Tool 4: TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment) and its Potential to Enhance Programme Assessment

TESTA is an approach developed in the UK that, as its title suggests, aims to transform the experience of students through assessment (Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014; Jessop, 2012). Its focus is on exploring assessment and feedback through the lens of a programme. TESTA emerged from a joint UK National Teaching Fellowship Project involving four partner universities: Bath Spa, Chichester, Winchester (lead partner) and Worcester. The project was funded by the UK Higher Education Academy for three years (2009-2012).

The TESTA approach:

has been used in more than 100 programmes in over 40 UK universities, as well as in Australia, India and the USA. TESTA works with and for academics, students and managers to identify study behaviour, generate assessment patterns to foster deeper learning across whole programmes, and debunk regulatory myths which prevent assessment for learning.

(TESTA, 2017)

TESTA was developed to address an issue often associated with a modular curriculum: that the sum of the parts (modules) does not equate to a ‘whole’ programme (Jessop, et al., 2014). The approach reviews (i) the quantity of assessment (ii) the balance between formative and summative assessment (iii) the variety and distribution of assessment (iv) the impact of assessment on student effort, feedback practices, the clarity of goals and standards; and (v) the relationship between these factors and students’ overall perception of their degree (TESTA, 2017). A key aspect of the TESTA approach is the engagement of a programme team to discuss the implications of the data gathered.

In TESTA, as in recent Irish literature (National Forum, 2017), summative assessment is defined as that which ‘carries a grade which counts toward the degree classification’. TESTA’s definition of formative assessment is ‘assessment that does not count towards the degree (either pass/fail or a grade), elicits comments and is required to be done by all students’ (TESTA, 2017). This differs slightly to the National Forum’s recently published sectoral understanding of assessment terms which considers low-stakes graded assessment, when used for feedback purposes, an example of formative assessment (National Forum, 2017).

The TESTA methodology of gathering data on a programme’s assessment and feedback approaches is a mixed methods approach and usually includes the following three aspects:

- A Programme Assessment Audit
- The Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ)
- Focus Groups with Students (TESTA, 2017).
The Programme Assessment Audit

The Programme Assessment Audit consists of an interview with the programme leader focused on course documentation. It involves sampling cover sheets and scripts to quantify the volume of written feedback students typically received. The audit draws on nine aspects of assessment, which relate to characteristics of programme-level assessment (Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet, 2009). The nine elements are:

- number of summative assessments;
- number of formative-only assessments;
- variety of assessment methods;
- volume of oral feedback;
- volume of written feedback;
- timeliness of feedback;
- proportion of examinations to coursework;
- explicitness of goals, criteria and standards; and
- alignment of assessment with programme learning outcomes.

The TESTA website gives some guidance on how to carry out the 10 steps in auditing the programme.

The Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ)

The AEQ was originally developed to measure how students respond to their assessment in individual modules. It clusters questions into 'scales', based on a review of empirical and theoretical literature concerning how assessment affects students (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). The TESTA website provides the templates for using a programme-level version of this tool (Dunbar-Goddet & Gibbs, in press). The scales include:

- quantity of effort,
- coverage of syllabus,
- quantity and quality of feedback,
- use of feedback,
- appropriate assessment,
- clear goals and standards,
- surface approach,
- deep approach, and
- satisfaction.
Student Focus Groups

The TESTA website provides some guiding questions for the student focus group and also advises on how to conduct focus groups and analyse resulting data.

Using the above three methods, the programme team are encouraged to develop strategies for improving assessment and feedback approaches. At the recent Y1 Feedback conference in Maynooth, Jessop (2017) highlighted some strategies for addressing programme assessment and feedback issues:

- Formative feedback – informal, immediate, conversational
- Peer feedback
- Audio and screencast feedback
- Blogging on academic texts with informal threads
- Developmental feedback (measuring performance against past performance)

TESTA can be run by individual institutions or programme teams using the resources, templates and guiding case studies provided by on their website (TESTA, 2017). TESTA has been used over the last 7-8 years in the UK to assist in reviewing, discussing and exploring programme assessment patterns (Jessop & Tomas, 2016). It has also begun to be used in some Irish institutions to assist in such programme review processes.

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References


TESTA. (2017). Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment webpage https://www.testa.ac.uk/