



HEA Viewpoint, August 2016

The case for  
**transforming  
assessment** in  
higher education

Dr Sam Elkington, Academic Lead,  
Assessment & Feedback

TRANSFORMING TEACHING. INSPIRING LEARNING.

Assessment is at the heart of many challenges now facing higher education. In light of government plans to reform higher education in England, as set out in the White Paper: 'Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice', together with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), Sam Elkington, the HEA's Academic Lead on Assessment and Feedback, makes the case for a significant, sector-wide, reappraisal of assessment strategy, policy and practice. He argues that the onset of TEF brings about considerable opportunity to shift the gaze of leaders and decision-makers onto new institutional approaches to assessment and refers to the HEA's Framework for Transforming Assessment to ask some important questions about the fidelity and reach of university assessment and whether institutions are, in fact, TEF ready.

---

### We must transform our conceptualisation of assessment to make visible a lasting sense of educational value for students

---

Assessment of student learning is a fundamental function of higher education and is likely to prove crucial in delivering value to students amidst the shifting discourse of 'excellence' in higher education, however defined. Currently only a quarter of students believe that their university course delivers value for money – this is a problematic statistic for two reasons: firstly, and more immediately worrying for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), is the fact that students are not seeing the desired return on their investment. Secondly, such a transactional view of educational value envelopes a pervasive attitude of 'acquisition' in students' approaches to learning – this, for me, is the real crux of the matter. The portrayal of student achievement is clearly important, but in the process of giving attention to

certification of student performance and maintenance of academic standards, we have pushed into the background a concern for learning and the necessary assessment practices which need to accompany it. Ironically, we have given insufficient attention to those aspects of assessment that contribute most to students' ability to learn for themselves – a prerequisite to students fully realising a sense of learning gain. The challenge before us is clear – we need to think differently not just about 'what' we are assessing and 'how' we are doing it, but also 'why'; our rationale for assessing on any particular occasion in any context. In short, we must transform our conceptualisation of assessment to make visible a lasting sense of educational value for students.

A greater focus on improving university assessment is justified by its direct and significant impact on the quality of student learning. Assessment tells students what is valued and what they need to achieve to be successful in their

studies; it captures their attention and directs their behaviour; it may act as both spur and/or deterrent for students in their studies; it informs them of their progress, which in turn, impacts on how they see themselves as individuals, and future professionals; and, following from these results, it may provide satisfaction or discouragement. Furthermore, assessment continues to be a major factor in the exclusion and attrition of students.

---

### There is firm evidence that assessment is not successfully meeting the needs of students, as results of the recent NSS demonstrate

---

It is also the means by which we assure and express academic standards and has a vital impact on staff time, university reputations, league tables and, most important of all, students' future lives. When considered against this backdrop, the cost of unsophisticated



assessment practice can be high. Indeed, there is firm evidence that assessment is not successfully meeting the needs of students, as results of the recent NSS demonstrate; while sector average satisfaction with teaching on courses has remained unchanged at 87% between 2015 and 2016, once again it is assessment and feedback that scores lowest overall at 74%.

---

## Assessment practices in most universities have not kept pace with the vast changes in the context, aims and structure of higher education

---

This evidence makes visible what researchers in the field have known for many years: assessment practices in most universities have not kept pace with the vast changes in the context, aims and structure of higher education. They can no longer do justice to the outcomes expected from a university education in relation to wide-ranging knowledge, skills and employability. The rising

demands of fee-paying students, the increasing financial pressures on institutions and the need to now not only maintain high academic standards, but to evidence a demonstrable commitment to teaching excellence at institution and discipline level are going to place extra strain on already vulnerable assessment practices.

And yet, even amidst such unprecedented change and challenge facing university assessment, there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the future in relation to what transforming assessment could achieve. It is an opportunity to re-establish learning and standards rather than measurement and grades as central to effective assessment and, crucially, to return to a focus on students as learners. It is a chance to think differently about how we put the significant resources devoted to assessment to better use to support learning, safeguard standards, improve retention and increase student approval – to improve assessment’s fitness for purpose generally.

This is particularly important in the context of how teaching quality is to be captured and measured as part of

---

## It now seems increasingly clear that questions 5 through 9 on the NSS will be used to foreground assessment-facing items to be included in subsequent iterations of TEF

---

the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Though metrics at this stage remain indicative, it now seems increasingly clear that questions 5 through 9 on the National Student Survey will be used to foreground assessment-facing items to be included in subsequent iterations of TEF. We must take care, however, to widen the lens through which assessment is viewed, since it is now generally accepted that the focus of existing metrics is misplaced when it comes to capturing the ‘quality’ of students’ assessment experiences. No one can deny the importance of clear marking criteria or timely and detailed feedback supporting student understanding to promote learning; however, assessment that is fit-for-

purpose will need to reflect different institutional contexts and priorities, and, at the very least, entail changes related to assessment design, student and staff engagement, and infrastructure.

Such change would see assessment methods diversified at the point of design to improve their validity, authenticity and inclusivity, making them clearly relevant and worthwhile in the eyes of students. Furthermore, sustainable assessment in which preparation for future learning and assessment is incorporated into assessment priorities at all levels will be a key element in such design. Students would be offered greater partnership in and through assessment, with a clear voice in institutional and programme-level decision-making regarding assessment. Efforts would be made to increase their understanding and trust in assessment through greater opportunity for self- and peer review, providing them with information about assessment standards and embedding support for study skills and academic integrity. The assessment literacy of academic staff would be paramount, as



---

## Assessment is set to be hotly debated in academic circles as institutions work to showcase their continued commitment to enhancing teaching quality and its lasting impact on student success

---

would a clear commitment to the continued professional development of staff regarding their assessment practice. Assessment processes would also see available technologies established and effectively harnessed to enhance assessment practice, improve feedback and streamline assessment information and administration. Regulations would be reviewed to promote assessment change and students' achievements would be communicated in fair and consistent ways. These features could be used as part of the additional indicative evidence offered in support of an institution's TEF submission as part

of a coherent narrative to provide a clear account of their contribution to and impact on teaching quality and student learning. Assessment is set to be hotly debated in academic circles as institutions work to showcase their continued commitment to enhancing teaching quality and its lasting impact on student success. Are we assessing the right kind of things? Is assessment fair and reliable? Does assessment help students to develop the skills they need for lifelong learning? What kinds of assessment task are most promising in supporting student learning? Do we over assess our students? What kinds of feedback process can most effectively inform students about their progress and prompt ongoing improvement? The most compelling cases will be those able to demonstrate holistic and integrated approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Such co-ordinated institutional activity is crucial in transforming assessment practice.

To this end, the HEA's framework for Transforming Assessment in Higher Education is designed to help higher education institutions, and their different constituent elements such as faculties, schools, departments and programmes, to review current policy and practice in assessment and feedback, with a view to radically rethinking their assessment strategy.

---

## The Framework is aimed at any member of staff who has a responsibility and interest in assessment matters

---

In that sense, it is aimed at any member of staff who has a responsibility and interest in assessment matters. In particular, it will be of use to those with responsibility, both centrally and in subject areas, for learning, teaching and assessment quality assurance and enhancement.

The framework offers an opportunity for your institution

and/or its constituent parts to reflect on what is working well, but then to take an honest and open look at what needs to change in different areas of activity in order to transform understanding and practice of assessment. More crucially, the process can help to highlight effective practices for dissemination both internally and externally.

The framework is intended to recognise local autonomy and context, raise awareness, engage a wider constituency, and facilitate dialogue and development within and between different units across an institution and can be used to inform teaching, learning and assessment strategy and to refine, revise or develop aspects of assessment, as appropriate. How this process is undertaken and realised will very much depend on institutional context and priorities.

It is important for us to keep in mind that all assessment is situated in the local context and in the particular traditions, expectations and needs of different universities, specialist institutions and academic disciplines.

Consequently, the framework does not prescribe standardised changes, but creates a framework for self-assessment and evidence-informed planning based on established knowledge of effective assessment practice. It can be used to evaluate and benchmark existing approaches and inform future developments and directions. The onus is very much on institutions to develop and critically evaluate assessment processes and procedures, as they are used and developed within their local context, comprising students, tutors, resources, regulations, and disciplinary and professional requirements.

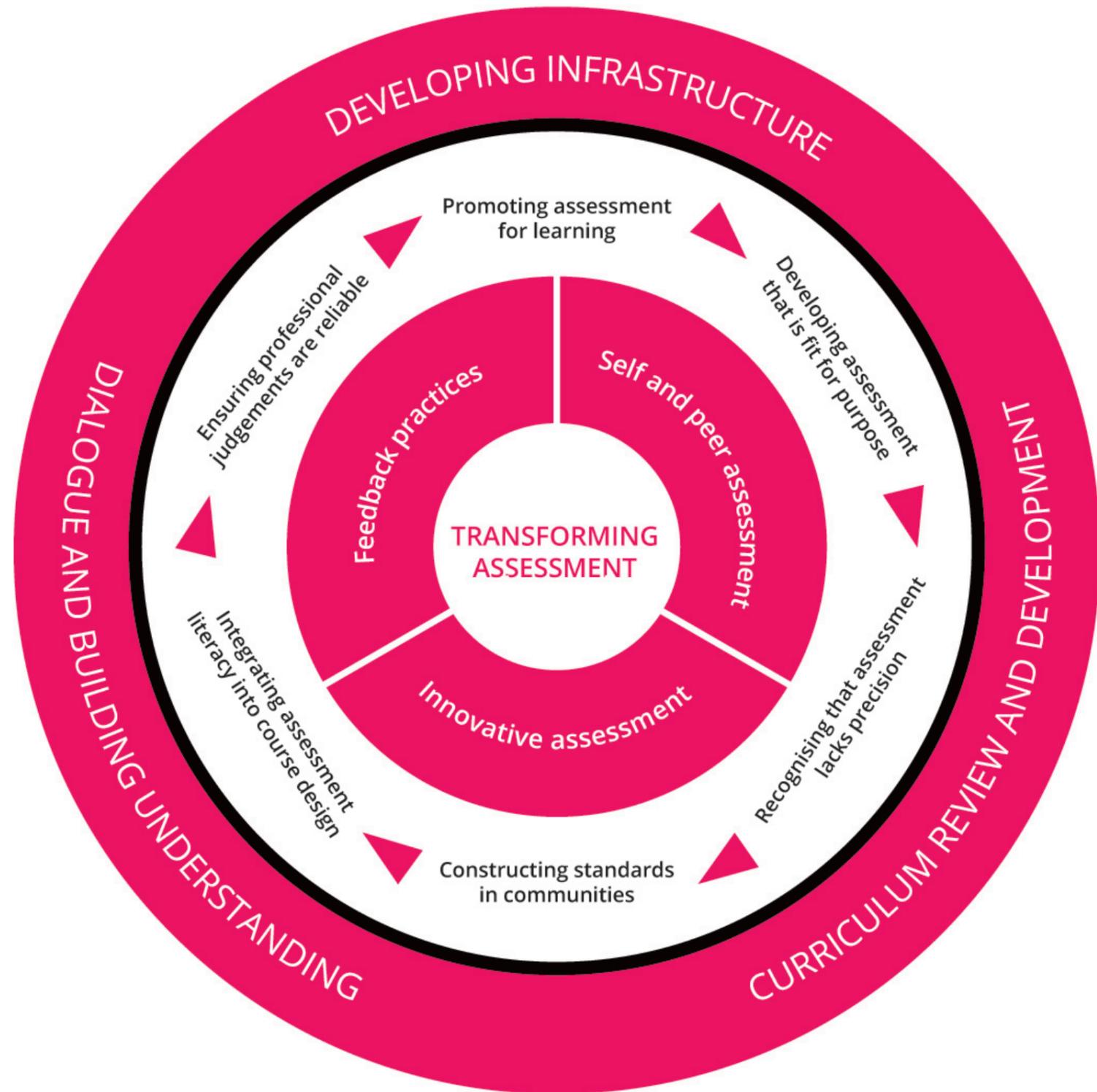
In this way, the HEA Framework for Transforming Assessment in Higher Education encapsulates an enquiry-based and evidence-informed approach for thinking differently about university assessment, and is a first step towards bringing about necessary changes in policy and practice as institutions prepare for, and build toward realisation of excellence in university teaching.

**Dr Sam Elkington is the HEA's Academic Lead on Assessment & Feedback**

[samuel.elkington@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:samuel.elkington@heacademy.ac.uk)

To download this and the other frameworks contained in our frameWORKS series, go to:

[www.heacademy.ac.uk/services/consultancy#section-best-practice](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/services/consultancy#section-best-practice)



© Higher Education Academy, 2015

# Take the next step

in enhancing student success in  
your programme, department,  
faculty, school or institution.

Email us at [consultancy@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:consultancy@heacademy.ac.uk)

Visit [www.heacademy.ac.uk/transform](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/transform)

or call us on +44 (0)1904 717 550

 #HEAframeWORKS



TRANSFORMING TEACHING. INSPIRING LEARNING.