Students as Partners in the Curriculum (SAP) Change Programme
Students as Partners in transforming feedback and assessment

University of Strathclyde
Case Study

Introduction

In recent years, the University of Strathclyde has funded students to work with staff in discipline-based research and pedagogically focussed university-wide initiatives. In the summer of 2013, four student interns (one from each of the University’s four faculties) were funded for 12 weeks to work in partnership with staff to improve assessment and feedback practices across the University. At the end of the initial 12 week period, the student interns made a series of recommendations to the University that were based on interviews, survey, and focus groups with students and staff from across the institution, and a review of relevant pedagogical literature. The findings from their work contributed to a review of the University’s Assessment and Feedback Policy and Procedures and the working group who developed a new University Assessment and Feedback Policy comprised student membership from both the University’s Students’ Association and the group of student interns.

Many institutions have undergone policy reviews in this area over recent years; however, such policy reviews have not necessarily led to consistent improvement of practice at ground level. This initiative sought to ensure that students and staff have the knowledge and resources to engage in effective practice, as outlined in the new policy. The student interns involved in this initiative engaged the wider university community of students and staff to develop such resources, to support a process of change, so that promoting effective student learning is central to our assessment and feedback practices. This report outlines the approach taken at the University of Strathclyde, lessons learned, and our next steps.

Aspects of the student learning experience the initiative sought to enhance

Recent National Student Survey (NSS) results indicate that assessment and feedback remains an area of concern for the University of Strathclyde. Away from the NSS, it has also been acknowledged that assessment and feedback practices in higher education require transformation to be fit for purpose, so that they enhance student learning and prepare students for life-long learning (Boud & Falachikov, 2006; The HEA, 2012). This initiative recognises that progress is most likely to be made if all stakeholders (students, academic staff, and professional services) are engaged in the change process, and as such marks a significant stage in the University’s journey to improve assessment and feedback practices across the institution.
Alignment with the HEA Students as Partners framework

The partnership model practiced at Strathclyde reflected various aspects of the HEA’s Students as Partners Framework (shown in Figure 1) at different points in this initiative. The student interns’ project involved ‘co-researching and co-inquiring’ as the students investigated effective practice in published literature and within the institution. Student input into the development of a new University Assessment and Feedback Policy (both in terms of membership of the working group and student representatives seeking wider consultation with the student body) aligns with the ‘quality enhancement’ component of the framework, and the resources developed by students to support the implementation of the policy, as well as the continuing journey to enhancing assessment and feedback in the institution aligns with the ‘co-learning, co-designing, and co-developing’ part of the framework. The initiative was underpinned by an authentic belief that only partnership working will deliver the necessary level of change to assessment and feedback practices. This initiative has largely focussed on change at an institutional level, and while such partnership working is present at other levels within the institution, it perhaps is not yet the norm in approaches to enhancing the student experience of assessment and feedback at all levels (e.g. faculty, programme, and class levels).

Figure 1. HEA Partnership Framework.
Approaches and activities developed

- A partnership approach was adopted by the student interns and staff working together over the summer of 2013. The group of student interns created their own work schedule and worked as a team to conduct an audit of current practices across the institution, taking into account the perspectives of students and staff. The role of staff on the project team was to provide the interns with guidance and support when needed. The students provided staff with updates via weekly presentations to the project team. A main output of the interns’ work was a series of recommendations to the University on improving assessment and feedback practices across the institution.

- An Assessment and Feedback Working Group was established to consider the recommendations made by the student interns and to develop a new University Assessment and Feedback Policy and review of Procedures. This group comprised student and staff representation from the internship project, as well as an academic representative from each of the four faculties, further student representation from the University of Strathclyde’s Students’ Union’s Vice-President for Education, and a representative from Professional Services’ Education Enhancement team. This group met many times during 2013-14 and consulted widely with students and staff in all four faculties and Professional Services. A new Assessment and Feedback Policy, underpinned by four principles of assessment and feedback, was approved by Senate for implementation in 2014-15. The group also reviewed the following related University policies/guidance: Procedures for Assessment and Feedback, Guidance on Assessment and Feedback in Large Classes, The Use of Computers in Examinations, The Use of Turnitin, Guidelines for Online Assessment Submission, Motivational Merit and Distinction, Compensation Scheme and Progress, and Policy on Invigilation in Examinations.

- Two of the student interns who worked in the summer of 2013 (including the intern who sat on the working group) continued to work in the summer of 2014 to create resources to support students and staff in fulfilling their responsibilities in relation to assessment and feedback, as outlined in the new Policy. These students produced a resource for students to communicate their ‘rights and responsibilities’ under the new Policy, and collaborated with staff in writing a guidance booklet for staff on implementing the Policy. Again, the wider student body was consulted in developing these resources. It was recognised that developing students’ understanding of assessment and feedback, their awareness of what they are entitled to, as well as what they are responsible for, is necessary for students to become instrumental in the change process.

- The interns were joined in 2014 by a group of three new student interns whose objective was to develop resources to support students’ reflections on feedback received on assessments. Previous interns developed a university-wide resource to support students with Personal Development Planning (PDP), and the aim of this project was to explicitly communicate to students the importance of reflecting and acting on feedback received on assessments. Again these students consulted with the wider university community and worked as a team to develop a ‘Reflect on your feedback’ resource for students and staff.
This resource was made available to all students on the PDP section of the University’s virtual learning environment (VLE) over the course of the 2014-15 academic year.

Resources

Below is a list of resources already developed:

- A new University Assessment and Feedback Policy, effective from September 2014. [https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/ps/cs/gmap/academicaffairs/policies/assessment_and_feedback_policy_Effective_Sep_14.pdf](https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/ps/cs/gmap/academicaffairs/policies/assessment_and_feedback_policy_Effective_Sep_14.pdf)

- A booklet designed by students for students, ‘Making the most of your assessment and feedback’, to develop students’ assessment and feedback literacy. The aim of the booklet is also to communicate the new Assessment and Feedback Policy to students in terms of what students can expect from the University in this area, and those aspects for which students are responsible. [https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/other/learningteaching/Making_the_most_of_your_assessment_and_feedback.pdf](https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/other/learningteaching/Making_the_most_of_your_assessment_and_feedback.pdf)

- A booklet designed by students and staff for staff, ‘Assessment and feedback for effective student learning: A guide for staff on implementing the University’s Assessment and Feedback Policy’.

- A series of resources, ‘Reflect on your feedback’, designed by students for students to support students’ reflections on feedback received on assessments. Incorporating Gibbs reflective cycle, the resource includes an introduction to the different components of Gibbs reflective cycle and the benefits to students in using it to support reflections on assessments and feedback, as well as a reflective log template which guides students through the components of Gibbs cycle for a given assessment and related feedback.

- A series of staff ‘Reflect on your feedback’ resources, designed by students and staff, for staff, includes posters with QR code linking to the student resource on the University’s VLE, a powerpoint slide for use in induction meetings etc to communicate the resource, and a ‘Reflect on your feedback’ sticker (includes signposting to the online student resource, and is available in electronic and paper formats) that can be added to feedback on assessments.

- Incorporation of the new principles of assessment and feedback into the Class and Course Approval Process.

- Development of the VLE to support implementation of the Assessment and Feedback Policy. For example, the VLE now includes a setting in the online assessment submission tool where staff set a deadline by which feedback will be returned to students. This setting facilitates communication to students about when to expect feedback, and also enables monitoring of adherence to this aspect of the policy i.e. expectation of timing and adherence to the timeframe.
Impact

- On the new principles of assessment and feedback, students were largely positive, with comments such as: "I like it, all my departments do things differently...and it makes it confusing to know what...they need to give to us," and "I like it, it's very clear and easy to understand", but also reflected some skepticism "Sounds good if it will be followed don't feel all points are followed now, especially in feedback terms, with timings and students being aware of criteria", and "Great but good luck getting people to follow them."

- Dissemination activities have included:
  - Publication of ‘Making the most of your assessment and feedback’ booklet for students. The booklet has been distributed to thousands of students across campus, including to new students in induction sessions, and an electronic copy is available on the university website.
  - The University of Strathclyde’s Students’ Union (USSA) ran separate Student Congresses for each faculty, where student representatives met with key faculty and university staff to discuss various aspects of the student experience. A session on assessment and feedback focussed on the published resources and discussed the role of student representatives in transforming assessment and feedback practices at class, programme, and faculty levels.
  - A member of the team involved in this initiative has presented the student interns’ project work and new policy multiple times to new staff taking the PG Certificate in Advanced Academic Practice.
  - External activities have included: A poster presentation at the HEA STEM Conference in 2014, where the team of student interns won the conference prize for ‘Best Student Poster’; and presentations at Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland events (2014-15) and the 2015 International Conference on Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education.

- Evaluation (and monitoring) activities:
  Implementation of the new Assessment and Feedback Policy was effective from September 2014, but it is recognised that the change process is a journey and will take time. Evaluation and monitoring activities will take place across the short, medium, and long term and will include:
  - Monitoring the assessment and feedback strategy noted by classes and degree programmes in relation to the new principles of assessment and feedback via the Class and Course Approval Process (C-CAP) and Internal Review processes.
  - Evaluation of student satisfaction with assessment and feedback via internal (survey sent to all undergraduate students) and national surveys (for example, National Student Survey and Postgraduate Teaching Experience Survey).
  - Data relating to students’ access of online resources, such as the ‘Reflect on your Feedback’ resource. In the months following its launch at the start of the academic year, the four resource documents have been accessed via the VLE by between 208 and 477 users.
- Long term, one may expect to see a reduction in the number of end of module examinations that are scheduled across the institution due to a more diverse range of assessments being used.

- Current developments in the University, such as a University strategy on flexible learning and the development of systems to support learning analytics, may facilitate future evaluation in this area.

• An unexpected and positive impact of this initiative was the extent to which the student interns’ employability was enhanced. Two of the interns who graduated in the summer of 2014 found that graduate employers were interested in their experience of working alongside staff and representing the student voice to influence University policy and practice across the institution; both students successfully attained graduate level employment either prior to graduating or soon after! Again, two members of the intern team who are due to graduate in 2015 are also reporting a high level of interest in their internship from prospective employers.

• At least two recommendations made by the student interns, 1) establishment of a peer mentoring scheme for students, and 2) development opportunities for staff, coincided with USSA’s developing a peer support initiative for students across the university and with the Strathclyde Teaching Excellence Programme (STEP), due to be launched in June 2015 with various development opportunities (including lunchtime workshops) for staff involved in teaching.

**Lessons learned**

- **Key enablers:**
  - Buy-in from across the institution; engagement of students and staff from all faculties.
  - Funding of student interns to facilitate partnership at an institutional level.

- **In hindsight:**
  - The approach taken was holistic in recognising that the transformation of assessment and feedback practices requires engagement of staff in various roles across the institution (for example, Estates). The Assessment and Feedback Working group should have comprised representation from other areas of the University, including those parts of the Student Experience and Enhancement Services that are involved in, for example, timetabling of examinations and return of grades.

**Next steps**

A priority over the coming months is to gather and make available various tools and resources to support students and staff in developing effective assessment and feedback practices.

- **End of summer 2015:** A new ‘Sharing Effective Practice in Learning and Teaching’ platform, hosted within the University’s Learning and Teaching webpage, will showcase case studies proposed by students and staff in all learning and teaching areas, including assessment and feedback.
• End June 2015: The University will launch the new Strathclyde Teaching Excellence Programme (STEP), which will provide a diverse range (topic and format) of teaching development opportunities, including in the areas of assessment and feedback and student-staff partnership working.
• Continuing the conversation with students and staff and building communities of practice.

**Key messages**
• Work done in partnership with students to develop policy and improve practices will make it more likely that outputs align with students’ concerns.
• Acknowledge that students have responsibilities in the assessment and feedback process for practices to be effective, as well as staff involved in teaching and assessment.
• Develop resources and opportunities for students and staff to develop effective practices, in alignment with policy.

**References**