

Reimagining University Assessment by Learning from Secondary Education

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Project Snapshot
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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Project Overview

This project has worked with five academic schools, each in a different faculty, at the University of Leeds, and with three secondary schools in the Yorkshire and Humber region. One issue that is often highlighted by academics is a modular approach to learning. Students can become concerned with passing each module without maintaining a holistic view, perhaps because they never need to in order to be successful on the programme. In this respect, the connection between the assessments and the programme-level learning outcomes are not explicit.

For the last 20 years or so, Key Stage 5 (A-levels) has been taught and assessed in a modular fashion, leading academics to believe that students are used to modular learning and assessment, which is then reinforced in HE. A shift to synoptic assessment could be regarded as an alien concept and therefore high risk. However, A-level reforms mean that from 2018 entry, students have experienced synoptic, final examinations at A-level. This presents a golden opportunity for universities to rethink their programme structure and assessment strategies.

This project has taken a qualitative approach to understanding educators' experiences of assessment and establishing the scope for change with respect to programme design and assessment practices. The hypothesis was that taking more of a programme level view could lead to better assessment design and also enable better use of formative assessment for learning.

Project Objectives

This project had four major aims:

1. Gain insight into A-level reforms (with a focus on STEM subjects) and what they mean in practice for schoolteachers and learners.
2. Understanding current approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and related concerns within the Schools and identifying barriers to synoptic assessment.
3. Develop a Programme Redesign Toolkit to aid colleagues in focusing on the relationship between programme learning outcomes and assessment design;
4. Develop a Compendium of Assessment Techniques to aid colleagues in redesigning degree programmes with a focus on assessment as an integral part of design at a programme level.

Methodology

Throughout the project a qualitative approach was taken, using semi-structured interviews. The style adopted was that of guided conversation and extended discussion. In this, the participants were regarded as conversational partners in the process; both the interviewer and interviewee could both be regarded as experts in this context and so each guided conversation was unique, where both parties shared knowledge and expertise pertinent to the research topic.

A set of question prompts were used, along with active listening, generating follow up questions as the interview progressed. The interviewer had considerable working knowledge and experience of the research topic, so the main aim of the research was to establish what was important to the individual participants.



A second phase of the project was to produce a Compendium of Assessment Techniques. The project leader worked with a team of student interns to produce the compendium. This student-authored approach provided an authentic student voice for conversations regarding assessment design.

Outcomes

Key Findings:

Findings from the participating Schools at the University of Leeds:

- A unanimous finding that emerged from the interviews was that it shouldn't be necessary to assess every module that is taught. The learning outcomes for the programme and, in turn, the modules need to be assessed, but this could be done, from a quality assurance perspective, in a more synoptic way. It would be necessary to map where the learning outcomes were assessed, but these didn't necessarily need to be self-contained within the modules.
- There was a strong sense that moving to a more synoptic view of assessment would help to make programmes more coherent, and therefore a better learning experience. However it was also noted that there are structural and cultural challenges to making such a move.
- There was also a sense that we are over-reliant on 3-hour unseen written examinations, which could be considered as a poor assessment methodology. Academics regularly cited examinations as 'efficient'. However, staff in the Student Education Service held a different view. There is a lot of cost associated with running exams, which is borne by the centre, and may be why Schools regard them as efficient.
- There was general support for the use of 'open book' style examinations, as they more closely represent working practices in the 21st century.
- A programme-based approach to assessment could also provide more opportunities for students to work collaboratively and in teams. This represents a truer representation of the working world, but is currently in tension with the need to generate a fair and transparent individual mark for students.
- Whilst accreditation, particularly in some areas, is very strict, it was not considered an issue in terms of introducing synoptic assessment.

Findings from the participating secondary schools:

- The most significant change to A-levels is that students now have much more time to get to grips with a topic before they are formally assessed, and they will revisit the topic several times between first introduction and final assessment. This could have significant implications for single semester modules where there isn't time to revisit topics several times. The introduction of spaced repetition of learning could be beneficial.
- A positive impact of synoptic assessment could be that students may be used to linking different areas of the curriculum to solve problems. This may help to address issues that are currently experienced in HE in terms of 'pocketed learning.'
- For practical subjects, a lot can be learned by the competency-based approach being taken at A-level. Rather than students being assessed on every aspect of every practical activity, they could be expected to demonstrate competency in a range of appropriate skills throughout the year.



Institution Level Recommendations:

- System developments to allow decoupling of teaching from assessment within programme structures
- Proposal for a Year 0 tutor/ pre-University tutor for each School in the first instance
- Review of current Programme Learning Outcomes as there may be a mismatch between what is documented, what individuals reported through interviews and what is assessed to demonstrate learning outcomes.
- Assessment Mapping
- Learning from Secondary Education and the introduction of spaced repetition in modules.

Outputs:

- Compendium of Assessment Techniques in Higher Education: From Students' Perspectives
- Programme Redesign Toolkit
- Planned paper on 'Changes to the A-level curriculum and the implications for Higher Education'

Challenges

Generally, there was good support from colleagues in each of the schools, although participants were not necessarily representative of the wider school views. In some schools with a range of programmes, it was difficult to get a full sense of programme learning outcomes, as opposed to the characteristics of graduates of the broader discipline area. This was also compounded by the fact that students on the same programme may take different combinations of optional modules.

Only three secondary schools participated, with nine teachers taking part overall. Whilst this may not be a representative sample, there was convergence in the findings from each of the participants.

Despite best efforts, it was not possible to form focus groups of students from each school. Taking this work forward would require discussions at school level with students, perhaps through student-staff forums. However, the student voice was very well represented in the student-authored compendium, and the student interns were from two of the participating schools, providing a connection within the work.

Next Steps

The findings of the work will be taken to the Assessment Strategy Group of the University of Leeds to provide guidance on programme development. There is an opportunity to expand the compendium to include a wider range of disciplines, and to also evaluate each of the methods for their inclusivity.

A major challenge facing this project is ensuring that the institution can benefit from and make use of the findings, and identifying methods for doing so.

For further information about the project please contact Samantha Pugh on s.l.pugh@leeds.ac.uk.



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