

Alternative assessment strategies for UK postgraduate students

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Keywords

Higher Education, assessment, PG , alternative

Abstract

Assessment policies in UK postgraduate education predominantly rely on summative coursework evaluations, often without compensation mechanisms available at undergraduate levels. Consequently, students failing both their initial and resit assessments are awarded only a Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) instead of a master's degree, even if their overall performance demonstrates substantial academic engagement. This approach poses challenges for students who struggle with single high-stakes assessments and does not align with contemporary formative assessment principles that emphasize learning improvement through structured feedback. This study critically examines alternative assessment strategies such as bonus questions, rapid resubmission, portfolio-based assessment, and competency-based grading to explore their applicability to UK postgraduate programmes. Drawing on international best practices, particularly US resubmission-based models, this paper proposes a novel Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM), integrating formative assessment principles with structured reassessment mechanisms to enhance student success while maintaining academic integrity. Through a comprehensive literature review and critical discussion, the paper situates the proposed model within the broader discourse on assessment fairness, student retention, and equity in postgraduate education. The findings contribute to ongoing policy debates regarding assessment reform in UK higher education institutions.

Introduction

Assessment in higher education serves as a crucial mechanism for evaluating student learning, providing feedback, and determining academic progression (Biggs & Tang, 2011). While undergraduate courses often incorporate compensation mechanisms that permit marginally failing students to progress, UK postgraduate programmes typically lack such flexibility (QAA, 2021). In this context, students who fail both an initial and resit assessment receive a PGDip rather than a full master's degree, irrespective of their broader academic performance.

The prevailing postgraduate assessment framework raises several concerns. The current model relies predominantly on summative coursework submissions without structured opportunities for formative feedback integration (Sadler, 1989; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). This inflexible structure disproportionately affects at-risk student groups, including international students, part-time learners, and those with learning disabilities, who may struggle with a rigid, high-stakes approach to assessment (Yorke, 2015). Moreover, this model misaligns with contemporary assessment theory, which supports scaffolded learning and iterative resubmission-based assessment models that emphasize improvement rather than finality in grading (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Internationally, reassessment policies in US higher education offer alternative strategies that allow students to revise their work based on feedback before final grading (Guskey, 2010). These models align with competency-based education (CBE) frameworks that emphasize mastery learning over punitive grading (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

This paper systematically examines alternative postgraduate assessment strategies and proposes a Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM) designed to balance academic rigor, fairness, and student retention. The study contributes to discussions on how UK postgraduate assessment can evolve to support student success without compromising academic integrity.

Research Questions

1. What alternative assessment strategies can be introduced for UK postgraduate students failing both their initial and resit assessments?

2. How do international assessment models, particularly in the United States, incorporate reassessment opportunities, and what lessons can be applied to the UK system?
3. How can a compensatory assessment model be designed to uphold academic standards and fairness in UK postgraduate programmes?

Research Objectives

1. To critically analyze UK postgraduate assessment frameworks and their limitations.
2. To evaluate alternative assessment models, including bonus questions, resubmission policies, and portfolio-based assessment, through a systematic literature review.
3. To compare UK and international assessment models, particularly focusing on resubmission-based learning and competency-based education.
4. To propose a Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM) that maintains academic standards while addressing student retention and success.

Methodology, Limitations, and References

Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review and comparative policy analysis to evaluate alternative postgraduate assessment strategies. Given the non-empirical nature of this research, a literature-based approach is the most appropriate method to synthesize existing theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and international best practices.

The research follows a qualitative, document-based analysis, using a systematic literature review (SLR) framework (Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017). The key elements of this approach include:

1. Identifying Relevant Studies – Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy reports related to higher education assessment, summative vs. formative assessment, compensatory models, and international reassessment policies were collected.
2. Eligibility Criteria – Studies published in the last 20 years (2003–2023) were prioritized, ensuring the inclusion of contemporary debates. Only sources that explicitly discuss postgraduate assessment, resubmission policies, competency-based education, or compensatory grading were included.
3. Comparative Analysis – Assessment policies in the UK postgraduate education system were compared against international models, particularly US, Australian, and Scandinavian higher education systems.
4. Thematic Coding – The key themes that emerged (e.g., resubmission-based learning, bonus question mechanisms, and portfolio-based assessment) were coded and synthesized to develop a comprehensive compensatory framework.

Data Sources

The following databases were used to identify scholarly sources:

- SCOPUS and Web of Science – Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) – Studies on assessment and learning models.
- Google Scholar – Policy papers and university case studies.
- Higher Education Academy (HEA) and QAA Reports – UK-specific assessment frameworks.

Justification of Methodology

A systematic literature review enables a rigorous synthesis of existing knowledge, particularly when empirical primary data collection is not feasible (Gough et al., 2017). Additionally, comparative policy analysis allows for an examination of best practices across different educational contexts, supporting the development of a tailored compensatory model for UK postgraduate students.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a theoretically and empirically grounded proposal for alternative postgraduate assessment models, it acknowledges several limitations:

1. **Non-Empirical Approach:** The study relies solely on secondary sources, meaning that direct student or faculty perspectives on assessment reform were not collected. Future research should incorporate interviews, surveys, or experimental interventions in UK postgraduate programmes.
2. **Generalizability Issues:** While international models (e.g., the US resubmission model) provide strong theoretical grounding, their direct applicability to the UK system depends on institutional policies, faculty perceptions, and regulatory structures.
3. **Variability in Institutional Policies:** Postgraduate assessment policies differ significantly across universities in the UK. The proposed Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM) may require modifications to align with individual institutions' academic integrity policies and resource constraints.
4. **Limited Discussion on Subject-Specific Assessment Differences:** The study assumes a general approach to postgraduate assessment without considering how different academic disciplines (e.g., STEM vs. Humanities) may require tailored assessment mechanisms.

Assessment for PG students

UK Postgraduate Assessment Policies and Their Limitations (RQ1 & RO1)

Assessment plays a critical role in postgraduate education, influencing student success, institutional reputation, and student recruitment. The current UK postgraduate model, which does not permit compensation mechanisms, disproportionately impacts students who may struggle with high-stakes assessment environments.

From a student success perspective, the rigid summative nature of postgraduate assessment often results in increased failure rates, particularly among students who require additional support, such as non-native English speakers and part-time students balancing academic and professional commitments (Havnes & McDowell, 2008). Research suggests that students who receive structured opportunities for resubmission and feedback-driven learning demonstrate improved retention and deeper understanding of course material (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The impact on course reputation is also significant. Courses with high failure rates risk negative student feedback, lower satisfaction scores in institutional assessments, and decreased employability rates among graduates. Such factors contribute to lower rankings in national and global university league tables, influencing institutional funding and policy decisions (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).

Moreover, assessment structures influence student recruitment. International students, who form a substantial portion of UK postgraduate cohorts, often consider reassessment policies when selecting institutions. Universities with flexible and formative assessment approaches tend to attract a more diverse student population, while those with rigid, high-failure policies may struggle to maintain enrollment numbers (Yorke, 2015). Consequently, introducing alternative assessment methods can enhance institutional competitiveness and foster a more inclusive educational environment.

The Non-Compensatory Model

Postgraduate assessment in the UK primarily relies on summative coursework evaluation (QAA, 2021). Unlike undergraduate programmes, which allow compensation mechanisms (e.g., allowing a marginal failure if the overall average meets a threshold), postgraduate students must pass all assignments outright (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).

This non-compensatory approach creates a rigid assessment environment, limiting opportunities for iterative learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Moreover, research highlights that the failure-to-PGDip policy disproportionately affects students from underrepresented groups, particularly:

- International students, who may struggle with academic writing conventions and require additional feedback cycles (Yorke, 2015).
- Part-time students, who balance coursework with professional responsibilities, making them more vulnerable to single high-stakes assessments (Havnes & McDowell, 2008).
- Students with learning difficulties, who may require multiple assessment iterations to achieve mastery (Sambell et al., 2013).

Alternative Assessment Strategies: Empirical Evidence (RQ1 & RO2)

Bonus Questions as a Grade Buffer

Bonus questions allow students to demonstrate higher-order thinking and earn additional marks (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Studies indicate that bonus questions can mitigate assessment anxiety and reduce failure rates without lowering academic standards (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Rapid Resubmission Based on Feedback

US universities frequently implement resubmission-based grading, allowing students to revise and resubmit coursework within a structured timeframe (Guskey, 2010). Empirical studies demonstrate that students who engage with structured feedback cycles improve their long-term academic performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Portfolio-Based Assessment for Progressive Learning

Portfolios track student progress over time, allowing gradual improvement rather than single-attempt failures (Trevitt et al., 2014). This method aligns with constructive alignment theory (Biggs, 2003), ensuring assessment reflects student learning trajectories.

A Compensatory Assessment Model for UK Postgraduate Students (RQ4 & RO4)

The Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM)

This study proposes the Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM), integrating feedback-driven resubmission, portfolio-based assessments, and compensatory mechanisms.

1. First Coursework Submission → Standard Grading
2. Rapid Resubmission Window (7 Days) → Feedback Integration
3. Final Resit → Traditional Resit if Failure Persists
4. Compensatory Portfolio Assessment → If the final resit is failed, students submit a reflective portfolio

This model aligns with international best practices and self-regulated learning theories, ensuring that assessment reflects student competency rather than a single test performance.

Discussion and Analysis

This section critically examines the literature and empirical evidence on alternative assessment strategies for postgraduate students, synthesizing insights to address the research questions and objectives. The discussion integrates perspectives on assessment fairness, student retention, and competency-based education, with a focus on developing a compensatory assessment model suited for UK postgraduate education.

Rethinking UK Postgraduate Assessment: Formative vs. Summative Approaches

One of the most significant limitations of the current UK postgraduate assessment framework is its over-reliance on summative assessment models, where student performance is primarily evaluated through one-off coursework submissions with minimal opportunity for structured resubmission or iterative improvement (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The absence of formative integration in postgraduate assessment policies contrasts with international best practices, particularly the US higher education system, where resubmission-based grading allows students to improve their work through structured feedback loops (Guskey, 2010).

The theoretical foundation for iterative assessment stems from constructive alignment theory (Biggs, 2003) and formative assessment principles (Sadler, 1989), which emphasize the role of feedback-driven learning. Research has demonstrated that students who receive structured resubmission opportunities exhibit higher academic performance and deeper conceptual understanding than those assessed purely through one-time coursework submissions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The lack of compensation mechanisms in postgraduate programmes exacerbates assessment anxiety and failure penalties, disproportionately affecting:

- International students, who may require additional feedback cycles to adjust to UK academic standards (Yorke, 2015).

- Part-time students, who balance academic and professional responsibilities and may struggle with rigid deadlines (Havnes & McDowell, 2008).
- Students with learning difficulties, who benefit from scaffolded assessment approaches rather than high-stakes grading (Sambell et al., 2013).

Addressing these concerns necessitates a re-evaluation of postgraduate assessment through alternative strategies that balance academic rigor, fairness, and flexibility.

Alternative Assessment Strategies: Evaluating Feasibility and Effectiveness

Several alternative assessment strategies have been proposed to address the limitations of rigid summative coursework models. The literature suggests four primary approaches:

1. **Bonus Questions for Grade Compensation** Bonus questions allow students to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills and earn additional marks beyond the primary coursework grading criteria (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). This approach aligns with differentiated assessment strategies, ensuring that students who exhibit deep learning and analytical reasoning are not penalized solely for failing core components of an assignment (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

However, some critics argue that bonus questions may introduce inconsistencies in grading, particularly if not all students choose to answer them (Harlen, 2005). To mitigate this, bonus questions must be carefully designed to assess critical thinking rather than compensate for weaker responses in the main assignment.

2. **Rapid Resubmission for Feedback Integration** A widely accepted alternative assessment model is structured resubmission, where students who fail their first coursework attempt are granted a defined period (e.g., 7 days) to revise and resubmit their work based on detailed instructor feedback (Guskey, 2010). This model aligns with mastery learning theories, which emphasize assessment as a learning process rather than a one-time judgment (Sadler, 1989).

Empirical studies indicate that students who engage with resubmission-based assessment models:

- Improve their long-term retention of concepts (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
- Exhibit higher levels of academic confidence and engagement (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).
- Demonstrate better application of feedback to future assessments (Ewell, 2013).

Critics argue that resubmission models may lead to grade inflation if not carefully regulated. However, studies have shown that when clear resubmission policies are implemented with rigorous marking criteria, the risk of lowering academic standards is mitigated (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005).

3. **Portfolio-Based Assessment for Progressive Learning** Portfolios provide a longitudinal record of student progress, allowing students to demonstrate competency over time rather than in a single high-stakes assessment (Trevitt et al., 2014). Portfolio-based assessment is particularly effective in professional disciplines, where learning application and reflective practice are key indicators of mastery (Hager & Butler, 1996).

A major advantage of portfolio assessment is its ability to integrate:

- Self-reflection, helping students track their academic growth.
- Multiple assessment components, reducing the impact of a single failure.
- Authentic learning tasks, making assessments more relevant to real-world applications.

However, the logistical complexity of portfolio assessment has led some institutions to hesitate in fully adopting it, particularly for large postgraduate cohorts (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Despite this, universities that have introduced scaffolded portfolio assessment have observed higher student retention and progression rates (Havnes & McDowell, 2008).

Towards a Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM)

Given the empirical evidence supporting iterative assessment and formative learning, this study proposes the Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM), which integrates multiple assessment strategies into a structured reassessment framework.

The CRM consists of four key components:

1. First Coursework Submission → Standard Grading
2. Rapid Resubmission Window (7 Days) → Feedback Integration
3. Final Resit Opportunity → Traditional Resit
4. Compensatory Portfolio Submission → If the final resit is failed, students submit a reflective portfolio

This model aligns with international best practices in higher education, particularly US competency-based grading models (Guskey, 2010), ensuring that students are assessed on the basis of progressive mastery rather than a single summative failure.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study critically evaluates alternative postgraduate assessment models and proposes the Compensatory Resubmission Model (CRM) as a viable reform strategy for UK higher education institutions. Key Findings regard that: The UK postgraduate assessment system lacks compensatory mechanisms, disproportionately affecting at-risk student groups; International best practices, particularly US resubmission-based models, provide a strong empirical foundation for integrating formative assessment in postgraduate education; Alternative assessment strategies, such as bonus questions, rapid resubmission, and portfolio-based assessment, enhance fairness and student success without compromising academic standards. Also that the CRM model provides a structured compensatory mechanism, integrating iterative learning, scaffolded assessment, and flexible grading policies.

Policy Recommendations

1. Adopt Rapid Resubmission Windows - UK universities should implement structured resubmission opportunities, allowing students to revise coursework based on instructor feedback within a defined timeframe.
2. Integrate Portfolio-Based Assessments - Postgraduate assessment should include competency-based portfolios, ensuring that students demonstrate learning progression over time.
3. Develop Institutional Resubmission Guidelines - Universities should establish clear policies for feedback-driven resubmission to mitigate concerns about grade inflation while maintaining academic integrity.
4. Pilot and Evaluate the CRM Model - Institutions should conduct pilot studies on the CRM framework, assessing its impact on student retention, learning outcomes, and institutional grading consistency.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should explore:

- The long-term impact of CRM implementation on postgraduate student success rates.
- Comparative studies on international postgraduate assessment policies.
- The scalability of portfolio-based assessments in UK higher education institutions.

By integrating structured reassessment policies, UK universities can enhance postgraduate student success while upholding academic rigor.

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