

International perspectives on assessment practice in Higher Education

Perspectivas internacionales sobre la práctica de la evaluación en Educación Superior

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Resumen

La evaluación universitaria varía considerablemente de unos países a otros, con diferentes expectativas sobre estándares y niveles, sobre qué son las buenas prácticas de evaluación y sobre los auténticos propósitos de la evaluación, así como la terminología especializada que se usa y qué prácticas se consideran aceptables. La gama de métodos y enfoques que se utilizan es igualmente muy variada, al igual que las expectativas sobre cómo debe darse y utilizarse la retroalimentación. Los sistemas de evaluación son administrados en diferentes formas a nivel mundial y no hay un acuerdo sobre qué es una buena conducta académica. El artículo plantea que tanto los académicos como los estudiantes pueden beneficiarse de orientación y formación sobre evaluación, y aboga por el diálogo sobre la manera de mejorar la evaluación, de modo que esté verdaderamente integrada en el proceso de aprendizaje.

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Abstract

University assessment varies significantly across nations, with diverse expectations about standards and levels, what comprises good assessment practice and the actual purposes of assessment, as well as the specialist terminology in use and which practices are considered acceptable. The range of methods and approaches in use is similarly highly variable, together with expectations on how feedback is to be given and used. Assessment systems are managed in different ways globally and there is no common accord on what comprises good academic conduct. The article proposes that both academics and students can benefit from induction and training on assessment, and argues for continuing dialogue on how to enhance assessment, so it is truly integrated within the learning process.

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Many globally regard assessment dilemmas as the most crucial matters that require being addressed in higher education nowadays. Assessment in times of freely available curriculum materials, Massive Online Courses (MOOCs) and open educational learning resources is the crucial locus of engagement between students and the academic staff who teach them. However, assessment practices are

not common to all nations across the world, with significant divergences in expectations and requirements.

The importance of devising and developing effective assessment systems and strategies cannot be over-stated. Sadler (2010a) proposes:

Assessment is a high-stakes activity for students, and has a major impact on how

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they approach learning. Regardless of innovations in assessment techniques, developments in interpretive frameworks and increased adaptability made possible by new and forthcoming technologies, the core activities that cover the design and production of appropriate assessment tasks, the emphasis on higher order cognitive outcomes, the criteria for appraisal, the assignment and interpretation of marks and grades, and the overall maintenance of academic standards clearly remain ongoing responsibilities for the higher education enterprise as a whole. (p. 254)

Indeed, as Boud and the 49 other senior managers and educational developers who worked on the Australian project Assessment 2020, which defined proposals for higher education assessment reform argue:

Assessment is a central feature of teaching and the curriculum. It powerfully frames how students learn and what students achieve. It is one of the most significant influences on students' experience of higher education and all that they gain from it. The reason for an explicit focus on improving assessment practice is the huge impact it has on the quality of learning (Boud & Associates, 2010: 1)

They were not alone in taking a strategic assessment approach at a national level to improving assessment. A similar approach was taken by the UK Higher Education Academy's 'Transforming Assessment' project, with the linked publication 'A Marked Improvement' (2012) which explores how to improve assessment systematically at an institutional level. This proposes six tenets or principles for good practice, with templates enabling institutions to review their institutional and local assessment practices. The HEA guide proposes that:

Assessment of student learning is a fundamental function of higher education. It is the means by which we assure and express academic standards and has a vital impact on student behaviour, staff time, university reputations, league tables and,

most of all, students' future lives. The [UK] National Student Survey, despite its limitations, has made more visible what researchers in the field have known for many years: assessment in our universities is far from perfect. (HEA, 2012: 7)

Further national initiatives to improve assessment in Ireland (O'Neill, Huntley Moore & Race, 2007), China, Singapore, New Zealand and Spain (López Pastor, 2009; Rodríguez_Gómez & Ibarra_Saiz, 2011) and elsewhere indicate a global quest to improve assessment.

Towards international concord on standards and levels

The Bologna process began in 1999 as a commitment by 29 European governments to pursue complementary higher education reforms in order to establish a 'European Higher Education area' of compatible national systems (Bologna process 1999). Subsequently it came to encompass 45 European nations as full members with representation of other bodies including students, quality assurance agencies, employers and academic trade unions. A key aim was to make university qualifications more easily comparable across Europe, offering a three-tiered progression framework covering Undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral programmes (Keeling, 2006 p 203-4). This framework enabled the smoothing out of diverse European pathways to graduate and postgraduate awards, but while accord has been reached on matters such as credit points and duration of programmes in itself it has not led to complete accord on standards, with local interpretations and expectations remaining very much in place.

Nations beyond Europe have looked to the Bologna and subsequent Lisbon processes, and some have aligned their own frameworks to enhance international understandings of standards and levels, but there is still considerable variation in systems and expected student achievements. This is unsurprising when considering that in some nations (e.g. Ireland and the UK, the proportion of high school leavers going to university is around

50% whereas in many nations the percentage is in single figures, with by implication an inevitable impact on standards. Work towards an international concord on standards and levels must continue to be regarded as work in progress.

Designing good assessment

Assessment plays a key role in both fostering learning and the certification of students. However, unless it first satisfies the *educational* purpose of ensuring students can identify high quality work and can relate this knowledge to their own work, the likelihood that they will reach high standards themselves is much reduced. (Boud *et al. op cit*, p.1)

Good assessment can act as a locus for learning where it is fully integrated within the teaching process: treating it as an add-on at the end of the curriculum design process is a wasted opportunity to shape student behaviour and skills development.

“ ‘Assessment for education’ rather than ‘examination of learning’ is the core concept for teaching and learning at any level’ as Whalley (2013) argues, hence the global trend in seeking to offer assessment *for* learning rather than just of learning (Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2012). The University of Northumbria in the UK hosted a five year initiative, a Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching to advance the concept, which arise originally from within the schools sector and has been extensively developed within the higher education context. Their approach, building on more than a decade of research:

- Emphasises authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement;
- Uses high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly rather than as the main driver for learning;
- Offers students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed;

- Is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms e.g. tutor comments on assignments, student self-review logs;
- Is rich in informal feedback e.g. peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work, which provides students with a continuous flow of feedback on ‘how they are doing’;
- Develops students’ abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others. (after Sambell et al, 2012).

Student dissatisfaction with assessment can be highly problematic, particularly when students are learning away from their home nation contexts. The majority of student complaints and grievances, which take up much academic and management time, so are therefore expensive to resolve, are concerned with perceived poor practice and misjudgements, particularly associated with perceived unfairness and this may well be associated with misconceptions and poorly explained differences in approach.

Diverse global views of the purposes of assessment

Chalmers and Fuller (1996) argue that assessment doesn’t merely measure achievement but drives learning and development, providing feedback and enabling critical reflection. There can be significant differences about the relative importance of formative and summative assessment from nation to nation. Each performs a different functions and works in different ways. Formative assessment which is heavy in feedback, forms and informs, and is primarily concerned with giving guidance that is aimed at prompting improvement in student work. It is often continuous and usually involves plenty of words. Summative assessment is principally concerned with summing up and making evaluative judgments, is often end-point and involves numbers and grades rather than words. Sadler, whose work on formative assessment is highly influential internationally, suggests that we need to:

Provide the means by which students can develop a concept of quality that is similar in essence to that which the teacher possesses, and in particular to understand what makes for high quality...Students need to be exposed to, and gain experience in making judgements about, a variety of works of different quality... They need planned rather than random exposure to exemplars, and experience in making judgements about quality. They need to create verbalised rationales and accounts of how various works could have been done better. Finally, they need to engage in evaluative conversations with teachers and other students. (Sadler 2010b)

In some nations and contexts, assessment has a single purpose: summative in nature, it exists primarily to judge the extent of the achievement of the outcomes of learning that the teachers or instructors are seeking to see students capable of demonstrating (Ibarra Saiz & Rodríguez Gomez, 2010). For example this would include:

- deciding whether a student may progress to the next level of study;
- deciding with what grade or classification students will graduate;
- enabling a judgment to be made about whether a student is fit to practice in a clinical or other professional setting;
- determining whether professional requirements have been satisfied sufficiently to achieve professional accreditation;
- providing statistics for internal and external agencies.

Many would argue, however, that excessive use of summative only assessment can have a deleterious effect on student learning. Gibbs proposes that:

Teachers rarely set tests or exam questions with the deliberate intention of inducing a surface approach, but they do often allow students to accumulate enough marks to pass without ever doing anything more sophisticated. For students, that may be all the encouragement they need (Gibbs, 2010: 23).

He further argues that over-use of end-point, high stakes assessment can have a harmful effect on student learning behaviours, with students behaving strategically (Kneale, 1997) rather than adopting a deep approach to learning:

Exams can have the effect of concentrating study into a short intense period at the end of the course with, for example, little study of lecture notes until many weeks after the lecture (Gibbs, 2010: 10).

However, in many nations there is an increasing awareness of a wider range of assessment functions which predicate the adoption of diverse approaches to assessment that maximise the impact of good assessment on student learning. These can include:

- providing students with opportunities to get to know how they are doing;
- giving them formative guidance on the remediation of errors while they still have time to improve matters
- enabling students to get the measure of their achievement;
- helping them consolidate their learning;
- motivating students so they better engage with their learning;
- Providing them with opportunities to relate theory and practice;
- Helping students make sensible choices about option alternatives and directions for further study;
- Providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their employability;
- Giving s teachers feedback on their own effectiveness as assessors. (after Brown, 2014).

What is actually assessed is variable too, since in some nations accurately demonstrating the learning of by heart of tutor-delivered content is most highly prized, whereas elsewhere, use of that information in context is the prime expectation. As Beetham (2010: 33) proposes:

When the focus is on accuracy of reproduction, learners will be given

opportunities to practise the required concept or skill until they can reproduce it exactly as taught. When the focus is on internalisation, learners will be given opportunities to integrate a concept or skill with their existing beliefs and capabilities, to reflect on what it means to them, and to make sense of it in a variety of ways

A key locus of diverse international practice is the extent to which originality of thinking and expression is valued: not all nations find it acceptable for students in their assignments to challenge prevailing concepts, particularly students from collectivist societies where individualism is less highly prized than working towards a consensual outcome. (Ryan, 2000: 54)

The vocabulary of assessment

The terminology of assessment cannot be assumed to be common to all those who share a language, and indeed in an English-speaking context we can sometimes find the same concept expressed in different words. . For example, in the UK, assessment means the marking and grading of student work and evaluation means the commentaries and the ratings and feedback about teaching given by students but in the US the terms are usually used the other way round. In Australia and New Zealand the way they use the terms tends to depend to some extent on the nation from which they principally draw their educational resources. Words like ‘rubric’ can similarly cause confusion: traditionally in the UK this has meant the guidance note at the top of an exam paper or other assignment which advises the student on what needs to be done, for example, ‘choose three questions from five’. In other nations, especially the US and more commonly in the UK nowadays rubrics are elements of text that describes ‘varying levels of quality, from excellent to poor, for a specific assignment’ (Andrade, 2000).

There is much confusion also about the terms Faculty, staff and administrators: ‘Faculty’ in the US is the term used to describe academic teachers as a whole whereas in the UK it is generally used as an organisational

term to describe groups of subjects or departments. The term ‘instructor’ is widely used in the US for staff who teach undergraduate students, but would in the UK usually be used to describe those who provide technical instruction. A Professor in the UK is a status only reached after extensive application processes, but the title ‘Professor’ is given to all senior academics in some nations. University *staff* in the UK tends to mean everyone employed by the university, but in the US it applies to what in the UK are termed administrators who support the roles of teachers through professional and clerical services (while those termed Administrators in the US would normally be called Senior Managers in the UK) (after Brown, 2014).

Such linguistic confusion has the potential to confuse both students and academics who are unfamiliar with these linguistic differentials.

Different acceptable assessment practices

The kinds of assessment activities students are likely to encounter varies from nation to nation. In many countries a limited range of assessment forms dominate particularly the use of unseen time constrained exams, which may be as short as one hour on the Indian sub-continent for example and as long as nine in Norway, or multiple-choice questions, which are widely used in the US and many Pacific Rim nations but to a much lesser extent in the UK.

In other countries assessment at higher education level can include very wide range of methods. In Brown and Knight (1994), more than eighty different assessment methods in use in higher education are described, but in many nations many fewer are found in regular use. Common assessment tasks involve student for example submitting for assessment electronic or hard copy portfolios, annotated bibliographies, blogs, diaries, reflective journals, critical incident accounts, project reports, theses/ dissertations and case studies. They may be asked to produce as assignments scientific posters, artifacts created in the art

studio or engineering workshop and displays/exhibitions. They may be required to participate in assessed live or virtual simulations or role plays, oral defenses/ vivas, presentations, assessed seminars, live critiques and live performances, in-tray tasks and Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs). These and other methods are described in detail in Brown and Race, 2012 (p. 79-84). All of these are common in some nations, and less frequently encountered in others, but both academic staff and student tend to believe that the types of assessment they know from their home nations are the 'normal' ones.

In some nations, computer-based assessment using a wide range of question types is common, whereas in others straightforward multiple-choice questions predominate, and in others still paper-based assessment is the norm, particularly when universal access to computers, bandwidth and even electricity can be assumed.

Assessing students in groups

Being assessed on how one performs in a group setting, as well as on what is collectively achieved can be problematic for some students. It's really important for students to work, learn and be assessed in small groups, since few nowadays live and work in isolation. To be able to take turns to propose task solutions, to resolve amicably intra-group conflicts and to work with all kinds of people in teams you've not selected yourself are all skills that make not just for better employability, but also for more fulfilling lives. Some but not all people naturally have these capabilities, and all benefit from regular and productive opportunities to hone them, hence the high value of including group tasks in university programmes. But there are no quick fixes: successful group work needs careful briefing, adequate preparation, rehearsal opportunities and the opportunity to interrogate both the task brief and the means of assessment.

Group assessment is strongly encouraged in some nations, where problem-based learning

is commonplace and is frowned on or banned in others (Denmark, for example, has only recently repealed a law preventing higher education students being assessed in groups) (Brown, 2014, *op cit*). Assessing individuals' contribute in to group work can only realistically be achieved using peer assessment, many would argue, but this in itself can give rise to problems if students are unprepared (or not prepared) to assess one another (see for example the discussion in Race, 2014). It can be very difficult for students unfamiliar with the concept of group assessment to come to terms with the high levels of sophisticated thinking needed for the achievement of summative (or even formative) marks for peers, and significant briefing, preparation and rehearsal is necessary for all to feel it is fair and valid. An example of students' and academics views in this area in Latin America is provided, for example, in Ibarra Sáiz and Rodríguez Gómez (2014).

Peer and self assessment are widely used in many nations including the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark and Spain (Rodríguez Gómez, Ibarra Saiz & García Jiménez, 2013) but less acceptable in others.

Nevertheless, many argue it is worth persisting with peer assessment, as a means of fostering student skills and graduate capabilities as the authors of the UK Marked Improvement project argue:

While the use of peer assessment may cause alarm in some external examiners and those focusing on academic standards, the ability to assess self and others is an essential graduate attribute. Studies consistently report positive outcomes for well-designed peer marking, including claims from students that it makes them think more, become more critical, learn more and gain in confidence (HEA, 2012: 9).

Furthermore, peer assessment has benefits in terms of helping students learn to make accurate estimations of the quality of the work they are producing while they are actually producing it.

Assessment is the making of judgements about how students' work meets appropriate standards. Teachers, markers and examiners have traditionally been charged with that responsibility. However, students themselves need to develop the capacity to make judgements about both their own work and that of others in order to become effective continuing learners and practitioners (Boud *et al.*, 2010: 1).

Diverse expectations concerning feedback

Feedback when it is effectively executed can act as a powerful engine to drive learning as well as having a positive impact on institutional performance indicators.

...where programmes plan for more formative assessment and feedback, there is a better chance that a greater proportion of students pass modules at their first attempt, thereby saving staff time in relation to demand for extra support, re-sits, appeals and complaints. Improved pass rates and reduced attrition bring obvious financial benefits for institutions and positive outcomes for students (HEA, 2012: 11)

However, there are widely divergent views in different nations on the importance of giving feedback, on the nature of appropriate feedback and of how quickly it needs to be given. For example, in the UK and Ireland, there are often institutionally agreed and publicised timescales for the return of marked work with feedback comments (commonly three weeks from the date of submission), whereas elsewhere no such expectations are encouraged. There can again be problems when there is a mismatch between what students expect and staff deliver.

There is considerable diversity in the explicitness of criteria and the amount of support students can expect if they are struggling with assessed work, with academics in some nations taking a much more intense personal interest in students' progression than in others.

There is considerable diversity in the explicitness of criteria and the amount of support students can expect if they are struggling with assessed work, with academics in some nations taking a much more intense personal interest in students' progression than in others. Furthermore, there can be significant variations in the extent to which students can expect to receive highly detailed feedback and advice on draft assignments, as opposed to comments following submission.

In some Pacific Rim nations, for example, higher academics see their role as strongly nurturing and student success being reliant on their quasi-parental support they are given by tutors. In parts of Europe, by contrast, students are expected to be far more self reliant, succeeding or failing depending on how much sense they are able to make of lectures, with little in the way of guidance on how to undertake assessment.

The nature of the language that academic staff use to comment on student work can be highly variable too, with in some cases minimal, directly judgmental comments appended, and elsewhere much more detailed and developmental commentary offered. David Boud suggests assessors should avoid using what he terms 'final language' (Boud 1995) as being counter productive: words like "appalling", "disastrous", "hopeless" and "incompetent" give students no room to manoeuvre. He suggests assessors should avoid destructive criticism of the person rather than the work being assessed and try not to use language that is judgmental to the point of leaving students nowhere to go.

The amount of feedback given to students needs to be consistent too: commonly assessors make more comments on poor assignments which need much remediation, but many would argue that students at the top end of the ability range should expect detailed feedback as much as their lower-performing peers, and at the same students with many weaknesses can easily become dispirited if there is too much negative feedback. The British Open University trains its assessors to give an *assessment sandwich* whereby they

start with positive comments, then go into the detailed critique and finish with something encouraging to motivate students to keep reading and to make use of the advice on offer.

Managing the assessment process

In some nations, multiple assessment opportunities are provided, and students failing modules simply pick up credits elsewhere (as in Australia, New Zealand and Spain for example) which is not the case in other nations, like the UK, which have much more hidebound regulations on progression issues.

Timetabling of assignments to recognise ethnic diversity is considered a necessity in some nations, but not a matter of concern in others. In the UK, for example it would be unusual for students to be timetabled to sit three exams in a day during Ramadan, when Muslim students might be expected to be fasting or for exams to be timetabled on Saturdays (impacting on Jewish students, for whom the day is the Sabbath, or on Sundays, which is the Christian day of rest).

Detailed assignment briefings are common in a number of countries, whereas in others students are given minimal guidance on what to do (for example, just an essay title or exam question) with little advice on criteria or weighting of separate elements. The extent to which criteria are discussed is variable too: with students in some countries encouraged to interrogate (or even negotiate) the criteria on which their work is to be judged, thereby helping them have a better understanding of what is required, while elsewhere this is discouraged.

Carroll and Ryan (2005) indicate that students sometimes have problems complying with assignment length regulations: in some nations word limits are merely advisory, but in others they are strictly adhered to, which can cause real problems. For some African students, for example, starting into the main body of the essay without a personal preamble is considered impolite, meaning they frequently go considerably over required assignment word limits, while other students whose first language is not English comment

on the problem of writing first-year assignments several thousand words long when their previous writing assignments have been much shorter.

Good academic conduct

Concerns about plagiarism and cheating have increased over the years, as academics and managers worry that mass higher education provides more opportunities for poor practice and lower chances of being caught. Carroll (2002) describes plagiarism as passing off someone else's work as your own, wholesale 'lifting' of entire assignments/ texts, patching together bits and pieces of others' work and paraphrasing without attribution, purchasing assignments from 'essay mills' and fellow students, or commissioning others to do one's assignments.

More extensive use of communication and information technologies, especially the internet, facilitate passing off the work of others as one's own. Students don't always recognise that what they are doing when they are patching together and pasting from diverse sources without acknowledgment is actually poor academic conduct. They do it with music and images they take and use from the internet and often cannot see a moral problem with what they think of as 'mash-ups' or 'homage'. 'The learning process is being radically reshaped, to a point where the notion of plagiarism is becoming foggier, and not one that's automatically synonymous with cheating' (Marsden, 2014: 49).

The increased use of course work may make plagiarising seem like the only solution for hard-pressed students working to complete multiple assignments all with the same deadline and students in pre-university contexts may have actually been encouraged into bad academic practices by schools and colleges that encourage learning-to-the-test and regurgitation of model answers.

Much of the current concern about plagiarism and cheating arises because students from different parts of the world don't fully understand the expectations in relation to

citing the work of others in use in the nation in which they are studying.

As Ryan (2000) suggests:

International students may have been previously rewarded for academic performance that drew heavily on the work of others. In some cultures this is regarded as a compliment to those whose work they copy (and is sometimes referred to as 'following the master'). In their new environment, international students may find themselves being criticised and penalised for not being independent, or worse, being accused of plagiarism or cheating (p. 54).

Students hate unfair assessment and are more inclined to cheat and plagiarise if they consider it to be happening all around them. They are also more likely to fall into poor academic conduct if assessment is ill-designed and makes it easy to behave badly, for example, with lecturers re-using essay titles or recycling exam questions year on year. Flint and Johnson (2011, p.2) suggest that student evaluations often describe poor assessment practices that lack authenticity and relevance to real world tasks, make unreasonable demands on students, are narrow in scope, have little long-term benefit for students' learning, fail to reward genuine effort, have unclear expectations and assessment criteria, fail to provide adequate feedback to students and rely heavily on factual recall rather than on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.

Assessment literacy

Students who understand how assessment systems work in universities tend to be more engaged and perform better in their studies. What Price et al term assessment literacy is a crucial set of capabilities that students need to develop to be successful at university. (2012) Boud and his associates argue:

Assessment is the making of judgements about how students' work meets appropriate standards. Teachers, markers and examiners have traditionally been

charged with that responsibility. However, students themselves need to develop the capacity to make judgements about both their own work and that of others in order to become effective continuing learners and practitioners (Boud et al., 2010: 1)

Sambell (2013) makes a strong case for enabling students to have a sophisticated and articulated understanding of what goes on inside the 'black hole' that assessment is sometimes perceived to be. She and colleagues, (Sambell et al 1997) propose that students often have little idea of what happens to work once it is submitted, and give little thought to how their work will be marked or how grades link to criteria. By explicitly addressing this on an early childhood studies course with high attrition rates, helping students to become familiar with concepts like criteria, weightings, and level helped them see how performance needs to match up to practice. In Spain, the *DevalSimWeb* Project has been developed to enhance students' assessment literacy through two formative programmes for students and two games to foster understanding of concepts: see <http://devalsimweb.eu>

Students also need to understand how assessment regulations work in the university in which they are studying, because there are significant differences from nation to nation, for example, on what they can expect when they have mitigating circumstances like illness or bereavement which prevent them taking exams or submitting assignments. In some nations, considerable amounts of flexibility are allowed at the discretion of the individual lecturer, but in others, like the UK, processes are much more formal and are carried out at a university or Faculty level.

Attitudes to students with disabilities vary significantly also across the globe, with some nations entrenching in law significant requirements for students with disabilities to be given 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that assessment is fair and equivalent for all, including those with visual and aural impairments, mobility limitations, mental health issues and conditions including dyslexia

and dyspraxia (see Adams and Brown, 2006). In other nations, there are no such expectations either in law or in university systems. Similarly, there can be divergences in expectations of equivalent treatment of minority ethnic groups and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In the UK, for example:

Equality legislation places a duty on higher education institutions to promote equality in order to tackle persistent and long-standing issues of disadvantage, such as attainment gaps between white, and black and minority ethnic students, and the low participation rates of those with disabilities. Assessment can take an important role in supporting this undertaking, particularly in enabling all students to successfully demonstrate their achievements. Inclusive assessment, for example using a variety of assessment methods, is designed to provide for all students while meeting the needs of specific groups (HEA, 2012: 13)

An understanding of different codes of practice and legislative requirements concerning university assessment in different nations is an important part of assessment literacy for students studying outside their home nations, as well as for international academics.

Developing assessment literacy is particularly important in a global context so students can be trained to develop an understanding of how assessment practices work beyond their home nations, and academics too may need to develop global perspectives on international assessment practice. Discussions of what a pass mark comprises should be integrated into early briefings, since students from some nations may have experienced pass marks in the eighties (e.g. Sweden) and others more used to only having to obtain 40% as in the UK. Grades similarly can cause confusion: whereas students in the US may commonly encounter the grade A+, this is not normally used in the UK for example, where A tends to be the top grade. A C grade in the UK represents

satisfactory levels of achievement whereas for US students such a grade when counted towards a grade-point average would be seriously disappointing.

Cultural *mores* can impact on expectations of behaviour and thereby can impact on assessment. For example, ‘Eastern, Latin American and some Caribbean cultures can deem it rude to make firm eye contact: while in the UK it is often thought rude not to’ (Grace & Gravestock, 2009, p.61). Maori students in New Zealand similarly retain close eye contact for personal relationships (or to frighten enemies). An insistence on the desirability of direct eye contact can be problematic where the assessment criteria for a presentation specifically mention it, which may be difficult for some students, including female students from cultures where eye contact with males is considered brazen.

Training assessors

All these dilemmas suggest that assessment is a complex, sophisticated, highly-nuanced task, and many would argue that it is too important to be undertaken by inexperienced assessors. This implies that those involved in assessment need to be trained, supported and monitored, not just at the beginnings of their academic careers, but also throughout them, particularly when innovations are introduced, although international expectations are highly variable. The UK Quality Assurance Agency for example requires that:

Higher education providers assure themselves that everyone involved in the assessment of student work...is competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities” and that “Assessment processes are implemented effectively when all staff involved have the necessary knowledge and skills, have received the appropriate development or training to fulfil their specific role, and are clear about their remit and responsibilities (QAA, 2013: 11).

Academic staff moving to new learning contexts similarly need induction into local practices to avoid disadvantaging students and to help them be confident they are assuring

standards. They may need guidance on how to use particular university systems and technologies like Moodle and on local practices in terms of what type of feedback is required. The Devalsim approach mentioned above is a good example of how lecturers are helped to develop assessment competences

Boud et al. (2010) propose that such support be codified and rewarded:

Academics need particular support in developing expertise required for subject and program assessment responsibilities. Such support could include mentoring, dialogue with peers in informal and formal moderation activities or formal courses. However, while enhanced assessment skills are essential, their acquisition is not sufficient to ensure good assessment practice. Institutions should have explicit requirements that professional and scholarly proficiency in assessment is necessary for satisfactory teaching performance. Further, leadership and exemplary performance in assessment matters should be recognised for promotion, awards and grants (Boud *et al.*: 3).

Conclusions

The assessment issues discussed in this article indicate the extent to which further debate and dialogue between assessment designers, implementers and strategists needs to continue if we are to develop global perspectives on practice. A key implication is that only through such discussions will potential misconceptions and misunderstandings both for staff and students be clarified. Clearly no nation has a monopoly on good assessment practices and principles, and we have much to learn from one another. With students and academics increasingly able to take up international opportunities for study and work, an increased understanding of the assessment approaches and conditions they can expect to encounter is to be encouraged. This article aims to contribute to the debate and to trigger further illumination of the complexities involved.

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