Enhancing Teaching & Learning Focus on: Assessment

Assessment is a constant challenge for those teaching in higher education. Increasing student numbers and assessment related workloads, resourcing constraints, etc. lead to a reliance on end of semester exams with limited opportunities for students to receive formative feedback on their performance before high stakes assessments. Research shows that poor experiences of assessment correlates with higher student failure rates and retention issues (HEA, 2013).

Purpose of Assessment

Assessment can be categorised under one of the following: Assessment OF, FOR or AS Learning. The majority of assessment we engage with is that OF learning, measuring students' performance and determining their award. A dearth of assessment that is more formative in function, contributing to a student's learning, can lead to poor experiences for students, resulting in disengagement for the majority of the term, a 'just in time' surface approach to learning, as opposed to deep engagement with the subject, high failure rates and student attrition[1].

Head of School Concerns

As a Head of School/Discipline/Department, there are a number of concerns with respect to assessment within the academic unit. Among those are ensuring that:

- *Resources are effectively managed;*
- *School colleagues are not over burdened;*
- *Quality Reviews/External Examiners/External Accreditation are satisfied;*
- *School's overall assessment load is manageable and reliable;*
- *Students are developing assessment literacies[2] and are*
  - *being assessed effectively;*
  - *being assessed appropriately;*
  - *being assessed authentically;*
  - *not over burdened.*

Assessment Challenges

Increasing class sizes, modular programmes, resource constraints, local assessment policies, and accreditation requirements, among other challenges can put a strain on the planning and attention needed to ensure efficient and reliable assessment practices across Schools and Programmes.

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[1] *Ball, S., Bew, C., Bloxham, S., Brown S., Kleiman, P., May, H., McDowell, L., Morris, E., Orr, S., Payne, E., Price, M., Rust, C., Smith, B., and Waterfield, J. (2012). A marked improvement: transforming assessment in higher education. The Higher Education Academy. York, UK. Available at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/assessment/a-marked-improvement, accessed August 2017.*

[2] *"students' understanding of the rules surrounding assessment in their course context, their use of assessment tasks to monitor or further their learning, and their ability to work with the guidelines on standards in their context to produce work of a predictable standard", Smith et al (2013), p46.*

Such challenges can result in assessment practice that

- *Is overly reliant on the end of semester exam;*
- *Is unrepresentative of learning and real world applications of learning;*
- *Is solely a measurement, as opposed to a learning experience/opportunity;*
- *Encourages a surface approach to learning;*
- *Encourages a passive engagement early-mid semester .*

However, a focus on assessment as a teaching and learning tool, with a commitment to enhancing the experience for staff and students has the potential to lead to

- *Improved student learning*
  - *By encouraging continuous engagement and broader learning/independent thinking;*
- *Increased student satisfaction, engagement and retention;*
- *Efficient assessment practices;*
- *Maximising existing resources for learning;*
- *Dependable representation of student achievement through authentic assessment;*
- *Better evidence of graduate attributes.*

Challenging our Assessment Practice

There are a number of existing resources that can help us obtain a clear picture of assessment practices in our schools:

A quick **audit of assessment practices** across the School can help identify initial areas for enhancement. Questions such as the following are worth asking:

- *What types of Assessments are used across the school?*
  - *Summative, Formative, Continuous Assessment (with or without marks)*
- *How much time is being spent on assessment?*
  - *By staff*
  - *By students*
- *Is there a policy on feedback turnaround times?*
- *Is there a format for communication on assessment to students?*
  - *Assessment criteria, rubrics, expectations re feedback*
  - *Timetable of continuous assessment points across programmes*
- *How many modules offered within your school use rubrics?*
  - *To provide quick and efficient feedback to students*
  - *As an efficient and consistent marking tool*
- *Do students have access to exemplars?*
- *Do staff feel over-burdened with assessment?*
- *Do students feel over-burdened with assessment?*
- *How are students in the early years supported with respect to developing assessment literacies?*
- *Is there programme level planning or oversight on assessment? (see TESTA)*

Challenge	Resources	Case studies/examples in practice
Assessing large classes	*Rubrics for marking and feedback*	
	Peer/Self Assessment	
	Technologies (MCQs, Clickers, …)	
Providing frequent timely feedback	*Rubrics for marking and feedback*	
	Peer assessment	*Students assessing students: case studies on peer assessment, Planet (2005)*
	MCQs	
	Marked exemplars	
	In-class feedback	
Assessment load	*Programme (team) approach*	*Programme-focused assessment and Feedback Strategy (DCU)*
Poor Student Performance/ engagement	*Focus on formative feedback/feed-forward*	
	Students as partners	
	Developing Students Assessment Literacies	*1st year UG Business Students, Smith et al (2013) below.*

*Data is available to institutions from The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (**ISSE**). This survey issued, since 2013, to all first and final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, asks a number of questions related to assessment. A summary of results (academic year 2015-16), categorised by field of study is available from the National Forum[3].*

*Current approaches nationally, supported by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, focus on **Programme Assessment**. Programme-based assessment has the advantage of ensuring students are exposed to a range of assessment types, provides a more connected experience, helps students integrate their learning, and can be a resource efficient method to include richer assessment. In a Commentary on Assessment[4], Boyd requests we remember that the award of degree is a public declaration that a student has demonstrated their learning (set out in the programme outcomes), and the 'learning power' of formative assessment. There are a number of*

3 ISSE data to inform Assessment Enhacement: http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Tool-1-ISSE-doi.pdf

4 Commentary: The wider context of Programme Level Enhancement of Assessment: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/P-Boyd-Commentary-doi.pdf

frameworks[5] proposed for auditing and implementing a programme approach to assessment: TESTA (transforming the student experience through assessment), a Programme Design Dialogue Tool, developed at UCD, and the Evans Assessment Tool (EAT) framework.

Also freely available is the Higher Education Academy (UK) Assessment Review Tool[6], including audit tools for senior management and resources to support change. A short summary of the publication is also available[7].

Resources:

National Forum (www.teachingandlearning.ie)

Expanding our Understanding of Assessment and Feedback in Irish Higher Education: http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Sectoral-insight-web-ready.pdf

Programme Approaches to Assessment and Feedback, Commentaries and Case Studies: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/priority-themes/enhancement-theme-2016-2018/sharing-good-practices-policies-phase-5/programme-approaches-to-assessment-and-feedback-overview/.

Higher Education Academy

Assessment and feedback in higher education: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/assessment-and-feedback-higher-education-1 2016 review of UK and international literature on assessment and feedback, and concept map of topics, trends, directions. (Published April 2017)

Assessment review tool, with a focus on senior management and heads of schools, available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/assessment/a-marked-improvement

Higher Education Authority (HEA)

HEA. (2015). National plan for equity of access to higher education (2015-2019). Dublin: Higher Education Authority

HEA. (2016). Enhancing student engagement in decision making. Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Higher Education. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Mission-based Performance Compact, 2014: http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/NUIG-Compact.pdf

JISC

Electronic management of assessment: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/electronic-assessment-management including how EMA can improve organisational efficiency.

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5 http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/priority-themes/enhancement-theme-2016-2018/sharing-good-practices-policies-phase-5/programme-approaches-to-assessment-and-feedback-overview/resource-enhance-programmatic-approaches-assessment-feedback-irish-higher-education/#1495797477969-a7cdc7fb-72a
6 http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/assessment/a-marked-improvement
7 http://www.uq.edu.au/teach/assessment/docs/brief-28-jan2013.pdf

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