



Digest of online resources relating to assessment

Rebecca Johnson

Summary

This article is particularly designed to support UK Higher Education subject teams who are preparing for Academic Review. In the UK, the assessment of student learning is the subject of close scrutiny by those who seek to ensure that assessment strategies, methods and approaches link closely together with learning outcomes and are fully integrated with effective student learning. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) has been in the vanguard in building on existing good practice to promote effective and efficient assessment.

The following digest offers details of a range of online resources that will provide colleagues in those subject areas about to enter the next round of academic review with an overview of resources relating to assessment. Included here are links to projects which were supported by the HEFCE Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), which arose from identified good practice in the last round of QAA Subject Review.

The digest also provides subject teams and others with links to relevant QAA documentation. See particularly the QAA Code of Practice section on the [Assessment of Students](#).

Biography

Dr Rebecca Johnson is currently Research Fellow at the University of Northumbria, helping subject groups in the School of Humanities to prepare for the new round of academic review. Previously, she co-ordinated research for the Assessment & the Expanded Text Project (FDTL-funded) across four university departments of English. She has published articles on both assessment and post-war literary culture.

Keywords

benchmarking, programme specification, QAA, integrated assessment, feedback, quality assurance

Introduction

22 subject communities have now completed their [subject benchmarking documents](#). These documents provide 'broad frameworks within which providers can develop programmes which respond to students' needs' and contribute to the maintenance of 'degree standards' (Politics). Assessment has a key role to play in meeting both agendas. Our five point assessment manifesto is a distillation of the recommendations subject communities make to their members. The digest of resources which follows each point is designed to help staff by providing links to case studies and relevant resources.

1. Assessment should be an integral component of course design.

A number of the subject benchmarking documents state the need for departments to devise assessment strategies which reflect the learning outcomes of programmes, (e.g. Archaeology, Geography, Computing). The new QAA review

methodology requires that this be done by producing [programme specifications](#) which clearly articulate the purpose and function of assessment as students progress through levels of study. A sample programme specification which maps out these links for Art History can be viewed by [clicking here](#) and selecting attributes of a Leicester graduate. Alternative sample programme specifications can be accessed [here](#).

As subjects produce programme specifications it may be possible for some to identify common learning outcomes and to pool 'high quality' assessment practices. 30 university departments are currently trialling a computer-based assessment system which enables objective [online assessment](#) of basic knowledge key skills and understanding taught in geography, geology, medicine, psychology and veterinary science. Equally, as departments gain an overview of their assessment practices they may wish to [streamline and reduce](#) assessment. Alternatively, departments with strong research profiles may like to consider shaping their curriculum to involve students more fully in their [research cultures](#) to prepare them for a substantial third level project.

2. Assessment should be explicit, valid, reliable and appropriate.

To meet this requirement the subject benchmarking documents recommend that assessment criteria should be made public that the purposes of assessment should be clear and that there should be procedures in place to keep assessment under rolling review. In doing so they follow the [QAA code of practice](#). A range of Institutional strategies for Teaching & Learning (including statements on assessment) can be compared here. Several cite the importance of key skills to their programmes. The [Management of Change](#) project includes case studies of various departments who have inculcated, developed and assessed key skills. The History benchmarking document appends suggested [criteria](#) for written work.

3. Assessment should play a positive role in the learning experiences of students. Assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn.

Several benchmarking documents suggest that assessment has an important role to play in guiding learning. A few go further, suggesting that students should feel ownership of their assessment (e.g. Computing) . Asking students to maintain portfolios and profiles on work placements for Law and Applied Social Work is one way of developing a student's skill at self-reflection and self-monitoring. These practices can actively engage students with their learning. (The site also includes guidelines to staff and students.) Involving students in the assessment process can also be an effective way of helping staff to become more aware of the impact of assessment on students and to monitor progress. Baker, I. and Bannister, P. [Self-Assessment](#) demonstrates how the introduction of a simple self-assessment form enhances staff/student dialogue about assessment. Other examples of self-and peer- assessment can be found by searching the [Geography Discipline Network](#).

4. Assessment should be diverse.

All benchmarking documents agree that programmes of study should offer a variety of assessments. Rationale for this ranges from 'assessment should reflect the range of learning outcomes' (Geography); variety provides 'interpersonal and transferable skills for employers' (Librarianship and Information Management); assessment should include a mix of methods 'that are, overall, accessible to students from varying educational and cultural backgrounds' (Archaeology). Forms of assessment which the benchmarking documents suggest could be used to create this variety include: variations on the essay and traditional 3-hour 8-question exam; coursework; project work; dissertations; oral assessment; work-based learning reports; portfolio; practical tasks and online assessments. Databases of these various assessments are available for [Geography](#) and [English Literature](#). More specialised case studies which may suit your own specific requirements (for example [phonetic training and assessment](#); [Assessment of groupwork](#)) can be accessed by [clicking here](#). For insight into the wide range of computer-assisted assessments being considered by various universities go to the [Computer Assisted Assessment Centre](#).

5. Assessment should allow students feedback on learning and performance.

Formative assessment has a prominent place in all the subject benchmarks. It is viewed primarily as an opportunity for students to practice and rehearse communicating the knowledge, skills and understanding upon which their final degree result rests. Online resources show that formative assessment frequently takes place in conjunction with tutorial or groupwork. They also show that increased student numbers have encouraged several subjects to develop ways to introduce formative assessment without increasing staff workloads. For example, the [electronic design studio](#) allows Architecture students to practice designing online and hosts examples of previous students' work. Case studies for [ASTER](#) (Assisting Small Group Teaching through Electronic Resources), show a variety of ways in which C&IT resources can be used to support small group teaching by setting computer based exercises which are part of an

assessment strategy. Two use electronic resources to help students plan long research projects (**Psychology**; **English**). Similar use can be made of software viewable from the **Physical Sciences LTSN**. Other examples of self-and peer-assessment used formatively can be found on the **Geography** and **English Literature** resource sites.

Note: Please note that the links recommended here are only a small sample of those available. As the **Subject Centres** start to develop it is expected that they will host and create resource databases similar to those identified here.

This digest was compiled by Dr Rebecca Johnson, University of Northumbria, December 2000.