Impact case study:  
Supporting the TESTA project to improve assessment and feedback

HEA collaboration with the University of Winchester

Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA) is a National Teaching Fellow research and development project led by the University of Winchester and supported by the HEA from 2009-2012. The aim of TESTA is to enhance the student learning experience by providing evidence to programme leaders about assessment and feedback patterns. This evidence then helps programme teams identify ways of improving assessment design to achieve better learning outcomes.

TESTA was led by a team from the University of Winchester in partnership with three similar institutions - Bath Spa, Chichester and Worcester. The project maps data from eight programmes to build a picture of assessment and feedback and the impact for students’ learning. At the same time, TESTA engages with senior managers to deepen understanding about the links between quality assurance frameworks and programme-level changes to assessment.

Dr Tansy Jessop, Senior Fellow in Teaching and Learning at the University of Winchester, who led the project, said: “If we want to build confident and competent students who are intent on learning, then our curriculum design and assessment needs to be smart enough to weave the two goals together.”

TESTA was originally trialled as a research method on assessment processes by the world-renowned expert in learning and teaching, Professor Graham Gibbs. With the help of the HEA, the project has since grown into a change process which has impacted over 25 institutions in the UK and internationally, including universities in Australia and India.

The TESTA approach uses data to identify any problem areas within an institution’s assessment and feedback process so that programme leaders can intervene. It’s also possible to compare data between institutions, identify assessment patterns and the consequences of different interventions.

Tansy explained that university programme leaders have been very enthusiastic about getting together to discuss how they do things, because often they “do the specification for programme validation in a lonely way, in an ivory tower, pulling in modules by email and they don’t necessarily discuss the pedagogy of assessment and feedback with their colleagues.”

The team has trained over a dozen researchers at other universities to implement TESTA and has built an open source website with tools to support implementation.

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With support from the HEA, the impact of the project has gone beyond the original research at undergraduate level, and programme leaders at several universities in the UK are now using it on Masters programmes.

“HEA support made it easy for degree programmes and whole institutions to opt in and get help to use the approach. There were ‘early wins’ with dramatic improvements in a range of National Student Survey (NSS) scores for degree programmes within a year, and take-up since has been phenomenal. The HEA Change Academy programme brought in another seven institutions, and the take-up and impact has been hugely exceeded.”

Professor Graham Gibbs, leading international expert in HE learning and teaching.

Dr Sean Brawley, Associate Dean (Education) of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia found that TESTA saved their staff a third of the time that they were spending on assessment and feedback because they started using more formative assessment and less summative assessment. It’s now being used across two Faculties at UNSW.

Professor Graham Gibbs explained that the issue of improving assessment and feedback is a “very wide concern” and praised the HEA for supporting TESTA.

“TESTA had largely been disseminated through educational research journals with narrow readership,” Graham said. “HEA support made it easy for degree programmes and whole institutions to opt in and get help to use the approach. There were ‘early wins’ with dramatic improvements in a range of National Student Survey (NSS) scores for degree programmes within a year, and take-up since has been phenomenal. The HEA Change Academy programme brought in another seven institutions, and the take-up and impact has been hugely exceeded.”

He added that TESTA “continues to be taken up across the UK and internationally on a self-funded basis, with the necessary expertise now held by an increasing number of people at a range of institutions.”