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A guiding framework for institutional transformation in assessment



Key principles

- Adopt a scholarly approach
- Respect staff autonomy, agency, disciplinary knowledge
- Use collaborative change, taking into account multiple constituencies
- Allow teams to control assessment evaluation data

Strategy

- At institutional level – only principles and tools for changes
- Specifics of change to be controlled at local level
- Focus change at programme level
- Gather robust evidence of programme assessment - involve student views
- Bring together teaching staff to review evidence and prioritise areas for change.
- Aim for workload neutral change as minimum
- Consider and prepare for risks

Infrastructure

- Ensure regulations and procedures support planned change
- Align validation, annual evaluation and other documents/ templates with planned change
- Make areas of change appear less risky
- Consider alignment of change with other policies/ aims
- Consider reducing module choice
- Check that funding methodology supports assessment change

Assessment literacy

- Improve assessment literacy in students and staff
- Greater communication about clear and simple regulations
- work inductively from assessment problems to development of assessment beliefs
- Share successful examples of assessment change
- Use saturation CPD where necessary.

Increasing the likelihood of successful institutional transformation in assessment

The following guidance is based on a review of literature examining efforts to make significant, embedded and long term change in learning, teaching and assessment in the HE sector. This includes national and local evaluation studies, case reports as well as scholarly research. It has been supplemented by interviews with university staff engaged in implementing assessment change strategies.

The guidance falls into four areas, a supportive infrastructure, strategy, professional development and leadership.

1. Infrastructure

The following bullets list ways in which an institution can assist the implementation of assessment changes through reviewing elements of its infrastructure:

- Address structural barriers to change, e.g. do QA processes make it appear difficult to make minor changes to assessment or to use certain 'learning-oriented' methods. Do module sizes and timetables limit the opportunity for formative assessment or encourage multiple small assignments?
- Actively involving those responsible for QA frameworks, reviewing whether regulations and quality procedures support the change desired. Adopting clear and simple regulations and assessment procedures is likely to facilitate staff understanding of them and their ability to apply procedures consistently.
- Encourage the reduction of student module choice in course design and approval – It may be unpopular at first but there appears to be a strong case for designing less complex programmes to make it easier to create greater coherence for students, at least in relation to assessment.
- Align institutional course approval, annual evaluation and other documentation with the proposed transformation – make sure the 'discourse' of documents doesn't work against the aims of assessment transformation, for example, do course approval (validation) forms and discussions privilege summative assessment and traditional assessment methods?
- Aim for consistency in assessment procedures and terminology.
- Maximise how desired change aligns with existing institutional commitments (e.g. in learning and teaching strategy or student engagement strategy). Do they mutually support each other?
- Make proposed areas of change appear less or un-risky to managers, staff and students – use of group assessment is a good example of this – a clear policy for operating group assessment including clear information for staff and students on the benefits, the maximum amount allowed in a programme, the handling of social

loafers and fair and transparent ways of allocating marks to group members could remove anxieties etc.

- Does the programme funding methodology support assessment enhancement or is it just based on contact hours?

2. Strategy

The following bullets list potential strategies to improve the likely success of institutional, departmental and programme assessment changes.

- Institutional level efforts should concentrate on strategies and tools (e.g. <https://www.testa.ac.uk>) for change rather than the direct specification of change which should be controlled at the local level. So don't make blanket rules about method, number or timings of assessment.
- Do not rely on individuals to drive change (e.g. through staff development, development grants or champions) as this disregards the influence of others. Academics are powerfully influenced by their immediate work group (programme/subject/ department team) and therefore the focus of change should be at this level, aiming to change assessment patterns and discourse at programme and subject level.
- Strategy should involve gathering robust qualitative and quantitative evidence using, for example, student surveys, focus groups, student reps and curriculum mapping to really illuminate the overall student experience of assessment on a programme. This evidence can be very important in building staff commitment to change. Build on the imperative of student satisfaction but with better quality information about their experience.
- Wherever possible, ensure that programmes/ departments retain control over any assessment evaluation data collected to guard against defensiveness created by external blame.
- Bring staff together to discuss assessment – if you only work with innovators and enthusiastic academics you may overlook barriers to involving all teachers. It may be better to be less ambitious and focus on everyday assessment practice and all teachers. Respect the 'autonomy, agency, and disciplinary knowledge of programme teams.'
- Working at the workgroup level will reveal contradictory influences on individuals or contrary working practices to be discussed and, where possible, resolved.
- Consider gains and losses for those involved. Look for workload neutral change as a minimum.
- Involve those responsible for QA frameworks - Work towards embedding assessment evaluation and change in institutional QA procedures to systematically encourage evidence-led curriculum design. For example the gathering and reviewing of robust

information on the student assessment experience could become a key stage in periodic review or revalidation.

- Look carefully at what the risks of assessment innovation are so they can be prepared for.

3. Professional development

The following bullets reinforce the contribution of staff professional development to institutional assessment change.

- Increase assessment literacy amongst all key staff including ‘quality’ staff and amongst students. Develop awareness of how traditional assessment practices take on the mantle of rules which can unnecessarily limit change.
- Work inductively from assessment problems faced by workgroups (e.g. from negative student feedback) to the development of beliefs rather than visa versa (a social constructivist approach to professional learning). Share successful examples of assessment problem solving as concrete evidence of the benefits of assessment improvement.
- Use saturation CPD where it really matters, for example to ensure fair and consistent assessment procedures.

4. Leading assessment transformation

The following bullets list aspects of change leadership relevant for changing assessment.

- Change leaders should avoid change by coercion and, instead, consider ‘interactive leadership’ for change; developing a shared vision of change through dialogue, listening and compromise.
- Leaders need to have a ‘feel’ for the limits and possibilities of change – establish the parameters for what is possible – perhaps limiting ambition.
- Leaders will need to recognise the influence of beliefs and informal rules on commitment to change. Success will require sensitivity to the context and history of the work group. It will need leaders to foster comfort with uncertainty. They will need to think about how power and identities may be threatened by changes.
- Leaders should be prepared for variable and unpredictable outcomes. They should keep early plans emergent to allow for adaptation and consensus decision-making and be tolerant of modifications to proposals. Tolerance of diversity better enables work groups to adopt approaches that they are likely to be committed to.

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