

A UQ Assessment Brief on “A marked improvement: transforming assessment in higher education”

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All previous ‘briefs’ in this series are available on the TEDI website at:
<http://www.uq.edu.au/tediteach/assessment/resources.html#briefs>

This recent 60-page publication from the UK Higher Educational Academy provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of university assessment, a manifesto for change and a practical tool that can support assessment audits or benchmarking exercises.

Ball, S., Bew, C., Bloxham, S., Brown S., Kleiman, P., May, H., McDowell, L., Morris, E., Orr, S., Payne, E., Price, M., Rust, C., Smith, B., and Waterfield, J. (2012). *A marked improvement: transforming assessment in higher education*. The Higher Education Academy. York, UK.

Available at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/assessment/a-marked-improvement>

Section 1: The rationale and groundwork for transforming assessment (pp. 7-17)

The introduction provides an overview of assessment and a rationale and groundwork for its transformation. Points covered include:

- the fundamental importance of assessment in higher education (HE)
- the failure of practice to keep pace with the changing context of HE
- the many challenges assessment poses to HE
- student perceptions of how assessment fails to meet their needs
- the risks to assessment integrity – technology supported plagiarism, pressures on standards, rising fees and rising student expectations, the difficulty is establishing comparability of standards.

The case for changing assessment that follows is based on anticipated benefits (p. 9):

- improved potential for student learning
- increased student satisfaction
- improved value for money
- assessment methods and approaches that are better able to assess the outcomes of a 21st-century education
 - a dependable and fairer representation of student achievement
 - greater confidence in academic standards and improved safeguarding of the
 - reputation of (UK) higher education.

To transform assessment, institutions need to bring about cultural change through attention to a range of factors:

- leadership – awareness of complexity, inclusive practices, persistent, flexible
- students - roles and development of student assessment literacy
- resources and workload management – deployment across a program and the message conveyed to staff about the importance of assessment
- staff development – assessment literacy and practical support

- regulation and guidance – conducive to positive change and without real or perceived barriers to effective practice
- use of technology-enhanced approaches to assessment – as a precursor to change in policy and practice, as support for efficiencies and an enhanced student experience

Section 2: Assessment standards: a manifesto for change (pp. 18-21)

The Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe) initiative resulted in a six-tenet Manifesto, each of which is unpacked with explanations and key points.

Tenet 1: Assessment for learning (p.19)

Learning and assessment should be integrated and fully aligned. Assessment is a crucial aspect of the process by which students have a high quality learning experience. It should not just be used to evidence that learning outcomes have been achieved.

Tenet 2: Ensuring assessment is fit for purpose (p.19)

When it comes to the assessment of learning, we need to move beyond systems focused on marks and grades towards the valid assessment of the achievement of intended programme outcomes.

Tenet 3: Recognise that assessment lacks precision (p. 20)

Limits to the extent that standards can be articulated explicitly must be recognised since ever more detailed specificity and striving for reliability, all too frequently, diminish the learning experience and threaten its validity. There are important benefits of higher education which are not amenable either to the precise specification of standards or to objective assessment.

Tenet 4: Constructing standards in communities (p. 20)

Assessment standards are socially constructed so there must be a greater emphasis on assessment and feedback processes that actively engage both staff and students in dialogue about standards. It is when learners share an understanding of academic and professional standards in an atmosphere of mutual trust that learning works best.

Tenet 5: Integrating assessment literacy into course design (p. 21)

Active engagement with assessment standards needs to be an integral and seamless part of course design and the learning process in order to allow students to develop their own, internalised conceptions of standards and to monitor and supervise their own learning.

Tenet 6: Ensuring professional judgements are reliable (p. 21)

Assessment is largely dependent upon professional judgement and confidence in such judgement requires the establishment of appropriate forums for the development and sharing of standards within and between disciplinary and professional communities.

Section 3: Assessment review tool (pp. 22-49)

The tool provided in this section offers a structured approach to the review of current policy and practice in assessment and feedback as the basis for improvement. It has two parts.

Part A: Strategic institutional issues in assessment and feedback

Part B: Issues in assessment and feedback at the faculty, school, college or department level

The framework provided by the six-tenet manifesto is used to organize the stimulus questions contained in each part. Questions require a three-part response:

- a rating of the extent to which the targeted institutional unit is able to provide evidence of a specific assessment behaviour or practice
- a description of the evidence available to support the rating
- a response to the ratings (e.g. further enhancements or necessary actions).

Each question has an identical layout as in the following example from Part B (p. 44).

Tenet 4: Constructing standards in communities To what extent...				
B4.1 Are there opportunities to engage in dialogue about standards among staff?				
1 none or very little	2 some but insufficient	3 just adequate	4 considerable but still some gaps	5 full and comprehensive
Evidence				
Actions				

Section 4: An annotated selection of resources (pp. 51-60)

The booklet concludes with a selection of annotated resources organised as:

- Core texts in support of the tenets
- Resources for leaders and senior managers
- Resources for educational developers and practitioners.

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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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