



# Enhancing practice

## Integrative assessment

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Managing assessment practices and procedures  
Guide no 4

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# Contents

Preface	iii
Managing assessment practices and procedures	iv
Introduction	1
Managing assessment <i>for</i> and <i>of</i> learning	2
Enabling evolutionary change to flourish	3
Shared responsibilities for managing assessment	6
References	8
Additional resources	10

## 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](http://www.sfc.ac.uk))
- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), run by QAA Scotland ([www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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

## Managing assessment practices and procedures

### Enhancement Themes Guides to Integrative Assessment, no 4

The effective management of assessment practices and procedures, this Guide argues, is fundamental to an **integrative** approach to enhancing assessment, ie one in which the many and various strands of assessment are brought together in a coherent way that addresses the desired goals and takes account of opportunities and constraints in the setting concerned. Yet while most dimensions of assessment are generally well-managed, there are also aspects which often have not received the weight of attention they seem to warrant in the contemporary higher education institution (HEI). These aspects are managing assessment *for* as well as assessment *of* learning; enabling evolutionary change in assessment; and wider sharing of responsibilities for managing assessment practices and processes.

The other three Guides in the **Integrative Assessment** series are concerned with *Monitoring students' experiences of assessment*, *Balancing assessment of and assessment for learning*, 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](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/IntegrativeAssessment)

## Introduction

There are many reasons why managing assessment effectively is not just important, but a necessity. Firstly, every HEI has to ensure that the assessment standards it sets engage with an intricate web of expectations and requirements - those of the subject areas or disciplines studied, those of the HEI itself and its ethos and goals as an institution, those of the wider HE system or sector, those of employers and professional and statutory bodies, and those of students and of the public at large. Secondly, each HEI has to be confident not only about what its standards are, but that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that the standards which have been set are pursued and sustained across all courses and programmes of study. Thirdly, an HEI has to assure itself that its assessment procedures and processes operate in ways that are (and are seen to be) just, equitable and consistent.

In Scotland and across the UK generally, considerable time and effort have been devoted by HEIs to addressing these imperatives - whether through, for example, frameworks of boards of examiners, marking schemes, policies on plagiarism, regulations for coursework and examinations, procedures for appeal, and many other structures and strategies for overseeing assessment. Yet while most dimensions of assessment are generally well-managed, there are also certain aspects which often have been overlooked or paid insufficient attention in the recent past, but which are increasingly important to the contemporary HEI. These aspects, this Guide suggests, are:

- recognising the need to manage assessment *for* as well as assessment *of* learning
- creating optimal conditions to support and sustain evolutionary change in assessment practices and procedures
- acknowledging that responsibilities for managing assessment practices are necessarily widely shared amongst those contributing directly and indirectly to assessing students' progress and performance - individual lecturers and course teams, boards and committees with oversight of assessment, middle and senior academic managers, and academic development and similar teaching-learning support units.

## Managing assessment *for and of learning*

*Balancing assessment for and assessment of learning* is concerned with striking a better balance between assessment *of* and assessment *for* learning. Assessment *of* learning is 'summative', ie its main purpose is to grade and certify students' achievement, while assessment *for* learning is 'formative', aiming to support and advance students in their learning. A pervasive feature of contemporary assessment practices and procedures, however, is that the scales are tipped towards summative assessment *of* learning (see, for example, Harlen and James 1997; Gardner 1999; Black and Wiliam 2003; Gibbs 2006). This is cause for concern since the pursuit of high-quality learning entails not just setting the high standards which students are expected to attain, but creating the conditions which will enable them to meet those expectations. Indeed, the potentially powerful impact of well-designed formative assessment is evident in the conclusions of a comprehensive review of the international research literature by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam:

The research reported here shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning. The gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable, [...] among the largest ever reported for educational interventions.

(Black and Wiliam 1998)

The relative undervaluing of assessment *for* learning also gives grounds for concern because survey evidence of student dissatisfaction with guidance and feedback is widespread and growing (see, for example, Maclellan 2001; QAA 2003; Hounsell 2003; Krause et al 2005; Hounsell et al 2005; SurrIDGE 2006). For instance, an analysis of over 3,000 quality assessment visits noted that, across almost the entire subject range, the reviewers had 'found it necessary to comment on the failure of a significant number of institutions to provide adequate feedback on students' work' (QAA 2003). Yet even in the later round of visits, and despite indications that some headway had been made, the reviewers 'saw this as the area most in need of further consideration by institutions'. In Australian surveys, worrying levels of dissatisfaction with feedback - on the part of two out of five first-year students - have not improved over a 10-year period (Krause et al 2005). A survey of psychology departments by Crook, Gross and Dymott (2006) has identified a worrying gulf between the contentment of the staff with their formal and well-ordered procedures for managing assessment and student unease that how the process was conducted failed to meet their needs for clarity about what was expected of them in their assessed work.

Against this background, exploring new strategies for enhancing assessment *for* learning of the kind outlined in *Balancing assessment for and assessment of learning* is of crucial importance. However, efforts to enhance practices at the module or course unit level may in themselves not suffice (Knight, 2000). They need to be accompanied by bringing assessment *for* learning more fully into the mainstream of academic management and leadership (Yorke 1998; Orrell 2006).

So how might this be done? One way forward in some HEIs would be to review the scope and strength of commitment to assessment *for* learning in policy frameworks, strategic plans or mission statements, whether at the central, faculty or departmental level. Is it clear across the institution, for

instance, how highly guidance and feedback are valued, and how significant a role good guidance and feedback are expected to play in the day-to-day work of staff as well as students? Another option would be to explore to what extent robust assessment *for* learning is just as much a routine consideration as rigorous assessment *of* learning in the deliberations of external examiners, boards of studies/examination boards, curriculum validation committees, or teaching review panels (Hounsell, in press). A third option would be to look afresh at published assessment regulations and procedures: are there, for example, explicit requirements or minimum standards for how often, how promptly, or in what forms students will be given opportunities for formative assessment? A fourth option might be to ask whether and how greater support (strategic, technological, administrative, students' learning and language skills) could be productively given to staff in the front line of assessing *for* learning.

## Enabling evolutionary change to flourish

An inescapable feature of contemporary HE is the scope and pace of changes in circumstances, opportunities and needs. In the realm of assessment, factors influencing change can range widely and can include:

- shifts in the contours of a subject, for instance, that need to be reflected in how and what is assessed
- developments in information technology that offer more effective or efficient ways of marking and commenting on students' work
- a firmer policy commitment to developing and assessing skills that students can deploy in a variety of workplaces and in other aspects of their lives beyond graduation
- fresh research insights into how high-quality learning outcomes can be attained
- an influx of students with more diverse subject backgrounds and aspirations, and a consequent need for better-targeted guidance
- alternative approaches to assessment that can enhance students' engagement or offer them new ways of communicating what they have learned.

Important though a readiness to rethink and recast assessment practices and procedures might be, there are factors which work against responsiveness to change, including pressures on resources - especially staff time - and cautiousness about innovating, which is associated with fears about declining standards. 'The dominant culture', Graham Gibbs has argued, 'is conservative and defensive rather than bold. It is often more difficult and more time consuming to gain approval for changes in assessment than for changes to any other aspect of courses' (Gibbs 2006). What scope, then, could there be to manage and lead assessment in ways that could better assist individuals and course teams to change and enhance practices in worthwhile and necessary ways, without jeopardising standards?



First and foremost, it may be helpful to clarify what freedom of action is open at what levels (the assignment or assessment, the module or course unit, the year or level, the degree programme), and within what limits, to explore and develop assessment approaches. This is necessary because the presumptive veto is often and widely perceived to stifle changes in assessment. 'We'd like to try X', the perception goes, 'but it wouldn't be permitted by the department/the faculty/the academic board/the senate/QAA/the external examiners/the professional accrediting body...'. Yet whether such a power or policy is real or imagined can sometimes be hard to discern, while the spectre of the pre-emptive veto, it appears, can be invoked as a convenient cloak for over-cautiousness.

A similar obstacle to change can arise because of an 'all-or-nothing' view of what may be feasible or permissible. In some institutions and subject areas, various innovative directions for which a sound educational case can be made (grading group or collaborative achievement, involving students in evaluating the quality of one another's work, commenting on students' drafts prior to final submission, summatively assessing oral presentations, marking on a pass/not yet satisfactory basis) can be deemed no-go areas because they seem to run counter to an ostensibly well-established rule-of-thumb, such as that any assessed work must be that of an individual, that only assessors can reliably and validly assess, that all assessed work must be available for scrutiny by the external examiner, and so forth. But there is a large amount of difference between seeking a wholesale transformation of an assessment scheme and entertaining the possibility that a given and perhaps quite modest fraction of it might not run with the long-prevailing winds. Freeing up just such a fraction for innovation and experimentation (20 per cent of the overall mark, perhaps) would be unlikely to put standards at risk if the initiative were well planned and carefully monitored. Indeed, it could help to forge new and timeous but no less exacting standards of attainment.

Another dysfunctional brake upon change and enhancement is uncertainty about how to proceed, stemming from a dearth of knowledge about how to put a particular assessment initiative into practice in a given course and subject area, in a form that would stimulate and not disenchant or unfairly disadvantage students, and be likely to fulfil its hoped-for goals. In the face of such understandable uncertainty, a promising counter-measure is to invest effort in the wider pooling of knowledge and expertise about changing assessment practices. Indeed, it is no accident that this Integrative Assessment series follows an increasingly popular path which combines guiding principles with a wealth of examples drawn from everyday assessment practices in a variety of settings (see, for example, Gibbs 1995; Hounsell et al 1996; Nightingale et al 1996; James et al 2002; Juwah et al 2004; Carless et al 2006). However gradualist and evolutionary it might be, change in assessment thrives on rich information about what has been tried elsewhere, in what form and to what effect, and with what apparent implications for the adoption of similar initiatives elsewhere.

Furthermore, the interchange of experiences and insights can be boosted within as well as across HEIs. At the University of Paisley, for instance, a thriving network of interested colleagues has been actively supported by the educational development unit in its efforts to share and discuss innovations in assessment; while at the University of Dundee, a working group convened by a

vice-principal has provided the focus for an institution-wide stock-taking of assessment practices and pinpointing of directions for enhancement. At Queen Margaret University, the approach adopted to validate and review degree programmes of study draws in colleagues from a range of departments and faculties, as well as externally, in order to foster understanding and debate about assessment and learning-teaching approaches across subject boundaries. Other examples can be found much further afield. At the University of Sydney, a recent special issue of an electronic newsletter has served as a medium through which staff engaged in assessment initiatives can share what they have learned with their colleagues (*Synergy* 2006); while at Melbourne University, a well-crafted set of guidelines has been devised to assist subject and course coordinators, heads of department and others in reviewing their assessment practices (Harris 2005).

## Shared responsibilities for managing assessment

In HEIs, it can reasonably be argued, the management of assessment is necessarily a widely shared responsibility because of the profusion of roles associated with assessment processes and practices, and the nature of the responsibilities which these roles call for. Indeed, simply trying to spell out these numerous roles is instructive because university teachers can commonly be expected to undertake almost any of the tasks outlined in figure 1.

**Figure 1 Assessment responsibilities of university teachers**

University teachers can commonly be expected to undertake any of the following:

- design a specific assignment or assessment
- convene a revision workshop in preparation for a text or exam
- guide and support students in the process of carrying out an assigned task
- evaluate the quality of students' work in a coursework assignment or exam answer and award a mark or grade
- craft feedback comments
- moderate a set of provisional grades or marks given by a group of teaching assistants
- grant an extension to a coursework deadline
- participate in the work of, or chair, an examination board
- draft departmental guidelines on the conduct of assessment
- devise a blend of assessments for a particular course unit or module that engages with the learning outcomes anticipated
- second-mark an honours project or dissertation
- serve as an external examiner
- draw up a set of appropriate assessment criteria
- gather and review data on student perceptions of assessment
- review a case for condonement or an appeal against a mark, grade or degree class
- join a committee responsible for overseeing faculty or institution-wide assessment policy and principles.

No doubt further roles could be added to the already lengthy list in figure 1, but their sheer number and range, and the degree to which each does not stand alone but is interconnected with others, demonstrates the great complexity of assessment systems or 'regimes'. Furthermore, none of these roles is routine, mechanical, or easily delegated: all call for the exercise of informed judgment,

anchored in a deep grasp of the subject-matter. This also implies, inescapably, that responsibilities for managing assessment effectively - that is, for ensuring that it meets course, subject, institutional and system-wide expectations and requirements - should also be seen as widely shared, rather than being concentrated at or confined to a single level or forum of decision-making (Yorke 1998).

That in turn means that the steps highlighted in this Guide for managing assessment more integratively need to be widely considered if any great headway is to be made. Course teams, subject groups, departments or schools, faculties or colleges, central bodies, middle and senior managers all may benefit from grappling with similar questions. In our plans, procedures and policies, have we struck a good balance between assessment *for* and *of* learning? Could we enhance our capacity for change in assessment, through better sharing of insights and experiences about changing practices, by freeing up opportunities to try out new approaches, by clarifying who is empowered to do what, through more visible encouragement and support? Finally, what contributions could educational developments units or teaching-learning centres best make to assist individuals, groups and bodies in pursuing these challenges?

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## Additional resources

For further information and additional resources, please look at Managing assessment on the Enhancement Themes website: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/IntegrativeAssessment](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/IntegrativeAssessment)

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