

LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #10

Student assessment
Thematic Peer Group Report

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Introduction

Student assessment is integral to curriculum design and to the learning journey of all students. Assessment is about process and outcomes. It enables a learner to determine their progress through the medium of ongoing feedback, and it also determines whether a student has met the intended learning outcomes. The focus on assessment in higher education is increasing, being closely linked to the enhancement of learning and teaching strategies and the emphasis on student-centred learning. Placing student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, under a single standard, i.e., 1.3, the 2015 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) further highlights this link. The standard states that “institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach”.¹

There is political and institutional high-level commitment to promoting an assessment design which is holistic and based on co-creation between students and academic staff.² Substantive research on developing practice in assessment feedback is also available.³ However, core practices in student assessment often remain problematic, and teachers and institutions face diverse

challenges in using research to improve assessment and feedback practices. Crucial challenges include approaches which take into consideration increasingly diverse student cohorts, ensuring the integrity of assessment, and being mindful of the workload for both teachers and students.

The EUA Thematic Peer Group (hereafter “the group”, see Annex 1⁴) “Student assessment”, composed of academics, institutional management and students, was invited to examine how student learning can be assessed in a way that takes into account both qualitative indicators and pedagogical progress, including peer- and self-assessment, and caters for students’ individual needs. The group was also tasked with exploring how assessment methods and criteria can be optimally aligned to learning outcomes and teaching activities, and how assessment processes could be more transparent, consistent and fair.

This report is the product of the discussions and conclusions of the group. The report aims to encourage further reflections and conversations around student assessment, and to provide tools to support development of assessment feedback at the institutional level.

Findings

I. CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

The group started with discussions around a common understanding of the theme, guided by questions such as:

- What are the ultimate aims of assessment at higher education institutions?
- Who owns the assessment discourse?
- What are the types of assessment mostly employed at your institution?
- Who drives the assessment methods?
- How do we engage academics and students in the process of co-creating assessment?

These questions led the group to discuss the most pressing challenges at their institutions in terms of student assessment. The nature of the challenges varied depending on the group members' respective higher education systems, existing regulatory contexts, the institutions' readiness for change, and level of student involvement in the design of the curriculum. For example, whereas continuous professional development on assessment and feedback is mainstream in certain systems (e.g., in the UK and Australia through the fellowship scheme managed by Advance HE for academic staff and, more recently, for students), other contexts and institutions are still working to make this a reality.

Key issues were found both at the individual and institutional levels (see below) and ranged from the necessity to embed formative assessment throughout curriculum design, to the need for enhanced assessment literacy for both staff and students alike.

Key issues discussed

1. Identifying and articulating the key design principles which could be used to evaluate the strengths of individual assessment designs and their fitness for purpose
2. Balancing the need for discipline-specific solutions to assessment with that for an overarching university assessment strategy
3. Technology-assisted assessment possibilities
4. Embedding formative assessment in curriculum design
5. Supporting students to become agents of change by inducting them into assessment practices at key transition points of their learning path, while being mindful of their different backgrounds
6. Attending to professional development in assessment and feedback
7. Fostering critical evaluation in assessment practices
8. Ensuring an inclusive and equitable assessment for all learners

In particular, the group decided to tackle the following three challenges:

1. Ensure that assessment is inclusive and equitable, especially considering students from different backgrounds
2. Support students to become change agents
3. Derive a framework for professional development to support academic agency in assessment

The following recommendations drafted to answer each of the three challenges are underpinned by discussions on effective practices drawn from various institutional contexts and from "Enhancing assessment feedback practice in higher education: the EAT Framework",⁵ a research-informed approach to assessment proposed by the chair of the group. The framework is unique in its integration of three core dimensions of practice, namely assessment literacy, assessment feedback and assessment design, where emphasis is placed firmly on the development of learner (staff and student) self-regulation skills to support equity, agency, and transparency in assessment.

This report defines assessment as integral to curriculum design which should be dynamic, in that it should be able to evolve in pace with student needs and contextual requirements. In interpreting the following recommendations, one should stay attuned to national and institutional contexts, which might preclude the mainstreaming of any recommendation or good practice.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

CHALLENGE #1

Ensure that assessment is inclusive and equitable, especially considering students from different backgrounds.

Many institutions still rely on traditional examination methods (e.g., graded exam at the end of a course) in order to assess a learner's success in meeting the intended learning outcomes. Such summative, one-size-fits-all assessment method does not, however, ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to demonstrate attainment of learning outcomes. A lack of flexibility in designing assessment prevents any adjustment to cater for the different needs of the students, including students from different ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds, students with learning or physical disabilities, etc. There are often invisible barriers that prevent access to fair and inclusive assessment, such as biased language or cultural assumptions.

To ensure equitable assessment, the group recommends the following:

- ◆ **Ensure flexibility** so that no learner is disadvantaged by the nature of assessment and negotiate together with the students the format of assessment. At the same time, efforts should be made to ensure the mode of assessment is the most appropriate to the requirements of the task. For example, the Support Centre for Students with Disabilities (UNIDIS) at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) supports the teachers in adapting assessment to student needs, such as facilitating different examination formats: computer-based exams, audio-recorded, or exams printed in Braille.

Moreover, assessment needs to incorporate universal design features to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed. For instance, using technology (such as e-assessment) to provide focused support or personalising the assessment calendar in order to fit student life and well-being, could be an option.

- ◆ **Provide meaningful and timely feedback to students** to allow them to better ascertain their current level of knowledge or skills and identify areas for improvement. To achieve this, constructive and challenging feedback should be provided in sufficient time to allow students to enhance their performance before the next assessment tasks. Early opportunities for students to test their understanding are essential.

A priority must be on developing students' self-assessment skills, so that they can evaluate the quality of their work for themselves. Working with students to understand assessment requirements through developing criteria for grading and showing students good examples of work support students' understanding of what quality looks like. Embedding 360-degree feedback should be considered when designing curricula. Where possible, students and external stakeholders could be co-opted as assessors and feedback-givers.

Furthermore, formative feedback must be organised so that it supports the requirements of summative assessment as part of an aligned approach. For example, the attainment gap for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students was eliminated in modules where teams adopted an integrated approach to assessment at the University of Southampton, UK.

- ◆ **Provide clearly articulated assessment criteria, marking and moderation policies.** These policies should be consistent, transparent and accessible to all stakeholders involved in the assessment. In order to respond to an inclusivity agenda, marking policies should be also statistically fit for purpose, e.g. by considering group performance. For example, the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Lausanne encourages scrutiny of questions or exercises that may discriminate against some students, to ensure assessments are fair.

CHALLENGE #2

Support students to become change agents.

Empowering students to become change agents so that they can improve the learning experience for themselves and their peers remains challenging in many higher education systems around Europe. Part of the challenge is the fact that the transition from school to university is not being addressed in a way that prepares students to take responsibility for their learning experience. Moreover, students' role in the learning process is commonly framed in terms of feedback receivers rather than feedback givers. This inhibits initiative from the part of students, disengaging them, among others, to lead on feedback, or to critically reflect on their own giving or receiving of feedback.

To respond to this challenge, the group suggests the following:

- ◆ Institutional leadership should **acknowledge and encourage the role of students in the process of co-creating curriculum design.** For instance, the University of Exeter developed an institution-wide initiative on "Students as change agents and partners"⁶, where changes suggested by students are explored, and implementation of ideas is considered through individual projects. The University of Oulu organises open workshops on assessment, where everyone interested can attend and contribute. In this way, the university tries to include all interested parties, and ensures that all students can attend and not just appointed student representatives.

- ◆ **Transition support should be embedded within curriculum design.** It is essential that students are inducted progressively into the requirements of higher education assessment practices. Overload at point of entry needs to be reduced, and potential 'crunch points' (i.e., key points in a students' learning journey; key concepts, etc.) identified. Care must also be taken not to over-scaffold support that may lead to increased student dependence rather than independence in learning.
- ◆ Higher education institutions should **prepare students for meaningful conversations around student assessment and peer engagement.** Students should be given opportunities to develop assessment literacy, for instance by being offered sessions on assessment design as part of their first-year studies. Assessment literacy pre-supposes a systematic dialogue between academic staff and students, to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which assessment is conducted. Training on assessment literacy also enables students to enhance their ability to evaluate themselves and their peers. Moreover, such training increases students' confidence in assessment being fair and inclusive by allowing them to be part of its design. Finally, explicit guidance on what constitutes effective feedback practice should be part of any such training.
- ◆ **Student recognition and reward for engagement** in the development of assessment practices and co-creation in general should be further promoted by institutional leadership. For instance, the University of Oulu awards extra credits to students enrolled in the course "Contributing to the university community",⁷ which employs a learning diary as a key assessment method.

CHALLENGE #3

Derive a framework for professional development.

Professional development opportunities for academic staff on assessment and feedback practices are still missing at many institutions. This is an area that requires further work, given that the diversification of assessment methods and the quality of feedback very much depend on the pedagogical knowledge, skills and competences of the teaching staff. It should not be taken for granted that a very good level of subject knowledge or years of academic practice necessarily mean that a teacher is also skilled in assessment practices.

Considering this challenge, the group recommends the following:

- ◆ **Higher education institutions should provide systematic formal and informal opportunities for academic staff to attend training on assessment and feedback practices.** The focus of professional development in assessment should be informed by ongoing evaluation by staff and students of assessment practices. Several modes of delivery could be envisaged - physical workshops, online training, mentoring, etc. This could be complemented by a repository of resources (e.g., evaluation rubrics, good practices) and by participation of academic staff in international seminars and conferences on the topic. Inter-disciplinary pedagogical support and guidance could be combined with a discipline-based approach to assessment (for instance in terms of assessment design, marking and moderation). An integrated approach to professional development is needed to support the development of aligned assessment learning communities at all levels within an institution (course, discipline, department, faculty, etc.). For example, the University of Minho organises regular workshops for academic staff on how to give feedback to students and on how to develop complex and meaningful assessment questions.
- ◆ Higher education institutions should **promote and reward innovation in student assessment and in learning and teaching, in general.** Staff recognition and reward for good and innovative practices, as well as for attending professional development on assessment and feedback literacy should be further enhanced, for instance by ensuring that such aspects count towards career progression.
- ◆ **A community of practice** should be set up at programme and institutional levels, with its members having a shared ownership of the initiative. Within this community, student-staff assessment feedback partnership models could be discussed, as well as examples of good practice and reflections on a research-informed integrated assessment framework. As such, the community would contribute to developing and ensuring implementation of a shared understanding of good practice in assessment.

Conclusions

Although the universities in the group find themselves at different stages in addressing student assessment and feedback, discussions showed similarities in the main challenges.

This report highlights the need to ensure that all learners have equal access to fair assessment. In this regard, identifying the most appropriate and efficient methods to test achievement of learning outcomes should be prioritised over insistence on a variety of assessment methods. Volume and variety in themselves do not create reliability and equal access to learning. In fact, variety and too much choice can even impact negatively on those students who are poor regulators of their own learning.

While the higher education community largely agrees with the notion of students as partners in assessment, understanding of what this means in practice and what is required to do this is impacted by various barriers. Training to address student and teacher beliefs and values around assessment practices is an essential first step. Resources in the form of time and recognition are essential considerations in facilitating such change.

Engaging students in understanding the protocols underpinning assessment and in formulating meaningful and personalised assessment is essential in mediating the growing concern with essay mills and contract cheating. Students should also play a central part in marking and moderation to support students' internalisation of standards. Finally, transparency in all decisions around assessment is vital to ensure systems are robust, equitable and fair.

To address the key challenges in assessment in the most efficient manner, the group advocates for adopting an integrated framework to assessment at institutional level.

Such a framework needs to be adaptable to local contexts, whereas a holistic approach is needed in order to tackle central issues, for instance the purpose and adequacy of assessment, its design and impact on supporting students to become more self-regulatory in managing their own learning.

The group discussed several measures for advancing towards such an integrated framework, namely:

- ◆ Formative assessment tasks are integral to the curriculum design and link to the requirements of summative assessment as part of an aligned approach;
- ◆ Co-ownership of assessment and feedback is promoted, so that teachers and students agree on shared responsibilities for the learning and teaching. This implies that students are supported to become change agents and that their assessment feedback initiatives have the potential to feed into the study programmes;
- ◆ Higher education institutions invest in professional development opportunities for teachers and students alike, coupled with the implementation of reward mechanisms for leaders in assessment at all levels within an organisation;
- ◆ Scheduled opportunities are provided for those engaged in a programme (staff and students, and other relevant stakeholders) to come together to comprehensively map the requirements of a programme as part of a team approach;
- ◆ The potential of technology is maximised to personalise approaches to assessment, and to use assessment data to support learning and especially the identification of vulnerable students;
- ◆ Better use of data is facilitated to enable students to monitor and regulate their own learning journeys in order to select and apply the most appropriate strategies to maximise their learning.
- ◆ Comprehensive approaches to evaluating practice from staff and student perspectives are incorporated into assessment design planning.

To support institutions in reflecting on the status of their assessment practices, the group developed a questionnaire included in Annex 2 of this report.

Annexes

ANNEX 1: EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim to engage with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities, and to
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2019 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2019 to February 2020, invited participating universities to peer-learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time they contributed to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. The groups met three times to discuss key challenges related to the theme, how to address the challenges through innovative practices and approaches, and what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. In addition, the groups were welcome to discuss any other issue that was relevant to the theme. Outside the three meetings, the groups were free to organise their work independently. Members of the groups also attended a final workshop, where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss the outcomes of other groups and address synergies. The workshop was hosted by Utrecht University in the Netherlands on 12 February 2020 and followed by the 2020 European Learning & Teaching Forum from 13-14 February, where focus groups based on the work of the Thematic Peer Groups were organised to obtain feedback on their results.

Composition of the Thematic Peer Group 'Student assessment' (starting with the group chair and by alphabetical order of the country name)

- University of Birmingham, United Kingdom: Carol Evans (chair)
- University of Rijeka, Croatia: Marta Žuvić, Tihana Švaljek (student), Matej Berisa (student) and Tea Dimnjasevic (student)
- University of Oulu, Finland: Sari Harmoinen and Henna Määttä (student)
- Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia: George Sharvashide and Tinatin Gabrichidze
- University of Latvia, Latvia: Agnese Rusakova, Deniss Celuiko (student) and Alise Ziverte (student)
- University of Agder, Norway: Astrid Birgitte Eggen
- University of Minho, Portugal: Manuel João Costa and Nuno Reis (student)
- Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia – UNED, Spain: Inés Gil Jaurena and Omar Khalil (student)
- University of Lausanne, Switzerland: Emmanuel Sylvestre and Loïc Pillard (student)
- University of Exeter, United Kingdom: Roni Roberts
- Group coordinator: Luisa Bunescu, Policy & Project Officer, EUA

ANNEX 2: EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

The group believes that self-reflection can be useful for institutions wishing to develop or review their assessment and feedback practice. To support institutions in their self-reflection, the group hence developed a questionnaire, which has been designed around the EAT framework (see endnote V). The questionnaire is written in a generic way, in order to keep it non-prescriptive, and can be adapted to suit individual circumstances.

The questionnaire is intended to be a starting point for a self-assessment tool for higher education institutions to use for building a plan for evaluating and improving assessment and feedback for staff and students. It is not intended to be a full self-contained solution, rather a tool that can help to paint a picture of assessment at each institution. Institutions will have different priorities and cultures that may impact these priorities and objectives assigned to assessment.

Institutional Support for Assessment: Key Priorities Score 1 = not addressed to 5 = fully addressed	Score 1-5
Agreed purposes/ principles/ethics	
1. Assessment and feedback principles are agreed at institutional level, and act as a baseline for all assessment feedback endeavours.	
2. University-level guidance is provided on assessment criteria , and this is translated to programme and module/course levels by discipline/department teams involving staff and students.	
3. Student partnership in co-production of assessment is promoted (policy/ teaching/marking/ feedback/moderation/ research/ leadership/enterprise).	
Alignment of systems and processes	
4. University structures support an integrated university approach to assessment. There are designated assessment leads in each discipline and clear priorities established for enhancing assessment practices.	
5. There is strong alignment between strategic institutional assessment priorities and enactment of assessment strategy at the local (course/discipline) level but flexibility to allow fine-tuning to local contexts.	
6. Time is allocated within workload models for team planning of assessment design, marking and moderation.	
7. Transparency is promoted in all assessment processes (rationale behind assessment design and how marks are allocated and moderated, appeals managed, etc.).	
8. Personal academic tutoring assessment support for students is aligned with course demands and cohort needs.	
9. Transitions management ensures mapping of key crunch points in assessment for students and academics to ensure appropriate monitoring and support.	
10. Electronic management of assessment fully supports the assessment process in providing seamless submission of, and feedback on work, and online support via virtual learning systems aligned to personal networks.	
Agility and quality of systems to support assessment	
11. Best use is made of technology to support assessment processes (e.g., mode and timing of feedback; virtual learning; personalised support using artificial intelligence; use of data: predictive analytics).	
12. A dedicated website for assessment resources exists with links to key materials to support an institutional assessment network.	
13. Quality assurance structures and processes are agile enabling ongoing enhancement in assessment design to ensure relevance.	
14. Processes for checking the integrity of awarded marks/grades are robust.	

Inclusivity	
15. There is commitment to inclusive assessment principles , such as Universal Design, to enable all students to have equitable access to, and chances of success within, assessment and feedback.	
16. Data analysis is used to ensure assessment is not disadvantaging any student group(s).	
Research-informed	
17. Research-informed assessment and feedback processes are used and their effectiveness evaluated.	
18. Staff and students receive comprehensive induction into assessment feedback processes in an iterative and developmental way (quality assurance processes; peer and self-assessment, mentoring).	
19. Interdisciplinary assessment communities of practice are supported, and leadership training provided to sustain and develop them.	
Reward	
20. There is reward for and recognition of effectiveness in assessment and feedback for staff and students.	
21. Course evaluations are aligned to high-level focused learning outcomes that place emphasis on students' development of high-level skills.	
Sustainability	
22. Assessment load and distribution of assessment are regularly reviewed to ensure manageability .	
23. A programme-level approach to assessment is emphasised where assessment is co-constructed with teams and links between modules are clear .	
24. Emphasis is on best use of resource and in promoting student engagement and self-regulation of assessment so that students are guided in how to evaluate the quality of their own work for themselves.	
25. There is a team approach to assessment engaging with wider stakeholders within and beyond the university to support authentic assessment practices (e.g., IT teams, library, careers, employers, professional bodies, alumni).	

Endnotes

1 _____ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), 2015, Brussels, Belgium. <http://bit.ly/2G3D134> (accessed 13/01/2020).

2 _____ See also Christersson, C., Staaf, P., Zhang, T. and Peterbauer, H., 2019, Promoting active learning in universities: Thematic Peer Group Report. Learning & Teaching Paper #5 (Brussels, EUA). <http://bit.ly/2VTKEym> (accessed 13/01/2020).

3 _____ See for instance Carless, D., Salter, D., Yang, M. and Lam, J., 2011, Developing sustainable feedback practices, in: *Studies in Higher Education*, 36, 395-407.

4 _____ The group would like to thank the University of Lausanne, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia -

UNED, and the University of Minho for hosting their three meetings. The group is also grateful to the members of the other Learning & Teaching Thematic Peer Groups as well as to participants at the 2020 European Learning and Teaching Forum (hosted by Utrecht University, 13-14 February 2020), for their feedback and input.

5 _____ Evans, C., 2016/2020, "Enhancing assessment feedback practice in higher education: the EAT framework", <http://bit.ly/3b0BOGG> (accessed 13/01/2020).

6 _____ See <http://bit.ly/2Wl4h50> (accessed 13/01/2020).

7 _____ See <http://bit.ly/2vw2pww> (accessed 13/01/2020).

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides a unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

This paper is one of a series of reports specifically focused on learning and teaching. It is designed to gather the knowledge and experiences of experts on the topic from across Europe. EUA's activities in learning and teaching aim at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision, underline the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and advocate for learning and teaching activities to be geared towards student learning and success.