Large classes present significant challenges to assessment quality. This paper (another by Chris Rust) from the Learning and Teaching Support Network (now the Higher Education Academy) offers some useful strategies for addressing this issue.


Other useful resources related to large classes are:


**Introduction**

The issue of large class assessment has intensified as staff-student ratios decline. The impact on assessment of larger class sizes can be detrimental if (1) it is done less rigorously and with reduced quality and quantity of feedback, or (2) if the amount of both formative and summative assessment is reduced. Less feedback can lead to a decline in performance because this makes it more difficult for students to become aware of learning strengths, areas in need of improvement and ways of working towards improvement. Also, if the amount of assessment is reduced, students may become selectively negligent in their study and motivation may drop.

**Learning and teaching strategies**

Some approaches to the assessment of large classes may have implications at the program or school level if they involve policy revision (e.g. minimum examination requirements) or the provision of equipment (e.g. computer software) and staff training in its use. Some solutions may require looking beyond disciplinary conventions to explore the possibility of borrowing or amending practices from other disciplines.

**Creative solutions**

The paper describes six creative strategies and illustrates them with examples or case studies.

1. **Front ending:**

   Putting in increased effort to set up the assessment plan can save time by reducing the amount of individual guidance required and reducing marking time. This can be achieved through providing students with detailed briefing instructions or engaging students in the use of the criteria and standards that will be used in assessing their work e.g. students use criteria and standards rubrics to assess exemplars of work collected from previous students in order to clarify task expectations.
2. **Doing it in class**

Assessment activities that can be undertaken in class time include (1) provision of general, group feedback highlighting what aspects of an assessment task have been done well or badly, highlighting common mistakes or misunderstandings: effective if combined with self or peer assessment that encourages students to reflect on their own returned work or that of their peers; (2) setting assignments that can be marked in class such as posters or oral presentations – benefits include reduced marking time, provision of instant feedback, sharing of work with peers (which can motivate students to improved performance) and peer assessment opportunities; (3) setting assignments that can be completed in class – e.g. Instant Lab Reports that are shorter than those written up after practical classes but are often more reliable demonstrations of student understanding if completed in invigilated conditions rather than written up outside class.

3. **Self and Peer Assessment**

One approach to self assessment is to require students to check their own work prior to submission using a check list, list of questions or prompts, or a criteria and standards matrix to be submitted along with the completed task. This should reduce basic errors and omissions and enable assessors to focus on more significant aspects of the work when providing feedback.

Peer assessment can not only save the time of assessors but can also have educational benefits in developing student critical faculties, improving the quality of work produced and in replicating many ‘real world’ conditions in which writing requires redrafting in the light of criticism. Another approach is to peer assess using model answers. Students can complete a problem individually in class time, swap papers and then assess each others’ work as the lecturer leads them through a model answer. Additional benefits include the motivational value of having other see their work, the development of understanding of how examination questions will be marked, and awareness of alternative approaches for approaching a common problem.

4. **Assess groups**

Group tasks can improve assessment effectiveness – collaborative and interpersonal skills are developed – and also bring about marking efficiencies. Strategies for addressing the issues of unequal contributions include:

- All members receive the same group mark but students are provided with support and strategies for dealing with ‘social loafers’
- Each member receives an individual mark based on the work they have ‘contracted’ to undertake as their contribution to the group task
- The group divides the group mark according to the efforts of individual members, sometimes with additional conditions such as restrictions on the amount of variation between the highest and lowest marks (*I would urge caution with this suggestion as it can undo the collaboration built during the completion of the task – CH*)
- A variation of the previous approach is that all members get the group mark with an additional separate mark obtained as a result of peer assessment of individual contributions
- A further variation is that all members receive a group mark plus an additional mark determined by a viva (*Whose idea was this? What was your particular contribution to this section?*). Though time consuming, vivas can still be quicker than marking individual papers.
- All receive the group mark but specific exam questions are related to the project. (*Explain the concept of xxxxxx with specific reference to your project. Select a method for xxxxxx using your group project as an example.*)

5. **Mechanise the assessment**
Use statement banks to provide feedback efficiently. These can be paper based – e.g. all students receive a ‘code’ or sheet of numbered statements to match with numbers written on their work. Electronic statement banks are even quicker.

Criteria and standards rubrics are flexible tools in that individual sheets can be annotated to provide feedback to students but they can also be used for students to self assess as part of submission requirements. This can also engage students in the feedback received, especially if the assessor’s judgement differs from their own.

Objective tests used with automatic marking are also useful with large classes. Though these are sometimes criticised because of a tendency to focus on superficial learning outcomes and factual knowledge, skilful users are able to devise items that assess understanding, application and analysis. (though writing challenging MCQ items can be quite time-consuming).

6. Strategic reduction

Reductions can be made in the number of tasks or amount of time spent on providing feedback that are not necessarily detrimental to learning if approached strategically. Examples include reducing repetitive assessment (e.g. weekly lab reports) and substituting shorter tasks for some lengthy essays (briefing paper, book review, draft research bid, poster).

Reduce the time spent on feedback using previous suggestions and also by exploring technology solutions— for example, use of recorded feedback (mp3 players, digital recorders) has shown that, with practice, more oral than written feedback can be provided in a set amount of time and that additional features available in an oral medium (e.g. tone of voice) provide more information than words alone.

The paper concludes with six illustrative case studies and a useful bibliography.

This series of briefs on assessment topics has been prepared by the UQ Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) for UQ teaching academics. “UQ ASSESSMENT BRIEFS” of journal articles, book chapters, reviews, websites, reports etc are distributed to Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Chairs in a form designed to encourage wider distribution.

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