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Assessment in Criminology

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

By the end of this chapter you should be familiar with:

- different types of assessment used in Higher Education programmes of study
- expected learning outcomes
- the importance of peer and self-assessment
- choosing modules.

3.1 What is assessment?

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) checks quality and standards of programmes and subjects within all Higher Education institutions by auditing these. The QAA Code of Practice on the Assessment of Students states that:

Assessment is a generic term for a set of processes that measure the outcomes of students' learning, in terms of knowledge acquired, understanding developed and skills gained.

and that:

It provides the basis for decisions on whether a student is ready to proceed, to qualify for an award or to demonstrate competence to practise. It enables students to obtain feedback on their learning and helps them improve their performance. It enables staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. (www.qaa.ac.uk)

Whether it takes place during a module or at the end of the module, and no matter whether it consists of an essay, presentation, examination or portfolio, assessment is an

important issue for students. This chapter discusses types of assessment that you may come across during your university career and explains why this assessment takes place and the learning outcomes involved. Chapters 4, 5 and 8 will attempt to provide some advice for you as you negotiate your way through assessment with notes and tips on essay writing, revision, examination techniques and strategies, presentation skills, report writing and portfolio-building ideas. These practical examples from within the Criminology discipline as well as the activities that you can complete will enable you to find the best way of studying Criminology whether you are new to studying or an experienced student.

3.2 Types of assessment – formative and summative

You will be assessed within the time that your programme takes place or at the end of the course. This work may be:

- **formative**
- **summative.**

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

This does not contribute to overall assessment and grading is not necessarily given for this work. Where a grade is given it is usually of a formative nature and does not usually count towards the final grade for the assessment on the module. This is an instance when peer review sometimes takes place. The rationale for asking you to complete formative assessment is because it provides you with feedback on your progress and informs your future learning. For example, you may be asked to produce a ten-minute presentation for a seminar class but will not be marked on that piece of work. Instead, the presentation would lead the other students in the seminar group to focus on a specific aspect of Criminology while you will gain the practice of preparing and delivering a presentation. An exercise like this will also allow you to receive feedback from the seminar tutor and possibly, as mentioned above, from your peers. There will be less pressure on you to perform in order to receive a grade but you will be able to develop skills that will help you to achieve a higher grade in assessed work. Formative assessment is useful in identifying areas which require

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further work and such presentations are especially useful for you during your first year as an undergraduate, although if too many formative pieces of work are given to students this can add to the burden of your workload. For this reason lecturers and tutors will be selective in asking you to carry out this type of assignment.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

This provides a measure of achievement made in respect of a learner's performance in relation to the intended learning outcomes of the unit, module or programme of study. One example of summative assessment would be an examination at the end of the module. This would check that you have achieved the learning outcomes of that module and would be marked and graded. Summative assessment may also consist of essays, reports and presentations that are graded and that count towards your final mark for the module. This would also mean that you would gain credits in order to progress from Semester 1 to Semester 2 or between years. As discussed in Chapter 2, you are expected to gain a specified number of credits during each academic year to enable you to progress to the next year of study.

3.3 Peer assessment

As discussed above presentations may often provide the forum for peer assessment. This is a form of assessment used in Higher Education that may be new to many students. Peer assessment is an evaluation of your work by your fellow students. In this form of assessment you may be required to grade another student's work. This could be an essay plan, a short essay or a presentation and the mark you give may form part of the overall grade for that module. An example of this might be that your peer group will appraise the ways in which you as a presenter have clearly identified and delivered the key points and issues relevant to the topic. They will also identify how well your presentation stimulated discussion and raised questions at the end of the presentation. This method of assessment can be extremely useful as, if you are required to appraise someone else's work, you need to know the subject area in some depth yourself! Evaluating other people's presentations in terms of, for example, style, structure and content also enables you to be able to pinpoint the good and not so good parts of your own work. An example of a Peer Assessment Mark Sheet is given on page 000 and highlights the areas that are assessed.

Peer Assessment Mark Sheet

Give each category a mark from 1 to 5 with 1 being the lowest mark and 5 the highest:

	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]
Clear plan					
Key issues identified					
Logical structure					
Arguments made sense					
Resources used: OHPs Powerpoint, Handouts, Flipchart, Video					
Teamwork					
Timing					
Promoted class discussion					
Entertaining					

Other comments:

Names of students presenting:

Topic covered:

Presentation date and time:

Peer assessment is not only an extremely valuable exercise within Higher Education but is also an important skill in relation to the workplace. In a general sense, when we attend meetings, make presentations or take part in training sessions, for example, there is a need to produce relevant information in a coherent manner so that people listening to you can understand your intended key points. Most jobs and professions within the world of work are service based and being able to present reports that are well structured and clearly written is a skill highly valued by employers, colleagues

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and clients. Taking part in peer assessment during your university degree can give you the confidence to be able to respond positively to points raised by your peer group rather than feeling exposed, resentful or threatened by a perception that someone has challenged your work unfairly. Peer assessment enables you to critically formulate and structure your information to get the best out of your work.

3.4 Self-assessment

Self-assessment in many ways is similar to peer assessment with the additional advantage that you can see how you are progressing through a module or programme of study and reflect upon your development. This is important as it is possible to identify strengths in your work, and resources needed to address any weaknesses. Students studying with you at university are drawn from a wide range of areas and backgrounds within society and are motivated to study for different reasons, for example, some of you who want to study Criminology may do so because you feel that you already know something about crime and society and have an interest in or are curious about crime. Others engage with the subject because they hope to take up posts within the criminological professions, such as the Police, the Courts, **Probation** Service or Prison Service whilst others may already be employed in these or other criminal justice agencies. The current tendency towards lifelong learning is often seen as a two-way process that marries together theoretical concerns on academic courses with practical skills in the market place, and gaining qualifications in a particular subject area is necessary for career advancement. Employers also increasingly require their employees to update their skills to keep pace with fast-changing economic circumstances that take place within a global market. Taking these factors into account together with the trend towards increasing professionalisation of many areas of work, academic study becomes a significant part of the professional ethos.

Activity 3a



Think about why you want to study Criminology and what motivates you towards this subject area.

List professional and personal reasons.

This will enable you to be selective about the modules and the assessment that you do. It can help you to develop specialised knowledge to support your future career aspirations.

As students you will bring different life experiences to your studies and it is recognised that each individual student has different limitations and strengths; practising self-assessment will enable you to locate any specific difficulties you may be experiencing and to think about what you might need to do to resolve them so that you can progress and achieve your potential. As well as the above, self-assessment can take many forms including checking your skills in accessing library resources, organising your work environment and schedules to meet deadlines, reflecting upon how you meet your targets, reviewing your writing and presentational skills and considering what might be done to improve your work.

Activity 3b



Think about the last examination, essay or presentation that you have carried out. Consider how you organised your research and revision and critically assess what you would need to do to improve it.

Studying Criminology at university encourages you to see crime and criminal behaviour from a variety of perspectives that will broaden and deepen your knowledge of the topic. It gives you a better grasp of the subject area and enables you to critically evaluate and question taken-for-granted assumptions about crime and society. Assessment is necessary to measure your learning and self-assessment can play a key part in developing your technical skills, improving your critical thinking and increasing your knowledge and understanding of Criminology.

3.5 Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are the intended skills and knowledge that you will acquire by studying a particular module. The following shows some examples of learning outcomes from Criminology modules.

A Criminal Justice module might state that on completion, 'you will be able to':

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- understand major themes in criminological policy
- recognise the social factors affecting the processes underlying the formulation and implementation of policing, prosecution, sentencing, penal and victim policies
- comprehend rationales underlying different custodial and non-custodial sanctions and recognise the character and effects of their implementation
- critically evaluate criminal justice policy and practice
- appreciate the social, political and ethical issues arising in criminal justice policy
- develop skills in communication, interpretation of data, problem solving, decision making and critical analysis.

For a 'Race', Crime and Criminal Justice module, expected learning outcomes might state that upon completion of the module, 'you should be able to':

- familiarise yourself with the range of sociological and criminological theories about 'race' and crime
- understand and distinguish different racisms (for example, direct, indirect, institutional) and their operation within society and the criminal justice system
- comprehend the ways that racism and racial discrimination operate within the criminal justice system
- analyse critically the different interpretations placed upon the relation between 'race' and crime
- appreciate the contribution of different theories of racism, ethnicity and identity towards criminological understanding of victimisation, offending and criminal justice.

These are provided only as an indication of the types of learning outcomes, and students should not expect to see exactly the same outcomes in similar modules throughout all universities. It is important to note that when you are being assessed these outcomes must be evident in the work you have done and it is how well you demonstrate that you have met them that contributes to your final grade.

3.6 Marking criteria

This is an indication of the typical criteria that assessors will be using when they mark your work. The example below is based on the criteria used at the University of Teesside and may vary somewhat in other institutions but the general principles will be broadly similar. External examiners are employed to ensure that the criteria used in different institutions are compatible to that in other similar institutions. As you can see 40% indicates a pass grade whilst 70% indicates very good work indeed.

AN EXAMPLE OF MARKING CRITERIA

70%–100%
Points are made clearly and concisely, always substantiated by appropriate use of source material. There is evidence of a sound ability to interrelate critically theories with examples from practice. The work contains coherent arguments with some evidence of original thought. Presentation is excellent.
60%–69%
Very good presentation with an emerging ability to apply knowledge critically to practice. Appropriate evidence, good use of source material, which supports most points clearly. Content is wholly relevant, within a fluent coherent structure. Critical reflection could be developed further.
50%–59%
There is demonstration of a sound knowledge base, but limited critical and practical application of concepts and ideas. Content is largely relevant although points may not always be clear, and structure may lack coherence. Use of source material to illustrate points is generally adequate but may be lacking in some instances. Contains some critical reflection. The presentation is of a good standard, but with minor errors in grammar and spelling.
40%–49%
Adequate presentation with some errors. The work is descriptive but relevant, with clear evidence of knowledge and understanding. There is evidence of some reading and there is limited critical reflection. Links to practice are made, although arguments are often lacking in coherence and may be unsubstantiated by relevant source material.
39% and below—fail
Poorly structured, incoherent and wholly descriptive work. Limited evidence of appropriate reading, and no evidence of critical thought. Referencing poor or missing.

3.7 Choosing modules to study

At various stages in your programme you may be given the opportunity to choose which modules you want to study (option modules are discussed in Chapter 2) that have a particular form of assessment criteria. Quite often these are modules that do not have examinations or presentations and instead use essays or other forms of in-course assessment. However, a range of assessments is likely to be used throughout your degree programme, and examinations and presentations as well as essays give you the opportunity to show your knowledge and understanding of the subject area. Depending on your programme of study, you will be required to take a number of core modules; that is, some modules will be deemed essential to obtaining a subject specific degree. As previously mentioned you will also be able to choose some from a range of other modules that you find interesting, and it is important that you base your choice on the content of the module rather than on what the assessment is. If you are interested in a specific topic area you will be motivated towards learning about it and gaining a thorough knowledge of the subject, whereas if you are taking modules based on what the assessment is there is a greater likelihood that you will become bored and disinterested quite quickly. It may, therefore, become a struggle for you to engage fully with the content and gain information that is necessary for you to pass the module.

A variety of assessment is also very useful for life after graduation. You may want to take up further study and research within Higher Education, such as a Masters degree programme, and the various techniques learned during your undergraduate studies will give you the confidence to pursue this. As we have discussed earlier in this chapter, within many work environments there is the requirement to write reports, make presentations and utilise your knowledge in those situations when you have to 'think on your feet'. This is discussed in more depth in Chapter 11 (Making Your Degree Work for You).

3.8 Relative weighting of assessments

You need to make sure that you are aware of the weighting related to the assignment that you are undertaking for assessment. For example, you may be asked to answer an essay question and are informed that this will be accorded 50% of the overall module mark, an essay plan will make up 10% of the overall mark, and a presentation will make up the remaining 40% of the module. Giving some consideration to the weighting of these specific elements is useful in terms of the time and effort you spend

on these tasks. In this example the essay plan is only worth 10% of the overall mark and, therefore, you will not put the same amount of time or effort into completing this as you would with either the presentation or the essay itself.

You must always check when each component of the assessment needs to be submitted, since they may have different deadlines, and ensure that you know where you need to submit these. In the above example it could be that the essay plan would have to be submitted in advance of the essay and this may be followed by the date for the presentation. Even though within this example there is no examination, these dates and details regarding the assessment ought to be treated in exactly the same way as you would approach an examination, as they are just as important.

3.9 Assessment range

Assessment takes place in various ways across the whole spectrum of university degree courses and sourcing knowledge and information necessary to meet assessment criteria particularly within Criminology takes many forms. Assessment does not necessarily depend upon one person's contribution but can depend upon the input of other individuals; for example, seminar presentations may involve co-presenters and peer group grading. Formal lectures are the means by which lecturers will provide you with key points about particular aspects of Criminology; however, it is within seminar groups and workshops that discussion and often critical debate takes place. Lecturers use various techniques and tools to introduce students to criminological theories, policies and practices and, although seminar activities are not graded, taking part in these activities is a productive aid towards assessment. For example, you may be asked to read several articles about the growing prison population and to highlight the similarities and differences between each writer's perspectives. You would then critically assess what you have learned and this could contribute towards a framework for an essay title or examination question.

Activity 3c

Gather articles or chapters that focus upon the reasons why penal policy in recent years has become more punitive in respect of offending behaviour. Critically evaluate competing values.



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Focusing upon and researching a specific topic area and summarising it for a seminar discussion group is another way of gathering information that can be used in your assessment.

Activity 3d



Read a chapter on the way crime is reported in the media and summarise the key points that you think could provide the basis for discussion in a seminar group (see for example Reiner, R. (2002) 'Media made criminality, the representations of crime in the mass media', in Maguire, Morgan and Reiner (2002: 376–416)).

Taking part in seminars and workshops is an essential part of your university career and whether you are a mature student or entering university straight from 'A' levels, the variety of skills that you develop and learn during seminars is invaluable in respect of your progress as an undergraduate. Whether they are graded or not, different types of assessment together with seminar activities and discussion groups are excellent ways of gaining confidence and building up a knowledge base that can be drawn upon across the range of assessments.

3.10 Summary

- This chapter has shown you why assessment takes place in Higher Education.
- The different types of assessment that you might undertake on a Criminology degree programme have been identified.
- Expected learning outcomes and marking criteria have been introduced to give you an awareness of expectations in Higher Education degree programmes.
- The usefulness of taking part in various types of assessment during your degree has been discussed and the relevance and benefits of these skills in future study or employment have been highlighted.