TESTA Tools

Challenges and responses
for programme-level assessment and feedback

This guide describes some common challenges that Departments/Schools and programme teams have encountered around assessment and feedback, with suggestions about how to respond. The guide specifically focuses on challenges and responses at the *programme-level*; i.e. how staff teaching individual classes can work together in a coherent way to help students to learn as they progress through a programme.

The challenges have been identified through the use of TESTA at Strathclyde over the past three years, and this guide may be useful to Departments/Schools and programme teams making use of the TESTA Tools.

Challenge 1: Students put more effort into memorising and reproducing lecture slides than into developing a deep understanding of the course material

Students frequently feel that the focus of assessments is on rote learning rather than developing a deep understanding. This is usually not the stated intention of teaching staff. While memorisation often has an important role in achieving the aims of the programme (particularly in some STEM disciplines) teaching staff are normally very keen for students to engage in the application of ideas, the connecting together of ideas, and the critical analysis of ideas.

- Response 1: One of the reasons why students can adopt more superficial approaches to learning is that they feel that there is too much content to get through. Memorising can seem more manageable than attempting to develop a fuller understanding, if the workload feels too high. Reducing students' workload can give them space to focus more on understanding. A good way of doing that is to reduce the amount of summative assessment on the programme: too much summative assessment can lead to students feeling under too much time pressure to jump through hoops before they've had a chance to really understand the material. Removing assessments can provide that space, as can making assessments purely formative so that they don't count towards the class mark, and are merely chances to practice and to consolidate understanding.
- Response 2: Another reason for students to fall back on memorisation is that they don't see the value of the assessment. Students (particularly those with a more predictable career destination such as those studying engineering or education) are

often quick to judge whether or not an assessment is going to help them in the 'real world', and to react more positively if it is seen as helpful in that way.
- Response 3: Sometimes staff design assessments in ways that *permit* and reward students to demonstrate understanding, rather than *requiring* them to do so. This can either be because staff are unaware that students will be strategic in deciding how to approach an assessment, or because they want to cater for weaker students.

Challenge 2: Exams are seen as simply memory tests

The most common version of Challenge 1 relates to exams, with students often seeing them as little more than memory tests, that require them to demonstrate no useful understanding and to retain information for only a short period.

- Response 1: This is a common problem with exams, and is often hard to counteract. It is worth considering whether exams are required, or whether other forms of assessment (essays, research reports etc) that are more naturally suited to the assessment of understanding may be more appropriate.
- Response 2: Exams can be designed in such a way as to require rather than just permit students to demonstrate critical analysis, application of knowledge to new situations etc.
- Response 3: In some cases, students' reliance on memory in exams may be a consequence of the use of past papers. If questions are used repeatedly year after year, then even if those questions require a demonstration of understanding, students may prepare answers in advance and then memorise them for the exam.

Challenge 3: Students aren't clear what is expected of them in assessments

Students are often unclear about how specific assessments are marked. They are sometimes also unclear on fundamental aspects of what high-quality work in their discipline looks like, e.g. what 'critical analysis' means in the context of essay-based subjects.

- Response 1: It is relatively rare for there to be explicit discussion of assessment expectations in a programme, but this can be very helpful. For example, giving students examples of particular kinds of assessments (e.g. essays or lab reports), and asking them to mark them against the assessment criteria, can be a good way of helping them to develop an understanding of what is expected of them.
- Response 2: A lot of variation in the kinds of assessments that students encounter can be a good way of avoiding the overuse of traditional formats such as essays and MCQs, but it can also hinder students in developing an understanding of what high-quality work looks like. By making sure that there is broad consistency in the kinds of assessments that students encounter as they progress through the programme, teaching staff can give students the opportunity to practice and develop their familiarity with assessment formats. Where new assessment types are introduced (particularly in later years where they count heavily towards the degree outcome) it is important to do so carefully, with low-weighted or purely formative opportunities to practice beforehand.
- Response 3: Students' lack of clarity can sometimes stem from inconsistency in how markers apply assessment criteria. This can happen within classes – where different markers apply criteria differently to the same assessment – or it can happen across programmes – where staff teaching different classes look for different qualities in

presentations or lab reports. It is important that there is a broad consistency in how staff apply marking criteria; this can be achieved by teaching staff discussing assignments in order to develop shared understandings of what they are looking for from students.

Challenge 4: Students don't engage with purely formative assessments

Teaching staff are often aware of the negative effects of large amounts of summative assessment (e.g. students focusing too much on the grades and not enough on the learning). They sometimes introduce assessments that are purely formative and don't count towards a class mark, but they frequently find that students don't engage with assessments that don't carry marks.

- Response 1: Busy students are often very strategic in their attitudes to assessments, and two-step submissions can be a good way of giving them a motivation to engage with purely formative assessment. Asking them to submit an unmarked draft assignment in order to receive feedback that will help them with a final summative assessment can be a good approach.
- Response 2: Another approach is to mark a sample of assessments. Asking students to submit (e.g.) five assessments, one of which will be marked, can give them a motivation to engage with the assessment.
- Response 3: Social pressure can be a useful prompt to engagement, e.g. by selecting students at random to present their solutions to tutorial problems, or by including a presentation (with verbal feedback from peers and staff) as an unmarked assessment.
- Response 4: When students are faced with summative assessments in other classes they are taking at the same time, it is challenging to encourage them to engage with unmarked assessments. Teaching staff may need to work together to create space in the semester for purely formative assessments, without competition from summative assessments.

Challenge 5: Students don't receive enough feedback

Providing feedback in sufficient volume with sufficient constructive detail, in the limited time available, can be a very challenging task for teaching staff. There are limited economies of scale available for feedback (unlike for teaching, where bigger teaching rooms are an option) and so feedback can be particularly vulnerable to worsening staff-student ratios. At the same time, students are often unhappy about the amount of feedback they receive.

- Response 1: If there are concerns about the amount of feedback that students receive on assessments, then it may be a good idea to consider reducing the amount of assessments to free up more time for each assessment. Many programmes feature lots of summative assessment, and rationalisation of assessment may at the same time reduce the workload of students (allowing them to focus more on learning than on dealing with deadlines) and allow staff to provide more feedback on the assessments that are retained.
- Response 2: Alternatively, making assessments purely formative can reduce the time required for feedback. By removing the pressure of grades, there is more scope for options such as peer feedback, automated feedback (e.g. on online MCQs); it may

also reduce the time required from staff as they feel less requirement to 'justify' a grade
- Response 3: In some circumstances and for some teaching staff, it can be quicker to provide more extensive feedback in audio and even audio-visual form. This will be dependent on personal preference and technological skill, but it may be possible to provide much more feedback in a five-minute audio file than in five minutes spent writing feedback.
- Response 4: Generic feedback – where feedback is provided to the whole class rather than individually – may be an efficient way of providing more extensive feedback. Where there is a lot of repetition in the feedback that staff are providing, and a relatively limited set of common points for improvement, generic feedback can be a good way of providing high-quality and extensive feedback. Students are sometimes reluctant to value generic feedback as it lacks the 'personal touch', however this can be mitigated if, for example, the generic feedback is provided in advance of grades so that students pay attention to the feedback as a way of discerning clues to their own performance.
- Response 5: The limiting factor to the amount of feedback that students receive is occasionally the format of assessments themselves rather than the time available to staff. If students do seem to need more feedback on their work to help them improve, then redesigning assessments to make that possible may be a good idea. For example: moving from MCQs to tests with longer-form answers; commenting on workings as well as final answers; or including presentations as part of project report submission, so that students can receive verbal as well as written feedback.

Challenge 6: Feedback is too slow

Just as it can be challenging to provide sufficient feedback, it can also be challenging to provide feedback sufficiently quickly, and a common concern expressed by students is that feedback in their programmes takes too long to arrive after they've handed in an assessment. One extra complication is around different expectations of the speed of feedback. Strathclyde has a University-wide policy that feedback should normally be returned within three weeks. What is crucial in particular circumstances is that feedback is received a) sufficiently quickly that the student can recall how they approached the assessment and what they were trying to achieve, and b) in time to help with the next relevant assessment. In some cases these conditions will mean that feedback will need to be provided earlier than three weeks to be of most use.

- Response 1: As above, reducing the number of assessments can free up more time. Rationalisation of assessment and appropriate planning may yield the kind of focused time required to provide feedback more quickly.
- Response 3: It may sometimes be worth sacrificing quality and quantity in order to maximise the speed of feedback. In some situations, brief feedback provided a few days after submission can be more useful than much more detailed feedback provided after three weeks.
- Response 4: Generic feedback based on a sample of assessments may be useful; e.g. after a few days providing group feedback of the form 'I've marked 10% of the essays, and so far these are the key points that people need to improve on…'
- Response 4: Making assessments purely formative instead of summative can provide opportunities for quick feedback due to the reduced pressure on both students and staff. For example, instantaneous peer feedback on a presentation may

be more likely to work when an assessment does not count towards a grade. Similarly, teaching staff may be able to provide written feedback quicker if they don't have to worry about 'justifying' a mark.

- Response 5: It is inevitable that busy staff will sometimes fail to provide feedback within the planned time. When staff teach in a relatively isolated fashion, it is easy for staff to think 'it's only me, I'm sure students are getting feedback promptly in their other classes'. That may not be true, and some level of visibility of feedback promptness (e.g. monitoring by administrative staff) can help to keep a programme perspective.

- Response 6: If it is no longer feasible to provide decent feedback sufficiently quickly (e.g. due to increased student numbers) then it may be necessary to redesign the assessment. Teaching staff have a lot of freedom to determine the appropriate form of assessments, and one of the key criteria for a good assessment is that prompt feedback is possible. Reducing the word count of essays and reports, switching from individual to group submissions and using online MCQs with automated feedback are all ways in which quick feedback can be made more feasible. As long as they meet the other requirements (i.e. they match the learning outcomes for the class, contribute to the aims of the programme, are fair for all students etc) then they can be helpful.

Challenge 6: Students don't use the feedback

Given the challenges that staff experience in finding enough time to provide sufficient levels of high-quality of feedback, it is particularly important that students make use of that feedback. However, there is often a strong sense among staff that students do not make the best use of the feedback they are provided with.

- Response 1: Feedback is much easier to use if it is quick. If it comes while they can still remember what they were trying to achieve then they will be more able to make sense of it. If it comes in time for the next assessment, they will have an opportunity to take it into account.

- Response 2: Mid-class feedback is easier to use than feedback that comes at the end of a class. It is common for the bulk of feedback to be provided on end-of-class assessments, but that effort might be better directed towards providing feedback earlier in the class.

- Response 3: Students should be able to make use of feedback when completing subsequent assessments, and they should be able to use feedback from one class in subsequent classes and subsequent years. For that to happen, there needs to be a level of consistency between the assessments that students encounter. If they only ever encounter a form of assessment once or twice, it will be very challenging for them to apply the feedback that they receive.

- Response 4: In general, students are more likely to engage with feedback if is provided in advance of grades. If feedback and grades are provided together, students will look at the feedback second (if at all) and largely as a justification for the grade.

- Response 5: If teaching staff want to increase students' engagement with feedback, then it can be a good idea to introduce activities that require (or at least encourage) students to engage with the feedback. For example, students can be required, when they submit an assignment, to provide a reflection on how they have responded to feedback received previously. Or assignments can have a two-step submission,

where students receive feedback on an (ungraded) draft, providing an intrinsic motivation to respond to feedback.

- Response 6: Turning feedback into feedforward can generate engagement. By turning generic feedback from a previous cohort into advice for this year's students (and even into a checklist for more basic elements of an assessment), students will have a strong incentive to respond to the comments in order to improve their performance.

- Response 7: Students are sometimes unclear about the meaning of feedback comments, and it can be very important to provide a mechanism for discussion about feedback. Most teaching staff are happy to have those kinds of discussions (within limits) but students are frequently unclear about the etiquette of asking staff for help, when they can seem very busy. Having clear and well-publicised rules about when and how students can contact staff for discussion of feedback can remove the need for (sometimes quite nervous) students to divine the personalities and preferences of individual members of staff.

- Response 8: Feedback on exams – a frequent source of dissatisfaction for students – is often only provided in the form of generic comments (if at all). Generic comments ('common mistakes in this exam included…') are hard for students to engage with if they can't remember how they approached the exam questions, which is likely if much time has elapsed. Providing students with the opportunity to see their own exam scripts will help them to make use of generic feedback. This can be done by having post-exam sessions where students can sit down with their scripts and discuss generic feedback, or through more technology-based mechanisms such as scanning and emailing scripts.

TESTA Tools

TESTA ('Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment') is way of helping teaching staff to work together to improve assessment and feedback across whole programmes. By providing evidence about how well assessment and feedback supports students' learning TESTA can help staff to improve the coherence and coordination of programmes. A centrally-resourced version of TESTA is provided to Schools/Departments by in the year prior to their Internal Review. Alternatively, this guidance is provided so Schools/Departments (or individual programme teams) can make use themselves of the tools that make up the TESTA method: the Assessment Experience Questionnaire, the Audit, and the Focus Groups.

For more information about the TESTA Tools, please visit
https://www.strath.ac.uk/sees/educationenhancement/innovationandgoodpractice/TESTAtools/

If you have any questions about the TESTA Tools, please contact
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