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Chapter 1 Principles of formative assessment and feedback

Chapter summary

In this chapter you will be introduced to some of the theoretical and philosophical aspects of formative assessment and formative feedback as well as the key differences and principles for practice. We will outline the role of assessment (summative and formative) in the context of higher education (HE) and the culture of assessment in HE, including a discussion on what we are trying to achieve with formative assessment and formative feedback and, by association, summative assessment. The chapter will also introduce the suggestion made throughout the book concerning the issue of students currently being driven by summative assessment and how a culture change is required to move to a learner-centred environment embracing the principles of formative assessment and feedback.

Initial definitions

Summative assessment

Any assessment activity that results in a mark or grade that is subsequently used as a judgement on student performance.

Ultimately, judgements using summative assessment marks will be used to determine the classification of award at the end of a course or programme.

Formative assessment

Any task that is intended to provide feedback to the student such that they can improve and self-regulate their work and to the teacher so that they may adjust their teaching.

Formative feedback

Formative feedback is any information, process, or activity that affords or accelerates student learning based on comments relating to either formative assessment or summative assessment activities.

Introduction

Much of the literature on assessment focuses on summative assessment, but there is also a large body of literature centred on formative feedback and on formative assessment. The intention of this book is to utilise the literature in order to deconstruct the theoretical and philosophical aspects of formative feedback and formative assessment, and in so doing consider the pragmatics of using formative feedback and formative assessment in your teaching practice in order to enable you to enhance the opportunities for your students to learn.

This chapter deals with some of the key theories associated with formative assessment and formative feedback. It is important to frame an understanding of the ideas of formative assessment and feedback in an appreciation of assessment in higher education more generally. We will, therefore, consider the underlying principles of assessment before pausing to look at what it might mean for your teaching practice.

Formative assessment and formative feedback are very powerful and potentially constructive learning tools for students and staff. In simple terms, any task that creates feedback (information which helps students learn from formative tasks) or feedforward (information which will help students amend or enhance activities in the future) to students about their learning achievements can be called formative assessment. Indeed, all learning and teaching interactions between teachers and students in higher education (and between students and other students) are to some extent formative in nature. Lecturers and tutors need to be aware of the impact these interactions have on student learning and student motivation, irrespective of whether the interaction is intended to be formative.

For the purposes of this book, formative assessment is defined as *any task that is intended to provide feedback to the student such that they can improve and self-regulate their work and to the teacher so that they may adjust their teaching*. We as educators need to give careful thought to ensure that formative assessment and formative feedback provide positive student learning opportunities, encourage dialogue and discourse between students and teachers, and provide motivation and impetus for students to drive their own learning. Related to the development of formative assessment and the provision of formative feedback, the change that has the greatest potential to improve student learning is a shift in the balance of summative and formative assessment (HEA, 2012). It is hoped that this book will encourage academic staff to consider the balance between formative and summative assessment in and through their own practice, and at the same time consider the objectives, purpose, value, and amount of summative assessment currently used.

The assessment dilemma in HE

Assessment of student learning is a fundamental function of HE. It is also complex, multi-faceted, and influenced to a large extent by the context in which it takes place (Sambell et al., 2013). It is the means by which we assure and express academic standards, and it has a vital impact on student behaviour, staff time, university reputations, league tables, and, most of all, students' future success. In the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS) consistently reports that graduates are less satisfied with assessment and feedback than other features of their courses. In a mass higher education sector, the rising demands of an increasingly diverse, fee-paying student body; increasing financial pressures on institutions; and the need to maintain high academic standards whilst negotiating growing cohort sizes are placing extra stress on already strained assessment practices.

There is a general acceptance of the importance of assessment in directing teaching and learning in HE; however, there is considerable debate surrounding the associated goals and impact on learning. Most institutional teaching, learning, and assessment strategies call for increasing diversity in assessment practices; however, the HE assessment system continues to be dominated by summative examinations and written coursework (Medland, 2016). For Medland: the broader shift towards more student-centred perspectives, as outlined in the learning theories literature, and the increasing emphasis placed on a product-focused curriculum has served to illustrate and solidify the dominant discourse underlying the assessment system. (2016:84)

The dominant discourse of assessment in higher education, according to Price et al. (2012), focuses on 'measuring' learning rather than the promotion of learning itself.

An overemphasis on assessment as measurement detracts from the potential of assessment to support student learning development (Elkington, 2019) and has been labelled as 'testing culture' (Gipps, 1994). It is a feature of modern modular programme structures that most assessment has a summative function, and this places pressure on students to focus on assessment rather than learning throughout their programmes. Evidence suggests that students are increasingly taking 'strategic' approaches to their studies, focusing their effort on assessment-related tasks (Yorke, 2003; Price et al., 2012). This is compounded by predominantly 'summative' assessment regimes with their appetite for resources delivering increasing volumes of marking, internal moderation, administration, and quality assurance. This means that there is huge pressure on teachers and students in dealing with the amount of summative assessment mobilised in and through our programmes and courses. It is suggested in this book that such pressures are to the detriment of the student learning experience. Not only does it mean that students are driven by summative assessment, but that the summative assessment will curb other learning activities. In addition to this, Glover and Brown (2006) argue that the burden of the amount of summative assessment will mean

that, inevitably, feedback is too slow and lacks the necessary quality to be effective for the purposes of student learning development.

Reflection point

What opportunities do you have for ongoing teaching enhancement in your current role?

What different kinds of support are available to you in the development of your practice (e.g. formal support from senior leadership, structured continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities, departmental or discipline mentor, active school- or institutional-level communities of practice)?

The purposes of assessment

A review of the assessment literature suggests assessment in HE serves several purposes, including using assessment summatively, formatively, and sustainably. Fundamentally, university assessment functions to judge students' achievements of learning outcomes; assure standards; and promote, develop, and enhance student learning, student engagement, and the development of graduate attributes. In his seminal paper, David Boud (2000) refers to these multiple functions of assessment as a 'double duty', meaning assessments need to encompass assessment-for-learning and assessment for certification. Hounsell et al. (2007:1) neatly capture the nuanced nature of this double duty when they note that assessment needs to be 'rigorous but not exclusive, to be authentic yet reliable, to be exacting while also being fair and equitable, to adhere to long-established standards but to reflect and adapt to contemporary needs'.

Recognising the powerful impact assessment has on what students and staff do, David Carless (2015:9) highlights the centrality of assessment for student learning development:

Assessment tells students what is valued and what they need to achieve to be successful in their studies; it captures their attention and study time, and may act as a spur; its results inform them of their progress, which in turn impacts on how they view themselves as individuals; and, following from these results, it may provide satisfaction or discouragement.

From a staff perspective, assessment also performs several functions with respect to quality assurance and enhancement, providing feedback to lecturers on student learning and providing grounds on which to evaluate a module's strengths and limitations and to improve teaching and monitor standards. Neglecting to pay attention to assessment practices is to ignore an important opportunity to enhance students' learning approaches and outcomes. There is evidence within the literature of a significant, negative 'backwash' effect on student approaches to learning and achievement from poorly conceived assessment strategies and design (Bloxham, 2014). A student's conception of learning and their intentions when studying are central to the approaches they choose to take and, it follows, the outcomes they achieve.

Clearly, the portrayal of student achievement is important, but in the process of emphasising certification of student performance and maintenance of academic standards, we are in danger of pushing into the background a concern for learning and the necessary assessment practices that need to accompany it (Evans, 2013). Conventional teaching and assessment processes give insufficient attention to those aspects of assessment that contribute most to students learning for themselves. As soon as the role of the learner is acknowledged, then conceptions of assessment and feedback need to move from the mechanistic to the responsive. That is, the role of learners as co-constructors of their own understanding and learning needs to be adopted. This book will mainly focus on how we can promote the need for formative assessment and formative feedback as part of the process of enabling active student involvement in learning and enhancing teaching practice. Formative assessment is not simply about setting a series of exercises where students receive feedback. Formative assessment and formative feedback are integral to the student learning process and learning experience and as such they are key aspects of learning and teaching design.

Reflection point

What, in your view, are the features that make assessment most effective?

What expectations are placed on you in the context of these features of assessment (i.e. how would you define your role in the assessment process)?

What is it that you want your students to achieve through their assessment experiences?

Summative assessment

Summative assessment (assessment of learning) gauges the level of achievement that a student has reached at a given point in time in a module or programme of study and is used explicitly to measure the achievement of learning outcomes. Whilst it is undeniable that summative assessment plays an important role in this respect, a review of the assessment literature highlights several recurrent concerns surrounding an overreliance on summative assessment. Firstly, there is a concern relating to whether summative assessment effectively captures appropriately complex knowledge and skills with assessments not focusing on the many aspects of cognition that learning theory research indicates is important. There are concerns regarding the usefulness of assessment in improving learning and teaching – summative assessment only provides limited information about students' understanding and does not provide teachers with an indication of the type of interventions required to improve students' learning. Assessment by its nature only ever provides a snapshot of student achievement at the time of assessment and does not provide a measure of student progress or development in the long term. Assessment is also a major factor in the exclusion and attrition of students, with the cost of unsophisticated non-discriminatory assessment practices extremely high (Broughan and Jewell, 2012).

Reflection point

What would you say are the main challenges to you in your assessment-related practice and development? Are these challenges related to factors within your control or are they systematic of the wider learning and teaching environment and/or culture at your institution (i.e. learning, teaching, and assessment policies and procedures)?

Summative assessments also need to be reliable, valid, manageable (i.e. efficient), and fit for purpose (i.e. usable). Reliability in the assessment requires the assessment to be objective, accurate, repeatable, and analytically sound. In essence reliability refers to the consistency of grades that are awarded and can be affected by marker consistency, inter-marker reliability, and/or test/re-test reliability. Validity focuses on the extent to which an assessment measures what it intends to measure and as such contributes to assessing the things programme specifications, programme learning outcomes, and module learning outcomes state are important and of value. Ensuring students can demonstrate what they have learned in relation to formal outcomes is one of the main purposes of assessment. In addition, mapping the content of modules against overall outcomes to determine how well other (non-graded) activities contribute towards achieving learning objectives and assessment tasks ensures all learning and teaching activities are constructively aligned (Biggs and Tang, 2015).

One significant consequence of modularisation in the UK (and international) HE has been that summative assessment takes place more frequently, often without giving students the time to meaningfully engage in their learning or indeed experiment with emerging ideas and knowledge. With modules typically restricted to a set number of assessment tasks per module (e.g. a 20-credit, semester-long module may be restricted to having no more than two assessment points), students often lose the opportunity for revision or consolidating their learning and understanding before higher-stakes summative tasks (i.e. examinations). Such modular structures permit limited scope for formative activities and little time for teachers to provide

constructive formative feedback. The consequence of this could be that students become driven by summative assessment, disengage with formative assessment, and feel that formative feedback on end-of-module summative assessments adds no value to their future modules and work. The process of working towards well-designed summative assessment can afford opportunities for formative assessment strategies such as peer feedback, student evaluation, and interactive teacher feedback (Carless, 2014).

Formative assessment

Formative assessment is different from summative assessment in what it seeks to achieve. The primary focus of formative assessment (and formative feedback) is to help students understand the level of learning they have achieved and clarify expectations and standards. For Brookhart (2013) formative assessment is about 'forming' learning; that is, it provides information that moves the student forwards. It usually does this by providing regular, useful, timely, and constructive high-quality feedback from which they can learn to identify ways in which they need to improve. As with summative assessment tasks, it is important that formative assessment activities and formative feedback be aligned to module learning outcomes and, when possible, indicate where and how they contribute to programme learning outcomes. Formative assessment tasks need to be planned in a systematic way so that the learning encouraged will 'feedforward' to appropriate tasks and challenges. Assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence generated through completion of these activities is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet the needs of students or by students themselves to change their own learning strategies. In more recent work that brings together a substantial body of evidence for formative assessment, Dylan Wiliam (2018) elaborates on this expanded view of formative assessment, claiming:

an assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners or their peers to make decisions about the next steps in learning and teaching that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have made in the absence of that evidence (p. 48).

In this sense, any assessment can be formative and assessment functions formatively when it improves the instructional decisions made by teachers, learners, or their peers. Black and Wiliam (2009; see also Wiliam, 2018) present five major strategies for effective formative assessment:

1. Provide regular opportunities to clarify and share learning intentions and criteria for success.
2. Engineer effective discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding.
3. Provide feedback that moves learners forwards.
4. Activate students as instructional resources for one another.
5. Activate learners as owners of their own learning.

Practically speaking, formative assessment is how we shift the focus from teaching to learning. This shift is not always easy to make as there are a number of factors that can inhibit formative practices. First, assessment practices and processes might explicitly or implicitly give more attention to grading and assess student work according to certain predetermined standards rather than providing information about how the work could be improved. Second, teachers might lack an appropriate awareness of students' specific learning needs. Third, the programme assessment strategies are structured according to a high-stakes attitude, privileging summative assessment practices. In contrast, outcomes derived from well-designed 'low-stakes' formative assessment enable teachers and students to

- Make better instructional (read: learning and teaching) decisions.
- Set clear, personally relevant learning goals.
- Evaluate performance and change approaches to learning and teaching.

- Encourage or become increasingly independent in and through the learning approaches adopted through an appreciation of learning standard and criteria.

On this last point, formative assessment activities which help students build their appreciation of standards and develop a sense of quality work in their discipline are needed if students are to regulate their own work and make sense of and act upon feedback, thus bringing a degree of transparency to the assessment process. It does this through developing students' 'assessment literacy': an appreciation of the relationship between assessment and learning; knowledge of the principles of sound assessment including the related terminology; familiarity with standards and criteria; familiarity with assessment methods, skills, and techniques; and the ability to judge, select, and apply appropriate approaches and techniques to assessment tasks for the purposes of learning (Price et al., 2012).

Balancing summative and formative assessment

Appreciating the differences between summative and formative assessment can potentially be confusing, especially for new lecturers as they become exposed to different educational approaches and processes. A straightforward view of the difference between the two is that summative assessment is for 'judgement' and formative assessment for 'improvement' (Sadler, 2010). The potential confusion becomes apparent when formative feedback is given on summative assessment or summative marks are allocated to formative activities. It is the view of the authors that the first scenario is a positive way to use assessment for-learning. But we do not advocate the second scenario; however, many practitioners still use this approach in order to encourage student participation in formative activities.

Gibbs (2005) suggests feedback should still be associated with summative assessment with formative assessment allied with 'feedforward'. Knight (2001) characterises 'feedback' as the product of formative assessment with summative assessment resulting in 'feedout'. If feedforward is to be used effectively, then there needs to be a link between modules, both horizontally (between modules at the same level of study) and vertically (tracking student progress over time) during the course of a programme of study. It also needs students to appreciate the value of feedforward with a clear rationale to encourage them to learn from the feedforward in and through subsequent work (Nicol, 2010).

As was outlined earlier in this chapter, a feature of modern modular course structures is that the majority of assignments have a summative function (assessment of learning). In summative assessment the stakes are high (for students, academics, and the university), which may lead students to take strategic approaches to their studies, potentially limiting their broader learning and independent thinking. In formative assessment learners are provided with 'safe' spaces and activities that permit greater risk-taking, experimentation, discussion, and development (Sambell et al., 2013). In formative assessment there is not the same level of requirement to ensure assessment reliability or validity, although assessment concepts such as manageability and sustainability do need to be considered. Research evidence suggests that if the nature of the learning context is changed, and assessment is the most influential element of that context, there is a likelihood that students' approaches will change with associated benefits for high-quality learning (Boud and Molloy, 2013).

As we have already noted, summative assessment has important purposes in selection, certification, and institutional accountability, but its dominance has distorted the potential of assessment to promote learning. The imperatives of summative assessment necessarily limit the use of assessment methods that have demonstrable value for learning, such as feedback on draft work, peer-learning, and work-based assessment. The need to provide a reliable, verifiable mark for each individual student for each assignment can either limit the methods we use or create justifiable concerns about consistency and fairness in marking. Peer assessment is a case in point. While the use of peer assessment may be cause for concern for some external examiners and those focusing on academic standards, the ability to assess self and others is an essential graduate attribute for a 21st century higher education. 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 confidence (Orsmond et al., 2002; Wimshurst and Manning, 2013).

A shift in the balance of summative and formative assessment towards the latter provides the scope to use a more valid and effective range of assessment-for-learning tools and strategies. Assessment-for-learning is designed to be formative and diagnostic, providing information about student achievement to both teachers and learners, which allows teaching and learning activities to respond to the needs of the learner and recognises the huge benefit that ongoing and dialogic feedback processes can have on learning (Sambell et al., 2013). This benefit is enhanced when feedback is embedded in day-to-day learning practices (Hattie, 2012).

Reducing the stakes in assessment by moving towards a culture of assessment-for-learning and enhanced formative assessment may well relieve some of the pressure from students (assuming the students engage with the formative activities; see discussion in Chapter 4). When the assessment pressure is removed – predominantly taking away the notion of marks, scores, or grades – then the opportunity to design formative assessment activities to encourage learning and formative development can be incorporated. Such low-stakes formative assessment strategies are recognised as being integral to good teaching, enhanced student motivation, engagement, and higher levels of achievement (Ecclestone, 2010).

Formative feedback

Feedback is a key component in formative assessment and for enhancing learning (Hattie, 2012). However, feedback itself does not imply learning improvement will ensue. Feedback processes in HE are commonly misunderstood, difficult to carry out effectively, and do not fulfil their aspirations of significantly influencing student learning (Carless, 2015; Carless and Boud, 2018). Carless and Boud (2018) define feedback as ‘a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies’ (p. 1). Oftentimes feedback information provided to students is not of sufficient quality or quantity and is not fully understood or used by them. Feedback is often ineffective because it is delivered too late to be useful for students for meaningful learning; because it relates to issues, topics, or tasks that are isolated; or because students do not value the information they do receive on their work and do not take action to improve their ongoing learning. Sadler (2010) outlines two functions of feedback more broadly:

1. Feedback provides a statement on the performance of a particular task and a rationale as to how this judgement has been arrived at in relation to previously stated criteria.
2. Feedback provides suggestions as to how the task could have been undertaken to a higher standard.

If feedback is to be ‘formative’, it, therefore, needs to be both specific and general, as it should both relate to the specific task or assignment, as well as attempt to identify clear principles that should be applied to future work (Molloy and Boud, 2013; Dawson et al., 2019). It is widely accepted that good assessment-for-learning practice creates low-stakes opportunities for feedback as students progress through their studies. It is important, therefore, to carefully plan feedback to develop student understanding and confidence appropriate to the level of study. Good feedback should be timely, relevant, clear, task-focused, and motivational (Nicol, 2010).

Reflection point

What sources of feedback are available to your students?
What are the main facilitating and inhibiting factors for effective feedback processes?
What steps do you take to ensure your feedback has a formative function?
In what ways do you encourage students to engage with the feedback provided?

Sadler (2010) distils a number of conditions that need to be present if students are to benefit from feedback. Formative feedback should endeavour to provide students with an indication of where they are in relation to achieving learning outcomes or standards, where they need to progress to, and how they will be able to reach the expected level. In order for this to be effective, the feedback should be based on clear goals that the students believe are achievable and valuable. Feedback should be understandable and communicated in such a way as to enable students to use the feedback to help in achieving the learning outcomes or reaching the required standard. Similarly, feedback should be worded in such a way as to encourage students to take actions to address any learning issues. If feedback information delivered to students about their learning does not generate meaningful action in response, it is unlikely the feedback will be effective (Boud, 2010).

New paradigm feedback processes

More recently, Carless and Boud (2018) have elaborated on the view that the quality of the written feedback product, its timing, and mode of delivery are key to engagement and satisfaction. They suggest feedback needs to have a dual function in meeting students' immediate assessment needs and in gesturing to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they require beyond modules and programmes as part of lifelong learning. While the traditional 'old paradigm' (Carless, 2015) view of summative feedback is typically modular and restricted to a series of one-off events and staff monologue responses, the most effective approach to feedback in this expanded 'new paradigm' (see Carless, 2015; and Winstone and Carless, 2019) view is to understand it as a 'process' and a 'dialogue' which is designed into modules and courses so that students can activate it and use it in an ongoing and developmental way (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015). Engaging in such dialogic practices might include the submission of draft work followed by generic and individual feedback, iterative assignments where feedback on initial stages helps to inform work in later stages, encouraging students to request feedback on specific aspects of their work, or students receiving feedback on draft work plans from their peers.

From this new paradigm approach, focusing resources on delivering increasing quantities of feedback, or even on improving the quality of that feedback, does not necessarily guarantee the desired effects. The impact of feedback is not realised through a single event or encounter, but rather through a linking together of different feedback processes (Winstone, 2019). It is, therefore, important for us to understand how best to not only design and send the feedback 'message' effectively, but also how to influence the way students receive that message – what they do with it (Winstone and Nash, 2016). It is widely recognised and documented that such a 'process view' of feedback is integral to assessment that promotes learning and is most effective when designed into courses and modules as part of a wider framework of guidance and support for student learning development (Sambell et al., 2013).

When feedback and assessment are considered as a form of ongoing feedback such that teachers and students modify, enhance, or change their strategies, there are greater gains to be made than when assessment is seen as being about informing students of their current status. This is the essence of formative assessment.

Formative feedback on summative assessment

Providing feedback on summative assessments allows teachers the opportunity to contextualise the feedback based on the student work and indicate where students have done well, where there might be issues, and where they can close the gap through future assessments or modules (Sadler, 2010; Hounsell, 2015). The provision of good quality feedback, which will enhance student learning, is not an easy thing to do. It is not always the case that students benefit from feedback or indeed learn anything from feedback (Price et al., 2010). This is particularly frustrating when time and effort have been put into providing feedback information to students in a timely fashion.

Two habits of practice that tend to accompany assessment tasks contribute to students not having the opportunity to directly use feedback to enhance their learning. First, students are usually provided with

feedback on how they have completed a task; however, it is rarely the case that they are given the opportunity to resubmit the task with a focus on issues that can be improved. Second, feedback sometimes focuses on specific errors or on indicating the current level of performance, compared with the standard to be met. In each case this information fails to inform the student of what exactly they need to do to close the gap (Sadler, 2010).

Scheduling of assessment tasks can also pose a considerable challenge when attempting to deliver effective feedback for learning. If summative assessment takes place at the end of the module there are potential problems in timing and perceived student value of the feedback information produced. Even if a summative assessment takes place within a module there are serious time constraints in getting the feedback to the students before their next summative assessment. This can be exacerbated by the need for the summative assessment process to be robust, reliable, and valid. Taking into account the need to assure the summative assessment through means such as double marking, blind double marking, and moderation whilst assuring the assessment measurement also has the effect of slowing the process.

So far, the discussion in this section has focused on formative feedback in general. Written assignments and developing the ability to write 'well' is both necessary for students to demonstrate the ability to work with module content, itself an important learning outcome. Essays and extended writing assignments can, however, lack an audience beyond the teacher (Carless, 2015), and students may grow to see them as routinised or ritualistic practices in and through which they access and summarise specific information (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Some students might feel that certain essay tasks have little to do with communicating ideas, making and articulating connections, or developing a position on an issue or topic (Sambell et al., 2013). This seems to imply a need for written assignments to be contextualised in relation to disciplinary issues and challenges so as to be valuable for student learning. Embedding formative assessment and feedback mechanisms within the process of students producing written work – i.e. producing draft work, establishing a clear 'working' understanding of assessment criteria early on in the writing process through seminars and group discussions – can help to illuminate the opportunities for meaningful learning and ongoing development through dialogues with tutors and peers.

Examinations are of course a significant type of summative assessment, and a number of professional bodies expect a large proportion of summative assessment to be undertaken through examination. Examinations are often seen as an assessment instrument that addresses issues of reliability whilst simultaneously tackling the problem of plagiarism. The limitations of examinations are well documented. The restricted working and writing time, coupled with the need to cram information over short time periods seems to favour some students, whilst excluding others (Knight and Yorke, 2003). By their very nature, examinations tend to get in the way of thoughtful planning, drafting, re-drafting, and self-evaluation. Students are unlikely to produce their best work under these conditions and may not be modelling good or authentic learning practices. A well-designed and carefully considered examination can mitigate some of these problems – i.e. open-book or 'seen' examinations. The process of preparing for essay-based examinations can open up spaces for formative practices and feedback that would otherwise not be available to students.

Resources and workload management

Assessment is resource heavy in the modern higher education institution. The increasing size of student cohorts and a shrinking unit of resource mean that tutor time has become disproportionately spent on summative assessment. Students can be taught in larger groups, but each assignment or exam script still requires individual attention. This imbalance is exacerbated by modular structures, which the UK has adapted from other national systems, very few of which have our traditions of second marking, moderation, external examiners, and assessment boards. Employing these safeguards for each element of summative assessment is creating an academic and administrative workload that is unsustainable. A shift from summative to formative assessment can reduce the costs involved in processing students' work and assessment records, prioritise quality checks for essential elements of assessment, and redirect academic resources towards learning. However, the high-stakes nature of summative assessment can lead to

expensive and time-consuming applications for extenuating circumstances, student complaints, appeals, and litigation.

Poor experiences of assessment and lack of feedback early in programmes are associated with failure and high student attrition rates. In addition, when 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 a demand for extra support, resits, appeals, and complaints. Overall, a movement towards a more balanced diet of assessment can bring cost savings and better use of teaching resources.

Research consistently shows that assessment drives student effort, learning, and achievement, yet resources and workload management traditionally focus on lecturers' class contact and course administration (HEA, 2012). Workload management needs to convey the message to staff that assessment planning, marking, and feedback are crucially important to student achievement and should be factored into the system before major assessment changes are introduced. Staff need to have permission, even encouragement, to change their practice in order to build assessment and feedback into contact hours. They should be given the confidence to review the use of contact time to privilege learning rather than transmission of knowledge and to avoid separating teaching from assessment. For example, immediate feedback given in class following a formative task or student presentations has benefits in relation to timely feedback on performance, while reducing additional staff workload in marking. The distribution of workload and resources should also be considered in relation to the whole of a student's programme. This could mean, for example, that resources should be weighted towards first-year courses where they can have an important impact on helping students make a successful transition to higher education and prepare them for more independent learning. Effort could also focus more squarely on the valid and reliable assessment of programme outcomes rather than poorer quality measurement of every individual module outcome. There is potential to reduce the quantity of summative assessment with its accompanying quality assurance load (second marking, moderation, external examining, assessment board time), which may free resources for use in formative assessment activity.

Reflection point

Much of this chapter has focused on the principles of effective formative assessment and feedback for developing student learning, but to what extent can you set up assessment feedback strategies as a source of information that can be used to help continuously inform and shape your own practice?

Summary

Assessment is a critical aspect of higher education because it has a range of powerful impacts on what staff and students do and how universities operate. A rationale for a focus on assessment and feedback and improving formative assessment more specifically is its huge impact on the quality of student learning (Beard and Humphrey, 2014; Carless, 2015). Assessment has many purposes in HE: it supports learning and ensures that students are prepared to meet the desired learning outcomes of a programme of study, and it may also contribute to final marks and grades which link to an ultimate classification or attainment of standards. Much of the emphasis is given to summative assessment with the focus on using assessment as an instrument to measure student ability and understanding. Whilst summative assessment has to be reliable and valid, this adds to the complexity and challenge around appropriate assessment design and has the potential to make assessment processes cumbersome and slow. Shifting the emphasis from summative assessment to formative assessment is not a panacea for all the assessment issues in HE but can contribute to alleviating some of the stresses, pressures, and problems. This view is reinforced throughout this book in acknowledgement that formative assessment and formative feedback can enhance

student learning and can be used to motivate students to undertake assessment-for-learning. Assessment, when viewed from this perspective, also provides the foundation for learners to make judgements about their own work, so they can learn and make assessments themselves beyond their time at university. There will be more on this last point in Chapter 4.

Further Reading

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