

Evaluating New Priorities For Assessment In Higher Education

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Abstract: *Recent years have seen a welcome move towards professionalising the whole approach to the support for student learning within higher education in the UK. Staff taking up academic posts in more or less any university are now expected to undertake some initial educational training in their first year or two in the job. Hopefully, this will help them to develop some appropriate skills and knowledge in relation to the complicated challenges that they will face in providing support for student learning within the rapidly changing world of higher education.*

Keywords: educational provision, reconceptualising, unassessed lessons, “reliable” and “valid”.

INTRODUCTION

Naturally, there are the days when it was assumed that anyone clever enough to gain a university post through their demonstrated scholarship and research would without doubt be able to pass on their wisdom to students without thinking too much about how to do it effectively. Even so, the amount of educational training provided for staff in universities is still fairly slight, compared for example to that expected of those preparing to teach in schools. Also, requirements to engage in initial preparation are in most institutions still unlikely to be followed up by any definite expectation of ongoing training and development throughout the rest of an academic career. Thus most university lecturers at best have experienced a short taster course to support their approach to providing university-level education, and many appointed more than ten years or so ago won't even have benefited from that. This marked disparity between school and higher education is hopefully slowly beginning to be diminished. Nevertheless, it will take a long time and a marked change in attitudes for university staff to be expected to be as professional in their approach to educational provision, as is expected of them in relation to their own particular area of scholarship.

BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

Recent initiatives such as the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) projects and all the Higher Education Academy developments (including the twenty-four subject centres) signal a gradual move towards professionalising the educational side of the work of higher education institutions. Ever so slowly the support for student learning is coming to be properly recognised as a substantial and difficult challenge. Many factors have contributed to this change, including the move towards widening participation, which is undoubtedly presenting university lecturers with new challenges. Technological change is another factor in increasing the range of techniques and approaches for supporting student learning and reconceptualising the educational approaches being used. Even experienced university teachers are facing challenges in terms of reconceptualising their approaches to teaching both individual modules and indeed entire courses. Although I wouldn't want to overstate the movement that has occurred so far, some academics at least are beginning to see the value of educational theory and research, and training that draws upon such a body of scholarship. Others also recognise the need for experimentation, reflection, the adoption of new approaches, and the value of spending time observing colleagues teaching students in radically different ways. In some subject areas e-learning, problem-based learning and off-campus work-based learning have become parts of a move away from traditional lecturetheatre-based approaches to the organisation of higher education. Even where lectures still have a big role to play, they may now be supported by e-learning materials, either used within the lecture theatre or available for students to access to assist with their own independent learning. Amid all of this, one area across standard university courses was very slow to change and innovate: the way in which students in higher education are assessed. Unlike school education, where the reform of assessment systems has been seen as a key factor in bringing about improvements in student learning, much of higher education has tended to plod along, seeming to take traditional forms of assessment as a given (with some notable exceptions, some of which are reported in this volume). While school teachers have consistently regarded student assessment as something that needs to be reviewed, updated and reconfigured at regular intervals, many universities have continued with very similar systems of assessment decade after decade. Viewed from the outside, this contrast between two areas of education operating alongside each other in the same geographical and educational context is rather puzzling, and is something that I want to examine. In doing this I am mindful of a quote from Boud, who puts his finger on what I regard as one of higher education's most exposed shortcomings: 'Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition, if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment' (Boud, 1995: 35). Few would

debate the fact that the role of assessment in education is fairly fundamental, and that reform of old-fashioned assessment approaches within higher education has been rather slow.

METHODS

Student assessment is for many educators one of the hardest things to resolve satisfactorily and in many settings leads to some of the fiercest debates. Some educational courses deliberately exclude any assessments of student learning as a matter of principle. Such courses can be regarded both by students and other interested parties as less important than those that do include such assessment. Clearly this depends a great deal upon the context of the course, and the motivations of the students for undertaking them. However, where unassessed courses exist alongside courses that are assessed, then it is widely acknowledged that they are frequently perceived as being of less importance (Murphy and Torrance, 1988). In some settings this has led those involved in so-called 'minority subjects' to campaign to have their courses assessed in the same way as other, more mainstream subjects. The paradox here is that the teachers of those subjects which are subjected to rigorous assessment regimes are often highly envious of teachers in other subjects, where there is less of an emphasis on student assessment. Such a scenario is most common in school-level education, where subject status within an overall curriculum can often reflect the assessment emphasis accorded to different subjects/parts of the curriculum. In higher education, optional unassessed modules may suffer in the same way. In higher education, in the vast majority of cases, students are assessed by staff members teaching the course that they are following. In many institutions there is still a strong reliance on formal end of course/module/year examinations, and the general approach to marking such examinations is relatively straightforward with little formal use of things such as detailed marking schemes, or elaborate mechanisms for standardising the marking of the different staff members involved. There is, of course, a long-established external examiner system, but this is widely recognised as being a fairly 'light touch' nod in the direction of attempting to maintain some degree of equivalence between different institutions. With a vastly expanded system of higher education it is now generally acknowledged that the standards required by different universities are, to say the least, variable. Only the most naïve users of degree outcomes would assume that a degree classification received by a student graduating from one university (Oxford, say) represents exactly the same type of educational achievement as the same degree classification received by a student graduating from another university (Bournemouth, say).

All of that contrasts markedly with the highly regulated system of assessment which has been developed in the school sector. High-stakes assessments (such as GCSE and A-level examinations) virtually exclude any involvement in the conduct of assessments by the teachers who are teaching the students. Examinations are set, administered, marked and graded by public examination boards (awarding bodies) and there is great emphasis on the standardisation of marking through examiner training, detailed marking schemes, cross checks, examiner mark monitoring and mark adjustments. The assessment industry in the school sector has grown into a gigantic, billion-pound enterprise with ever more layers of assessment being introduced through the national curriculum and other initiatives. It is also characterised by increasing levels of sophistication in the assessment techniques used, technological interventions including an increase in on-screen assessments, and the application of expert research to attempt to make assessments more accurate, more efficient, fairer, and, as far as possible, comparable across subjects, awarding bodies and year groups. So we have two systems with very little in common. It is rare to find people working in one who know much about the other and it is very difficult to point to ways in which insights from one have been transferred to be used in the other. From my experience, the assessment system in higher education is generally regarded with some amazement by assessment experts working in the school sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

One of the biggest areas of concern in the wider educational assessment literature over the years relates to the dependability of assessment results (Murphy, 2004). If the assessment results are to be taken seriously, then those who use them need to be reassured that they can trust them. Such an emphasis has been linked to an acknowledgement that there are 'high-stakes assessments', upon which crucial decisions depend, and other kinds of assessments, which in a real sense do not lead to quite such crucial outcomes. In situations where high-stakes assessments are being conducted, judgements by those who have been teaching the students are generally regarded as less robust and dependable than assessment results relating to more sophisticated tests and examinations set and marked by individuals who are not at all involved in teaching the individual students. In this context it is interesting that in United Kingdom higher education the reliability (or dependability) of assessments appears to have been much less of a concern than it has been in other places of education. Most assessments are carried out by the same individuals who teach students, albeit with some checks through double marking procedures, and external examiner light-touch oversight. Only with Ph.D.s does the assessment of students depend strongly on the judgement of staff from outside the institution, and even in that case such examiners receive no training, appear to be chosen in something of a haphazard way, and are able to operate personal assessment standards rather than

following anything that could be described as a detailed assessment framework. It is a little disappointing that no case studies relating to innovative approaches to assessing Ph.D.s could be found to include in this volume. Nevertheless, concerns about the fairness of student assessments have surfaced within the sector, and some particular issues have been foci for much research and innovation. Anonymous marking to try to mitigate against unfair uses or prior knowledge and expectations is now widely used and has been shown effectively to counteract certain kinds of bias that can occur when markers know things relating to the identity of the students whose work they are marking. Also, counteracting plagiarism by students has become a major preoccupation, especially with the rise in opportunities to borrow and buy ready-completed essays, project reports and dissertations on the internet. In addition some universities have developed assessment guidelines that require assessment criteria to be made available and which also require departments to organise systems of double marking of student work or other approaches to minimise the grossest manifestations of marker bias or unreliability. Increasingly there has been much speculation about the comparability of assessment standards across the greatly expanded higher education sector in the United Kingdom. While it is hard to imagine how, for example, a first-class honours degree in History from the University of Oxford is equivalent to the same award from a post-1992 institution such as Bournemouth University, there has been a great deal of reluctance to discuss such matters fully in an open way (Murphy, 1996). Employers are known to exercise their own judgements in interpreting the value of degrees from different universities, whereas the government has been keen to stress the overall quality of degree-level education and standards in the United Kingdom. Compared to the level of attention to comparability of awarding standards between the GCSE and A-Level awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Forrest and Shoemith, 1985), there is a strange reluctance to address such matters in higher education.

In the current turbulent world of higher education it seems unlikely that the present fairly underdeveloped approach to student assessment will be allowed to continue. An increasing emphasis on quality assurance and quality control has already started to make an impact. Increased competition between institutions will, I am sure, lead to many wishing to take a more professional approach to assessing student learning outcomes, and that in turn will inevitably lead to a greater public awareness of the somewhat uncertain basis that underpins most student assessments in higher education today. Universities need to become more professional in their use of assessment techniques. That will involve all university staff who are going to play a part in the important and highly skilled task of assessing students being given more training and support in relation to their assessment practices. Quite simply, higher education can no longer hide behind its elite status in this respect, and in my view urgently needs to become much more professional in its approach to the assessment of students. Hopefully, this volume, with its open critique of many common assessment practices linked to a fresh look at alternative approaches, can play a significant part in that process.

Assessment for learning

One of the strongest emerging themes in the literature on educational assessment, outside higher education, has been the increasing emphasis on exploring, understanding and exploiting the strong influences that particular assessment approaches have on student learning (Black *et al.*, 2003). Undesirable back-wash effects on the curriculum have long been recognised and have highlighted reasons for developing better alignment between course aims and assessment methods. In addition, the powerful motivating effect that good formative assessments can have on student learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Torrance and Prior, 1998) has hastened a big drift towards an 'assessment for learning' culture in school education in the United Kingdom. Here the prime interest is in developing classroom assessment approaches that support and enhance student learning, and this has led to quite different discussions both about the types of assessment that are most desirable and new considerations about this use by classroom teachers within the context of their normal classroom work. 'Assessment for learning' is a neat catchphrase that needs defining (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Sutton, 1995). It is a concept that can be undermined if we are not careful to clarify what it means. First, it relates to debates about matching learning goals and priorities to assessment goals and priorities. Unless these goals are matched, learning which occurs may be primarily assessment-driven and therefore quite different to the intended learning priorities. Biggs' (2003) notion of 'constructive alignment' is helpful here in providing a model around which learning goals and assessment goals can be aligned in a way that makes the most of the impact of one upon the other (and several case studies in this volume use this concept as a guiding principle). A second major priority relates to the use of assessment to give learners constructive feedback on how their learning is progressing. The power of Black and Wiliam's (1998) work is in identifying the positive benefits that can accrue to learners, when formative assessment processes are used effectively to give the frequent feedback on how they are getting on in relation to their developing learning. It is clear that learning processes can be enhanced by the appropriate application of good formative assessment procedures. There is a growing body of knowledge about how to do that in school classrooms,

but in higher education we are still at an earlier stage of understanding how effectively this approach to assessment can be developed within different higher education institutions and in different areas of the curriculum (although Bond (1995), Knight (1995) and Hinnett (1997) have all made useful contributions to thinking about how such a development could progress).

The movement of many higher education assessment practices towards a greater use of coursework and continuous assessment, and less reliance on end of course/module examinations, opens greater possibilities for assessment for learning, but this movement on its own does not guarantee a positive impact on student learning. Coursework and other forms of continuous assessment can still focus on summative assessment goals such as 'assessment for grading', unless genuine attempts are made to use such processes as the basis for feeding back constructive information to students in a way that can influence their future learning.

It is clear that higher education has moved away from a model where several years of learning were followed by a major concentration on 'finals' (final-year end of degree course examinations), and the only feedback that students received was a final degree classification on a short four- or five-point scale. Having said that, the movement away from finals and/or a concentration on summative end of course assessments, the purpose of which is largely to determine degree classifications, does not guarantee a move fully into the realm of assessment for learning. We will need to evaluate each assessment innovation separately to see the benefits it offers in relation to this important new way of conceptualising assessment benefits. An old-fashioned approach to evaluating assessment innovations was to explore solely the extent to which the assessments used were 'reliable' and 'valid'. Such concepts were imported into education from psychometric traditions in psychology, and are now seen to have limited usefulness because of the way that they assume that all assessments are unidimensional, and that they are steps towards producing a single 'true score' to summarise the educational achievement level of a student (Gipps, 1994). Our more modern stance is now to recognise that assessment procedures can and should contribute to student learning as well as measure it, and to acknowledge that student learning across the higher education curriculum is complex, multifaceted and may need to be assessed in a wide variety of ways, and indeed be reported in ways that recognise the diversity rather than mask it.

CONCLUSION

In some cases this may justify the use of quite different assessment techniques to assess different learning outcomes. To illustrate this point, one could refer to the increased emphasis on core, generic or key skills in higher education (Murphy, 2001). Such skills have been widely recognised as forming a valid part of student learning across the higher education curriculum (CVCP, 1998). Furthermore, some universities have encouraged processes for assessing such skills within specific discipline-based courses in such a way that students' progress in developing such 'generic skills' can be observed and in some instances reported alongside, but separate from, their learning achievements that are more specific to the subject that they are studying in higher. This type of approach does not necessarily mean that generic skills have to be assessed through different assessment procedures to 'subject-related skills', and in some areas innovative approaches have been developed to derive both generic and subject-related information from common assessment tasks. For example, students may, in an engineering course, engage in a group project which is both written up and presented to other students. The assessment of such a project may reveal highly specific engineering-related knowledge and skills, while also allowing some generic skills, such as working with others, problem solving, communication, information and communication technology (ICT), numeracy and managing own learning, to be assessed as well. This is a very good example of an innovation that has in a more coherent way addressed more than one assessment need within an HE context. This discussion of assessing discrete elements within higher education courses also raises the question of how such elements are reported. Here we have an increasing interest in reporting mechanisms, which allow more information to be given than has traditionally been the case with a single scale of degree classifications. Records of achievement, progress files, e-portfolios and student transcripts all open up the possibility of reporting the results of student assessments in relation to a wider range of learning outcomes than has been the tradition in the United Kingdom in the past. The distinctiveness of such approaches lies in the way in which they do not try to condense diverse assessment information into a single grade or degree classification and open up the likelihood that more complex accounts of student learning can emerge from related assessment procedures. So authentic assessment is a concept, which has much to offer higher education, and is one which matches the philosophy of many HE assessment innovations. It has, however, also led us into a consideration of more meaningful ways of reporting student achievements in situations where distinct learning goals are identified for particular courses. A discussion such as this also takes us back to the 'dependability of assessments' section, as any attempt to report assessment outcomes across a wider range of learning objectives will inevitably raise questions about precision, reliability and dependability of assessment outcomes in relation to each area which is to be reported.

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