



## Work-Based Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning: Context, Purposes and Methods

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This *Forum Insight* aims to enhance our understanding of various approaches to work-based assessment in higher education. The Insight relies upon the broad understanding of assessment which emerged as part of the National Forum's Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning Enhancement Theme. This Insight was developed from a series of related national conversations and includes an overview of assessment terminology, the contexts within which work-based assessment takes place, and some initial suggestions regarding assessment methods, assessors and grading for assessment OF, FOR and AS learning activities within a work context.

### The Need for Work-based Learning Experience

Learning from experience has always been a key aspect of higher education. Engagement with real-life scenarios and authentic experiences can support student learning. Having work experience (or work-integrated learning) embedded in or occurring in parallel with higher education programmes supports an experiential approach to learning. Some programmes have given, and some are required to give, particular emphasis to this approach.

At national policy level, with a view to enhancing the skills of graduates, a target has been set to increase the number of higher education students undertaking a work placement or work-based project as part of their course by 25% by 2021 (Department of Education & Skills, 2017). A recent European report also highlighted the need to increase 'the links between higher education and other economic actors, including through involvement in the design and delivery of programmes and the provision of work-based learning opportunities' (European Commission, 2016, p.12).

As a key pillar of work-based learning, work-based assessment must be conducted in a manner appropriate to its context. It is timely, therefore, for a resource that draws on the experience of those who have been involved in the assessment of students in workplace contexts.

### The Contexts and Purposes of Work-based Assessment

Work experiences can serve a number of purposes, such as the following:

- To allow students to experience the world of work before graduation
- To allow students to develop or acquire specific skills, or professional abilities/attributes
- To allow students to apply theoretical disciplinary knowledge in practice (Smith, 2014)

When, how and who assesses work-based learning may depend on the contexts and purposes of assessment.

### Assessment contexts

The spectrum of work experience opportunities ranges from those which are strongly aligned with the institution's curriculum/programme to those which are more loosely aligned, sometimes called co-curricular work experiences (See also ACCE, 2017; McRae & Johnston, 2016) (See Figure 1).

In the case of work experience opportunities that are strongly aligned with the curriculum/programme:

- Outcomes are linked with academic and/or professional goals.
- Reflection is formalised and ongoing.
- Higher education institution (HEI) staff monitor the design and the assessment of activities.
- Examples include internships, clinical placements, cooperative education, and apprenticeships.

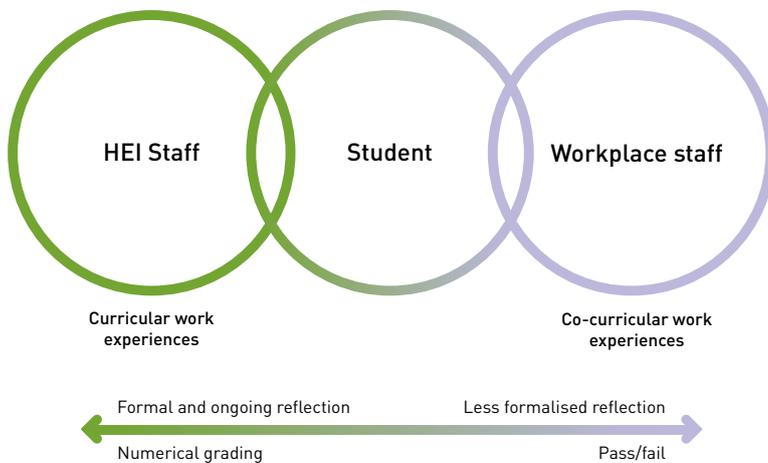
In the case of co-curricular work experience opportunities:

- Learning is more 'hands on' in the workplace.
- Learning occurs as a result of engagement in an activity in the work-place.
- Reflection is less formalised.
- Learning is more likely to be assessed by workplace staff, with less formalised links back to the curriculum.
- Examples include volunteers, students as staff, research or teaching assistants.

Table 1 Work-Based Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning: Examples of Assessors, Assessment Methods and Grading

|   | Description/Comments  | Before Work Experience (Placement)   | During Work Experience (Placement)   | After Work Experience (Placement)  |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Who assesses?</b>  | Often described as a tripartite approach, the three key assessment partners are the student (self and peers), the work-based staff (employers, clinical staff) and the HEI staff (academic staff, career officers, tutors)(See Figure 1).   | Programme staff/careers officers/students (self) and/or student peers  | Work-placement staff/employers/programme staff/students (self) and/or student peers  | Programme staff/students (self) and/or student peers   |
| <b>Assessment OF Learning:</b><br><i>To demonstrate achievement of students' learning</i>             | <p>The most familiar purpose of assessment is that it demonstrates achievement of student learning. This is termed 'summative assessment' or '<b>Assessment OF Learning</b>', emphasising that the assessment is graded (either pass/fail or numerically) and that the judgment happens after a period of learning.</p> <p><b>Debate on Grading</b></p> <p>There is ongoing debate as to whether work experience should be graded through a binary approach (e.g. pass/fail or competent/not yet competent) or a numerical/category approach (e.g. A, B, C, D, E, F, or percentages).</p> <p>The binary pass/fail approach is often used because the context, assessors and complexity of activities in the placements can vary so much that it is hard for the numerical or categories approach to be reliable and valid. The term 'pass', however, has the demotivating connotation of 40% for some students and therefore some contexts use the term 'competent'.</p> <p>Numerical or categories grading is often used in work experience where the judgement is based on more easily comparable assessment methods, for example, reports, project work. These are often assessed by HEI staff (See Figure 1).</p> | <p><b>Reflection before action</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning journals/blogs</li> <li>Portfolio/ePortfolio (reflection and evidence)</li> </ul> <p><b>Learning contracts/individual learning plan</b> to set, discuss and possibly negotiate <b>personal and/or professional learning goals</b>. These can involve students, career staff, programme staff and/or employers/placement staff. The goals should be specific, measureable, achievable, relevant and timely (SMART).</p> <p>Completion of an <b>expression of interest form</b></p> <p><b>Participation and/or report based on preparation workshop:</b> including, for example, ethics, etiquette, confidentiality, interview preparation, specific skills development, health and safety,</p> <p><b>CV preparation</b></p> <p><b>Literature review</b> (for more applied research-placements)</p> | <p><b>Reflection in action</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning journals/blogs</li> <li>Portfolio/ePortfolio (reflection and evidence)</li> <li>Regular reflective log (diary)</li> <li>Link with learning contract/individual learning plan</li> </ul> <p><b>Competency-based assessment:</b> for example, personal development, teamwork skills, communication, problem-solving. Assessment by staff and student (self-assessment), followed by conversation, reflection and/or action plan.</p> <p><b>Additional discipline-specific activities/skills:</b> for example: student performance and staff observation of specific task</p> <p><b>Discipline specific writing tasks (projects):</b> for example: research project, business report</p> <p><b>Exit presentation</b></p> | <p><b>Reflection on action</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning journals/blogs</li> <li>Portfolio/ePortfolio (reflection and evidence)</li> <li>More in-depth final reflection on learning</li> <li>Critical incident reflection (focus on specific significant 'critical incident')</li> <li>Link back to learning contract/individual learning plan</li> </ul> <p><b>Presentation</b> by student (i.e. verbal, video, poster) on their learning and performance</p> <p><b>Employer report</b></p> <p><b>Student report/project submission</b> (often assessed by programme team)</p> <p><b>CV preparation</b></p> <p><b>Dissertation/research report</b> (for more research type work placements)</p> |
| <b>Assessment FOR Learning:</b><br><i>To give feedback</i>  | <p>Assessment is also used to give feedback on learning (for the student) or feedback on teaching/supervision (for the staff). This is often called 'formative assessment' or '<b>Assessment FOR Learning</b>', which emphasises the learning aspect.</p> <p>This approach, essential in the workplace, advocates the importance of a dialogue between teachers/supervisors/staff and the learner. Feedback, however, needs to be timely, actionable and understandable.</p>  | <b>Student-tutor meeting</b>   | <p><b>Formal and informal conversation and discussion with</b> staff and peers (other students/colleagues).</p> <p><b>Group discussion:</b> face to-face and/or online</p> <p><b>Placement visit (or Skype/phone)</b> by programme staff</p> <p><b>360 feedback</b> activities between staff and student</p>   | <p><b>Employer feedback questionnaire</b> which is not graded, but for feedback purposes.</p> <p><b>Employer's prize/award</b> for student achievement</p> <p><b>360 feedback</b> activities between staff and student</p>   |
| <b>Assessment AS Learning:</b><br><i>To support students to self-regulate and critically evaluate</i> | <p>Assessment has the purpose of empowering students to self-regulate and critically evaluate their learning and performance.</p> <p>This is often entitled '<b>Assessment AS Learning</b>'.</p>  | <p><b>(Ungraded) Reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning journals/blogs</li> <li>Portfolio/ePortfolio (reflection and evidence)</li> </ul> <p><b>Students self-assess</b> against set criteria/competencies</p>   | <p><b>(Ungraded) Reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning journals/blogs</li> <li>Portfolio/ePortfolio (reflection and evidence)</li> </ul> <p><b>Open questioning</b> approaches</p> <p><b>Students self-assessing and peer review</b> against criteria</p>   | <p><b>(Ungraded) Reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning journals/blogs</li> <li>Portfolio/ePortfolio (reflection and evidence)</li> </ul> <p><b>Setting career goals</b></p> <p><b>Students self-assessing and peer review</b> against criteria</p> <p><b>Interview</b> with employer/programme/careers staff to assist student to self-regulate and critically evaluate their learning</p>  |

### Three partners in work-based assessment



**Figure 1 Characteristics of curricular and co-curricular work-based contexts**

In both contexts, in addition to assessment by HEI and/or work placement staff, students need to be in a position to develop the skills to self-assess prior to, during, and post-placement (See Figure 1). Student peers have a key role to play in developing this self-judgement skill, as peer reviewing is known to enhance self-monitoring.

### Assessment purposes

There are three key overlapping purposes of assessment: Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning (See Table 1; See also National Forum, 2017). In different work contexts, the purposes of assessment may have different emphases at different times (pre, during, post). Table 1 sets out some of the sectoral insights on these differences and on grading work-based assessment.

### Assessment Methods

Reflection is common to most work-based assessment contexts and phases. Reflection usually includes analysis of feelings/self to inform practice, learning through one's experience, and a change in perspective. When used alongside evidence, it often takes the form of a portfolio (or e-portfolio). When used to support learning it can take the form of a learning journal or blog. Reflecting on critical incidents in work is another approach to structuring reflection. Critical incidents (either positive or negative) are based on the significance and the meaning that the learner attributes to them.

Students, however, need support to develop the skills of writing reflectively, and to move from more descriptive to more critical reflections. (See link to the bibliography of resources for examples of practical advice that can be given to students and some models that describe the deeper levels of reflection.)

Where students need to develop specific skills, professional abilities/ attributes and/or apply theoretical disciplinary knowledge in practice, there is a need for a range of other methods, such as reports, projects, practical skill work, or observations. See Table 1 for examples.

### In Conclusion

When considering the appropriate assessment OF, FOR and AS learning for work placements, the following questions are helpful to consider:

- What are the key aims of the work experience? For example, to experience the world of work, develop specific skills and/or apply disciplinary knowledge in practice?
- Is the work experience strongly or more loosely aligned to the curriculum?

Based on the answers to these questions, the following decisions can be made:

- The most appropriate balance of input into assessment, between the student, HEI staff and/or workplace staff
- Whether specific disciplinary or more general methods are most authentic for the assessment OF, FOR and AS learning
- Whether the assessment should be graded pass/fail or numerically

While this Insight aims to give a general overview, the accompanying bibliography gives more details on the literature and related resources for staff and students.

### References

- ACCE. (2017). *Comparative matrix of co-operative education with other forms of work-integrated education and work-integrated learning*, British Columbia Accountability Council for Co-operative Education (ACCE).
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- National Forum. (2017). *Expanding our understanding of assessment and feedback in Irish higher education*. Dublin: Author.
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### Bibliography

A list of associated references can be found on the National Forum website here: [teachingandlearning.ie/bibliography](http://teachingandlearning.ie/bibliography)