Irish Government initiative for higher education which aligns innovation with national strategy objectives). Over its lifetime from 2020 to 2025, Futures will create 1000 additional student places on 10 new programmes, with the aim that it serves as a template for wider DCU change. The 10 programmes are divided between entirely new programmes, and new “specialisms” for existing programmes. An example of a new programme is the BA in Climate and Environmental Sustainability, which bridges natural and social sciences. In contrast, the BSc in Chemistry with AI is a new specialism, where students share a common first year programme with other chemistry undergraduates, but in subsequent years specialise in the application of AI to chemistry.

Students in common entry programmes experience aspects of the Futures approach in their first year, but to a lesser extent than those on one of the five new programmes, or than those in the second or third year of their specialism programme.

To complement external funder evaluations, DCU commissioned an internal evaluation, with a focus on sustainability and scalability. This paper presents selected findings from that evaluation, focusing on Futures students' views and experiences of continuous assessment.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on a subset of data from a survey of students on Futures programmes and on a small group of “comparison programmes” within DCU. While 639 students completed the

survey, this paper presents data only from the 546 students who agreed that their data could be used for broader dissemination. Students completed the survey during March and April 2023, and their data were grouped into the following three categories:

- **Non-Futures:** Traditional DCU programmes (146 student respondents).
- **Futures Light:** New programmes with a common entry first year, and a Futures specialism in later years (297 student respondents).
- **Futures Core:** New programmes adopting a Futures approach (101 student respondents).

There were 267 students in the first year and 279 students in the second year of their programme.

In addition to the evaluation survey, the paper uses DCU data from the 2023 cycle of a national survey of undergraduate students in higher education, called StudentSurvey.ie (<https://studentsurvey.ie/>). It is conducted annually and aims to explore student engagement and experiences. Data from the survey are used in this paper to provide insights about students' perceptions of academic integrity and plagiarism.

4. Results

The evaluation survey included statements designed to gauge student attitudes to CA in a general sense, to specific forms of CA, and to the preferred balance between continuous assessment and traditional exams.

4.1. Attitudes towards CA in general

Figure 1 provides an overview of students' attitudes towards CA. It shows that the vast majority of students (92%) believed that CA was fairer than exams, while 87% felt it provided a more comprehensive assessment of their skills and was less stressful. However, 25% acknowledged that CA could be less accurate than exams, and 15% expressed a preference for exams over CA.

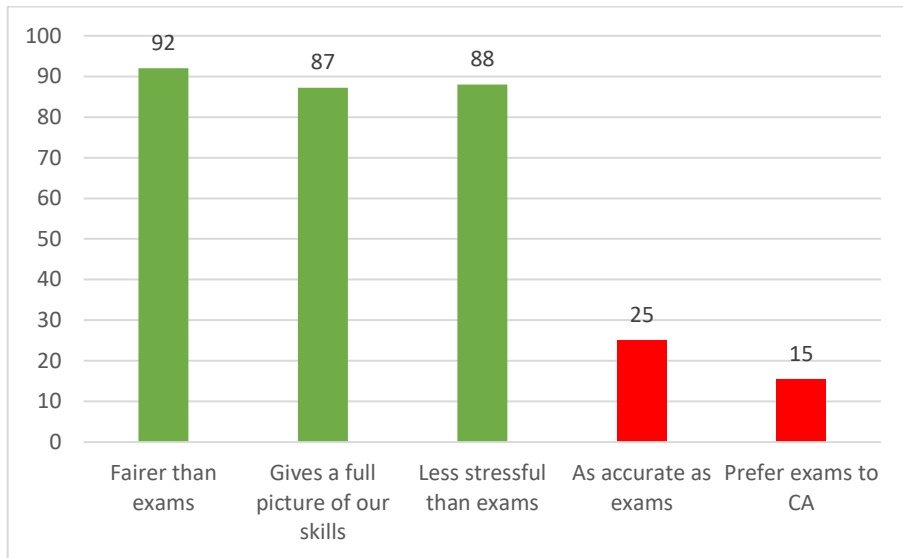


Figure 1. Percentage agreement with statements about CA, overall

Irrespective of programme type, year of study, or student gender, students typically expressed positive views on CA in general. That noted, second year students on Core Futures programmes are the group with the greatest exposure to CA, and they were also the group that expressed the most positive attitudes. Almost all (98%) believed that CA was fairer than exams and that it provided a fuller picture of their skills. They were also far less likely to believe that CA was not as accurate than exams (only 7% expressed this view, compared to 22-29% in other groups).

4.2. Attitudes towards the balance between different forms of CA

Regarding different forms of CA, students generally expressed satisfaction with the balance between the different forms (Figure 2). Large majorities were pleased with the amount of work assessed via Loop (DCU's digital learning platform) quizzes, reports and essays, labs and practicals, and presentations. Labs and practicals, along with Loop quizzes, emerged as the most popular assessment forms, with very few students seeking a reduction in the amount of work assessed by them.

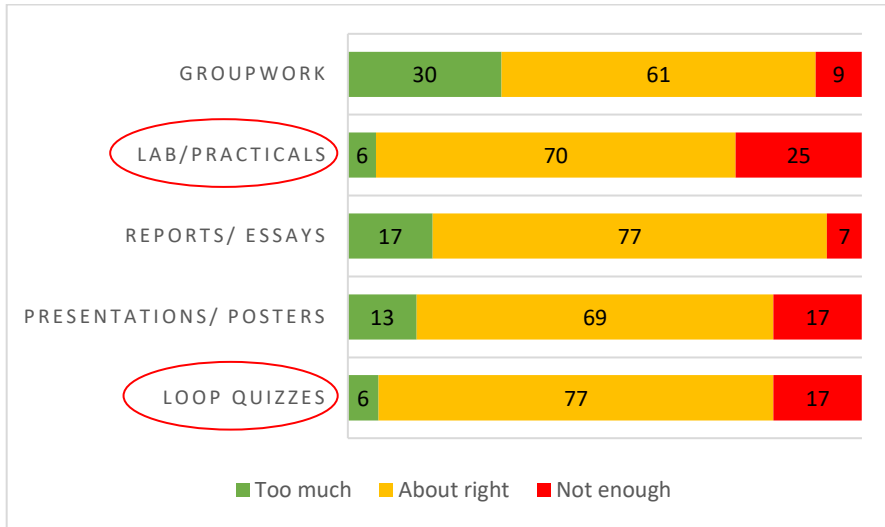


Figure 2. Satisfaction with amount of work assessed by different means, all respondents

Of the five forms of assessment listed in Figure 2, groupwork was the only one for which a large minority thought was allocated too much time. Use of groupwork also varies by programme type, featuring very strongly in Futures Core programmes, relative to other models. Thus, Figure 3 looks at attitudes to groupwork, by programme type. Half (50%) of all Futures Core students felt that too much of their work was assessed using groupwork (vs 23-30% in the other groups). Looking only at second year Core Futures students, 61% were dissatisfied with the amount of time allocated to groupwork.

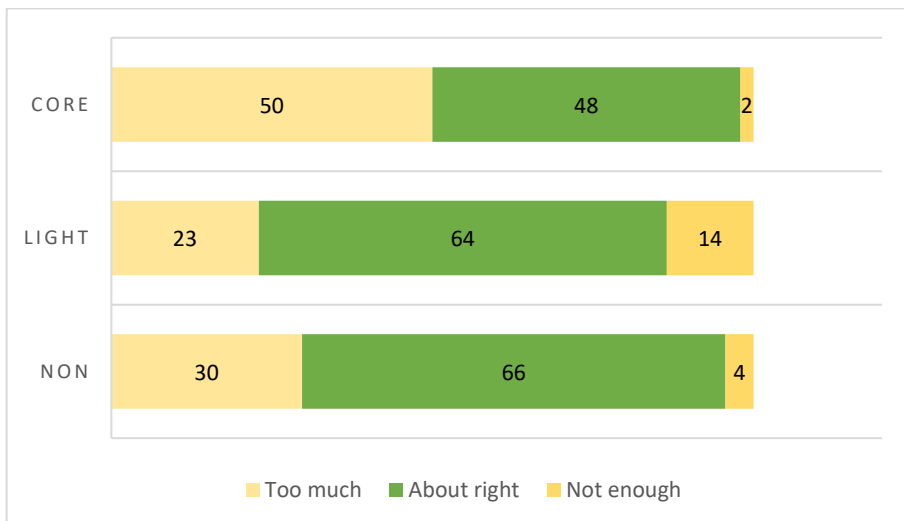


Figure 3. Amount of work assessed by groupwork, by Futures category

Because groupwork is a frequently used element of the Futures approach to how students learn, the survey included several questions exploring the student experience of groupwork. These showed that, irrespective of programme type, students preferred face-to-face groupwork over virtual meetings (90%). A majority in each group (83-85%) also expressed concerns about the potential stress of groupwork, and a smaller majority (54-65%) agreed that certain individuals could dominate group activities.

Students in non-Futures programmes (who typically had far less exposure to groupwork) were most likely to express a desire for guidance on working in groups. Conversely, those who were in second year on Futures Core courses were by far the most likely to feel that they had too much groupwork, and to agree that some did not contribute to activities.

4.3. Attitudes to Challenge-Based Learning:

Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) is a particular form of authentic, group-based assessment, and is a core element of the DCU Futures model. Few non-Futures students had experienced CBL, compared to 82% Futures Core and almost half of Futures Light students. Thus, this section focuses on Core and Light only. Students who had experience of CBL were generally very positive, agreeing they learned from others and were able to use skills from their course. Least positive ratings related to contributions of others on their team. While almost all (94%) Futures Core first year students agreed that they learned from others on their CBL team, only 64% of Futures Core second years did so. In a related vein, 76% of Futures Core second year students agreed some of their team did not contribute, as did 44% of their first year counterparts.

4.4. Students' preferences for CA and exams

When asked about their ideal assessment approach, students overwhelmingly favoured a predominantly CA approach (Figure 4). However, Futures Light students were less inclined towards entirely CA assessment, opting instead for a mixed approach that incorporated mainly CA and some exams. While close to two-thirds of Futures Core and non-Futures students preferred to be assessed entirely by continuous assessment, only 27% of Futures Light students selected this option. Conversely, 61% of Futures Light students opted for assessment mainly using CA, but with some exams (an option chosen by only 26-36% of students from the other two groups).

Examined by year, second year Futures Core students were the group most likely to prefer assessment to be entirely based on CA, with no exams (77%). This is also the group that has had greatest exposure to being assessed by CA.

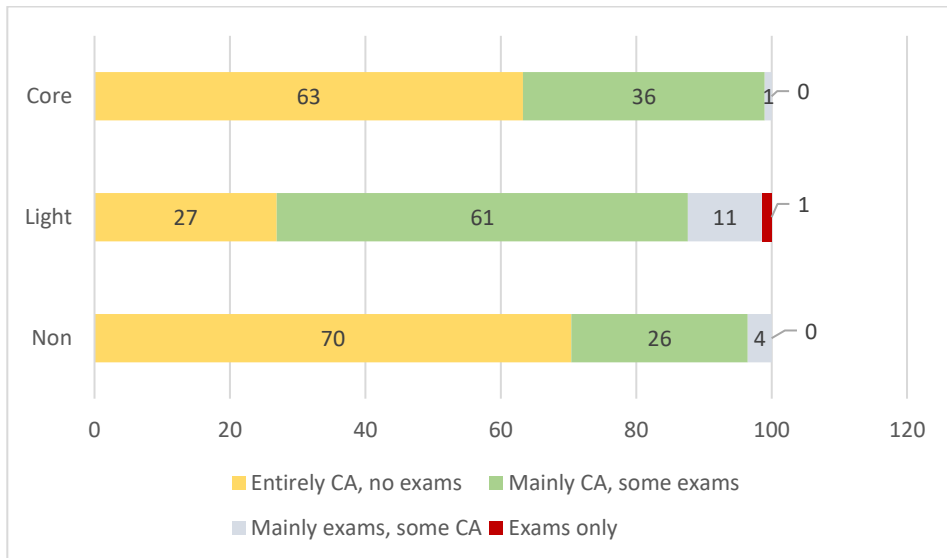


Figure 4. Preferred forms of assessment, by Futures category

4.4. CA and academic integrity in Futures

Lim (2022) has flagged how assessment practices increasingly need to include non-traditional methods (such as presentations), because AI can be used to subvert the process of assessment via traditional written essays and examinations. The Futures approach uses diverse and multi-modal continuous assessment methods (e.g., combining written, presentation, and oral skills), and the online quizzes incorporate at least some course-specific content. This suggests that it is more difficult to use AI to undermine student assessment within Futures. Support for this view comes from the findings of the national StudentSurvey.ie 2023, where Futures Core students were those most likely to perceive their assignments and assessment methods as being tailored to reduce cheating (92% agreed, versus 77% of Futures Light and 85% of non-Futures students).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Using the opportunity afforded by the DCU Futures initiative, this paper investigated how student perceptions of CA were related to their exposure to CA overall, and by different forms of CA. The results highlight many positive attitudes towards CA. Relative to traditional exams, it is seen as fairer, more comprehensive and less stressful. Broadly, increased exposure to CA is associated with more positive attitudes towards most dimensions of CA. Exceptions arise when CA requires working as part of a team. The findings may have wider relevance, but in the specific context of DCU, they are being addressed by a targeted groupwork toolkit for Futures programmes, and by efforts to improve student understanding of the nature of continuous

assessment and of assessment rubrics, their design, their use, and their fairness. Finally, by using a variety of continuous assessment methods, Futures programmes aim to minimize concerns about AI-enabled plagiarism, and to enhance academic integrity.

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