Preparing for assessment in foundation programmes

About the author

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The ability to handle assessment is integral to success in higher education and therefore needs to be central to any foundation programme. The results of a survey of assessment tasks undertaken by students in higher education at one university are presented. Considerable differences in the type and range of assessment tasks used across levels and disciplines were found. This variety uncovered contrasts with the relatively narrow range of tasks used in most text-books. It is argued that foundation programmes must broaden their horizons and more use be made of subject-specific material when preparing students for assessment.

Introduction

The purpose of foundation programmes is to prepare students to embark on courses in higher education at undergraduate or postgraduate level. In order to succeed in higher education, it is not enough simply to learn the required subject content; competence in communication, study skills and literacy must also be achieved. As these competences are partly developed and evidenced through the assessment process, the task of helping students develop strategies for handling assessment is central to the duties of any professional teaching on such programmes.

Assessment related skills are particularly important nowadays where demands are made for greater variety and for more effective use of feedback and formative assessment. This allows learning to become emancipatory, developmental and lifelong (Boud, 2000; Yorke, 2003). Biggs (2003) calls for constructive alignment, where the student is able to create meaning when teaching methods and assessment tasks line up with learning activities and outcomes.

If students are to be better prepared for this process, foundation programme professionals must first fully understand the nature of assessment tasks being prepared for. The research described here compares advice on best practice in assessment with analysis of what the learner actually experiences. The main research question is: What kind of assessment takes place across different levels in different subjects in higher education? It is argued that answers to this question would lead to a better understanding of the task facing the student and therefore better support and preparation.

Methodology

To find out details of assessment across our institution, we sampled our online database of course specifications, known to us as Definitive Module Documents (DMDs). Details of assessment are given in the DMDs and useful information on the kinds of tasks used came from approximately one third of the database (2,367 modules). Using the complementary approaches to assessment practices discussed in, for example, Rowntree (1987); Habeshaw, Gibbs & Habeshaw (1993); Biggs (2003) a broad typology of features of assessment tasks used at different levels and in different disciplines was developed. Six key areas were identified:

Table 1 Typology of assessment tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>[Multiple choice; Open book; IT based; Interactive; Group element; Role play]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grouped together here are any tasks other than essay or exam that the learner may face in the course of an assessment exercise.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>[Oral; Numeric; Diagram/Pictorial]</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These three features define assessment tasks that rely on means other than the written word.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who assesses?</th>
<th>[Self assess; Peer assess; Self set element]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All three descriptors highlight the learner’s involvement in the assessment process.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>[Analytic; Evaluative; Skills focus; Primary research; Theory focus]</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Used to categorise tasks that place an emphasis on certain intellectual processes.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time-span</th>
<th>[Reflective; Process; Periodic; Portfolio]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lists assessment tasks that take place over an extended period of time and demand sustained involvement from the learner, thereby focusing on development.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work-related</th>
<th>[Practice focus; Case study]</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The final category describes activities that focus on the future and the work-place.</td>
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</table>

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Results

The results provided an overview of the assessment tasks undertaken by students at all levels in all subjects at our institution. See Gillett & Hammond (in press) for more details. The data clearly showed that assessment features varied substantially across levels and subjects. Students in year one, for example, were doing very different assessment tasks from students in year 3 across most disciplines. There was a particularly marked difference between Masters level and undergraduate level of study. For instance, oral assessment appeared to decrease from level 1 to level 3 and then increase at Masters level. Group work and self and peer assessment were more common at Masters level. As expected, focus on practical skills and IT-based assessment decreased from level 1 to Masters.

It was also clear from the research that different disciplines made very different use of the range of assessment tasks uncovered. This needs to be borne in mind when designing preparatory programmes. For example, Health and Human Science and Art and Design made more use of reflective assessments than average. Engineering included more IT-based assessment and used multiple-choice testing more. They also made use of oral assessment less.

Looking at the rank ordering of approximately half of the features that the research identified, it is clear that they appear to be under-represented in traditional study skills and EAP support material. We wonder to what extent they are covered in foundation programmes and would be interested to hear the views and learn from the experience of the InForm readership.

- Practice focus
- Process/Perioidic
- Group element
- Reflective
- Diagram/Pictorial
- Portfolio
- Case study
- IT based
- Open book
- Self set element
- Interactive
- Peer assess

Conclusions

The research uncovered a wide range of differences in the type and range of assessment tasks used across levels and disciplines, far greater than the traditional diet of essay, report and oral presentation. Foundation programme professionals need to be fully aware of their students' future assessment needs in order to make them explicit for the learners, and better prepare them for success.

There is a large amount of excellent quality material available to students. However, there remains a mismatch between text-book and real-life assessment. Published materials too often fall back on a staple diet of assessment tasks: how to write short texts, how to structure a talk or take part in a seminar, how to understand lectures and take notes. What is missing is any wider discussion of the range of academic activities and assessment tasks demanded of students in different subjects of study at different levels. This current orientation of most published EAP materials means that our students are at risk of developing a restricted view of the type of assessment tasks expected of them in higher education.

It would seem that institutions need to look more closely at how assessment works across the range of levels and subjects to ensure that students are better equipped for the learning society.'


