



Let's Talk About Assessment: Exploring QQI's Green Paper on Assessment in Higher Education



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

On Monday 12 November 2018, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education jointly hosted an event bringing together representatives from the higher education and training sector to discuss the assessment of learners and learning. This *Forum Insight* shares some key themes arising from discussion during that assessment event.

Background

The National Forum facilitated a sectoral enhancement theme on 'Assessment of/for/as Learning' in 2016-2018. The enhancement theme helped to focus expertise and attention on assessment and feedback, an issue of real interest and importance to teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The ultimate aim of the enhancement theme was to ensure that Ireland adopts and promotes innovative, engaging, collaborative, learner-oriented and integrated approaches to assessment that take account of the complex dynamics and requirements of higher education. By gathering evidence, building capacity and sharing good practice, much progress was made. This included the publication of a profile of assessment practices in Irish higher education, the articulation of agreed definitions and principles underpinning assessment in Irish higher education, and the compilation of resources to support programme approaches to assessment in higher education¹.

In 2018, QQI published a Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning, which set out a framework and context for a wide range of assessment issues, identifying areas of concern and suggesting options for quality assurance and enhancement. The Green Paper acknowledged that assessment is intrinsic to effective teaching and learning and the quality of education and training. The document drew on work undertaken as part of the National Forum's enhancement theme, as well as international models of good practice. It was intended for consideration by all of those involved in recognising, promoting and supporting effective assessment practices across further education and training, higher education and training or English language education.

The event on November 12th sought to foster discussion around QQI's 2018 Green Paper from the perspective of those in higher education. The keynote presentation was delivered by Professor Lambert Schuwirth, Flinders University College of Medicine and Public Health, Adelaide. Other speakers included representatives of QQI, the National Forum and the Union of Students in Ireland. A key focus of the day was to enable participants to highlight key issues and themes arising from the Green Paper.

The outcomes of the discussions are presented in this insight according to the themes of the four breakout sessions organised on the day: programme assessment and feedback, work-based assessment and feedback, diversifying assessment, and thinking about assessment in a digital world.

Theme 1: Programme Assessment and Feedback

The benefits of adopting a programme-level approach to assessment and feedback are being recognised increasingly across Irish higher education. Participants debated some of the challenges and enablers to this approach, including how to develop more transparent, coherent, efficient and effective programme assessment and feedback approaches. A number of issues arose on enabling effective programme approaches to assessment and feedback. These included the following:

- An academic culture needs to be fostered which incentivises taking a high-level programme view of learning for both staff and students. The assessment literacy of staff and students must be prioritised, and assessment valued as a driver of learning.
- Those who teach need to be supported to work together to understand the benefits of, and the processes involved in, implementing a programme approach to assessment. Cohesive programme strategies, developed and supported by those who teach on programmes, is important to the success of a programme approach.
- The requirements of accreditation bodies and inputs from graduate employers can impact on assessment practices and the ability to plan flexibly at a programme level. There is a need to balance/align these external drivers with the learning needs of students within the programme.
- In cases where external professionals assess student learning, transparency must be respected, with students understanding from the outset how learning will be assessed/fostered through assessment.

1 See www.teachingandlearning.ie



Theme 2: Work-based Assessment

There has been an increase in the number of students availing of work-based learning, including internships, placements and apprenticeships, and this trend is set to continue. The assessment and feedback approaches in such contexts can be unfamiliar to both academic staff and workplace mentors. Participants discussed the challenges and opportunities presented by work-based assessment and feedback, sharing the following insights:

- The relationship between summative and formative assessment in work-based learning is important.
- Empowering students to have authentic involvement in their own work-based assessment was seen as key to taking a student-centred approach to assessment and feedback.
- The balance between the reliability and validity of work-based assessment was debated, with a particular focus on judging when it is best to use a pass-fail versus a percentage grade for summative assessment.
- There is no one-size-fits-all method for work-based assessment. Diversity of assessment is important and such diversity needs to be well supported from both the staff and student viewpoint.
- Work-based assessment involves different roles to traditional assessment methods and each role, including that of the onsite supervisor/mentor, needs to be well supported. Similarly, the roles of each person involved in work-based assessment, and expectations of each, need to be clarified from the outset.

Theme 3: Diversifying Assessment

Irish higher education is attracting diverse cohorts of students and many programmes/modules are exploring different approaches to assessment and feedback in order to cater to individual student learning needs and rapidly changing learning contexts. In discussing the diversification of assessment practices in Irish higher education, participants acknowledged that much progress has been made in recent years and there are now many innovative assessment methods from which staff can choose and students can learn. Key insights on this topic included the following:

- Diversity in assessment is seen as appropriate to the increasing focus on graduate attributes in Irish higher education. Advances in technology-enhanced learning have been helpful in diversifying assessment. However, ensuring the reliability and fairness of new assessment methods can sometimes pose a challenge.
- There are concerns about validating diverse forms of assessment and ensuring that senior management are supportive of the risk-taking inherent in the initial stages of exploring and validating new forms of assessment.
- Professional development to support staff in the appropriate use of diverse forms of assessment is vital to ensuring that assessment engenders student learning. Equally, students need to be given adequate opportunities to become familiar

with and to practice new forms of assessment. Validation panels need to be well versed in diverse methods of assessment in order to make informed judgements.

- It is important that assessment diversity serves a clear, stated purpose and is not undertaken for its own sake. Clear communication regarding the purpose of diversifying assessment is key to gaining institutional support and creating an institutional culture that values diversity in assessment.

Theme 4: Thinking About Assessment in a Digital World

The digital world provides us with new ways of accessing information, designing teaching and learning and thinking about higher education. Assessment and feedback have also been impacted by the digital revolution. Participants emphasised the many positive learning opportunities presented by the digital dimension of assessment practices currently in evidence in Irish higher education. They also highlighted some considerations for the optimal use of technology in assessment practices. Among the insights shared were the following:

- Those who teach and learn need to be appropriately supported to engage meaningfully with technology in assessment. This requires supportive learning environments, space and time available for staff professional development, and an appreciation of the need for students and staff to gain a level of digital fluency to harness the potential for learning in technology-enhanced assessments.
- It is key that student learning drives the use of technology in assessment, rather than technology being the focus.
- Evidence-based, responsive, enabling policies, situated in the practice of those who enact them, are needed to support assessment practices in a digital world.
- Assessment in a digital world requires flexible systems and underpinning infrastructures. The pace of technological change demands that systems are responsive and can adjust to policy developments such as GDPR and the increasing challenge of cyber security and online plagiarism.

Next Steps

The inputs from this Insight are a welcome addition to the almost 80 responses received through last year's online consultation on QQI's Green Paper. QQI are carefully studying all of these submissions and will produce an analysis of the main emerging themes, alongside QQI's response. These will be published in Autumn 2019 and QQI looks forward to discussing follow-up initiatives with stakeholders at that stage.

