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Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: a practical guide

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Contributors

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Acknowledgements

PART 1
INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1   Introduction

The primacy of assessment

Research and experience tell us very forcefully about the importance of assessment in higher education. It shapes the experience of students and influences their behaviour more than the teaching they receive. The influence of assessment means that 'there is more leverage to improve teaching through changing assessment than there is in changing anything else' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004–5: 22). Tutors implicitly know the importance of assessment. Anecdotal experience tells us that, to a large extent, assessment activity in higher education is the learning activity. Students may take notes in lectures, seminars or from their reading, they may have been through the prescribed activities in laboratories or on field trips, but it is only when faced with assessment tasks that the majority seriously engage with that material. Tutors despair of trying to persuade students to undertake study which does not contribute in some way to their grades.

Sadly, though, university assessment practice lags well behind its equivalent in the school sector (Murphy 2006), relying largely on a limited range of tried (but not always tested) methods. It is dealt with in an *ad hoc* way (Swann and Ecclestone 1999a) and the situation is not mitigated by the 'amateur' status of many academics regarding assessment (Ramsden 2003: 177). We learn the craft of assessment informally through being assessed ourselves and through being part of a community of practice, but lack scholarship regarding assessment (Price 2005). Undoubtedly, most of us have survived this approach to professional learning reasonably unscathed but it is not a recipe for enhancement; it provides no reliable route for ensuring that research on assessment reaches those doing the assessing.

Assessment pressures and influences

The contemporary environment of higher education means that assessment cannot carry on unaltered; it is subject to too many pressures and influences which create a force for change. Increasing cohort size and the shrinking unit of resource creates pressure for more cost-effective assessment methods especially as assessment is very expensive and, in today's mass classrooms, can use more resources than teaching (Gibbs 2006b). This problem is

exacerbated by **modularisation**, which has increased the volume of assessment as each small block of learning must be formally assessed and graded.

In addition, the student body is changing. Reliance on part-time work and other commitments appear to be turning students into very strategic learners (Kneale 1997) unwilling to devote effort to study which does not contribute to **summative assessment**. Tutors are increasingly teaching a much more diverse student body who challenge existing assumptions about what can be expected from new students (Northedge 2003a), with many non-traditional students needing greater support in making the transition to higher education. Poor early experience of assessment is associated with high student **attrition** rates (Krause 2001).

Moreover, the employability and graduate skills agenda is placing pressure on tutors to design assignments and examinations which assess a much broader range of achievement than in the past. Assessment is now expected to assess subject knowledge and a wide range of intellectual, professional and generic skills in a quality-assurance climate that stresses reliability with robust marking and **moderation** methods. Tutors are also facing pressure to modify assessment so that it supports learning through student involvement in assessment, prompt **feedback**, flexible and formative approaches and a wide variety of assessment methods.

In addition, assessment practices are being influenced by advances in technology. While computers afford the opportunity for online assessment, immediate feedback and computer-marked assignments, they also provide the breeding ground for the increase in **plagiarism**.

Within individual universities the mediation of regulations and the assessment process by departments, programme teams and individual tutors may be influenced, possibly constrained, by locally based, taken-for-granted assumptions, and even myths. Effective communication and academic development work may often be required to support programme teams in enhancing their assessment design and practice.

Finally, student evaluation through the National Student Survey (2006) has made student reactions to our programmes public for the first time, and assessment is proving to be the weakest area in the analysis. Competition in the new consumer market in higher education will mean that departments cannot neglect the student perspective for too long.

Policy

Perhaps the most obvious recent influence on assessment has been the policy climate in relation to quality assurance and enhancement. The quality assurance and accountability climate differs from nation to nation. In the UK,

institutional autonomy and self-regulation are now constrained by unambiguous public policy (Jackson 2000), largely in the guise of the 'academic infrastructure' of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2006d). This includes a set of guidelines designed to create greater confidence in standards across British higher education, including the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (**FHEQ**) which indicates the types of learning outcomes expected from different awards, **subject benchmark statements** for individual disciplines, various codes of practice, including one for assessment, and programme specifications. A key feature of external review of institutions (institutional audit) by the **QAA** is the extent to which the quality assurance procedures for any university comply with these guidelines.

At the heart of the QAA approach is the notion of constructive alignment between 'learning outcomes' and assessment. Assessment practice is judged primarily on whether it effectively measures the intended outcomes of a course of study in a valid, reliable and transparent way. This book acknowledges the centrality of this approach and its pervading influence on so much day-to-day institutional practice, and therefore an outcome-based method has been adopted throughout the text. However, such a philosophy is not accepted unquestioningly. Outcome-based course design represents a set of ideas which are currently fashionable in higher education quality assurance and educational development circles, but the approach is also open to criticism. Box 2.3 in Chapter 2 summarises the debate.

A further policy imperative emerged in the late 1990s in the UK. The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997), followed by various initiatives and the 2003 Higher Education White Paper (Department for Education and Skills 2003), placed considerable emphasis on raising standards of teaching and assessment in higher education. This included requirements for institutional learning and teaching strategies and strong encouragement for the professionalisation of academic staff in relation to learning, teaching and assessment. Some form of initial training for higher education lecturers is now widespread in British universities.

Research evidence

Publications now abound with tips for improving assessment and case study accounts of assessment practice. However, Knight and Yorke (2003: 209) argue that they largely represent a 'cottage industry' lacking a systematic theoretical basis for understanding judgements of achievement, and thus 'attempts to enhance assessment practices are built on sand'. This book attempts to distil the consistent elements of research findings to provide well-informed but intensely practical advice. In doing this, it is recognised that academics   are   by   definition   sceptical   and   will   wish   to   see   an

acknowledgement of conflicting ideas and alternative perspectives, with any subsequent recommendations emerging from persuasive evidence.

Despite the evidence-based approach, we have attempted to write in an accessible way that does not require the reader to have prior knowledge of educational theory. *Leads into Literature* boxes will be used to provide routes into further reading or summarise areas of debate in relation to conflicting theories or controversial policies. In this manner, the book aims to provide strong guidelines explicitly supported by research.

Why another assessment book?

The dominance of assessment in the student experience and the social, economic and policy climate have led to a situation where assessment is in a state of flux, facing pressures for enhancement while simultaneously coping with demands to restrict its burden on students and staff. It is a demanding agenda but one which this book endeavours to embrace. The book recognises and welcomes the challenges presented above of assessment for learning, quality assurance, student numbers and diversity, modularisation, workload, plagiarism and technology. It also aims to provide a guide which focuses on all stages of the assessment cycle (see Figure 1.1). In this sense, the book is unique and comprehensive.

The book attempts to translate what is implied from research into the day-to-day demands of *doing* assessment in higher education. Our approach is informed by many years of experience struggling to improve assessment and use it creatively to influence students' learning. The poverty of assessment in higher education has made it tempting for assessment texts to advocate major institutional change; in our view this is an ideal rather than a realistic approach. Our experience and knowledge of the sector have persuaded us towards a more pragmatic approach recognising the limited appetite for change among academics facing huge pressures for productivity in other aspects of their role. Potential frustration for staff attempting change but constrained by institutional structures (Cuban 1988) is also acknowledged, so the book advocates practices which can have significant impact on the student experience yet have the potential to work within existing structures.

Thus, although we do not gainsay many of the conclusions of other scholars in the assessment field, they are not developed here. As Boud (2000: 159) suggests, 'one of the traps in arguing for a shift in assessment practice is to propose an unrealistic ideal that can never be attained'. In its place, we have attempted to write this guide within the bounds of what is possible in most university departments. The book focuses on discussion of issues, offering pragmatic solutions, and does not spend too much time advocating

the overhaul of a system which is too loosely coupled to be easily subject to change.

Having said that, the text does alert staff, particularly those in positions of responsibility, to some of the weaknesses in existing assessment infra-structure such as modularisation, constraining regulations and the con-sequences of tutor discretion in **examination boards**. Overall, the book aims to combine a clear academic rationale for good practice with concrete advice and living examples of successful assessment interventions.

Situated practice

Tempting as it is, educational research and theory do not translate simply into ideas for educational practice. Laurillard (2002: 62–3) emphasises the 'situated character of all learning' and the impossibility of defining 'reliable prescriptions for teaching strategies'. Readers' knowledge of assessment is situated in the context of their own experience and in the particular tradi-tions, expectations and needs of different academic subjects. What we offer is based on our own experience and interpretation of the literature, but every recommendation and activity has to be adapted to the reader's local context. This includes tutors, their skills, experience, time, enthusiasm and interests. It also includes students, their previous education, backgrounds, knowledge, skills, level of study and motivation. Finally, it also includes contextual issues such as group size, resources, regulations, and disciplinary and professional requirements.

Thus, although the growing evidence base of research on assessment provides a useful basis on which to build and review practice, it leaves the onus on tutors and teaching teams to develop and critically evaluate assess-ment processes and procedures as they are used and developed within their local context. Thus, while the evidence base can inform institutional and departmental policy, it will require mediation to suit local contexts and stu-dents groups.

Overall, we need to listen to Black and Wiliam (1998b) when they assert that there is no quick fix which will give rapid rewards in relation to assess-ment. Earl (2003), drawing on the work of Cuban (1988), refers to the notion of first-order and second-order change. First-order change is making existing procedures more efficient and effective, and we have all seen institutional strategies designed with this end in mind – speeding up the time for return of marked assignments, improving assignment feedback proformas, streamlin-ing procedures for assessing claims for extenuating circumstances, and introducing plagiarism-detection software to improve **malpractice** proce-dures. This text does provide advice on these procedural matters but, as Crook *et al.* (2006) point out, equitable and consistent procedures are not sufficient

to deliver good-quality assessment practice. Procedural changes and efficiencies will struggle to determine individual practices. For example, procedures may ensure assignment briefs are published four weeks in advance of the deadline and always include **assessment criteria**, but they do not ensure the appropriateness of the **assignment** or the quality of the criteria. Such first-order changes do not get to the heart of individual practice. That is second-order change (Earl 2003): change designed to alter the fundamental ways staff operate. It is the latter that we aim for in writing this book. We are hoping to encourage a transformative approach to thinking about the purposes of assessment, enabling staff to comfortably '[accept] and [embrace] the subjectivity of judgement' (Clegg and Bryan 2006: 224) so that they, in part, are liberated to review the contribution of their practice to student learning.

Audience

This book is aimed at lecturers in higher education and others with responsibility for the assessment of taught programmes of study. While we hope it will be of particular use to new lecturers, we have also written it with more experienced staff in mind: those embarking on a new role or responsibility in relation to assessment, writing a new module or taking on programme leadership. It is not aimed at educational scholars, for whom there are more research-focused texts available, although they may choose to follow up the leads into literature offered within the chapters. We particularly commend the book to programme leaders, whom we see as the vital link in the chain between individual tutor intentions and the likelihood of providing a coherent assessment experience for individual students.

In addition, the book is also aimed at those with subject management, quality assurance and educational development remits who are seeking information regarding assessment strategy and management.

Plan of the book

Figure 1.1 sets out the structure of the book. Above all, the book is distinguished from its predecessors by attempting to capture all the stages of assessment from initial task design to final examination board and evaluation. These stages are reflected in the central spine of the diagram (rectangular boxes). One might characterise these chapters as dealing with the day-to-day practice of assessment. The oval or round shapes characterise elements of assessment research and practice which you may wish to consider in developing your assessment strategy. The two diamond shapes indicate processes which influence all stages of the assessment cycle: the management of
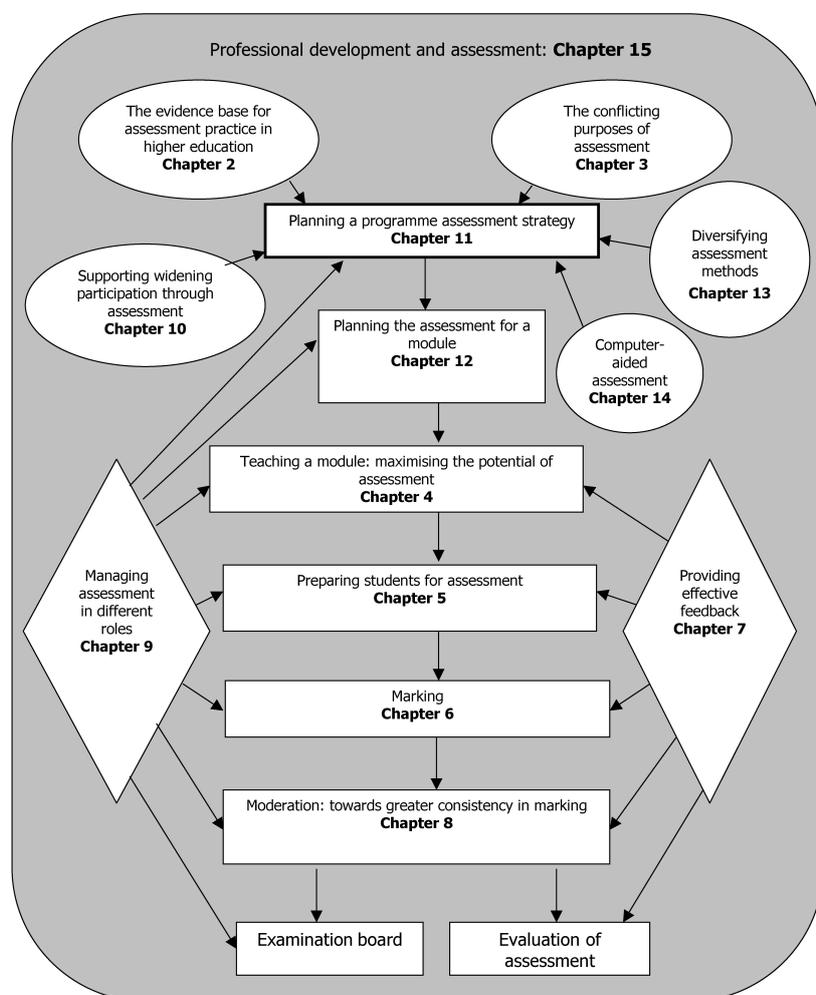
Figure 1.1   Structure of the book

assessment in different roles and providing effective feedback. Finally, suc-
cessful development of assessment relies on the active engagement and
learning of tutors, and therefore Chapter 15 is shown as underpinning all
other chapters of the book.

   The book falls naturally into three parts. Part 1 summarises research on
the relationship between assessment and learning and critically explores the
difficulty of reconciling the various principles underlying assessment with its
different purposes. It provides both a challenge to current assessment practice

and outlines the research and theory which underpin the advice contained in subsequent chapters. Part 2 focuses on the day-to-day matters associated with dealing with assessment, including recognition of the new emphasis on assessment and feedback which 'promotes learning' (QAA 2006c), and working with the needs of diverse students, including those with disabilities. Part 3 is aimed at the design stage of the assessment cycle. It stresses the importance of taking a programme-level approach to developing assessment, as much as anything to ensure a balance of practice which can meet the often conflicting demands on our assignments and examinations. It provides ideas for broadening the range of assessment to meet its different purposes, including an overview of online assessment. Finally, we examine the issues and good practice associated with developing tutors and teaching teams with respect to assessment.

The book takes a broad view of the purposes of assessment, including recognising the pressures for quality assurance and standards discussed earlier. The implications of these policies, including the QAA code of practice on 'Assessment of Students' (QAA 2006c), are woven throughout the text, and Box 1.1 identifies where specific information can be found in the book.

How to use this book

The book is not intended to be read in a linear fashion but is designed to help individual tutors and teaching teams with relevant advice depending what point of the assessment cycle they wish to examine. Some suggestions for how to use the book are as follows:

- New tutors or postgraduate teaching assistants may wish to start with Chapter 4 which deals with the 'assessment basics' needed when beginning to teach a module for the first time. Chapter 6 also provides advice on marking.
- Tutors could use the bulleted lists which appear in most chapters as checklists, for example to ensure module outlines contain appropriate assessment information, to check they are aware of assessment responsibilities, or to test the impact of assessment practice on international students.
- Programme leaders or heads of department could use short sections of the book as pre-reading for team meetings. For example, the chapter on providing effective feedback (Chapter 7) or the section on designing assessment to reduce plagiarism (Chapter 4) might be used to stimulate discussion about departmental practice.
- Programme leaders could draw on Chapter 11 at the beginning of a course design process, using the ideas presented to interrogate their

Box 1.1   Code of Practice

The text below sets out Appendix 1 of the *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education*, Section 6: Assessment of Students (© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2006) and identifies which chapters address each specific principle.

<u>**The Precepts**</u>

General principles

1. As bodies responsible for the academic standards of awards made in their name, institutions have effective procedures for:

i   designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing the assessment strategies for programmes and awards
     Chapter 11

ii   implementing rigorous assessment policies and practices that ensure the standard for each award and award element is set and maintained at the appropriate level, and that student performance is properly judged against this
     Chapter 12

iii evaluating how academic standards are maintained through assessment practice that also encourages effective learning.
     Chapter 9

2. Institutions publicise and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable.
Chapters 2 and 4

Contribution to student learning

3. Institutions encourage assessment practice that promotes effective learning.
Chapters 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14.

Assessment panels and examination boards

4. Institutions publicise and implement effective, clear and consistent policies for the membership, procedures, powers and accountability of assessment panels and boards of examiners.
Chapters 8 and 9

Conduct of assessment

5. Institutions ensure that assessment is conducted with rigour, probity and fairness and with due regard for security.
Chapters 6, 8 and 9

Amount and timing of assessment

6. Institutions ensure that the amount and timing of assessment enables effective and appropriate measurement of students' achievement of intended learning outcomes.
Chapters 4, 11 and 12

Marking and grading

7. Institutions have transparent and fair mechanisms for marking and for moderating marks.
Chapters 6 and 8

8. Institutions publicise and implement clear rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award.
Chapter 9

Feedback to students on their performance

9. Institutions provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment.
Chapter 7

Staff development and training

10. Institutions ensure that everyone involved in the assessment of students is competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.
Chapters 9 and 15

Language of study and assessment

11. The languages used in teaching and assessment are normally the same. If, for any reason, this is not possible, institutions ensure that their academic standards are not consequently put at risk.

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' requirements

12. Institutions provide clear information to staff and students about specific assessment outcomes or other criteria that must be met to fulfil the requirements of PSRBs.
Chapter 11

Assessment regulations

13. Institutions review and amend assessment regulations periodically, as appropriate, to assure themselves that the regulations remain fit for purpose.
Chapter 9

Student conduct in assessment

14. Institutions encourage students to adopt good academic conduct in respect of assessment and seek to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities.
Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 14

Recording, documenting and communicating assessment decisions

15. Institutions ensure that assessment decisions are recorded and documented accurately and systematically and that the decisions of relevant assessment panels and examination boards are communicated as quickly as possible.
Chapter 9

programme assessment strategy. Module leaders are encouraged to read Chapter 12 as a first step in rethinking the assessment of their modules.

- Staff developers could use the text as a resource in designing staff development workshops, for example by using the case study approach in Chapter 3 to analyse how well diverse types of assignment provide for the different principles of assessment or using Chapter 6 as the pre-reading for a workshop on marking for postgraduate teaching assistants.
- Practitioner researchers could use the references in the *Leads into Literature* boxes as a stimulus for further investigation of aspects of assessment.
- Quality assurance teams could use Chapter 11 in the training for validation or accreditation panels. It can help them identify the questions they might want to ask in testing the merit of a new programme assessment strategy.

Cross-references are used throughout the book to assist readers in finding broader information of relevance to the topic of a particular chapter.

A note about terminology

Various different terms are used to refer to the same entity in higher education across English-speaking countries. Therefore, in order to avoid considerable confusion and repetition in the book, we have adopted certain terms as follows:

Assessment task – any item of assessment whether examination, test, coursework or direct observation.

Assignment – coursework usually undertaken by a student or students in their own time and not under controlled conditions.

Examination – an assessment task undertaken under controlled conditions.

Test – an assessment task taken in semi-controlled conditions such as an in-class or online test, usually of a relatively short duration.

Assessment strategy – the procedures adopted to assess student learning in a given module or programme.

Module – a specific unit of study or block of learning which is separately assessed. Combinations of modules form a programme of study.

Programme – the overall curriculum followed by an individual student, normally comprising a specified set of modules or option choices.

Course – unlike programme and module, which are used very specifically, the term *course* is used generally, to refer to any organised scheme of teaching.

Curriculum – like 'course', used generally to refer to all aspects of the student learning experience. It includes both the syllabus (content) and the teaching, learning and assessment methods.

Year – many staff in higher education have replaced the term 'year' with 'level' to represent the stage of learning, because the diversity in modes of study means that students are often spending more than a year on a programme level. Thus, level 1 is equal to year 1 of a full-time undergraduate programme. We have chosen to use 'year' as the indicator of level of study because it is readily understood and because various labels exist for different levels. For example, level 1 is also referred to as foundation or level 4 depending on the framework in use. The use of the term 'year' implies no assumption that all students are full-time. (See Box 11.3 for a discussion of levels.)

Attribution/attributable – we have selected these terms to refer to the extent to which an assignment can be reliably attributed as the work of an individual student. The word 'authenticity' is frequently used in this way, but we have rejected that term because it is also commonly used to mean an assignment which mirrors realistic demands outside the university. Using the term for both meanings would be confusing.

A full glossary of terms and acronyms used in this text is set out in the Appendix.

Conclusion

This text is offered as a comprehensive resource based on research, public policy and experience. As with most things educational, there are no right or simple answers that can be employed across the messy business of providing programmes of learning for adults. There are only more or less likely solutions to problems and they will be affected by you, your students, the learning environment, and the **subject discipline** in many different ways. The temptation might be to hold back from advice in such unpredictable circumstances, yet that is a recipe for leaving things as they are in an environment which is hardly static. The pressures discussed in the opening paragraphs emphasise the importance of taking action, and that action should at least be as well informed as possible. Having said that, we have had to be fairly sparing in our use of evidence in order to balance background information with practical advice. We realise it is presumptuous to claim this as a guide to good practice, and indeed we would prefer our advice to provoke you, even enrage you, rather than leave you untouched. If we wish for anything, it is that tutors and teaching teams seriously engage in debate about assessment and decide for themselves what constitutes good practice.