What do we currently understand the purposes of assessment to be? What are the principles that we adhere to in implementing assessment? And what challenges do we face in doing so?

The role of assessment has continued to attract considerable reflection and debate in Higher Education research for many years. It has been prompted by increased scrutiny on the outcomes of students learning and experience, on the quality of assessment and grading, and on the drive to align university education with the needs of employers – all in context with significant growth in the sector that has placed demands on assessment systems, as they have been required to scale up.

Current challenges for HE assessment

Higher Education has grown

The sector has grown considerably in the past ten years, with a 27.6% increase in the number of undergraduate entrants and a 45% increase in postgraduate taught entrants since 2007-08. (UUK, 2018) This has inevitably placed increasing pressure on existing assessment systems. As well as more students, we have seen an increase in the number of programmes and modules – and therefore more assessments entailing more marking, moderation and quality assurance.

Student evaluations of assessment

The National Students Survey has repeatedly brought the challenges associated with assessment into the cognizance of university leadership and staff. The influence of the NSS on university league tables means that responding to perennially low satisfaction rates for assessment and feedback (a sector-wide issue) has become a regular item on the educational enhancement agenda.

Difficulties in rebalancing assessment to emphasise learning

Much research and evidence points to the valuable role assessment can play in supporting the learning process. However, the sector continues to struggle to depart from a heavy reliance on summative assessment that measures learning.

For example, in recent research evidence examining the assessment patterns of more than 70 programmes across 14 UK universities revealed the extent of the challenge, in that ‘students typically experience a ratio of 1:8 formative to summative tasks over the course of a degree programme.’ (Jessop and Tomas, 2017, p. 995).
Rebalancing the purposes of assessment

When considering the role of assessment we may view it as an important activity at the end of the learning process that takes account of the level of understanding achieved by students. We also know that assessment is also a can play other important roles in supporting student learning. So are we striking the right balance between these functions?

Assessment that checks standards and certifies those standards is really important. These summative assessments measure progression and achievement, are useful for employers, and in some disciplines are a license to practice.

The difficulty is that assessment for certification is time-consuming and high stakes, placing pressure on staff and students. A good example is marking workload. Marking loads are a common challenge for staff, but the processes around assessment take up an enormous amount of time, quite apart from the actual marking itself. Unfortunately, the effort that goes into summative assessment for certification does not help students very much when it comes to their learning. Feedback can justify the mark, and the mark is something bank – but students do not learn from it.

Students are powerfully motivated by assessment meaning that it plays an influential role in shaping learning habits and processes. In this knowledge, we ideally aspire to increase the attention given to integrating regular formative assessments that promote learning. In turn that this increases opportunities for feedback and improvement, and for students to learn about the criteria against which their work is being judged.

We know that the choices we make about assessment design have a profound influence on how students approach their learning. It is important therefore to make sure that those choices are influencing students towards useful learning characterised by higher order learning such as analysis, evaluation and criticality.

---

**Summative: Assessment of learning**
- Certify achievement
- License to practice
- Enable selection for further study and employment
- Test University standards
- Quality assurance

**Formative: Assessment for learning**
- Promotes learning
- Diagnostic, formative
- Steering approach to learning
- Informing teaching
- Learning about criteria, standards and professional judgement
- To be able to tell how well you are doing.

**Sustainable: Assessment as learning**
- Assessment as process in developing/supporting metacognition for students.
- Support students’ ability to judge the quality of their own work.
- Developing student assessment literacy.
- ‘Sustainable’ assessment for life-long learning, beyond the programme. (*Boud & Soler, 2016*)
Assessment core principles

Even in rebalancing assessment it is important to recognise the factors which sustain high quality assessment design. Such core principles are a good starting point for reflecting on the robustness of assessment, and can be used as a tool for reviewing and development new assessment approaches.

**Reliable**
To what extent are assessment criteria being consistently used to achieve comparable judgements about student performance?

**Transparent**
To what extent are assessment criteria and professional judgements made by markers transparent to, and understood by, students?

**Valid**
To what extent does the assessment method that you are employing actually assess the things that you want it to?

**Relevant**
To what extent are the assessment tasks being set relevant to students wider learning and ability to apply knowledge in authentic ways?

**Inclusive**
Understanding how to undertake a particular type of assessment can take time in of itself. If not given sufficient time, the assessment mode can be a barrier to students in showing what they have learned. To what extent are assessments inclusive of a full range of students on your programme?

*Adapted from work by Chris Rust, 2002*

---

**References**


