Abstract

Assessment is currently in the spotlight for its poor ratings in student satisfaction surveys and 'under performance' in quality reviews. Consequently, a variety of initiatives and projects are being undertaken aimed at improving assessment. However, many of the concepts and theories underpinning assessment practice are complex and interrelated, which can mean that relatively simple and apparently minor changes can have major, and often unintended, consequences. This paper was initially prepared to foreground an internal document providing diagnosis and recommendations for change to assessment strategy and policy in a post-1992 university. It draws on a wide body of literature and research studies to distil and discuss key issues, which should inform assessment decisions. These key issues provide a framework to examine assessment policy and practice and enable the alignment of assessment policy with the beliefs and values of an institution.

After summarising the current assessment situation in the UK, the paper draws on the assessment literature to identify ten premises to provide a set of benchmarks against which institutions can consider their assessment values and practices. It is stressed that these premises not be seen as separate as their interrelationship acts to increase the complexity of assessment.

Premise 1: assessment is central to the student learning experience
Though the majority of students regard assessment as the most important aspect of their course, other aspects of curriculum such as teaching and defining content push the planning of assessment into the background.

Premise 2: assessment must focus on learning rather than on marking and measurement
While assessment can be a powerful motivation and vehicle for learning, the need to undertake assessment of learning often takes priority over assessment for learning.

Premise 3: a key reason for a assessment failing to support learning is ineffective feedback
Students value feedback very highly and are consequently frustrated and disappointed when they don’t receive it or when it fails to provide useful information. Feedback practices in higher
education are often haphazard and idiosyncratic rather than fundamental course design considerations.

**Premise 4: assessment is complex**
Assessment is one of the more complex activities that coordinators and teachers undertake as it involves a range of educational skills such as design, student support, communication, clarification and the application of standards, stimulating and enhancing student engagement with the task, and feedback.

**Premise 5: assessment of high-level and complex learning is under threat.**
Though pressures resulting from factors such as increasing student numbers can be partially addressed through the economies of scale of larger class sizes and reduced class contact, equivalent assessment efficiencies are harder to find. This has led to the adoption of assessment and feedback methods of limited validity such as multiple choice exams.

**Premise 6: assessment standards are under threat**
Pressures to achieve higher levels of consistency and reliability in assigning grades can lead to a skewed focus on reliability at the expense of validity.

**Premise 7: assessment standards reside in academic/professional communities**
While explicit articulation of assessment standards is necessary to the drive for assessment transparency, it is not sufficient. Active engagement with standards through student/student and staff/student interaction in learning communities is essential to the achievement of a common understanding and its communication.

**Premise 8: learning is more effective when students understand the assessment process**
It is sometimes assumed that students' prior assessment experience in the school sector equips them for university assessment processes, but this is not always the case.

**Premise 9: ‘over assessment’ is a meaningless term**
Perceptions of over assessment often arise from imbalances in the system in relation to:
- Student time in balancing summative and formative assessment
- Staff time in balancing summative and formative assessment
- Student engagement in balancing summative and formative assessment
- High-stakes assessment in balancing summative and formative assessment
- Feedback in balancing summative and formative assessment
- Accrediting learning in balancing summative and formative assessment

Some attempts to address such imbalances result in the blurring of the distinction between formative and summative assessment. However making some tasks serve dual formative and summative purposes may eliminate significant formative benefits.

**Premise 10: how the assessment environment is managed in packs strongly on the effectiveness of assessment.**
Institutional culture has a stronger in impact on assessment practice than individual disciplines. Institutions can support or challenge an assessment culture through a range of mechanisms including the value placed on the scholarship of learning teaching and assessment, the extent of risk that is tolerated, resource availability, or incongruities between policy rhetoric and reality.

The paper concludes with a discussion centred around five continua which can be used to appraise an institution’s position for each of the premises.

- Simplicity - complexity
- Measurement – learning
- Individual – Communist seat
- Efficiency – effectiveness
Quality assurance – enhancement

An extensive reference list supports and elaborates on each of the premises presented in the paper.

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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