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Performance Gaps and Preference Patterns:
A Mixed-Methods Study of Student Preferences and Experiences with Assessment Types

Over the last decade, there has been a growing focus on understanding various assessment formats and how student preferences for these formats impact learning outcomes (Holzinger et al., 2020). Students are likely to favour familiar assessment formats, even if these are not necessarily those in which they perform best (Watering et al., 2008). There is limited empirical evidence to support the claim that students perform better on their preferred assessment formats (Watering et al., 2008), highlighting the need for further research into how assessment preferences affect academic performance. For international students, assessment preferences may be shaped by their academic backgrounds and experiences in their home countries, which can impact their educational experiences. Bartram & Bailey (2010) investigate differences in assessment preferences between UK and international students, finding that coursework is favoured by international students because it allows them to develop their English language skills.

Our research builds on the existing literature on assessment methods by aiming to understand whether LSE students in the Departments of International Development, Government, Public Policy, and International Relations opt into courses based on the type of assessment and whether this assessment type is correlated with performance at the LSE. This matters because assessment is not just a tool for measuring learning—it also shapes student satisfaction and engagement. Our goal is to understand how students perform on and perceive different assessment types, thereby providing crucial insights that can inform how the LSE can better achieve student satisfaction and learning outcomes. By employing a quantitative analysis of exam results from academic years 2021/22 to 2023/24 and qualitative research of current students, we also seek to understand whether certain assessment types may disadvantage some students more than others.

Assessment Types and Performance Gaps: Quantitative Findings

Using the likelihood of receiving an upper grade per assessment format (coursework or exam), controlling for socio-economic characteristics, we explore whether particular groups of students are disproportionately affected by different modes of assessment. We relied on a dataset comprising 30,580 student records from the Development, Government, International Relations, and Public Policy Departments, spanning 2021 to 2024. It is focused on the performance of these students, categorised into upper and lower grade bins per course. Variables include ethnicity, disability, sex, fee status, course level, age group, and socio-economic class.

Table 1: Regression Output

	Dependent variable:
	Upper Grade Odds Model 1
has_exam	−0.958***
	(0.032)
has_coursework	−0.207***
	(0.019)
Constant	2.233***
	(0.011)
Observations	2,322
Log Likelihood	−11,057.150
Akaike Inf. Crit.	22,120.300
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Three models were estimated from the available data. The first model (Table 1) assessed whether assessment format alone was associated with student outcomes. It found that both exams and coursework were negatively associated with the likelihood of receiving an upper grade, but the negative association was stronger for exams than for coursework.

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The second model (Table 2) contained socio-economic controls and showed that the exam effect persisted. In this model, students with BAME backgrounds, students with declared disabilities, and those aged 25 and over were all found to have significantly lower odds of achieving upper grades. In contrast, white students and those with overseas fee status were more likely to attain upper grades when taking exams.

The third model (Table 3) focused on coursework and showed that coursework was also associated with reduced odds of upper-grade attainment, though the effect was smaller than that for exams. Socio-economic effects manifested in similar ways to the results of Table 3: students with BAME backgrounds, students with declared disabilities, and those aged 25 have lower odds of achieving upper grades compared to white students and those with overseas fee status when evaluated on coursework.

Table 2: Regression Output

	Dependent variable:
	Upper Grade Odds Model 2
has_exam	−1.093*** (0.030)
soc_groupAge (PGT):25 and over	−0.214*** (0.046)
soc_groupDisability:Declared disability	−0.366*** (0.050)
soc_groupDisability:No known	−0.005 (0.036)
soc_groupEthnicity:BAME	−0.373*** (0.037)
soc_groupEthnicity:White	0.190*** (0.043)
soc_groupFee Status:Home	−0.037 (0.045)
soc_groupFee Status:OS	0.131*** (0.039)
soc_groupSex:Female	−0.174*** (0.037)
soc_groupSex:Male	−0.275*** (0.040)
Constant	2.260*** (0.029)
Observations	2,322
Log Likelihood	−10,895.380
Akaike Inf. Crit.	21,812.750
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3: Regression Output

	Dependent variable:
	Upper Grade Odds Model 3
has_coursework	−0.398*** (0.018)
soc_groupAge (PGT):25 and over	−0.270*** (0.046)
soc_groupDisability:Declared disability	−0.367*** (0.050)
soc_groupDisability:No known	−0.017 (0.036)
soc_groupEthnicity:BAME	−0.395*** (0.037)
soc_groupEthnicity:White	0.197*** (0.043)
soc_groupFee Status:Home	−0.023 (0.045)
soc_groupFee Status:OS	0.115*** (0.039)
soc_groupSex:Female	−0.174*** (0.037)
soc_groupSex:Male	−0.302*** (0.040)
Constant	2.344*** (0.030)
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Log Likelihood	−11,228.200
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Assessment format is associated with differences in academic performance, and these differences are unevenly distributed across socio-economic groups. However, it fails to establish causality: the associations may reflect other unobserved factors, such as differences in course content, teaching quality, or student selection into certain types of courses. Furthermore, data restrictions led to assessment formats being simplified into binary indicators of exams vs coursework, which limits the generalizability of the findings as well as the variations in exam formats overall.

Nevertheless, our descriptive analysis shows that exam-based assessment is more strongly associated with lower student performance than coursework, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to achieve an upper grade under both assessment types.

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Nevertheless, the analysis allows us to highlight descriptive findings: exam-based assessment is more strongly associated with lower student performance than coursework, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to achieve an upper grade under both assessment types.

EXAM EXPERIENCE (Qualitative)

The second portion of our project aimed to understand how students in the International Development (62% of respondents), Government (24%), Public Policy (10%), and International Relations (4%) Departments at the LSE perceived and experienced academic assessment types. We distributed a 10-minute survey via newsletters and class group chats, which received 63 complete responses.

Course Selection: In course selection decisions, by far the most important first-order factor for students was subject matter (33), followed by relevance for career (6). Rankings for assessment type were concentrated around the 3rd and 4th rankings, while scheduling reasons were most commonly ranked last (with 23). However, 57% of respondents indicated that the assessment format had previously been the cause of their choice not to take a course. This reflects a finding that exam format is a motivating factor behind students' course selection options.

Format Preference: Students expressed a strong preference for open-book take-home exams, with 21 respondents out of 63 (33%) choosing this as their first-choice format. Coursework was the second-most preferred (14 respondents), while traditional in-person, closed-book written exams and group projects were the least popular options. Notably, respondents tended to prefer in-person e-exams over in-person written exams, even if both were closed-book. Students widely cited time pressure (72%) and access to resources during the exam (62%) as key determinants of these preferences. At least 40% of students selected all categories, indicating that there were various factors playing into their preferences and decisions. For students where English was not their first language, struggling with language affected their exam experience and occasionally merited a preference for take-home exams. 3 students also expressed dissatisfaction with the 48 hour take-home exam format, which *'proved to be stressful due to time limit and word count'*.

Mix of Assessment Types: The majority of responses from students indicated a preference for mixed assessments types (29) citing the opportunity to reduce pressure on a single high-stake task, increased engagement with the content and having a more holistic approach.

Impact of Background: The majority of students testified that their previous educational backgrounds played a major role in shaping their preferences and performance. Some felt that having attended previous schools or national systems which had emphasised essays or in-person exams helped them feel familiar and comfortable with LSE's system. (China, France, England, Italy, and the US were cited here.) However, others felt that their educational background disadvantaged them at the LSE. Students from systems reliant on memorisation (Pakistan and South Korea) found the analytical and argumentative focus of UK assessments to be a difficult adjustment. Many international students again felt that English not being their first language meant they '*lacked the speech to structure a clear reasoning under time pressure*' though they noted LSE offered many resources to help with this.

Even among native English speakers, discomfort with in-person exams was often tied to past experiences, with some citing long absences from formal exams due to COVID-19 disruptions. Respondents who indicated that COVID-19 did influence their exam format preferences (16) suggested that the pandemic led them to prefer at-home, online exams due to a limited recent experience with in-person timed assessment formats.

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Recommendations

1. Ask staff to **reflect critically on the benefits and drawbacks of timed, closed-book exam**s, as exam-based assessments were more strongly associated with lower performance than coursework-based assessments. For **international students** who make up a large portion of the ID Department, formats with more time were considered more inclusive and contributed to fairer academic outcomes. The use of **e-exams** were also perceived to be more equitable due to the enhanced ability to edit and spell check their answers.

2. **Further research performance disparities across socio-economic groups**, which were statistically significant in both exams and coursework assessment formats. Understanding whether these differences arise from prior educational inequalities, assessment design, or structural barriers is essential to developing targeted interventions that reduce the gap.

3. Encourage the use of **mixed assessment types,** rather than reliance on one essay or exam.

4. Improve **feedback for formative components** and ensure that formative exams align with the assessment type of the summative.

5. **Further explore the assessment performance and preference link.** Our research has shown that students tend to perform better at coursework and simultaneously prefer it as an assessment format; however, this relationship remains untested in the current analysis.

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