

Research Paper

Effectiveness of Assessment Exemplars in a Business Management Course

Andrew Lee Hock Cheong
Global College Malaysia, Heriot-Watt University Malaysia

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Abstract: Samples of past and present student work should not just be kept away in the faculty drawers, cabinets or simply stored in the digital space. There are many benefits from these valuable pieces of work that can be shared with their peers and future students. By sharing and showing these exemplars, students understand better the expectations for their own work to obtain good grades. They not only learn to benchmark their work against their peers and understand the assessment requirements better, but most importantly, exemplars provide them guidance when undertaking a piece of assessment. This action research explores the use of assessment exemplars and its effectiveness on Business Management students in a pre-university programme at a private university in Malaysia. A basic qualitative approach using focus group discussions was adopted. Four major themes on the impact of assessment exemplars emerged from the focus group discussions, namely assessment exemplars provide guidance, make students aware of standards and expectations, provide motivation to start writing, and builds confidence. This study provides insights into understanding students' experience in using exemplars in the pre-university context.

Keywords: Assessment exemplars, pre-university, business management

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*Correspondence: Andrew Lee Hock Cheong, Global College Malaysia, Heriot-Watt University Malaysia. Email: andrew.lee@hw.ac.uk

Introduction

Students face a variety of assessments with multiple requirements for their various courses in their tertiary education. For pre-university and even first-year undergraduate students, this can seem daunting. For courses such as Business Management where writing essays and/or other written assignments are a common assessment feature, this adds a further challenge for some students. From language-based essays that students are supposedly familiar with at the secondary school level, i.e., essays written for the English language or other language subjects, they now have to transition to a subject-based essay. At this stage, a student must not only have grasped the basics of essay writing, but also have good knowledge of their subject matter to produce a coherent, logical and sound essay. For some Malaysian pre-university students at private higher learning institutions where English language is the medium of instruction, this can be a tall order since English is their second language.

With this in mind, the use of assessment exemplars could be one way of easing or addressing such challenges amongst students. Typically, a written and/or verbal feedback are the main evaluation options provided by lecturers for a student's essay submission. However, this may be too late for students to make improvements, or they simply may not understand what is expected of them. For some students, this feedback may not be helpful in pointing them in the right direction in order to improve their grades. Unless clarification is sought from the lecturer or the lecturer takes time to explain the feedback, the student may not be fully aware on how he/she could further improve on a particular assessment task. Grainger (2015) argued that feedback that has not been well understood by students, are often put aside and this becomes a source of frustration for both lecturers and students.

One way of making students understand lecturers' expectations, the standards to reach and the pitfalls to avoid is to engage them with exemplars. For students who may find it challenging to write a subject-based essay, exemplars provide them an actual work of a peer that they could refer to as a guide. This gives them the necessary confidence to work on an original essay rather than resorting to artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT or worst, engage in other forms of cheating. Exemplars complement written feedback and students can better decipher the feedback when they refer to exemplars (Handley & Williams, 2011; Hendry, 2013). For pre-university students who are transitioning from high school to university, the exemplars act as a feedforward mechanism that shows them how to convey their points, build their arguments with appropriately cited references and sequence their thoughts coherently in the written assignment task.

Grainger et al. (2018, p. 1) defined exemplars "as a formative tool to guide students to what is valued by assessors in a specific assessment task, in short, as examples that illustrate, typically, dimensions of quality." They added that these

are generally high-quality exemplary works of students but could also include poor quality ones. These high and poor quality exemplars are in the possession of lecturers and they can be harnessed for the benefit of students. As highlighted by Sadler (2002), exemplars are excellent or poor works that provide a benchmark for students.

This study aims to contribute towards our understanding of the use of assessment exemplars in line with Grainger et al.'s (2018) suggestion for research across different courses and contexts. To the author's knowledge, there seems to be limited studies on the use of assessment exemplars in Business Management courses at the pre-university level. As such, a study on how assessment exemplars can benefit pre-university Business Management students is important since these students are writing subject-based essays and/or written assignments for the first time.

Furthermore, To et al. (2022) also suggested a qualitative study in this area to explore how students use assessment exemplars to guide their understanding. This will enable lecturers to provide effective exemplars that can support students in their learning.

Based on the research gaps identified, this study aims to examine the use of assessment exemplars among a selected group of pre-university Business Management students and how the exemplars influence their learning. Hence, the objective of this study is to explore the effectiveness of assessment exemplars among a selected group of pre-university Business Management students at a private university in Malaysia. It is hoped that this study can extend the knowledge base on the use of assessment exemplars, especially at the pre-university level.

Literature Review

The importance of assessment exemplars in supporting students learning has gained traction in the past decade. However, these studies, as reported by To et al. (2022), mainly focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Some of these notable studies include the work by Carless and Chan (2016), who emphasised that exemplars benefit students as they would be able to compare their work against that of a successful or an unsuccessful piece of work. For exemplars to be effective, they suggested that teachers and students should engage in a dialogue and jointly determine the criteria for quality. This in turn will build students' self-assessment. To et al. (2022) reported that 75% of the 40 exemplar-based studies they reviewed showed that students perceived exemplars to be effective in clarifying expectations, guiding them in preparing a task, increasing their understanding on quality, and learning to self-evaluate their work while the dialogic use of exemplars enabled them to seek their lecturer's guidance. It is, however, worth noting that according to Smith et al. (2013), they did not find any differences in students' performance after the dialogic use of exemplars.

We gained more understanding on assessment exemplars as a powerful learning tool through Grainger et al.'s (2018) study among 72 students in teacher education programmes at a regional university in Australia. They identified four key themes, i.e., assessment exemplars as guides, supplements, starting points, and standards for comparison. Their study demonstrated that exemplars help build students' self-regulation through three phases, namely setting goals by using exemplars as benchmarks, devising strategies to avoid plagiarism and managing the various exemplars provided.

One of the very few studies on the use of assessment exemplars amongst business students was Hawe et al. (2019) whose sample consisted of 53 first-year undergraduate students in a core introductory business course at a tertiary education institution in New Zealand. The authors used exemplars of various standards which included past written works of students in the form of single paragraphs, extracts from reports and an entire report. They found that with strategic use, these exemplars can motivate, enhance students' self-efficacy, promote the understanding of task requirements, expand knowledge as well as develop evaluative and productive knowledge.

Generally, a review of the literature following To et al. (2022) still found it wanting on studies of assessment exemplars among pre-university students. Two of the most recent studies in 2023 in this area focused on high school and middle school students. One of them was a study by Lipnevich et al. (2023) who explored the effects of rubrics and exemplars on writing performance among 206 9th and 10th grade students at a private high school in northeast USA. They suggested that high school students can effectively use rubrics and exemplars to self-assess, generate self-feedback and revise their essays. Students who were trained with solely exemplars showed the highest performance in their writing performance. They also advised teachers to encourage students to use both exemplars and rubrics to raise their performance and generate self-feedback. The latter according to them will significantly reduce teachers' workload.

Assessment exemplars remain important in learning and teaching as noted by Tomazin et al. (2023). However, they found that studies on assessment exemplars among primary and middle school students were scarce. In their experimental study among 94 middle school students at a private school in Brazil, the researchers investigated the students' persuasive essay writing performance following the use of annotated exemplars, teacher comments and the combination of both teacher comments and exemplars. Students' performances were found to have significantly improved from their first to second written draft for all three conditions. Nonetheless, this study could not find statistically significant differences among those who obtained teacher comments, those who used annotated exemplars of excellent quality and those who received both teacher comments and the annotated exemplars.

Based on the literature review, it is clear that the use of assessment exemplars among Business Management students at the pre-university level and in the Malaysian private higher education context has been hardly studied.

The study of assessment exemplars in higher education have received mixed results. According to To et al. (2022), many quantitative studies claimed to have found positive effects of exemplars on student learning. However, this may be an overclaim as there are other variables, rather than specifically exemplars, that could have benefitted students' learning. Thus, the authors encouraged research from a qualitative perspective to further understand how students use exemplars to inform their work.

Smyth and Carless (2021) further emphasised that an observational classroom research on the use of exemplars with interview data from students would further expound our understanding on the use of assessment exemplars. Hence, when undertaking this study, the views of these authors were considered.

Background on the Assessment Exemplars Used

The following exemplars were shared and discussed in class with students pursuing a three-semester Business Management course:

- (a) a well-written answer on PEST factors' impact on businesses following a mid-term test.
- (b) a sample answer on how to explain product life cycle. This was shared after a tutorial on this topic.
- (c) a well-written answer on the analysis of a chosen leader's leadership style.
- (d) a good and poorly written answer on the strategy proposed for a chosen business.

Exemplars (a) and (b) were shared with students in Semester 1. Meanwhile, exemplars (c) and (d) were shared two weeks before each assignment's submission deadline in Semesters 2 and 3, respectively. The author observed that some students found it challenging to write their answers and argue their points for the topics mentioned in the exemplars above. Hence, exemplars (a), (b), (c) and (d) were chosen. Only exemplar (d) was annotated. These exemplars were accessible through the university's learning management system and discussed with students in Week 7 of the respective semesters.

In order to maximise the effective use of exemplars, To and Carless (2015) as well as To and Liu (2018) highlighted studies that focused on students' active discussion of exemplars. O'Donovan et al. (2008) contended that while there is no single formula in the utilisation of exemplars, it is important for students to actively use them to develop their understanding of the assessment standards. In addition, Handley and Williams (2011) stressed that the use of exemplars accompanied with class discussions allows for clarification of standards and criteria. Taking into

account these authors' suggestions, and given the allocated time for each class and other tutorial questions that required discussions, the time spent to discuss these exemplars for this study was limited to 15 to 20 minutes.

Exemplars (a) and (b) in Semester 1

Students were given between 5 –10 minutes to read through exemplars (a) and (b) during class. They were then asked to verbally provide their views on these exemplars, i.e., in terms of what made the answers stand out, the marks they will allocate for each point and any shortcomings that they found in the answers.

Exemplar (c) in Semester 2

As part of their 2nd semester assignment, students had to select one leader from the three choices given and analyse the leadership style. Students were provided with one well-written exemplar of a chosen leader's leadership style two weeks before the submission of this assignment. This exemplar was the work of a previous student; however, it was based on a leader who was not listed in the three choices.

Exemplar (d) in Semester 3

In their final semester, students were required to analyse a business of their choice and propose a strategy to grow the business. Students were provided with both a good and poorly written exemplars two weeks before the submission of this assignment. The exemplars were from past students' work and was not similar to any businesses chosen by this group of students. The exemplars, unlike the previous ones, included the authors' annotation. Annotated exemplars were only provided in Semester 3, in line with Hawe et al.'s (2019) view that including annotations when exemplars are first introduced may restrict students' holistic approach when evaluating the exemplar. They may be focused on the annotations provided and not consider other aspects of the exemplar. The annotations referred to here are suggestions on how to further improve the discussion in that exemplar.

For the exemplars used in Semesters 2 and 3, students were given about 5–10 minutes to go through the exemplars and verbally provide their comments on how the points are argued, whether the analysis is adequate and well-understood as well as areas of improvement. They were also required to award marks for each of the exemplars. Hendry et al. (2016) argued that when students mark exemplars before a written assessment task, and engage in dialogue with their lecturers on why the exemplars were graded the way they were, students develop a better understanding of the expectations, and their level of performance improves in the assessment task.

For both semesters, the assignment was due in Week 9. It was determined that providing the exemplars two weeks prior to the submission of the assignments

would be a reasonable measure as most students would generally have addressed the topics to a certain extent. They could then make improvements to their own work, following the discussion of these exemplars in class.

Methodology

Research Design

A basic qualitative research approach was undertaken for this study. According to Merriam (2009), basic qualitative research showcases effective practices and techniques used by teachers. Merriam (2002) added that a researcher adopting this approach is seeking to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, perspectives, and worldviews of the participants in the research, or a combination of these.

Participants

The primary data for this study was obtained from two focus group discussions with five Foundation in Business students from the author's institution who were pursuing the Business Management course. A purposive sampling method was applied when choosing the participants for this study. This method enables the harnessing of the participants' knowledge and experience in this research topic as recommended by Etikan et al. (2016). The five participants have been introduced to assessment exemplars since their first semester. In reference to Patton (2002), they were assessed to obtain a greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- (a) They were above average students and academically strong.
- (b) They were willing to be interviewed and share their experiences with assessment exemplars.

The participants were mainly females with only one male student. For confidentiality, each participant is identified with a pseudonym, namely Lance, Elaine, Wendy, Jennifer and Rachel, as shown in Table 1. One of the participants, namely Rachel decided to opt out from this research due to personal reasons and did not participate in the second focus group discussion.

Table 1. Participants' details

Participant's Pseudonym	Gender	Age
Lance	Male	20
Elaine	Female	18
Wendy	Female	18
Jennifer	Female	17
Rachel	Female	18

As an exploratory study, a semi-structured interview approach was taken to obtain the participants' views on this topic. The interview questions were derived based on relevant literature on assessment exemplars and the context in which the exemplars were used. The focus group discussions were conducted at the university itself in November 2022 and March 2023, i.e., at the end of the 2nd and 3rd semesters of the Business Management course and after the participants had submitted their assignments.

During each discussion, the participants had access to the exemplars on the learning management system. This was to encourage discussion and to freshen their memory on the exemplars used during lessons. The participants were asked about their experience when using the assessment exemplars. Among others, the interview questions required them to explain how they used the exemplars, how effective the exemplars were in preparing them for their essays, what they learned from the poorly and well-written essay samples and their overall views on the use of exemplars in class. To elicit a richer understanding of the participants' experience, probing questions were used whenever necessary. The interviews which lasted between 15 to 20 minutes were recorded with the participants' consent.

The author sought the participants to check the interview transcripts to ensure the credibility of his interpretation and understanding of the transcripts. Upon feedback from the participants, the interview transcripts were reviewed. The textual data was analysed following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) advice. The data was organised into similar categories from which major themes were derived.

Findings

Following the analysis of the focus group discussion transcripts, four major themes that addressed the research objective were identified, namely: 1) assessment exemplars provide guidance; 2) awareness of standards and expectations; 3) motivation to start writing; and 4) building confidence.

Theme 1: Assessment Exemplars Provide Guidance

All five participants acknowledged that assessment exemplars provided them the necessary guidance as they embarked on their respective assessments. Having these exemplars in their possession allowed them to refer to the exemplars from time to time to guide them in their writing.

Lance shared the following:

I didn't copy the exemplars. It provided me with the gist of how to go about the assignment. I downloaded & kept the exemplars in a file. Every time when I'm writing my assignment, I referred to the exemplars. I highlighted the key

areas & points. For the strength of the leadership, I learn how it was written & how I could construct my own paragraph. By looking at the exemplars, I know what should & shouldn't be included. It's always good to have a guide to follow.

Elaine explained the following:

I firstly read through the exemplars and amended my work accordingly. It provided a little bit of guidance. It gave me a rough idea on how to start.

Wendy opined the following:

Every time when I'm doing my assignment, I referred to the exemplars - in terms of how the student wrote his/her opinion, how they stated their opinion and how they cited their work.

Rachel mentioned the following:

I viewed the exemplars at the beginning, to get an idea of the outline and structure. I could see their choice of words and how they structure their paragraphs. I understand what I shall include in the assignment.

Jennifer stated the following:

I referred to the exemplars mainly in semester 2 as I was lost while doing my assignment. It was my first individual assignment for a business subject. It really helped me a lot. It was a good reference point. I tried to use the structure in the exemplar in my own way.

The participants strongly acknowledged the importance of having these exemplars especially when they embarked on their first individual subject-based assignment in Semester 2. Despite having access to rubrics, written instructions, and consultations with the lecturer regarding the assignments, they admitted that the exemplars were another important point of reference for them.

Theme 2: Awareness of Standards and Expectations

The participants unanimously agreed that the exemplars raised their awareness of the standards of good writing and what is expected of them in their respective assessment tasks for their Business Management course.

Jennifer opined the following:

For Semester 1, the exemplars provided allowed me to see the different way of writing out my answers as compared to when I was studying for my IGCSE. In university, we need a more thorough answer, so the exemplars helped me to understand the standard expected. The exemplar allowed me to push myself to the next level as compared to what I did during IGCSE. It provided like a benchmark.

It is also worth noting that Jennifer understood the standards required when she voiced the following:

The poor sample I observed had no citations in it. This poorly written essay was rather general in its discussion. Although it had lots of theories but these were not suited to the question (company chosen).

Rachel added the following:

I now know what is expected of us.

Lance too demonstrated that he knew of the expectations when he made the following comment:

By looking at the exemplars, I know what should and should not be included. Some sentences in the essay are repetitive and redundant, reiterating the same points multiple times. Also, the essay mentions various strategies such as improving customer services, cross-selling products and targeting young markets, but does not provide specific examples or evidence to support these strategies. Adding concrete examples or evidence would make the essay more persuasive and credible.

Wendy expressed the following:

I learned how it was referenced and cited. There's a flow in the essay. The annotations were helpful as I can avoid making the same mistakes.

The participants also agreed that they will not be giving a score of more than 10 marks out of the 20 marks allocated for the poorly written exemplar as it was not detailed enough. Using the exemplars as a guide, the participants can self-regulate their own and their peers' work. They can avoid the pitfalls and learn how

to differentiate between a poorly written and well-written essay. As explained by Jain et al. (2023), engaging in this academic experience ensures a clear acquisition of such knowledge by the participants. According to Allen et al. (2013, as cited by Ramasamy & Lee, 2022), students need to be skilful in providing feedback on their own work or their peers' work against a set of criteria as this is in line with the assessment for learning notion.

Theme 3: Motivation to Start Writing

Having seen the exemplars provided the impetus for the participants to start working on their own assignment tasks. Realising that their peer could write well on the task and subsequently attain good scores motivated these participants to do the same. Elaine verbalised this:

It gives me the motivation to start on my assignment as there's an example to follow.

Lance too had a similar sentiment and said the following:

It helps to start my essay.

Jennifer summed it best when she said:

I understood what you explained in class, however when I started writing, I did not know how to go about explaining about the leader, specific points that I need to address and areas to narrow down. The instructions were clear but how to start writing was a challenge. The example provided me the head start.

This particular finding is rather interesting. Most students from the author's experience tend to procrastinate when it comes to doing their assignments. However, the participants in this study acknowledged that having seen and discussed the exemplars with their lecturer gave them that nudge to work on their assignment. Generally, the participants opined that the number of exemplars given was adequate with Rachel cautioning on the following:

Shouldn't give to many examples as students may tend to rely on it. We should be expressing our own ideas.

It is heartening to note that the number of exemplars used in the course was just about right as the author wanted students to present and defend their original ideas and views in their written assignments.

Theme 4: Building Confidence

The participants felt that the exemplars helped build their confidence when working on their assignment. They now had something concrete to view, refer, check and learn from. This helped reduce their anxiety as they embarked on their subject-based essays.

Jennifer mentioned the following:

By looking at the exemplar, it made me feel that I could also write at this level.

Wendy too shared a similar view like Jennifer:

The exemplar made me feel that I may be able to write at this level.

Lance shared his thoughts on this:

It definitely helps in reducing anxiety and increasing my confidence.

This finding is in line with Hendry and Anderson (2013, as cited by Chong, 2019) who found that exemplar-based instruction in the higher education context helped students gain more confidence in completing the assignment tasks. Building this confidence at the pre-university level is crucial before students embark on more challenging writing tasks in future, e.g., their thesis or final-year project in their undergraduate studies.

Discussion

The participants of this study generally felt that the assessment exemplars were effective in helping their academic performance for the Business Management course. The participants certainly agreed on the importance of these exemplars in their learning. They had a better understanding on how to write an essay for a question or a particular topic; became more aware of the assignment's expectations; able to assess the value of a written piece of work and could identify areas of concern and make suggestions for improvements in a particular exemplar. According to Smith et al. (2013) the best predictor of business students' performance in a written assignment is the student's capacity to judge various standards of work.

Based on these findings, it can be established that these pre-university students generally developed a positive view of exemplars and gained a better understanding of the standards and expectations of their written tasks. They acknowledged the usefulness of the exemplars in improving their writing. This corroborates with Yucel et al. (2014)

who opined that these views are commonly found among first-year undergraduates who require such support as they transition from high school to university.

The exemplars used by post-secondary school students seem to raise their self-efficacy as they gained the confidence and impetus to start writing. The assessment exemplars motivated them that they too could write as well as their seniors. Additionally, the exemplars reduced their anxiety as they embarked on subject-based essays, which they may not have experienced in schools.

Various researchers like Scholes et al. (2013), Hawe et al. (2017) and Carter et al. (2018) as cited in Grainger et al. (2018) have stressed the importance of exemplars on student motivation, self-efficacy and self-monitoring, aside from improving the understanding of task requirements. Furthermore, Grainger et al. (2018) also explained that the use of exemplars together with rubrics, marking guides, dialogue between students and lecturers as well as grading of exemplars by students will positively affect students' learning. All of these measures were applied in this Business Management course as well.

However, it would be rather premature at this stage to claim that the exemplars used had improved the students' results. Nonetheless, from the author's perspective, it was much simpler to convey the expectations of a particular assessment by using exemplars. The use of exemplars enabled the author to deliver the tacit knowledge embedded in these exemplars to students faster and with much clarity. Tacit knowledge, according to Sadler (2010) and Carless et al. (2018), are aspects of knowledge that are difficult to transfer through speaking and writing. Further, Polanyi (1958) stated that tacit knowledge can only be communicated through examples and not by percept. Chong (2019) further argued that explaining tacit knowledge like assessment standards through lectures and handouts may not be effective as the wordings and expressions in these standards could be abstract to students.

Limitations and Future Research

Hawe et al. (2019) contended that to maximise the potential of exemplars, students need to be purposefully and deeply engaged in analysing the exemplars with the help of dialogues between them and their lecturers. In this study, due to class time constraints, the dialogue on the exemplars could not be done for extended periods. In the future, perhaps a separate session could be conducted to provide more time for students to analyse and discuss the exemplars with their lecturer.

The research findings cannot be generalised as only qualitative data was collected and from only a single private higher learning institution. Nonetheless, the rich experiences of the participants when using the exemplars have further extended our understanding on the effectiveness of these exemplars in assisting essay writing in a Business Management course. Future quantitative studies could fruitfully explore and test the themes derived here.

A student log or diary could also be tapped upon for a richer understanding on how students go about engaging with exemplars and making improvements to their own assessment tasks. Students could use this log or diary to reflect on their learning. Additionally, students could also be required to submit drafts of their work before and after the exemplar intervention. In this manner, it can be assessed whether the exemplar used led to better student performance or otherwise.

Future research could also focus specifically on the academically weak students' attempt or lack of attempt to engage and use the exemplars. It would be interesting to find out whether the exemplars help improve these students' grade over time and enhance their performance. The use of assessment exemplars could also be studied among students undertaking pre-university courses in both public and private higher learning institutions.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to the existing literature on assessment exemplars from the perspective of a selected group of pre-university business students. The findings show that assessment exemplars support pre-university students' understanding of the standards and requirements of discipline-specific writing, something which they must quickly grasp as they transition from high school to university. Well-written answers or essays can help boost these students' confidence that they too could write to that level with sufficient practice.

As pre-university courses prepare students for their undergraduate studies, sufficient time should be invested in the use of assessment exemplars at the pre-university level. This will ensure students are well prepared to face the rigours of their respective subject-based essays and other written assignments in the future. Subject-based lecturers can adopt the use of assessment exemplars and work closely with academic writing experts for a more effective use of assessment exemplars in their teaching as suggested by Hendry et al. (2016).

This study has also shed light on the effective use of assessment exemplars and its benefits for students and lecturers in a pre-university business course. The appropriate and timely use of exemplars acts as feedforward rather than feedback to students. Undertaking an exemplar-based feedforward approach could potentially remove students' ignorance of quality as stated by Sadler (2009). Well-chosen exemplars of various quality can help train these students to be conscious of their own work vis-à-vis the exemplars. They then become more aware of the expected standards and can self-assess. These reduces the time taken for lecturers to provide feedback once the task is assessed.

It is widely acknowledged from the literature that exemplars together with rubrics, dialogue with lecturers coupled with self-reflection supports students' understanding of the standards to achieve for an assessment task. The development

of this skill amongst higher education students is an important aspect of assessment for learning as emphasised by Sadler (1989) and Boud (2000).

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