Enhancing practice

enhancement
themes

Integrative assessment

Monitoring students' experiences of assessment

Guide no 1

Contents

Preface

The approach to quality and standards in higher education (HE) in Scotland is enhancement-led and learner-centred. It was developed through a partnership of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The Higher Education Academy has also joined that partnership. The Enhancement Themes are a key element of a five-part framework which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement. The Enhancement Themes support learners and staff at all levels in enhancing HE in Scotland; they draw on developing innovative practice within the UK and internationally.

The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject-level reviews undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves; guidance on internal reviews is published by SFC (www.sfc.ac.uk)

- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), run by QAA Scotland (www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR)

- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance on the information to be published by HEIs is provided by SFC (www.sfc.ac.uk)

- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) (www.sparqs.org.uk)

- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, facilitated by QAA Scotland (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

The topics for the Enhancement Themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of establishing a programme of development activities which draw on national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each Theme are intended to provide important reference points for HEIs in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each Theme, its steering committee, the range of research and development activities and the outcomes are published on the Enhancement Themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector - including taking forward the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes - an overarching committee, the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller, Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde has the important dual role of supporting the overall approach of the Enhancement Themes, including the five-year rolling plan, and institutional enhancement strategies and management of quality. SHEEC, working with the individual topic-based Enhancement Themes' steering committees, will continue to provide a powerful vehicle for progressing the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish HE.

Norman Sharp
Director, QAA Scotland

Monitoring students' experiences of assessment

Enhancement Themes Guides to Integrative Assessment, no 1

This Guide examines strategies to monitor how well assessment in its various manifestations is working, so as to build on strengths and take prompt remedial action where helpful. The Guide explores:

- **why** it is important to check how systematically we are monitoring our assessment practices
- **what** aspects of assessment are generally well monitored at present, and which have tended to be under monitored or rarely if ever looked at
- **how** to enhance our monitoring of assessment, choosing from a range of options.

Monitoring assessment in this systematic way, it is argued, is a key aspect of an **integrative** approach to enhancing assessment, ie one which brings the various strands of assessment together in a coherent way that addresses the desired goals and takes account of opportunities and constraints in the setting concerned.

The other three Guides in the **Integrative Assessment** series focus on *Balancing assessment* of *and assessment* for *learning, Managing assessment practices and procedures* and *Blending assignments and assessments for high-quality learning.* All four Guides can be freely downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/IntegrativeAssessment

Introduction

Assessing students' progress and performance is a complex process that involves many different elements. It encompasses assessment purposes and principles, content and methods, criteria and standards. It brings together various participants - students, teaching assistants and lecturers, assessors, administrators, secretarial and technical support staff, external examiners and professional accrediting bodies. And it has to be tailored to the distinctive requirements of a subject area, a level or year of study, the intended learning outcomes of the course unit or module concerned and the broader aims of the degree programme within which the unit or module is offered. Given the complexity of assessment, therefore, it is crucial to strive for an **integrative** approach to enhancing assessment. This entails bringing the various strands of assessment together in a coherent way that addresses the desired goals and takes account of opportunities and constraints in the setting concerned, whether that be a specific course or programme of study, or department or faculty, or university as a whole.

This Guide looks at one key aspect of integrative assessment: strategies to monitor how well assessment in its various manifestations is working, from the perspectives of the students being assessed. Assessment can thus be enhanced in a way that builds on achievements and strengths and enables prompt remedial action to be taken when improvement is called for.

Evaluating teaching, learning and assessment

In contemporary higher education, the regular evaluation of courses and teaching is widely seen both as a necessary component of quality assurance and quality enhancement (QAA 2003), and as an integral part of good professional practice (Hounsell 2003). It provides an indispensable feedback loop (Hounsell et al 2006b), alerting course teams and individual lecturers and tutors to those aspects of teaching, learning and assessment which are functioning well, and those where expectations of students and of staff have not yet been adequately met. For teaching staff in particular, it can also provide a second pair of eyes and ears, throwing light on how a course is perceived and experienced by the students at whom it is aimed. This is especially necessary given research evidence on the disparities between staff and student perceptions of what is ostensibly a common experience (see, for example, Stefani et al 1997; MacLellan 2001; Williams 2005; Carless 2006; Crook et al 2006).

While a wide range of methods and sources of feedback can be deployed (see, for example, Harvey 1998; Hounsell et al 1997) the approach to evaluating courses and teaching which is most commonly adopted involves the use of end-of-module student questionnaires. These are often combined with face-to-face discussion through a consultative body or liaison committee which brings together student and staff representatives. Further and more incidental sources of feedback (Hounsell 2003) include informal interchanges in practicals, tutorials or studio-based teaching and learning, the quality of students' assigned work and distributions of marks or grades, and meetings of exam boards.

In reviewing how the assessment dimension of courses and programmes is currently evaluated for this Guide, four tasks were undertaken. First, with the help of the Integrative Assessment Enhancement Theme's contact network, we surveyed and analysed a representative range of questionnaires drawn from across the Scottish higher education sector, including Heriot-Watt and The Robert Gordon Universities, the Universities of St Andrews, Strathclyde and Stirling, and Bell College, and discussed how these questionnaires were used.

Secondly, we looked at other questionnaires that have been developed for research purposes or for use in large-scale surveys, to identify what aspects of assessment they were concerned with and to what extent the questions they asked were similar to or different from those found in the sample of Scottish university questionnaires. The main research and survey questionnaires analysed were the following:

FAST   Questionnaires and other evaluation tools devised as part of the Formative Assessment in Science Teaching (FAST) Project.

ETLQ   The Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire (ETLQ), a questionnaire developed as part of a large-scale Economic and Social Research Council-funded study on Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses.

NSSQ   The National Student Survey Questionnaire (NSSQ) developed to canvass the views of recent graduates from universities and colleges in England and Wales.

CEQ   The Course Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ), a well-established questionnaire used in both Australia and Britain and a forerunner of the NSSQ.

Assessment A questionnaire devised by Professor Effie MacLellan at the University of Strathclyde
audit   to survey student and staff perceptions and experiences of assessment.

Thirdly, we undertook a search of the research literature on assessment to establish whether there were other important facets of contemporary assessment practices in universities and colleges that could be more systematically evaluated in courses or programmes of study. Fourthly, we conducted interviews with four groups of students from differing years of study at two Scottish higher education institutions about their experiences of assessment. This also yielded many helpful comments about how assessment was monitored that have been fed into the sections which follow.

How well is assessment currently monitored?

These four tasks revealed that, currently, a wide array of aspects of assessment are surveyed in student questionnaires and other evaluation tools, spanning how assessment is organised, what methods of assessment are used, the provision of guidance and feedback to students, and the design of strategies to monitor and evaluate assessment practices. However, as summarised in table 1, our review identified not only what features of assessment are usually well monitored, but also those which are often overlooked.

Table 1 Strengths and limitations in current surveying of students' assessment experiences

	What's usually surveyed well?	What's often overlooked?
Organisation and conduct of assessment	- Degree of difficulty. - Timing of assessment. - Assessment workload. - Modes of assessment, eg summative (assessment of learning), formative (assessment for learning) and diagnostic.	- Assessing large and diverse classes - factors arising from students' prior knowledge and capabilities - timing and responsiveness. - Change and innovation in assessment practices and procedures.
Assessment methods used	- Matching methods of assessment to course aims/intended learning outcomes. - Variety and blend of methods used. - Assessment that encourages and rewards high-quality learning. - Understanding of expectations, criteria and standards.	Students' experiences and perceptions of exams (including the balance between/weighting of exams and other kinds of assessment).
Guidance, support and feedback	- Quality and quantity of support. - Feedback provided to students - quantity and helpfulness of feedback - promptness of feedback - types of feedback given - influence of feedback on motivation and improvement.	- Assessing large and diverse classes [continued] - consistency of feedback and marking.
Design of monitoring strategies		Students' overall experiences of assessment, especially across course units, across subjects and over successive years of study.

Assessment in classes with large and diverse student intakes

For the most part, the course questionnaires sampled asked little of students by way of information about their backgrounds and prior knowledge of the subject concerned. Yet as higher education continues to grow and students become increasingly diverse, it becomes all the more important to ask such questions - not to pry unnecessarily, but to try and throw light on how effectively a course unit is working for the full spectrum of students enrolled. This would mean trying to tap into dimensions of students' backgrounds that might be a significant factor in how well they are coping, and analysing the resulting data in such a way as to check whether any of these factors might have been influential. For instance, a questionnaire finding that, overall, four out of five students found the pace of lectures 'about right' and the guidance on coursework assignments adequate to their needs would generally be welcome news, but less so if further analysis showed that most of the students who had responded less favourably were those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Similarly, where a course unit recruited students with varying levels of prior knowledge of the subject (eg those with and without a Higher, A level, vocational or other qualification in the subject), it might be prudent to look at how the different groups fared in their pass rates and patterns of marks, and perhaps also at any differences in their perceptions of guidance and feedback.

A second challenge with large classes, especially in the first year, is that more informal ways of keeping tabs on how students are faring can be harder to sustain than in later years-not just because of class sizes, but also because responsibilities for supporting and assessing students are often spread across large and diverse course teams (Hounsell et al 2006a). Yet many of these students may still be struggling to find their feet at university and in need of prompt assistance in tackling assignments and assessments. In such course settings, the ubiquitous end-of-module questionnaire can come too late to trigger constructive action, and so fail to offer the responsiveness (QAA 2006) that is a hallmark of effective quality assurance and quality enhancement. Mid-semester mini-questionnaires or mechanisms to strengthen and coordinate informal and incidental feedback from tutors and lab demonstrators may be more effective.

Thirdly, where the various members of a large course team share responsibilities for marking and commenting on students' work, problems of consistency can arise (Peat et al 2005; Hounsell et al 2006a). This is often tackled by ensuring that the marking carried out by postgraduate and other part-time tutors, demonstrators or teaching assistants is overseen by mainstream lecturers or the module coordinator, as a check on the reliability of marks or grades. Much less common, however, is any systematic oversight of the feedback provided, whether to ensure that there are no large disparities in the quantity and quality of the comments made on students' work, or to coach inexperienced markers in the far-from-straightforward skills of giving feedback that is helpful and to the point.

Change and innovation in assessment

In recent years, approaches to assessment have been rapidly evolving in response to a variety of influences: fuller attention to students' grasp of know-how and know-why as well as know-what, the opportunities opened up by developments in information and communications technologies, a better understanding of assessment processes and challenges, and more generally, a greater readiness on the part of universities to reappraise established practices (Hounsell and McCulloch 1999; Bryan and Clegg 2006). This raises the issue of how well, if at all, the impact of such changes is being captured by evaluation questionnaires routinely used in course monitoring, and more especially given research evidence on students' experiences of innovative teaching and assessment. For example, Segers and Dochy (2001) question how well change in assessment is supported by concomitant changes in teaching practices, while Savin-Baden (2004), discussing problem-based learning, airs concerns about the converse - whether assessment has adapted to reflect this new approach to teaching and learning. Similarly, Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001) ask whether students have been provided with enough training and support to become accustomed to changed assessment, and McDowell and Sambell (1999), casting their net over a much wider shoal of innovative assessments, suggest that students' experiences merit more careful monitoring. They see many substantial benefits in innovative forms of assessment:

> Students appreciate assessment tasks which help them to develop knowledge, skills and abilities which they can take with them and use in other contexts such as in their subsequent careers. Assessment which incorporates elements of choice, perhaps about the topic for research or the method of approaching a development task, is also beneficial.
> It can give students a greater sense of ownership and personal involvement in the work and avoid the demotivating perception that they are simply going through routine tasks which have been done by many students before them. Collaboration with fellow students rather than working in isolation can also help to maintain student motivation and improve the quality of their learning as it opens up the possibilities for discussion, new ideas and varying approaches. Innovative assessment therefore has the potential to encourage students to take an interest in their studies, work hard, engage in genuine or deep learning and produce good outcomes which will have long-lasting benefits.
>
> (McDowell and Sambell 1999)

However, these findings also surface many of the potential pitfalls in introducing innovations in assessment, including, for instance, students' motivation to deal with challenging tasks and competing demands upon their time from other assignments. They therefore suggest that 'although students may find what they are doing interesting, we all tend to need the additional push of a deadline to meet to help us focus and find our way through competing pressure on our time' (McDowell and Sambell 1999). Another potential issue is that it seems 'generally much easier to develop assessment tasks which are valuable learning tools and which motivate students than to mark or grade such tasks fairly and accurately' (McDowell and Sambell 1999). Attention to how and why students' work was awarded a certain mark is consequently essential.

Exam experiences in course units

Since most evaluation questionnaires are distributed in, or close to, the last teaching session in a course unit, it should not be surprising to learn that they typically do not ask students about their experiences of exams, which would not at that point have taken place. But what does seem puzzling - and was confirmed in our interviews with students - is why students' perceptions of exams should be so rarely inquired into, even in those universities and subject areas where exam marks continue to make up the largest overall weighting in calculating final grades, and are consequently considered to be a prime indicator of the quality of the students' learning.

A more integrative approach to monitoring assessment would seek a means of closing that gap - but how? Students might well not relish delaying their departure from an exam hall to answer further questions, however brief or to the point, or feel that the experience is too fresh and immediate to be reappraised. The most feasible strategy may therefore be to survey them in the following semester or academic year, viewing the opportunity this could offer of 'recollection in tranquillity' as a boon rather than a drawback. Ideally, they should be invited to reflect not just on the exams, but also on the contribution of the exams to the blend of assignments and assessments across the course unit. Yet pragmatically, even a short questionnaire may be unwelcome: better options might be a round-robin email seeking open-ended comments, or focus group discussions over coffee with a sub-set of past course participants. An emphasis on feedforward rather than feedback may also be more likely to engage students' interest, eg asking them what suggestions they would like to make about the next round of exams in the light of their experiences in the preceding semester or year.

Assessment experiences overall

The suggestion just made has the potential to open up a dimension of students' experiences that falls outside the scope of most evaluation questionnaires, which typically focus on a specific module or course unit. It offers a reminder that, as a consequence of this restricted scope, there may be little or no opportunity for students to reflect on their experiences overall and in the round, ie across course units, across and between subjects, and across and between successive years of study. Yet the experience of higher education, for students, is precisely of this kind: not of compartmentalised units of curriculum, but of a confluence of courses and subjects.

A truly integrative approach to monitoring and enhancing assessment would seek to make good this oversight, and to capitalise on the insights that students can offer. As the students interviewed for this Guide commented, in progressing from year to year of a degree programme, they develop an increasingly rich appreciation of the extent to which the different ways in which they have been assessed seem to interrelate, complement and build on one another. Equally crucially, they are well placed (better placed than most staff, it can be argued) to draw comparisons and contrasts between subject areas and disciplines - even to the extent of pointing to assessment practices in cognate subject areas that might fruitfully be learnt from.

Strategies for better monitoring of assessment

The review undertaken for this Guide has highlighted where current assessment practices seem generally well monitored, and what aspects have often been overlooked. What follows below is a set of suggestions to be considered in monitoring assessment in a more integrated way. It is not a counsel of perfection, for to take up more than a few of these suggestions at one and the same time would be impractical. What programme coordinators, module directors and course team leaders can realistically do is to pursue those options that would best meet their needs, and those of their students, at a given point in time.

1 Plug gaps in monitoring students' experiences

eg ask students about:

- their experiences of exams and tests
- the consistency of feedback and marking
- the weighting of different kinds of assessment
- how different types of assessment compare with one another
- any other aspects of assessment normally overlooked.

2 Tap into their wider assessment experiences

eg ask questions about:

- their experiences across modules/course units
- their experiences across different years/levels of study
- their experiences across different subject areas.

3 Combine questionnaires with other methods

eg explore students' experiences and perceptions via:

- focus group interviews
- an open forum to which students are invited
- web-boards or virtual learning environments which invite students' comments and suggestions.

4 Focus in on changes in assessment practices or procedures

eg ask students to comment:

- where procedures change (for instance, a new marking scheme is adopted)
- when a new method of assessment is introduced (for example, when oral presentations or portfolios are introduced).

5 Ask different kinds of questions

eg:

- what one thing would really improve how your work as a student is assessed?
- which aspects of assessment seem to work really well/less well/could be improved?

6 Rethink when to ask students for their views

eg:

- carry out a brief survey mid-term or mid-semester, while there is still time to address major concerns raised by these students
- once students have been given feedback on their coursework by their tutors, invite comments on its helpfulness to them.

7 Review what background information you ask of students

eg to enable you to relate differences in students' perceptions to whether

- they have studied the subject before, and how well they did
- they are likely to take further courses in the future
- they live on/off campus
- they have a job in term-time
- they come from an English-speaking background.

8 Focus in on areas of known student concern

eg where past evaluations have indicated student discontent with the provision of guidance and feedback, make use of items from existing resources, such as the FAST inventory, Weaver's (2006) questionnaire, or a typology of potential trouble spots in guidance and feedback (Hounsell et al 2006b), to probe the issue more searchingly.

9 Survey staff as well as student experiences and perceptions of assessment

particularly where teaching and assessment responsibilities are spread across a large and diverse course team (eg mainstream lecturers, postgraduate teaching assistants, part-time tutors or demonstrators).

References

Bryan C and Clegg K, eds (2006) *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education,* London: Routledge

Carless D (2006) Differing perceptions in the feedback process, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31.2, pp 219-233

Crook C, Gross H and Dymott R (2006) Assessment relationships in higher education: the tension of process and practice, *British Educational Research Journal*, 32.1, pp 95-114

Hanrahan S and Isaacs G (2001) Assessing self- and peer-assessment: the students' views, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 20.1, pp 53-70

Harvey J (ed) (1998) *Evaluation Cookbook*, Learning Technology Dissemination Initiative, Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University
www.icbl.hw.ac.uk/ltdi/cookbook/cookbook.pdf (last accessed 18 December 2006)

Hounsell D (2003) The evaluation of teaching, in Fry H, Ketteridge S and Marshall S (eds) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (second edition), London: Kogan Page, pp 200-212

Hounsell D and McCulloch M (1999) Assessing skills in Scottish higher education, in Dunne E (ed) *The Learning Society: International Perspectives on Core Skills in Higher Education,* London: Kogan Page, pp 149-158

Hounsell D, Tait H and Day K (1997) *Feedback on Courses and Programmes of Study*, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Johannesburg: University of Edinburgh, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment/Universities' and Colleges' Staff Development Agency/Institution for Higher Education Development in South Africa
www.tla.ed.ac.uk/etl/publications.html (last accessed 18 December 2006)

Hounsell D, McCune V, Litjens J and Hounsell J (2006a) *Bioscience Subject Overview Report*, Universities of Edinburgh, Durham and Coventry: Enhancing Teaching-Learning in Undergraduate Courses Project
www.ed.ac.uk/etl/publications.html (last accessed 18 December 2006)

Hounsell D, McCune V, Hounsell J and Litjens J (2006b) *The quality of guidance and feedback to students*, Paper pres, 3rd Biennial Northumbria/European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction, Special Interest Group on Assessment and Evaluation, Assessment Conference, County Durham, 30 August - 1 September 2006
www.tla.ed.ac.uk/etl/publications.html (last accessed 18 December 2006)

MacLellan E (2001) Assessment for learning: the differing perceptions of tutors and students, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26.4, pp 307-318

MacLellan E, *Perceptions of assessment: an audit of practise*, York: Higher Education Academy
www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=fullrecord&section=generic&id=429 (last accessed 18 December 2006)

McDowell L and Sambell K (1999) The experience of innovative assessment: student perspectives, in Brown S and Glasner A (eds) *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches*, Guildford: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press, pp 71-82

Peat M, Franklin S and Taylor C (2005) Application of ICT to provide feedback to support learning in first-year science, in McLoughlin C and Taji A (eds), *Teaching in the Sciences: Learner-Centred Approaches*, Binghampton, New York: Food Products Press/Howarth Press, pp 157-175

QAA (2003) *Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review: Scotland*, Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR/handbook/scottish_hbook.pdf (last accessed 18 December 2006)

QAA (2006) *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 6: Assessment of students*, Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section6/ (last accessed 18 December 2006)

Savin-Baden M (2004) Understanding the impact of assessment on students in problem-based learning, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 41.2, pp 223-233

Segers M and Dochy F (2001) New assessment forms in problem-based learning: the value-added of the students' perspective, *Studies in Higher Education*, 26.3, pp 327-343

Stefani L A J, Tariq V N, Heylings D J A, and Butcher A C (1997) A comparison of tutor and student conceptions of undergraduate research project work, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 22.3, pp 271-288

Weaver M (2006) Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31.3, pp 379-394

Williams K (2005) Lecturer and first year student (mis)understandings of assessment task verbs: 'mind the gap', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10.2, pp 157-173

Additional resources

For further information and additional resources, please look at Monitoring assessment on the Enhancement Themes website: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/IntegrativeAssessment

This contains a downloadable copy of this Guide, button links to the survey research questionnaires examined, and other research reports of attempts to monitor students' experiences of assessment.