

Five Insights for Improving University Assessment Practices

“From our students’ point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum” – Ramsden

Effective assessment and feedback are fundamental to successful curricula. At the same time, educators across the higher education sector find it challenging to create excellent assessment designs and provide helpful feedback. These five insights to improve assessment are intended to assist *learning and teaching (L&T) leaders* in improving assessment practice in their institutions. They are drawn from education scholarship, practitioner expertise and in-depth interviews with university educators.

1. Good assessment practice is about educators

- ✓ Innovative and excellent assessment practices are instigated, shared and developed by educators, either individually or in teams
- ✓ Good assessment happens regardless of policy – educators often don’t refer to policy documents
- ✓ Sharing effective strategies will support and engage local assessment innovators and experts.

Action: identifying local exemplars both rewards innovators and assists to normalise good practice.

2. Good assessment practice is supported

- ✓ Educators need time to design assessments
- ✓ Assessment is an expert practice and educators express a variety of needs for help with assessment, including expert support
- ✓ Frameworks and models help guide assessment design within the constraints of real practice (for example, see www.assessmentdecisions.org).

Action: identify the supports and resources required for successful assessment within a department, faculty or institution.

3. Peer review improves assessment

- ✓ Peer review is a powerful method for improving assessment; it improves quality and shares innovative practice
- ✓ Peer review can be both formal and informal and ranges from corridor chats to formal review days to Faculty Education Committee submissions
- ✓ The formal and informal approaches are best balanced, so that peer review is widespread but not cumbersome.

Action: leaders can implement changes to provide appropriate amounts of formal and informal opportunity for peer review.

4. Effective assessment procedures balance prescription and flexibility

- ✓ Tensions exist between the need to ensure quality/certainty (often through handbook policy/procedures) and the need for responsiveness in assessment practice
- ✓ If procedures are too prescriptive, they will stifle innovation, lock in assessment or be ignored
- ✓ If procedures are too flexible, there is a lack of certainty and cohesion across program/institution.

Action: feedback links between educators and those responsible for policy/procedures can assist in ensuring the right balance between quality regulation and responsiveness.

5. Good assessment happens when L&T leaders in faculties/schools/departments are engaged

- ✓ 'Chalkface' or local L&T leaders are very influential in assessment (e.g. Assistant Deans of Education, Heads of Department, program coordinators)
- ✓ Often L&T leaders are the main interface between policy/procedures and practice
- ✓ Targeted support for local L&T leaders through professional development, resourcing and expert advice, may have a broad impact on assessment practice.

Action: value local L&T leadership and identify ways for these leaders to improve assessment in their faculty/department.

For more information about improving assessment practice see: www.assessmentdecisions.org

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