Transforming assessment practices in a higher education institution

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Abstract

A review of institutional practices is presented to elicit the extent to which assessment practices really align with the principles of the standards-based paradigm. An institutional case presents the creation of a framework for practice and its use in evaluating institutional practices. Insights at institutional level suggest that mainstream practices and cultural change may need transformation. In particular, design, student engagement, marking and review of assessments may require strengthening. The ensuing institutional agenda to address central areas of concern have evolved into a range of institution-wide initiatives. The case illustrates how faculty and centre projects may work together to enhance the shared understanding of institutional "good" assessment practice and the development of communities of practice.

Keywords: criterion referenced assessment; validity; assessment frameworks; institutional transformation.

1. Introduction

A paradigmatic shift during the 90s concerning assessment practice saw the introduction of the standards-based paradigm for practice. This move entailed fundamental changes leaving the measurement model behind. The purpose of assessment shifted from selection to learning; the method of assessment shifted from comparing student against peers to assessing against set standards and criteria (Taylor 1994). The paradigmatic shift during the 90s was of global reach. Several phenomena reported in the literature may suggest that principles of the standards-based paradigm may not be fully adhered to in practice. Ongoing tensions between the two paradigms, and resulting incoherence in practice, has also been widely discussed (Elton and Johnston 2002; Yorke 2011; Medland 2016; Boud 2017).

Key studies and voices in the literature over a few decades show some warning signs of tensions in practice, absence of clarity in some areas. Grade inflation has been reported as a challenging issue (Bachan 2015), the gaps in stablishing a learning culture in assessment are repeatedly highlighted (Jessop and Tomas 2017; Jessop and Maleckar 2016; Jessop, El-Hakim and Gibbs 2014) and lastly, the absence of clear standards in marking is also of concern (Bloxham, Hughes and Aide 2016; Boud 2017).

It is felt that establishing with greater confidence the nature of this misalignment between practice and the standards model of assessment may require more specific work. Few cross-institutional studies are available. A closer investigation is needed to establish how most productively assessment practices need developing to really align with the tenets of the standards referenced paradigm. An institutional case will aim to suggest ways of gauging the distance between principles of the standards based model and dominant practices. An illustration of how this can serve to influence institutional agendas and projects on change is presented.

2. An institutional framework to understand mainstream assessment practice

A unitary framework for practice is proposed that addresses the principles of validity in standards-based assessment. Messick's theoretical breakdown of validity (1994, 1995, 1996) considers a breakdown into steps in practice. Table 1 below maps the theoretical concepts in an assessment life-cycle framework and with proposed steps.

A series of evaluations drawing from key representatives of Faculties, across the university, has enabled the identification of mainstream steps and common considerations in practice. These are summarized in the column that indicates whether considerations expressed are commonly considered in steps that are required. This is indicated as common. Optional indicates where some practices or considerations may be left to practitioners. Unknown designates practices that are not considered at all and absent.

Whilst the proposed framework is an idealized model, the institutional summary of typical considerations reveal several limitations and areas where institutional enhancement of practices and transformation needs to take place.

Table 1 Articulation in practice of the theoretical construct and operationalisation of validity

Assessment life-cycle stage	Validity element	Step in practice	Common practice
Design stage	Content	Selection of an assessment method (task)	Common
		Task analysis determining the knowledge and skills to be revealed in the tasks - Evaluative criteria (overall attributes required of the student)	Optional or unknown
		Revision of assessment tasks that assess the same construct across a programme of study	Optional or unknown
	Structural	Quality levels and sources of difficulty	Optional
		Determining sources of difficulty of different criteria in a task	Optional
		Definition of combination rules (e.g. scoring strategy) Minimising construct irrelevant difficulty	Optional
Communication, support and engagement	Structural and consequential	Increase student familiarisation to reduce anxiety Communicate to students criteria and levels; Engage students in understanding quality	Optional Optional
Pre-marker training	Structural	Staff familiarisation: Check interpretations of levels of performance (inter-marker)	Optional
Marking	Structural	Ensure consistency during marking (intra-marker)	Optional
Feedback and marks	Consequential	Provision of meaningful feedback and criteria	Common (various approaches)
Post-marking moderation	Structural	Revision of scoring of assessment and identify rival explanations for results	Common (various approaches)
Review of task,	External	External validity of marks (analyses) (e.g.	Unknown

rubrics and results		how well marks relate to other related tasks) Consistency of marks with other performances (for an individual)	
	Substantive	Evidence base for task analysis and structural validity (post-hoc analyses)	Optional
	Content	Revision of assessment design	Optional
	Consequential	Student perception of the value of assessments Impact on self-assessment ability, motivation, lifelong learning and reflection skills	Optional
High stakes decisions	Generalizability	Consideration of similar tasks, different assessors and consideration of the consistency of student performance to drive final decisions on degree classifications	Unknown

3. The institutional transformation project

Based on the framework for practice, a purposeful programme of transformation work has been conducted. Particular stages, based on the evaluation that required revision were prioritised: design, student engagement and review stages. Priorities are ranked in order of importance as well as feasibility:

• Engagement of students in advance of assessments: communication, practice and active engagement are fundamental for practice

• Enhancing the transparency of standards, expectations and marking (design stage)

• Programme level assessment: load, design, consistency of practice

Institutional transformation is a slow process requiring multiple steps. The process of transformation has involved locally led projects with the support of the centre in setting agendas and developing the models. The phases of institutional transformation are laid out below:

Initial phase: 2014 to present (ongoing)

• Step 1 Development of the theory based framework for performance based assessments (centrally) as detailed above.

- Step 2 Agenda setting, exploration of local practice and needs

Institutional consolidation, growth and ongoing exploration (2016 onwards)

- Step 3 Assessment framework endorsed as a university level framework.
- Step 4 Ongoing liaison with Schools/Faculties and launching of new projects
- Step 5 Ongoing exploration and experimentation of alternative practices and models (e.g. moderation; peer assessment and evaluative judgement)

4. Outcomes

The framework for practice has been instrumental in enabling and supporting institutional and local strategic decisions. Local autonomy and decision making are central to the institutional approach whilst, centrally, support is offered with models and assistance with local developments. Some of the central gains include:

- greater understanding of practices

- greater consistency and growing a community of practice

- alignment of assurance reviews and systems

This joined up effort is essential to retain the essence of the principles in practice but also to enable, as an institution, to develop and share greater understanding of practice. The work is still in progress but the impact is visible with Faculty and School-wide cases of transformation of practice in place.

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