What's so special about eAssessment?

(Dundee eAssessment Conference, 23 August, Sally Brown @ProfSallyBrown s.brown@leedsmet.ac.uk)

In an era of MOOCs and other innovative curriculum formats , eAssessment cannot solve all the issues that assessment obsessives like me have struggled with for decades. Here are eight underlying assessment issues, with some personal thoughts about how eAssessment can help resolve them.

1. **Justice:** Students need confidence that they will be assessed fairly, justly and with integrity. This includes both the confidence that all students will when submitting equivalent work be judged on a fair and equal basis whoever marks their work. Students should not be advantaged or disadvantaged by issues related to their persons. Nor should students who get on well with assessors have a better chance of getting higher marks than students who are less familiar or distanced from their academic teachers. Assessors need to ensure that students are provided with equivalent (rather than identical) opportunities to succeed.

eAssessment, where students normally submit work electronically, potentially excels in offering students just assessment, whether it is by multiple choice tests, which are ‘objectively’ marked (although the questions may not be objectively designed, for example, privileging Westerns students) or by tutor-marked submissions (although techniques may need to be used to ensure anonymous marking, if for example, students just email work to tutors without going through an assignment submission system). Just as in conventional assessment, tutors need to ensure that students get equitable support, so for example rather than play e-mail tennis answering questions from an individual student, it may be better to acknowledge the query then post it and the response onto a course VLE where others can join in the conversation.

1. **Fitness for purpose:** for each assessment occasion, the programme designers need to consider, taking into account the level, context and subject area: **Why** the assessment is taking place? (to help students know how they are doing, to judge fitness to practice or to progress, whether professional requirements have been satisfied); **What** is being assessed (theory? practice? both? knowledge? Its application? ); **How** these things are assessed? ( e.g. essay, time constrained exam, practicals, MCQs, portfolios); **Who** is the best person to undertake the assessment? (tutors, peers in the same group, peers in other groups, students themselves, employers, clients, service users); **When** the assessment takes place (end point? Incrementally? When it suits our systems? When the students are ready?).

Those designing eAssessment can usefully use this checklist and look specifically for the benefits that it offers, for example, multiple opportunities to be assessed with almost instant developmental feedback, the ability of students to submit assignments to a personally determined rather than institutional timetable, the ability to self assess. It is important however to ensure the methods and approaches are fit for purpose, rather than just fall back on MCQs and short answers since computer-based assessment of essays is still in its infancy. Webcams and software such as Elluminate can play a role in live and group assessments, so long as in each case criteria and the bases for making judgments are transparent and clearly communicated . ePortfolios are excellent means of enabling students to demonstrate prowess, capability and knowledge.

1. **Veracity:** We need to be confident that the work submitted is the students’ own. Our options include working with students in **controlled** environments like PC labs where photo ID must be shown, using assessment design to **make cheating difficult** and **building an ethos** where poor academic conduct is unthinkable.

This is really difficult to assure in terms of eAssessment, and the second and third options are more likely to have impact than the first, beyond simple ‘hygiene’ factors such as requiring students to sign it with ID, since clever but unscrupulous students can usually find workarounds for all impediments to cheating.

1. **Clarity:** Good assessment systems don’t play games with students, such as “Guess what I want you to do?”. Students need to be really clear about what is required of them and what standards of work are expected. This means that the criteria in use should be available to students at the assignment briefing stage, so they know where to direct their energies to get good marks.

A very good way to ensure clarity of goals and expected outcomes within eAssessment is to show students a good range of completed outputs (not just model answers, but outstanding examples, satisfactory ones and weak ones) coupled with on-line opportunities to see examples and discuss *why* a piece of work is deemed better than another, and *how* nuances of expression, organisation or practice can make an assignment clearly outstanding rather than merely satisfactory.

1. **Professionalism of assessors:** Many would argue that if we want a just and equitable assessment system, all who undertake assessment should be trained to do so and mentored/monitored through early assignments.

In eAssessment, this implies not just guidance on how to use particular systems like Moodle, but also practical training for assessors on the kinds of issues discussed in this seminar. It also implies high levels of supportive monitoring and scrutiny by experienced colleagues for novice assessors, to help them both gauge standards and also to develop an awareness of what kinds of feedback are supportive and developmental. Quality assurance practices common in conventional assessment such as moderation need to be equally practised in eAssessment. A key feature of high quality assessment is rapid turnaround of assignments with high quality and quantity of developmental feedback, and this is where eAssessment can be a very powerful tool, for example though the use of rubrics in Moodle. Students will also benefit from legibly written comments (rather than handwritten scrawl) which can be provided in various formats.

1. **Inclusivity:** this needs to be carefully thought through when designing assessment from initial thoughts through to the implementation stage, ensuring that no student is unfairly disadvantaged by virtue of background, disability or orientation. Planning reasonable adjustments for students with special needs is so time consuming, it is often best to design in some options at the outset for those who don’t see, hear or write easily, and potentially making these available for all students to choose.

This is a real potential strength for eAssessment, when designers are really clued up about the capacity of software to support inclusive practice. TechDis <http://www.jisctechdis.ac.uk/> offers superb practical advice on alternative formats and understanding user needs.

1. **Practicality:** Problems arise in badly paced assessment programmes whenstudents are presented withcompeting deadlines, causing them stress and their tutors workload issues concerning marking. At the same time, there is often over-assessment within programmes, particularly when innovative assignments are added to rather than replacing original ones. Mapping out assignments against the lived student experience week-on-week can help greatly, as can a radical review of the number of assignments, asking whether each is actually serving a purpose. Sometimes things go wrong when well-meaning tutors design excessively complexassignments with different weightings and then try to fit them into university/college/school arrangements for gathering marks.

Multiple, separately assessed elements can be an administrative nightmare, but this is another area where eAssessment comes into its own, since number crunching needs no longer be a matter of a lecturer working with a calculator and a self-designed spread sheet which is then transferred with potential for many errors to the institutional system, particularly if a system like Taskstream is used.

1. **Authenticity:** It is often the case that we assess what is easy to assess, or proxies of what has been learned, rather than the learning itself, linking well to real-life experiences. A valid assessment is one that has close relevance to the criteria, which are in turn constructively aligned to the stated learning outcomes of a programme. Effective assessment is highly relevant to ensuring that graduates can demonstrate the knowledge, behaviours, qualities and attributes that were described in the course outline or programme specification. Assignments that require students to write about something rather than *be* or *do* something may not be fit-for-purpose.

Over-use of multiple choice questions in eAssessment can be problematic for example, when what is being tested are things like team work, creativity, leadership, without these being authentically tested out in practice. So here’s a final caveat: in our excitement about the potential of eAssessment to save tutor drudgery, provide rapid and detailed feedback fast, and to provide equivalent and inclusive assessments, let’s not use it inappropriately, just because we can. Let’s be as reasoned in our choices of eAssessment innovation as we are about traditional assessment. Actually, no, let’s actually try to do it **much better** by strategically designing really good eAssessment and keeping the best features of traditional formats.