



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:
Moving Forward Together



QQI Insight on Assessment 2021



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cálíochta agus Cálíochtaí Éireann

What are the forefront issues concerning the assessment of students in further and higher education in 2021? To answer this question, QQI conducted a series of informal soundings with key people from Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) in 2021. Here we report our main HE-relevant findings.

Assessment was at the top of everybody's agenda in 2021 owing to the Covid-19 restrictions that precluded many mainstream approaches to assessment, such as in-person invigilated examinations, and forced people to

- (i) determine the precise purposes of each assessment activity precluded by the Covid-19 restrictions,
- (ii) identify the essential learning outcomes that students needed to achieve and demonstrate, and
- (iii) engage with alternative approaches to the assessment of those outcomes for those purposes.

QQI arranged 33 interviews: eighteen, nine and six interviews with interlocutors from HE, FE and PSRBs respectively. The interviews were informal, unstructured and non-attributable. The idea was to surface views.

What follows is not a set of consensus or majority views but a selection of some interesting opinions along with some reflection.

Innovation and change

There is an opinion that the culture around assessment needs to change among staff and students in tertiary education not only to address known challenges, e.g., to enhance academic integrity and to ensure that student and staff workloads are sustainable, but also to expand the repertoire of approaches to the assessment of students for better learning and teaching.

We need imaginative and forward-looking approaches to assessment to keep up with the changing learning and teaching environments; the number and diversity of students requiring assessment; and evolving expectations: such as giving students more choice in how they are assessed, and assessing students using authentic tasks in authentic contexts by practitioners.

Covid-19 stimulated thinking on assessment at all levels within organisations. That experience should be leveraged to keep assessment reform high on people's agendas. Staff may need to be enabled and persuaded to take more time to reflect deeply on assessment; consider whether change is warranted; and commit to it where it is.

Innovating staff require back-up and support as they may face resistance to change: e.g., owing to a lack of familiarity with the proposed alternatives; the opinion that current methods are good enough; or competing demands on human, physical or financial resources.

Conventional wisdom about assessment in any given discipline needs to be scrutinised to ensure that it is well founded rather than just assuming it is.

Pedagogical innovations are worthy of academic kudos. We need to build up the scholarship of tertiary teaching, learning and assessment in Ireland. Research intensive institutions may need to think about establishing more academic teaching-track posts.

Policies, procedures, frameworks, and systems need to allow room for people to innovate; promote innovation at a sustainable pace; and recognise that different disciplines may have significantly different assessment challenges and needs.

Examinations and diversifying assessment

There is a lot of interest in diversifying assessment and in letting students choose how they are assessed. The preponderance of the end-of-semester two- to three-hour written examination is under the magnifying glass now. Authentic assessment is gaining traction.

Diversifying and innovating assessment can involve more assessment work but jointly considering teaching, learning and assessment may reveal trade-offs that can allow more time for this extra work.

Assessment in support of learning

There is a widespread view that formative assessment is beneficial. However, copious assessment and feedback can be counterproductive. Formative feedback is effective when it is timely (students get it when they need it) and when students engage with it, and use it to learn. It may be challenging to motivate some students to learn from feedback, therefore, incentivising them is important.

Workload on students and over-assessment

Over-assessment is a problem that impacts on student and staff workloads. Guidance on giving feedback; modularisation; and the use of assessment to engage students; may have contributed to the problem.

Problematic 'bunching' of assessment can result in peak assessment loads being unsustainable for students even when students manage their time reasonably well; this can occur even when the average assessment load over a semester appears to be at a manageable level.

Students are responsible for managing their own time, but their assessment workload needs to be manageable by them in the context of their whole programme.

Some institutions are thinking about providing guidance for staff on the quantity of assessment work that is appropriate.



Students and institutions are assessment partners

Students necessarily partner with their institutions on assessment and they are crucial to discussions about assessment. This partnership can be enriched e.g., students can collaborate with their institutions in assessment design and can be involved in peer assessment activities.

Intended learning outcomes, programme design and assessment

Learning outcomes need to be at the forefront of the debate around assessment. Competence in using learning outcomes is improving but needs to be further enhanced. Programme design needs a pedagogical focus and learning outcomes are not always driving programme design to the extent that they should. In practice, programme design and review can move too quickly to the modular level. Greater alignment is required between assessment and intended programme learning outcomes. Institutions need to reflect on how they do this. As one HE interlocutor put it, we could be assessing every module right but assessing wrong for the overall programme. There are provisions for integrative assessment, notably final year projects and dissertations in HE, internships and apprenticeships, but integrative assessment is not as widespread as it could be across all programmes.

Remote e-assessment, e-proctoring and academic integrity

Covid-19 made the debate about remote assessment real for many. There is excitement about the possibilities offered by e-assessment and technology enhanced teaching and learning more generally.

Remote e-assessment is relatively new to many and academic integrity is a concern. Many are exploring or piloting e-proctoring and there are mixed views on it nationally and internationally. Replacing in-person invigilated examinations with e-proctored remote online examinations is only one option and may not always be the best option. Nevertheless, e-proctoring can play a role in assessment in some situations, however, it does bring along some new challenges. This will be explored in a forthcoming paper on e-Proctoring to be published by QQI.

Academic integrity more generally is a live issue in tertiary education. It is topical in HE not least because of the work of the [National Academic Integrity Network](#); the rapid transition to remote assessment in response to the Covid-19 restrictions in 2020; and interest in how to maintain rigour when innovating assessment.

External examining

External examining plays an important role in assessment. However, there are a number of questions, answers to which it may be helpful to explore: What is the purpose of external examining and is it fulfilling that purpose? How do institutions source and work with external examiners? How do institutions support external examiners in their roles?

Work-based assessment

A substantial proportion of teaching happens in the workplace in some occupation-oriented programmes. However, not all occupation-oriented programmes include a practice placement and hence opportunities for learning, teaching and assessment

in this context. Finding placements can be an issue, in times of recession for example; and of course, it has been a major issue during the Covid-19 crisis.

There may be some benefit in establishing some national principles to support the QA of work-based assessment and help people who are new to it to get the most out of it. One interlocutor observed that for students with a disability, reasonable accommodation in the context of practice placements is the biggest issue where PSRBs are involved.

Assessment and the professions

One PSRB described how Covid-19 stimulated innovation, drove flexibility and strengthened relationships between PSRBs and HEIs. Professional bodies' expectations impact on assessment, and we need to reflect on this and work together with them. When providers, employers providing placements and professions work together closely in concert they can accomplish great things.

Staff experience and development

Among the HE staff development issues raised are:

- Research experience may have greater influence over appointments than teaching experience;
- Staff may find they need to judge the return on spending time on teaching and assessment against the return on research related activity;
- There is a need to recognise good teaching and assessment;
- Relative to teaching and learning, assessment needs more attention than it is getting;
- Professional development for heads of school would be useful (e.g., on assessment strategy);
- Staff may have more to learn about alternatives to their tried and tested approaches;
- There is a need for more professional development in authoring examinations and assessment more generally;
- 'Casualisation' of teaching and its alleged impact on assessment: need to reflect on how casual or short-term contract staff are supported;
- Sharing examples of effective practices has great value;
- Many want to build on positive things that happened this year but sometimes programme and administrative structures may not always sufficiently encourage and promote creative innovation.

Concluding remarks

The Covid-19 experience highlighted the intricacies and challenges of assessment and stimulated thinking about opportunities for its enhancement.

It is important not to lose this momentum but rather to redouble our efforts on rethinking assessment in higher education. QQI looks forward to supporting this momentum and facilitating further debate in partnership with stakeholders.