KEY ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

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Heriot-Watt University is committed to adopting a more purposeful and manageable approach to assessment as set out in the **Inspiring Learning** strategy. This guide suggests solutions to a number of common assessment challenges. It is intended to support staff to implement the idea of *Assessment for Learning*

THE MARKING LOADS JUST SEEM TO INCREASE YEAR ON YEAR: HOW CAN THESE BE MADE MORE MANAGEABLE?

This particularly tends to happen when cohort sizes increase year on year without proper calculations being made about how to manage the increased loads on assessors. There are a number of approaches that can tend to mitigate this problem. First of all, do you have too many assignments? Go back to the learning outcomes for the course and check whether some of them can be synoptically assessed within a single assignment. Next ask if the tasks you are setting are making life more difficult than it needs to be: are the word limits on coursework you propose too long? Do the time limits on exams need to be as long as in the past? Can you ask for a shorter and more authentic output such as an executive summary or an annotated bibliography rather than the full report or essay? See 'The changing landscape of assessment: some possible replacements for unseen time-constrained face-to-face invigilated exams' at **https://sally-brown.net/kay-sambell-and-sally-brown-covid-19-assessment-collection/** for the pros and cons of further suggestions for diverse assessment approaches.

Can you streamline your feedback approaches? For example, can you use techniques like statement banks or assignment return sheets (see the **Watt Works Quick Guide #4** on streamlining assessment and Race 2020 p127-9) to speed up your feedback to students, or make better use of pre-emptive feedback like exemplars and more detailed briefings (See **Watt Works Quick Guides #8** and **#9**) to reduce the need for repetitive follow-up comments?

Some argue that peer assessment can save tutor marking, but of course it takes time to train and support students to do so effectively. But there is no doubt that some tasks like reviewing of drafts can benefit hugely from peer review in class or online (Nicol et al, 2014) when carefully designed and moderated by the tutor, rather than drafts having to be submitted individually to tutors.

- **Rapid response:** Use collective feedback comments which address common issues on student submissions, supplemented with individualised comments where appropriate. Alternatively, model answers work well in some disciplines as a means of providing rapid collective feedback, as opposed to lengthy personalised comments.

- **Longer-term solution:** make feedback processes a fundamental part of your curriculum design – building in staged assignments, pre-task guidance, feedback exchanges which involve students and anticipatory feedback, rather than prioritising post-task feedback. Effective feedback processes give thought to when feedback can most profitably lead to students engaging with opportunities that are made available to them, and this is often before they submit their work for marking (Winstone and Carless, 2020). The **Watt Works Quick Guide #3** has practical suggestions on giving formative feedback prior to submitting summative tasks.

STUDENTS SEEM TO BE STRUGGLING WITH THE AMOUNT OF FORMATIVE TASKS THEY ARE BEING GIVEN AND SAY THEY JUST WANT US TO TEACH WHAT WILL COME UP IN THE EXAM.

Students learn best if assessment is fully integrated with learning tasks rather than an additional element stuck on at the end. Crucially we need to help students understand for themselves that the formative tasks are part of the learning experience rather than an optional stand-alone element. For students to engage fully with them, it is essential at least in the early stages of a programme that formative activities take place within allocated class time, and it helps if this is quite strongly directed so that formative tasks build incrementally towards or contribute significant understanding of final summative activities. In that way they become integral parts of the process which are valued in their own right by students, because they can "practise and improve, building competence and confidence before they are summatively assessed" (Sambell et al 2013). It's important, therefore, to make the links between the formative and summative tasks explicit and communicate the benefits frequently. One of the key drivers for student interaction with feedback is the apparent immediacy of its use on similar tasks (Zimbardi et al, 2017) and activities which enable students to develop a better sense of what counts as quality work (for example through seeing standards and criteria illustrated in concrete ways via dialogic activities based on the analysis of carefully selected short exemplars) is a particularly powerful and popular approach in helping students learn to develop the skill of benchmarking their own performance in time to improve it (Carless and Chan, 2017; Carless, 2020) even when class sizes are large.

- **Rapid response:** Explicitly link the formative assessment to the summative assessment, so that students see a direct benefit to investing effort. Explain the thinking behind your approach, and help students to develop strategies to implement feedback and take action.

- **Longer-term solution:** Help students to appreciate that the activities you involve them in are about learning to see and think in the complex and subtle ways that a disciplinary specialist does, usually by taking on progressively challenging tasks with the helpful advantage of being able to learn by making mistakes, and by building a sense of what quality and standards look like in a specific context. These self-assessment skills are not about second-guessing the grade, but about learning to make judgments and apply criteria – all graduate attributes that are vital in the longer term, not just for grades

STUDENTS COMPLAIN THAT THEY FEEL THAT MARKING IS NOT FAIR AND THERE IS LITTLE APPARENT CONSISTENCY BETWEEN MARKERS.

Consistency within and between assessors and across programmes is important but hard to achieve, and problems arise when there is little shared agreement about the quality of work required to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been achieved to an equivalent standard. Work by the Higher Education Academy, (now Advance HE) argued that we should ask:

"Are opportunities taken to share the rationale for assessment judgments among colleagues to give confidence in such judgments? Are there support mechanisms, such as mentoring, to help staff build confidence in the formation and reliability of their assessment judgments? Are professional judgments made within the wide context of disciplinary and professional communities? Is the potential for bias in professional judgments acknowledged?" (HEA 2012)

Both intra-assessor reliability (are you consistently applying the same standards in your marking no matter how many hours you have been working on it?) and inter-assessor reliability (is everyone marking the same assignment working to the same standards?) are very difficult to achieve unless those standards have (ideally) been collectively devised or at least shared dialogically rather than just disseminated. Consistency relies on shared professional standards which "makes extensive use of teachers' qualitative judgments" (Sadler, 1987).

O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2008) argue that standards need to be communally achieved if consistency is sought: if two markers have awarded really different marks (say 40% and 60%), it is not enough to simply average them. One of the markers in this case thought the work was just about good enough to pass whereas the other thought it was a pretty good effort otherwise, so if this happens, a constructive dialogue between them needs to take place otherwise their standards will never align. Hence it is valuable to hold as many team-based staff discussions as possible, especially with newcomers (Handley et al, 2013) around assessment tasks, associated guidance, criteria, marking schemes, and feedback protocols to address this. Dialogue based on concrete examples of sample work helps staff share their interpretations of standards. "Dialogue can make more visible the tacit knowledge of criteria and standards which is often not evident in explicit criteria and can enable greater sharing of understandings" (Handley et al, 2013).

Here are **three things we can do to help assure students** that their assignments are being fairly and consistently marked:

a. Let them into the process by which you and your fellow assessors ensure everything is marked to align with agreed standards. Show them how marks are collated and moderated and tell them about the role of the external examiner. Many students have no idea that this work is going on in the background;

b. Use rubrics to show the kinds of evidence and performance required of students at each band of marks is clearly specified, although this will never be 100% reliable;

c. Involve them in some elements of peer assessment so they get used to concepts such as criteria and weightings. By assigning marks themselves to the work of others, they will start to see how grades are constructed through a systematic process rather than randomly allocated according to gut feelings.

And here are **five things you as an assessing team can do to improve fairness and the assurance of standards:**

a. Plan the assessment process as meticulously as you do the curriculum delivery process, and try to identify in advance where unconscious bias and injustice can creep in, so you can mitigate the from the outset;

b. Don't mark for more than an hour without a short break, or more than three hours without a proper break, or three well-spaced sessions of three hours in a day, (and less than this if it involves a lot of reading online);

c. Mentor new colleagues throughout their first marking experience so a more experienced colleague can review marks given by the novice and comment on the standards being applied;

d. On courses where many are involved in marking, assign a 'captain' (who is not necessarily the course leader) who is responsible for briefing colleagues, sharing the criteria, leading the discussion of what these really mean, and sampling marking outputs to check that there are no major anomalies;

e. Review whether students on one course within a programme are regularly achieving much higher marks than on other parallel courses within that programme, and if so, ask serious questions such as: Are the tasks and questions being set at too basic a level for that level of study? Is the lecturer concentrating on 'teaching to the test'? Is the marker not applying sufficiently nuanced standards in grading work? Is the mark being awarded on the basis of gut reactions rather than the careful application of criteria? Or is that person such a brilliant teacher that everyone achieves magnificently (which is also possible!).

- **Rapid response:** Arrange a 'calibration meeting' if there are multiple people about to mark an assignment. Ask everyone to mark a couple of submissions, and then discuss the grades you've provided.

- **Longer-term solution:** Run a series of professional development sessions with your programme team, to discuss the purpose and value of assessment rubrics, and perhaps work with students to design a clear and effective rubric. To stimulate thinking about the complexities and situated nature of assessment, and surface some hidden assumptions about criteria, try The Biscuit Game – available as an **Activity Sheet**.

IT IS SOMETIMES A STRUGGLE TO MAKE SURE ASSIGNMENTS ARE INCLUSIVE: HOW CAN WE ENSURE ALL STUDENTS HAVE EQUIVALENT OPPORTUNITIES TO SUCCEED?

This is a complex issue that requires careful thought and expert advice from the outset but what is clearly good practice for disadvantaged students normally represents good practice for all students. For this reason, it's imperative to involve students with specific learning needs and specialist staff in planning at all stages of design, particularly because designing in inclusive practice from the outset is easier than coping with issues on an ad hoc basis as they arise. Technological solutions can be helpful but are not the complete answer and again specialist guidance is invaluable from colleagues who can advise on accessibility issues, particularly when working online. Some ways you can work towards inclusive practice include:

a. building in awareness of unconscious bias and inclusivity issues in induction for both students and staff: sometimes the greatest levels of discrimination come from fellow students (Adams and Brown, 2006), and this is particularly important when peer assessment is involved;

b. designing an assessment strategy that involves a diverse range of methods of assessment to spread the risk (since all forms of assessment disadvantage some students);

c. undertaking a risk assessment and associated mitigation plan when designing assessment tasks which takes account of how any students or groups of students might be disadvantaged;

d. undertaking an individual needs analysis (as legally required) for assessment requirements for any student who has notified the university of any special or additional needs as soon you are aware of them, and involve the individuals themselves in the discussions as they are likely to be experts in for example, any specialist disability issues they have. This will maximise time available for additional idiosyncratic adjustments to be made for students whose needs had not been foreseen;

e. considering the health and safety requirements of students with disabilities who are to be engaged in practicals and field trips from the outset. Considerable work has been done in this area by the University of Gloucestershire (Hall et al 2004).

- **Rapid response:** Think about people's lives outside university when setting assessment deadlines; try to take into account religious observances and school holidays.

- **Longer-term solution:** Develop portfolio assessments, that allow students to choose themselves, within clearly specified parameters, how to demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes.

WE WORRY THAT WE ARE OVER-ASSESSING ON OUR PROGRAMME: WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

It all goes back to good assessment design, and this means revisiting learning outcomes, which if well designed, direct the assignment designers towards purposeful tasks which will provide evidence of their achievement. But don't assume that every separate learning outcome requires its own associated assignment: it is possible very successfully to assess more than one outcome synoptically within a single authentic assignment. It is also a good idea to consider, especially in the final year of a programme, to consider whether learning outcomes from different courses can be assessed together

in a single capstone outcome or project. The work of the PASS project on programme level assessment is particularly helpful here: for an introduction see Hartley and Whitfield (2011).

- **Rapid response:** Where assessments have multiple elements, consider turning some into low-stakes tasks which offer students a staged approach to the final assignment, so students have chance to apply feedback from one stage to the next. Use whole-class interactive approaches to feedback to help engage students (Winstone and Carless, 2020) and keep your workload manageable, especially where you have large cohorts (see ideas in **Watt Works Quick Guide #3**)

- **Longer-term solution:** Work with your programme team to identify and reduce any overlap in assessments (and see the reflection points in **Watt Works Quick Guide #13**).

STUDENTS SEEM TO HATE BEING ASSESSED ON GROUPWORK AS A GROUP: HOW CAN WE CONVINCE THEM IT'S IMPORTANT?

Students often say they would prefer to be assessed individually as they are worried that in groups other students won't pull their weight. But five years after graduation, many students say that the groupwork they did were the most relevant assignments they did in the course of their degrees and employers tend to value teamwork very highly. The key is to make it very clear how you are assessing them to ensure that it is a fair representation of their collective effort and that no one suffers if some students contribute less for whatever reason. If the task is small, weighted low and doesn't count towards the final degree this may not be very important, but later on much stress can be caused by this anxiety. In these cases you may wish to ask each team member to take responsibility for a particular separately assessed area, or give them additional individual reflective tasks after completion, or set an exam question later in which they can't shine unless they have contributed fully. It's a complex area that is more fully covered in Sambell et al (2017) Chapter 4 *'Learning and Working together: students as peers and partners'* particularly pages 118-122.

- **Rapid response:** Help students to understand the value of groupwork, by inviting an alumnus to come and talk about the benefits that group assessment has had on their professional success.

- **Longer-term solution:** Work as a programme team to build students' confidence and ability with groupwork. Start in the first year with small tasks with high levels of tutor support, and build to more substantial and complex tasks in later years, where students are given much more independence.

Conclusions

The challenges tackled here are only a subset of the many obstacles higher education academics face on the road to designing effective and manageable assessment and feedback processes that support students' learning. For more detailed advice, do consult the Watt Works leaflets at **Assessment and Feedback - Learning and Teaching Academy** and consult with the specialist staff in the Heriot-Watt Learning and Teaching Academy.

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The following articles in support of this approach can be found at https://sally-brown.net/kay-sambell-and-sally-brown-covid-19-assessment-collection/

Sambell, K. and Brown, S. (23 March 2020) 'Contingency-planning: exploring rapid alternatives to face-to-face assessment'.

Sambell, K. and Brown, S. (2 April 2020) 'Fifty tips for replacements for time-constrained, invigilated on-site exams'

Sambell, K. and Brown, S. (1 June 2020) 'The changing landscape of assessment: some possible replacements for unseen time-constrained face-to-face invigilated exams'

Brown, S. and Sambell, K. (17th August 2020) 'Writing Better Assignments in the post-Covid Era: approaches to good task design'

Brown, S. and Sambell, K. (21st August 2020) 'Changing assessment for good: a major opportunity for educational developers'

Brown, S. and Sambell, K. (19th March 2021) 'A compendium of examples of authentic assessment in practice from diverse disciplines'

Brown, S and Sambell , K (3rd May 2021) 'Authentic assessment compendium: Episode Two – the saga continues!'

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