Evidence Informed Quality Improvement (EQUIP) Change Programme

Sustainable Assessment: Applying programme assessment reflection to promote staff/student engagement with principles supporting the enhancement of students’ learning experience

University of Kent Case Study

Introduction

The University of Kent is made up of three Faculties, each with around seven Schools and one or two Centres (discipline area with less than 500 students). While NSS scores overall are good, the Assessment and Feedback score shows that Assessment is an area for improvement at Kent. Several assessment enhancement initiatives have been undertaken across the Institution, but these have largely been based within Schools targeting School activities.

One such initiative was the assessment reflection process built on TESTA-based methodology. This contextualised approach has been used since 2011 to explore the student experience of assessment and feedback within Schools, particularly in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

From the assessment reflection data and NSS results, it became evident that there are common themes around the design of individual assessments and the coherence of assessment structures within programmes that are working against principles of assessment for learning (Gibbs: assessment designed to support deep learning) and sustainable assessment (Boud: assessment as preparation for lifelong learning).

For these reasons, it was decided to implement a broader Faculty wide project around assessment design to enhance the students’ learning experience by embedding the above principles in the design process for module and programme assessments.

Aspects of the student learning experience the initiative sought to enhance

Concerns raised by students fall into two broad categories: firstly having clear and transparent assessment requirements; and secondly, receiving useful, useable and timely feedback. These aspects of assessment are clearly linked, and our initiative aims to address both through providing resources and guidance around assessment design and provision of feedback. In addition, we aimed to improve the students’ understanding of the assessment rationale and thereby their engagement with the learning process.

The project aimed to achieve clarity and transparency in the purpose and requirements of assessment by providing consistent terminology and parameters about assessment formats and types; encouraging staff to link module learning outcomes to each assessment task and associated
feedback; supporting inclusive assessment design; and facilitating constructive alignment of assessment and feedback design.

**Approaches and activities developed**

It was our deliberate intention to link our goals with recognised institutional strategies and aims; to align resources within existing school and faculty processes and to use existing projects and information to support our own data requirements.

We planned to:

- produce, disseminate and implement Faculty Assessment and Feedback Design Guidance and Assessment Profile to enhance student experience through coherent, consistent assessment and feedback design and processes;
- improve the quality of contact hours through guiding improved feedback / feed forward processes;
- foster better collaboration across Schools and between students and staff;
- encourage greater engagement of students in Schools’ own assessment reflection processes in the future;
- produce case study and conference materials for the wider dissemination of our experiences and findings.

We formed a project team of five to meet monthly. Team members represented staff (central services and schools, academic and administrative roles) and students. In consultation with stakeholders we established the initial requirements of schools and the type of resource that could best suit staff and students.

- Schools were asked to provide module information related to the list of assessment types compiled from TESTA data. Where possible, details about assessments were mapped using module guides and module specifications; occasionally academic staff supplied all of the necessary details.
- Student representatives were asked to collect feedback about the type of information that students would find useful in any resources and how that information should best be presented.
- Quality Assurance Office supplied information about regulatory requirements and incorporated links to the resource within their website where relevant.
- The Faculties Office was consulted regarding the flow of processes involved in module approvals and how this could be incorporated into the guidance for using the assessment development resource.
- Models of good practice were identified in the sector and adapted where it was felt beneficial.

EQUIP team meetings were held monthly during the 2013/2014 academic year. These allowed the team to discuss ideas for resources to be produced, ways they might be embedded in school and faculty procedures and most importantly, ways that individual staff might be encouraged or motivated to engage with both the project and the use of the resources. In addition, two staff attended HEA facilitation days in September 2013 and 2014. The whole team attended a two-day workshop in January 2014.
It was decided that there would be a project launch event and a network developed to promote the project made up of 'champions' from each School. Champions agreed to this role during individual meetings where the project aims were discussed and the role of the 'champion' was explained. The project was launched on 19 February 2014 and staff attending were asked to provide feedback on the overall project aims, as well as the resources under development.

The project was also presented at two educational development conferences: one in the UK (SEDA), one in Sweden (ICED). From these, collaborative work has been started with other institutions to expand the appeal of the assessment resource.

**Resources**
The following resources are under development except where indicated.

*Assessment and Feedback Design Resource*
Online resource on assessment design using principles of constructive alignment. This includes information on linking levels and learning outcomes; writing and using learning outcomes, assessment criteria and feedback, plus generic exemplars. [completed]

*Assessment Profile*
Online resources mapping descriptions, weightings and formats of different assessment types used across the Faculty. Sample learning outcomes are included plus information on reasonable adjustments.

*Guidance for Assessment Design*
Printable information on points to consider when designing assessment and feedback at module and programme level. This guidance links the online resources to printable mapping templates to allow schools to review existing assessment patterns and to design coherent assessment regimes across programmes.

*Top ten tips…*
A series of pre-existing pdfs on aspects of assessment design which have been amended and incorporated into the overall assessment design resources. [completed]

Interactive assessment mapping tool: Online tool for staff and students to map programme assessment patterns at either the personal, programme or School level.
Impact

The fundamental intention of this project was to incorporate sustainable assessment design practice into School procedures and processes across the Faculty of Social Science. The project contributed to the Faculty plan by providing a pathway to enhancing learning and teaching through informing the development of the Faculty of Social Sciences Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fund which is a competitive source of funding for L&T projects within and across Schools.

Project resources are being piloted in the School of Economics to develop programme and module assessment design by applying the assessment tools to the assessment types, patterns, weighting and marking criteria used by the School.

The project is being used by several School Directors of Learning and Teaching to link their school activities with Faculty and Institutional strategic plans. Further, in discussion about School NSS results, links are being made to EQUIP project as part of the portfolio of tools being used to develop Assessment and Feedback scores in those Schools which had been involved directly in the initial stages of the project. It is anticipated that this will lead to a wider engagement with the project and associated resources across the Faculty.

An unexpected impact has been the use of this project to evidence and inform University level actions in meeting the requirements of quality assurance. Two team members are members of the newly formed Assessment and Feedback Steering Group which has been charged with writing a new Assessment Policy for the University. The steering group was formed in response to publication of the QAA Section B6 and is reviewing information gathered from various sources including EQUIP project. The EQUIP project is also being used to evidence relevant University activities for the purposes of the Higher Education Review (2015).

Participation in the EQUIP project is being cited by Schools in applications for funding for L&T projects from the Faculty L&T Enhancement Fund. Schools are being encouraged to apply for this funding for joint enhancement initiatives. This will further the interdisciplinary collaborative approach to developing the student experience begun by involving the Champions Network from different Schools in the Faculty in the project.

Information from EQUIP is being used to explore links with the new student data system which might also be used in the development of the interactive assessment mapping tool.
Lessons learned

A key lesson from this project is the importance of having team members whose role is primarily to further the work of the project. In this instance, there was only one team member whose role was to work mainly on projects, and EQUIP was not the primary work focus. Other team members had several conflicting demands on their time, as did the larger network of staff working on promoting EQUIP.

This lack of resourcing in terms of staff time led to delays in work being completed and in the development of particular planned resources which required either devoted time or particular expertise to complete.

Another lesson was appreciating the amount of time necessary to develop an actively engaged network of champions and to maintain the personal contact required to encourage School/staff engagement with the project and the developing resources.

Principles of change management outline difficulties of embedding change successfully and our approach has been to embed change incrementally. This requires time for momentum to accrue plus time of team members to foster the change ideas at individual levels. While Schools agree with the principles of the project, embedding the full process across the board is a much longer process and requires integration as far as possible with existing systems. It will also require resourcing to provide adequate staff time to maintain the momentum achieved so far.

Next steps

Short term
The immediate goal of the project is to finalise the resources and get information from the pilot School about benefits and challenges of applying the materials to their assessment processes. The resources and feedback will then be demonstrated to other Schools via a ‘roadshow’; i.e. an informal drop in session held in a convenient location for School staff.

Medium term
We aim to increase uptake of the resources incrementally and ultimately have Schools adopt the assessment mapping and review process as part of their regular School based module design process.

The work presented at the two conferences will be written up for publication.

Longer term
In addition to building up the use of project resources by individuals and Schools, we aim to provide a quality approval process (or checklist) whereby alignment with the project goals can be used in support of the assessment relevant aspects of University level programme design and periodic review processes. This would mean that in the longer term, the outputs from the project would be used and applied by the University as a whole, rather than existing within one faculty only. To initiate this process, links are being made in the Assessment Profile Guidance to show how steps in the assessment design process are linked to School and Faculty office processes as
well as to support provided with the Curriculum Developers. By showing the new process as integrated within existing systems, it is anticipated that this will facilitate acceptance of EQUIP project goals as the norm.

The information and resources generated by EQUIP in Social Sciences will be used to inform the work of the Assessment and Feedback Steering Group which is responsible for writing the new Assessment Policy; reviewing and enhancing assessment and feedback practices; and disseminating good practice and current thinking on assessment and feedback across the University. This strategic alignment of the project and University goals is anticipated to provide opportunities for embedding project resources at a much wider level than otherwise possible.

**Key messages**

The EQUIP project was brought to Kent at a time when assessment was the focus of several existing enhancement initiatives. This, along with the publication of the QAA Section B6 on Assessment (October 2014) and the review of Kent (planned for March 2015) provided an ideal environment for the dissemination of the project's ideas and resources. By being able to link the project's aims with existing institutional strategic goals and immediate concerns, the project gained far more support and recognition than would otherwise have been possible.

In addition:
- find supporters who are in a high enough position to act;
- look for opportunities to embed the project where not expected and to address ongoing university concerns;
- allow time to achieve project goals and to create the supportive networks necessary to fully embed the work of the project team;
- have a dedicated project team member (or at least those with time set aside for project work);
- consider the expertise of team members;
- recognise the importance of consultation with all stakeholders.