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# Getting what you've earned: an insight in to the future of university assessment methods

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How do we achieve the most beneficial and educational system for university students? I attended a talk hosted by the Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague to look in to assessment methods in higher education, specifically focusing on Mathematics, and to find some answers concerning the current state and future of our marking systems, approaches, lecturing styles and learning by framing the state and effectiveness of our current educational models.



Our guest speaker, [Dr Paola Iannone](#), senior lecturer in Educational Research at the University of East Anglia, England, conducted some intriguing research, of which she came to share with us in order to stimulate some much-needed discussion on the future potential of our university assessment choices. Primarily concerned with general educational assessment in the UK and its affected students, she spoke with honest enthusiasm towards student voices and towards grasping student kinship with their university experience and material. Her lecture *Oral Assessment and its Potential: the case of university (Mathematics)* gave us some detailed insight in to the effectiveness, application and educational reception of oral exams – an assessment method rooted in to Czech higher education – in the scope of “closed book” exams traditionally and broadly found in British universities. Her queries and research, she claimed, were in response to a long call to investigate and define the purpose of assessment methods exercised and entrusted by universities. Reviewing the essence and effectiveness of assessment methods and student’s interactive experience of them, paying particular attention to oral exams in the context of the under-examination of university Mathematics, Iannone analysed what is exactly meant by the most “beneficial” educational means, and what is therefore meant by the most “innovative” in regards to future changes aiming towards it.

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She distinguished between two key assessment methods found in the Czech Republic and Britain: summative and formative assessment, the first being more applicable to Britain and the latter to Czech universities. *Summative*, from Dr Iannone's research and from my own experience, investigates what students learn according to a set syllabus, and grades according to a student's ability to adapt to a criterion. As a student who's been subject to this, I've held a negative opinion towards summative examination for quite some time in relation to its rigidity of expression, restrictions on creativity and distance between the examiner and examinee. The standards for achieving grades are determined by absent examining bodies and there is sometimes a lack in feedback, which I believe, is essential for a student's self reflection and ability to pin point their achievements and progress, which is further necessary to identify target areas, mistakes and construct a plan for future progress and achievement. British students often comment on how our assessment demands reduce authenticity and complexity of understanding and require students to shape their learning in the direction of selective material and a concentrated exam period, encouraging them to selectively learn temporary information that is regurgitated and forgotten. It also excludes vital regular assessment and limits interaction between student and mentor. I've wondered how the strict criteria of summative assessment additionally affect your post-study life: that it has to be formally met in order to attain your qualification and then prove to others that you are capable and aptitude in a given area (when you could in fact know very little but be blessed with a very good short-term memory). However, without being too dismissive, my university education has been abundant with opportunity, debate and inspiring teaching, and the determinants of my assessment, is somewhat perhaps beyond their control.

Formative assessment, more applicable to the Czech universities, tests students along a timeline of study and designates much more autonomy to teachers concerning their preferred marking exercises – which is why, Erasmus students (especially from Britain), you will find a great deal less uniformity and regularity in assessment across departments and lecturers; some asking you for 3 essays and others asking you to complete a multiple choice exam, comprehensive paper and regular quizzes alongside an oral or written examination at the end of the term (the oral test being more frequent at Czech universities amongst Czech students, whilst Erasmus classes are sometimes led by foreign guest teachers who bring written assessments to the classroom). This has appeared like less of a memory test, as your skills and competency are frequently brought to light and you can express yourself in a number of ways and in accordance to your learning style, especially as there is more choice and flexibility for gaining a grade and with choosing your exam dates. I've found formative assessment has kept me in check with my own progress and understanding, through regular tasks and interaction with the teacher. I've observed how it has kept lecturers informed on their student's whereabouts, motivating them to give more regular feedback instead of irregular, or none. Students are more likely to have their marked papers returned for reflection, in contrast to the UK, where you're unlikely to see them again. However, it was very interesting to observe the reasoning behind British lecturer's summative preferences.

I could see a large disparity between the ethos of British assessment – which is carried out by anonymous committees, and Czech universities, where your grade is decided more personally, by your teacher.

Iannone's research underwent three surveys – the first looking in to the composition of assessment in the UK, which was found to be textbook taught material, close book examinations and an exclusion of oral exams with the exception of language and linguistics. Interestingly, survey two uncovered student preferences, of which they answered dissertation style assessment. The third survey tracked a first year course, where an attendance sheet was taken and 99 students were videoed undergoing oral examination. They were later asked to complete a questionnaire on the experience, and as I thought, students left holding a positive opinion of oral assessment, regarding it to be an active learning experience in itself due to the elements of immediate feedback and interaction from the teacher, who would guide them, prompt them and encourage them to articulate arguments and responses by drawing answers out from their current existing knowledge. In contrast, Iannone pointed out that during written exams, students are left to their own devices and can easily get stuck on a question which they could otherwise answer, causing a loss of marks or a fail; reflecting how the rigidity of closed book exams creates unfair indications of a student's ability.

Although her data told us a lot, we were still shouldered with the problem of how to prescribe “innovative” education, which she defined as a path to addressing new agendas and re-conceptualising assessment methods. This is complicated further when we consider innovative assessment across borders with rather different ideas on what is “traditional” and what is contemporary. Iannone concluded with the closing remark that British students had a positive impression of oral exams and that they felt their preparation had been more thorough. The eagerness that British students also showed for participating in her research (she informed us that many jumped to be interviewed) conveyed to me, that there is at least a demand for change, variety and stimulation in university assessment. However, with her study limited to the UK, we were left with little aspiration of how to envision “innovativeness” in Czech education, as formative assessment is long-established. Nonetheless, it's far from perfect, as other lecturers present commented. One highlighted that bias – something I had not reflected on before – is a key driving force and explanation for the strict, invariable adherence to summative assessment in the UK. More urgently, it compensates for why British institutions and government have been unwilling to take a risk in applying alternative assessment methods, despite numerous studies proving them to not only be innovative, but preferred by students – and as Iannone remarked, their perception of assessment drives the way in which they learn. Nevertheless, British universities are exhaustively preoccupied with preventing discrimination and with the possibility of being accused of being unfair, which is why a distant, formal approach and clear-cut assessment criteria exists. In other words I thought, it's a “necessary evil” in avoiding wider problems of student experience, which

could be more easily encountered in less precise or structured, and more private or arbitrary, assessment found in formative methods. Here, I could see a large disparity between the ethos of British assessment – which is carried out by anonymous committees, and Czech universities, where your grade is decided more personally, by your teacher. However, Czech lecturers in the talk believed this was compensated for by committees that students can request to reevaluate their grade, and the fact that three exam attempts can be made by students in a module.

I believe from this, a number of questions are posed: what is more important: student protection or student satisfaction? Is it possible to have both? I think when we find this answer to this, taking in to consideration opposing cultural and educational values – is when we can come up with what is “innovative”.



**Poppy Gerrard-Abbott** is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.