

HEA Assessment and Feedback Change Programme

Birmingham Assessment for Learning Initiative (BALI)

University of Birmingham

Case Study

March 2013

Introduction

Module-focussed assessment has, over time, resulted in some unintended challenges for students (and staff) at programme level. For example, assessment types, timing and load can hamper, rather than drive, effective student learning; feedback practices do not always effectively 'feed forward', and programme level aims can become obscured by a focus on modules. The HEA Change Programme offered us the opportunity to undertake a review using a tried and tested approach (TESTA – Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment), with support from experienced colleagues and ideas exchange between peers from other institutions, in such a way as to introduce new skills to key individuals from the five colleges within the University and central education support unit so that a sustainable approach to assessment and feedback across Programmes can be embedded across the institution.

Approaches and activities developed

- A core team was assembled, comprising a senior academic lead, two academic programme leads and a student member plus the Director of Educational Development from the University's Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD).
- The core team were supported by several researchers who were trained in the TESTA methodology by Dr Tansy Jessop (University of Winchester) to help assemble the data for the audit, assessment evaluation questionnaire and focus groups; the researchers also wrote reports summarising this information.
- A Project Board was set up to coordinate the activities across the University.
- Data and reports were produced for three Programmes (Biochemistry, Psychology in the College of Life & Environmental Sciences; Civil Engineering in the College of Engineering & Physical Sciences) and were considered by the Programme teams; action plans were agreed for changes for the 2012/13 session; there will also be further meetings to discuss more substantial changes in the future.
- The TESTA approach was presented at various teaching fora across the University to make staff aware of the project.
- Several Programmes from two further Colleges (Arts & Law; Social Sciences) were audited and the plan is to cascade the expertise and approach across the University.

Outcomes

- The audits, AEQs and focus groups were completed for Biochemistry, Psychology and Civil Engineering Programmes and reports were produced by the researchers and discussed by the Programme teams during the summer of 2012.
- This was too late to make substantial changes across Programmes for the 2012/13 session but it was possible to take the following actions: (i) introduce peer assessment/review of marked essays using marking criteria in all years, (ii) alter assessment schedules to reduce bunching and to allow feedforward, (iii) replace some summative assessment with formative exercises; (iv) inform students about the different forms of feedback and how to use it effectively.
- A booklet on 'how to perform TESTA' has been produced bringing together the experiences of the team, for use by future researchers and participants.

Meetings with colleagues at Nottingham University were initiated to discuss the possible use of the TESTA approach to audit their Programmes.

Impact

Staff have been impressed with the TESTA approach that provides evidence to enable strategies to be developed for individual programmes. The PVC for Education, Professor Karen O'Brien, has been leading a curriculum review at the University and the approach will be incorporated as part of the strategy adopted to improve assessment and feedback across programmes.

Lessons learned

Enablers:

- The TESTA approach works within an academic culture by providing evidence of current issues (data) on which academic programme teams can then plan and act
- Linking to a large-scale strategic project (curriculum review)
- Employing an experienced administrator for around one half day per week and using formal project techniques to keep on track
- BALI Project Board that met regularly to discuss progress, problems and other issues

Engagement:

- It is important to explain the process fully to staff in the Schools in which the TESTA approach is being used
- It is important to use early adopters to spread the message
- Communicating at many levels, repeatedly, about the project e.g. at senior fora or colleague to colleague

Next steps

- Continue to cascade the approach across programmes in the five Colleges
- Link to the curriculum review in the University and the development of an updated learning and teaching strategy
- Produce case studies in how TESTA can be applied across various disciplines within one institution, via publication of final reports, including 'lessons learned,' and examples of good practice identified during the investigation

Key messages

- A Project Board allows coordination of this approach across the University
- Administrators and researchers can help with the data gathering, processing of this data and the writing of reports
- A timeline of assessment and feedback is a key component of the audit and allows structuring of assessments across programmes to be planned more effectively
- It is important to collect the data by the end of March/April in order to give sufficient time for Programme teams to use this to make changes to the Programme for the following session
- It is difficult to recruit students to e.g. focus groups once the revision period and exams have begun in the summer term

Project Team

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