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A compendium of examples of innovative assessment at Masters Level
Sally Brown and the Assimilate project team, August 2012

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Introduction

'Assimilate' was a three-year £200,000 National Teaching Fellowship project based at Leeds Metropolitan University, designed to explore innovative assessment at Masters level, offer the sector greater awareness of diverse practice in assessment at taught Masters level, and provide a catalyst for future development of assessment in this much under-researched area. Its rationale was that fit-for-purpose assessment leads to enhanced student learning experiences, i.e. assessment for, not just of, learning (Nicol and MacFarlane Dick, 2006). Many Masters programmes are professionally-orientated or vocational hence the need for a strong focus on authentic assessment, so the project research was designed particularly to benefit programmes for students already working or planning to work in professional fields.

Interviews were undertaken between 2010 and 2012 in the UK and internationally by students and team members to elicit information about diverse approaches and to produce the case studies in this compendium, so as to showcase innovation. The case studies represent snapshots of practice at the time of the interviews, so some changes may have taken place since then. International conversations on Masters level assessment were undertaken by members of the project team in Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands and Singapore. The compendium includes some overviews, from different nations, of approaches to Masters level assessment.

Diverse Masters level assessment methods

Prior to the start of the project, using the relatively limited literature available on M-level assessment, we expected to find that most assessment in current use relies principally on very traditional methods – particularly unseen time-constrained exams, essays, and above all, dissertations and other lengthy written assessments, of which we found plenty in our research. We also initially expected to find less richness and diversity of assessment practice compared to undergraduate level, but were nevertheless hoping to find examples of good practice to share. Both expectations have been confirmed, and this compendium illustrates the most diverse and innovative assessment approaches we discovered.

Features of innovative assessment at Masters level

Feedback opportunities on programmes of short duration, as exemplified by UK Masters level courses which are frequently undertaken in between 12 and 15 months, can be limited, allowing less scope for students to learn from mistakes and remediate errors. A number of our case studies illustrate good practice in this respect, which tends to be highly valued by students and quality assurers alike.

The project team sought examples that went beyond traditional assessment methods. The ability individually to produce extended text has traditionally been highly regarded in postgraduate study, and this continues to be the case on many courses, despite some concerns around lack of authenticity of assessment methods. However, an increasing number of programme teams are looking to replace this form of assessment, often with multiple smaller tasks, seeking to include evaluation of a wide range of skills and competences, particularly linked to demonstrating employability on graduation, for example through portfolios. The alternatives described here suggest that there is considerable scope for diversified assignments to be as demanding of higher order skills and competences as dissertations, and in many cases to offer more positive ways of engaging students actively in relevant tasks.

On vocationally-orientated programmes, authentic assignments that related to real world tasks tend to be highly prized by students and employers alike (QAA, 2010, Wharton, 2003). As most employment contexts require employees to work in teams, assignments that foster effective team and group activities are particularly valuable and our interviews found many useful examples of these.

A number of our case studies demonstrate highly original approaches to M-level assessment, some of which are particularly designed to promote reflection, self-awareness and metalearning, which many regard as characteristics of Masters level programmes. In addition, the abilities to act independently, think on one's feet and stay calm in stressful contexts are also prized at this level. A number of creative approaches involve the use of innovative technologies to support and engage M-level learners.

Case Studies Overview

- AA** Highly authentic assignments, which relate closely to programme outcomes.
- MA** Multiple assessments which build incrementally to final submission.
- FO** Good feedback opportunities, giving students the chance to benefit from advice to improve performance.
- TG** Assignments that require teamwork and group activity.
- EA** Assignments that foster employability.
- EE** Employer engagement in designing, undertaking or assessing assignments.
- TE** Assignments that are enhanced and supported by technology.
- PE** Peer engagement / peer assessment.

Case Number	Page	AA	MA	FO	TG	EA	EE	TE	PE
1	3	*	*			*			
2	5		*	*		*		*	*
3	6			*	*	*	*		*
4	7	*				*			
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1. Madelyn Peterson

Griffith University, Australia

Interviewer: Sally Brown

Background

Madelyn described some non-traditional approaches to assessment on an MSc in genetic counselling at Griffith University. The course runs over two semesters, each with 13 teaching weeks, with a maximum cohort of 10 students per year. Students enter with a variety of previous degrees, from professions she considers appropriate, including nurses, science teachers and scientists, but other subjects are considered. Entrants must have a grade point average from their degree of 5, where the scale is 1-7. The cohort size is small, because students undertake a placement in practice. It's a very full-on programme and from 2011 became a 2 year course.

Assessment

This comprises a number of assignments for each of 3 areas over the 13 weeks, from week 4 to 12 in the first semester, and week 5 to 13 in the 2nd semester. Assignments are all coursework, practical tests, multiple choice and problems. Some areas are taught by Madelyn, and some are taught and assessed by specialist colleagues. All students find the programme very demanding, and some, especially the scientists, find it very challenging, as they are expected to develop counselling skills and insight as well as scientific thinking. There are 10 different assignments in semester 1 and 10 in semester 2. Subject areas in semester 1 include advanced human genetics, introduction to genetic counselling, and applied counselling, and in semester 2 include genetic counselling, clinical genetics and practicum case studies, the last of which includes an unassessed case-book.

An interesting feature of the programme is that each student is allocated three specialist topic areas, on which a number of their assessments are based over the 2 semester period. They are allocated these largely on a random basis, although if students have a particular area of interest, they might be allowed to include that in their three specialist topics. One student might for example have as their three specialist topics, familial breast cancer, Huntington disease, and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Another might have cystic fibrosis, Marfan syndrome, and familial adenomatous polyposis. In semester 1, students start with a multiple choice quiz on DNA knowledge, and next have an

assignment based on a genetic counselling issue. This is an essay with broad topics, e.g. family dynamics, kinship, and genetics. There is quite a structured marking guide, which gives students sufficient scaffolding to understand what is required of them, and the task is authentic as it relates to areas that they will probably have to cover in practice.

Two more assignments follow, set by colleagues, but in week 5 there is a practical test of family history and pedigree drawing. Students working in live-timed tests sit with Madelyn, who is working from a pre-prepared template. Students have to ask her the relevant questions, so they can take a history from her that matches the template she has in front of her. Students achieve marks if they get the correct information from Madelyn, but lose marks if, for example, they forget to ask about siblings. Each of the 10 students does a different test, so Madelyn has to prepare 10 different templates. Significant preparation is needed for these 15 minute tests, although they can be reused, and are quick to mark, and students get their mark back the same night. Madelyn is currently creating a video of a practice run, so students can see what is expected of them.

The next assignment described takes place in week 5 of semester 2 (clinical scenario). Here each student is allocated a referral case scenario pertaining to a relatively common genetic disorder. They have to prepare thoroughly in advance, using the Griffith Blackboard site which is called 'learning at Griffith'. This is a relatively open-ended task, which some students find very difficult because it's not so much about scientific information, as about how each student can deal with the case particularly ethical and psycho-social aspects.

The 4th assignment takes place in semester 2 week 11, and is described as a reflective journaling assessment. Madelyn has designed this assignment new for last year, and it is influenced by her interest in 'narrative medicine'. The 1st part of this is effectively a practice run to enable students to write on demand following a prompt. The 1st part of this is simply to write about their own name for 5 minutes, and then this is read aloud. In the 2nd part of the assignment following the warm-up, the students are asked to write in response to a prompt, about how they respond personally to particular issues. The prompt is 'write about something important that you have learned about yourself as a result of your reflective journaling this semester' (this is in effect a very open-ended critical incident account focusing on personal responses). As this is a new assignment undertaken with only one cohort thus far, Madelyn cannot yet report on what kind of impact it has.

The 5th assignment takes place in week 13 of semester 2 and is a skills test, which is an assessed role-play that is both peer-assessed and tutor-assessed. This is linked to each student's specialist conditions. Madelyn finds very good reliability between her own marks and averaged peer marks. It is designed to assess the student's ability to respond to client cues. Madelyn takes the role of the person asking advice from a genetic counsellor, for 10 minutes, with other students also evaluating the effectiveness of the responses. Madelyn normally has in mind a series of strategies she would expect students to use to deal with her responses, and a de-brief enables students to hear how they have done, and to get feedback. Madelyn provides a mark-sheet for this, which identifies some of the challenges and best possible responses. Students gain marks if they are empathetic, non-confrontational, accurate and use language matched to the role-play client, and they lose marks if they are over-tentative, use the incorrect theme or inappropriate language.

The 6th assessment component appears at week 11 in semester 2, and is a skills test concerning explanations of genetic conditions and inheritance patterns. She and a colleague role-play a couple seeking advice, with students again focusing on their specialist topics. The scenario is that the clients are a couple planning to have children, but they have been told that one of them has a family history of the condition, about which they know nothing, and they are seeking to understand more about the condition before they investigate family history further. This task focuses not so much on the family history and risk, but on the students' ability to provide information and respond to questions about the specific condition in an appropriate way. The task also includes requiring the students to write a summary letter to the clients. This again replicates authentic practice.

The 7th assignment she uses takes place in week 5 of semester 2, and is an ethics counselling scenario. A client with no fertility problems is seeking advice for potentially travelling to California to have IVF so as to try for gender balance in her family. The focus of the assignment is again less scientific than ethical. The response is a short written paper, 1000-1200 words long, and is to include appropriate strategies or statements to use to support the client's decision-making strategy. Students in this assignment must demonstrate knowledge, communication abilities and ethics.

In addition to the programme of coursework, there are also exam questions. 8 are provided, of which 6 must be answered in the time available, one of these questions is extremely open-ended, and others enable students particularly to demonstrate their knowledge and counselling skills.

Quality assurance issues

In developing these innovative assignments, Madelyn has largely had a free hand, although they were potentially subject to scrutiny in 2011 by the HGSA professional board (Board of Censors for Genetic Counselling). Her Head of School reviews any changes in assessment practice, but there is no formal quality assurance protocol required for major or minor adjustments to assessment practice, although development of new assessments are discussed with clinical and academic colleagues. Each year the faculty reviews results for each semester, and the tutor must justify any outlier results, for example a year when there were no high distinctions, but with a cohort this small, it cannot be expected to demonstrate a wide distribution of results every year.

Difference between undergraduate and Masters' level assessment

She suggested that these assignments are more competency-based than knowledge based, and therefore multiple-choice questions cannot test in ways that these more-demanding and authentic assignments can test. It is very difficult for students to plagiarise on this course, both because it is such a small cohort, and because each student has their 3 specialist topics, thus enabling personalised approaches. Students can get excited and highly motivated, and Madelyn finds assessing these assignments very enjoyable.

Although this programme contains a significant number of assignments, plus two exams during the end-of-semester exam periods, and an intensive week laboratory course in the exam period at the end of the 2nd semester, Madelyn does not consider the course over-assessed, as the assignments are so deeply integrated within the course.

2. Annie Danbury

Bedfordshire University

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

Annie is involved with the MSc in Marketing Communications, which is a specialist programme that attracts international students. The programme has been running for five years and there are 15-20 students in each cohort. Assessments in Marketing and Communications have tended to be focused towards group work and, although things have been working very well, Annie wanted to introduce more individual assessment. She argues that group assessments do not suit everyone, can tend to lead to weak students being carried and do not necessarily give very good students an opportunity to shine. Last year she took the opportunity to try to change a few things and came up with the idea of using an individual development portfolio, integrated with the content of what students were studying on a particular unit.

Assessment

Institutionally Bedfordshire has quite a lot of focus on employability, for preparing students for the world of work. Whilst ensuring that assessment design covers the academic assessment criteria for the programme they also try to give students opportunities to develop skills, such as, developing marketing communications plans and report writing, which will be useful in the workplace and allow them to add value from the very start of their employment. One specific assessment consists of six tasks. It makes use of an industry standard diagnostic test that looks at the students preferred way of thinking and is typically used by advertising agencies. The test allows them to assess whether they are a 'logical' or more 'creative' thinker and how that prepares them for the creative industry. For the assessment, students are asked to write and comment on the results of the test, to reflect on what they have learnt, and whether it is in line with their current thinking about themselves.

Students then undertake a peer-assessment, where they peer-review others' work and, in doing so, learn to assess work other than their own and give constructive feedback. The assessment then moves on to job related skills: students have to complete an application form, produce a promotional podcast and a personal reflection. Finally they are given five minutes to

'sell yourself', emulating a form of job interview. The creative industry often requires people to sell themselves quickly, and employers often ask for a podcast for selection to interview.

Feedback

This is ongoing from the time of each of the assessment briefs until a draft assignment is submitted electronically. Students are also encouraged to show their tutor their work and to seek feedback when they are preparing the assessment. Each item in the portfolio of assessments has to be submitted as a draft within the given timescale. If they failed to submit this draft then that piece of work carries no marks within the final portfolio. Up to the point when the final portfolio is submitted, students have the opportunity to improve any piece of work, based on the ongoing feedback and further research. Annie feels that the setting of deadlines and penalties for missing them not only ensures that the students spread their workload, so lowering the risk of a rushed submission at the last minute, but also helps them learn time management for the workplace.

Setting a number of short individual assignments also allows the students to take ownership of them and they are more motivated as a result. They can also talk to employers about their experiences in producing the assignments, which are very authentic to the workplace environment. The need to work independently, undertake challenging tasks, and to be critical and reflective encapsulating the differences in the assessment of students at Masters compare to undergraduate levels. Although there are no specific restrictions on assessment, Annie tries to retain two exams within the programme. The dissertation reflects the employability emphasis and creative nature of the course and is divided into 3 parts; an integrated marketing communications campaign, a literature review and a personal reflection, where the academic rigour is predominantly provided by the literature review.

The flexibility possible at Masters level means that assignments have to be carefully balanced, to give the correct amount of support and encouragement to the students, and so provide them with sufficient confidence and motivation, while allowing them to learn independently. In an assessment such as the production of a podcast, students still have to think about what they need to do and build a framework within which they are going to do it.

3. Andrew Johnstone

Cranfield University

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

The Manufacturing Masters programmes at Cranfield encompass a number of MSc courses. Each course comprises three parts: a taught element, a group project, and an individual thesis, and the weighting is 20% for the group project, and 40% for the other two parts each. This case study focuses on the group project.

Group projects

These last for 12 weeks, and on each project a group of 4-8 students work for a company on a significant and current issue that needs to be resolved. The students are responsible for running and managing their projects; this means that, in addition to doing the work, they have to liaise closely with their client, and arrange all meetings, transport and accommodation. Occasionally students carry out the work on site with the client company, but typically they are based at Cranfield and visit the client as necessary.

Each project group produces a full project report and a poster, and gives a presentation; there may also be additional outputs such as models (e.g. a new factory layout in Lego), software, or training packages. The presentations are high profile and given in a formal setting to an audience of over 100 – all the other students, academics, and guests, together with company representatives from the projects just completed, and other visitors from industry and commerce. To ensure the presentations reflect Cranfield's high standards, and so that students know what excellent presentations look like, in the week leading up to the presentation day, the project supervisors and supporting faculty push their students hard to ensure the presentations are polished and professional. The posters are presented on the same day as the presentations and are available to view by the whole audience.

Assessment

The mark students receive for their work on the group project comprises two parts: 70% of the marks are allocated to a group mark, where all the students receive the same mark. This is based on the presentation,

report, and poster; the presentations and posters are graded by faculty and averaged, while the reports and any additional deliverables are marked by each group's supervisor and then moderated. 30% of the marks are allocated to an individual mark, based on each student's performance. A rigorous process has been developed for determining this mark, and assessment covers seven categories: communications, team work, leadership, problem solving, ideas and applications, personal reflection and improvement, and technical knowledge. For each category, examples of behaviours – from 'good practice' to 'not-so-good practice' – have been developed, and these are issued to students and faculty; it is therefore clear exactly what is expected for a given mark. While it can be difficult to determine the contribution and performance of each student, this rigorous and structured approach enables marks to be determined and substantiated more easily than previously.

Skills Development

In the Manufacturing Department, group projects have been running for over 30 years. For many years, students were given substantial academic and technical support, but very little support on transferable skills which were not perceived as 'academic' – and as such provision of support in this area was discouraged. Now work in this area is considered appropriate because it is becoming clear that if an individual cannot work with others effectively then they are unlikely to achieve their full potential. Recently a Group Projects Special Interest Group was set up at university level to discuss and disseminate good practice in the areas of management and enhancement of group projects.

Two weeks into the project, students are given a half-day interactive session to explore group working, and the different needs of groups and individuals (Belbin, Hertzberg, Adair, Rosenberg etc). This helps them to begin to understand how groups communicate and work. Setting the session two weeks into the project gives students the context, and therefore the material covered is more relevant to them.

Coaching

An innovative feature of the group projects is the use of two 15-minute individual coaching sessions, based on inputs from the other students in the group, for every student. To provide inputs for these sessions, every group member produces a one-page pen picture of their own performance; for every other member in their group they also identify two strengths and two

areas for improvement (AFIs). The strengths and AFIs for each student are collated anonymously and then used during the coaching session. During the first coaching session, which takes place half-way through the project, each student identifies two areas they would like to develop and improve during the second half of the project. A second coaching session is held at the end of the project and progress discussed. Great care and sensitivity is required during coaching sessions. Often students are not aware that sometimes they come across in a way that has an adverse impact on the way other individuals or the group perform. While few of us like receiving such messages, it is more beneficial if the message is delivered while at university – where one can receive help and support, and have the opportunity to practise making changes – than when in employment. Students are therefore encouraged to give feedback to each other, and to share their development areas with the other members of their group – and to seek their support and encouragement in making changes. For example, if an individual is told that they come across to the group as ‘bossy and arrogant’ then they can say to the rest of their group: “I’m sorry, I don’t want to be like this and I would like your help to change.” The group can then support the student by letting them know when they display that unhelpful behaviour, and can also help the student to identify ways of expressing their message in a way that does not antagonise the other team members.

The focus on developing interpersonal skills during group projects has very useful in helping students to develop – both as individuals, and as team members; evidence for this is seen at the second coaching sessions when students have often commented how their confidence has improved, and how well the members of their group have got on together. Many managers are not good at giving feedback, but through the interpersonal work on the group projects, coaching, and supporting other team members, students learn both how to give feedback, and how to support the development of others.

Conclusions

Improving interpersonal skills on the group projects has helped students to work with others more effectively; this is of benefit both to the students and the companies sponsoring projects. It is also of great benefit to students as they embark on their careers.

4. Carolyn Roberts

University of Gloucestershire (now at Oxford University)

From email communication with Sally Brown

On the Masters in Water Resource Management, at the University of Gloucestershire students delivered seminars and workshops to final year undergraduates on topics they have researched, including interviewing key individuals beforehand, adding further to the authenticity of the assessment task. They are then assessed on both the content and nature of engagement with the student group to whom they delivered. This is a professional course so it is really important that the activity of engaging undergraduates is the same as they would face professionally in engaging stakeholders in water management decisions. They found it challenging but enormously satisfying; some said that they had never had an opportunity to practice this type of skill beforehand.

Vignette (i): John Sweet and Irene Amrore

University of Bedfordshire and University of Warwick

Presentation at the Assimilate Conference, September 2012

John has introduced Topical Review Articles as an approach to Masters assessment of practitioners in the medical professions. It is used as an alternative to a standard literature review required as a professional project. Topics can be chosen which are current or controversial and where an additional voice can contribute, rather than topics chosen because there is the right volume of literature available to review. Interest can be maintained over a long period as the article provides a growing focus and clarified end point from start to finish. John asks students to locate author requirements in an academic journal of their choice in their discipline and to construct an article along these lines as they pursue, and where possible, systematically review the literature available on the topic. The task is fully aligned with course learning outcomes. Irene used the Topical Review concept as a student taking a professional project assessment. An abstract was accepted by an international research organisation and an oral presentation followed at a conference: this contributed to her academic success following the completion of her professional project.

5. Gill Marshall

University of Cumbria

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

When Gill took over the Masters in Medical Imaging (MRI route) at the University of Cumbria, she could not understand why the students were sitting a three hour physics exam. The programme was a practitioners' course and the students were going to be radiographers, not physicists. The students of the part-time course were typically employed in MRI departments, and attended the university by block release. While an understanding of applied physics was necessary she felt that the assessment format had little to do with testing the skills they needed. It also meant that the students were not independent learners, and could not extend their knowledge beyond what they had been 'taught.'

Assessment for learning

Gill embraced the ideas of assessment for learning, and assessment as learning, rather than simply using assessment of learning, and in 2005 overhauled the course. She used authentic assessments that mirrored what the students would do in practice. With the changes in place, the students could see use of the assessments and started to appreciate and engage with them. Staff also enjoyed marking the new assessments, as they were individual and directly applicable to advanced practice. The authentic nature of the assessment is a special feature of the assessment: feedback from externals and mentors has stated that the students were challenging and questioning what was being done in the students' departments, and were looking at the protocols used compared to the state of the art. They were actually saying 'We could change this, we could make this better', and so practice can move on. With the students liking and engaging with the new assessment, deeper learning has been achieved, and so there have been few changes.

Diverse assignments

The assessments used include: reflection on an MRI image, a risk assessment, production of a leaflet regarding MRI suitability, an information sheet, technical evaluations, scientific poster production, case studies, literature review of

a leading edge MRI technique, evaluation of MRI technique, evaluation of a communication incident, audit of a change in clinical practice, critique of a research paper, and a costed research protocol. The dissertation has also been adapted into an article suitable for a peer review journal.

Validation of the new assessment saw considerable resistance from the validation panel and some professional bodies. However, by comparing staged clinical assessments with the conventional exam marks, it could be shown that the examinations marks did not correlate well with the clinical assessments and hence were a poor guide of clinical competences. When an OSCE (objective structured clinical examination) was suggested it was thought to be too anxiety-provoking. However, use of Spielberg's State-Trait Anxiety Analysis showed that by comparing a written examination, a staged clinical assessment, an OSCE and a seminar, it was actually the seminar that was hugely more stressful than the OSCE. A poster was not well understood, but the assessment sees the students standing by their poster, in a similar manner to a conference, and it is rigorously judged. The posters have been one of the most potent means of actually contributing to the scientific community and a large number have been submitted for external events. Masters programmes may be assessed in traditional ways due to a lack of imagination, she argued.

Feedback

Feed forward, rather than feedback, is given on all assessments so they can be used with the next assessment. Two summative assessments are set for each module, ten and twelve weeks after the end of the module respectively. These are graded for the beginning of the following module so that everything learned can be applied to the next module and its assessment.

Differences between Masters and undergraduate level assessment

At Masters level, she argued, there is a need to show mastery of the techniques, to be able to take the theories back to first principles and then synthesize them. Considerable time is spent generating that concept within the students.

6. Sarah Chesney

University of Cumbria

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

The University of Cumbria has a Post-Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE, which mostly includes students who are staff from the university, together with some external students (for example from the NHS). This produces a mixture of learners, many who are new in post, and who have to complete the PGC as part of their contract. The course has three 20 credit modules.

Patchwork text assessment

The assessment of one module was by the use of digitally enhanced patchwork text, which is five different patches, each of around 1000 words. Of these, four are written around themes on learning and teaching, together with the fifth which is a 1000 words reflection on their practice. The students work in small groups of about five, each showing their fellow group members their draft patches, from which they get formative peer feedback. Everyone could see everyone else's feedback unless selected as private. This process is eased by the use of Pebble Pad, an ePortfolio, which allows flexible and controlled access. The peer feedback does not have a grade associated with it, which can prevent some students from engaging with the process; they feel that if there is no mark associated to it then there is no point in doing the exercise. With learning groups of five, this generates five sets of formative peer feedback.

The patches are produced throughout the module, and so removes the need for a large assessment at the end. The tutors also give feedback on the drafts which allows the feedback and work to be challenged and any misconceptions or errors corrected and ensure that the students are progressing in an appropriate way. All the students on the course are working full time (mostly teaching at the university).

Getting students to review their peers' work allows them to see a broad range of work, although some students found it a challenge to give feedback. Evaluation from the students indicated that, as they were not in a position of authority, they did not feel confident enough to comment.

Feedback

The feedback tended to be very general ("this is very interesting, well done") which reduced the effectiveness of the process. The students were told about the etiquette of on-line feedback and it was thought that some were too concerned in trying not to cause offence and so were too polite. This was curious since most of the students were going on to be HE practitioners and give feedback to students. The feedback was generally very well received, although it was not always acted upon; there appeared to be little learnt from one patch that was applied to the next, and most students appeared to be glad that the patch was done. There was also feedback on the final summative work from the tutors, but not the other students. This was particularly useful as one patch led onto the research module that followed.

The peer feedback was largely in line with the tutor's, however, there were situations where the peer feedback had been very positive, which conflicted with the tutor's view, where the feedback needed to be sharper. This could place the tutor in a difficult position by saying that the students should be as authoritative as the tutor but challenging the peer feedback. A solution to this issue is still being investigated.

The patchwork assessment is changing and will shortly need revalidation. For example, to improve the nature of the feedback the students were advised to give feedback in line with the learning outcomes. If they were feeling unsure of what the feedback should then they were advised to examine the learning outcomes and see if they were addressed and the amount of evidence to support this. This process also improved the students' engagement with the learning outcomes.

Quality assurance issues

A very small number of students were worried about plagiarism; reading someone else's work would prevent them working in the same area and may cause them to have to change topic. However, the work was about their personal practice so the content would be individual and hence not affect ones work.

The change to the patchwork assessment took place three years ago to overcome the cumbersome paper portfolios that were heavy and tended to expand with excessive appendices. Students felt that if they included everything then they could not miss anything. Moving to a digital approach

forced them to be more selective. There were also issues of leaving the work to the last minute, and hence not submitting the work on time. This has been countered by staggering the work over the module. Each patch is mapped into the learning outcomes of the module.

The assessment innovations were unproblematic in being validated and she felt it is a largely a cultural conception that students should produce essays. Sarah argued that it is a myth that assessments must completely align with what has been written in their module description. If worded appropriately then there is considerable scope for innovation, for example, descriptors often read: "5000 words or equivalent." However, people are hesitant to change, feeling that Masters have to be difficult, and that this can only be achieved by a big essay.

With most students being lecturers, the assessment is very authentic, particularly as they are trying to bring non-text based evidence into the ePortfolio (video and other clips).

Although the cohorts are small, the assessment would scale relatively successfully because the peer feedback does reduce the amount of feedback the tutor needs to provide. It is very easy to administer, particularly once the assignments are collected in. Additionally, the format allows for quick and efficient searching and retrieval of information. Unfortunately there were several failures in the final research module, which is difficult to complete while they are in post. However, the system could be used to easily look back at the feedback given on that patch to check progress to the research module and so check that the students had been guided as hoped.

Differences between Masters and undergraduate level assessment

Sarah has not a lot of experience with undergraduate assessment but feels that the difference between undergraduate and Masters level assessment is that Masters students are expect to identify problems and look for solutions in their practice.

7. Donna McAuliffe

Griffith University, Australia

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Introduction

Donna works in the area of professional ethics, on both post and undergraduate programmes, including a Masters of Social Work, and a Masters of Mental Health. These are full-time professional courses. Additionally Donna also works on six different undergraduate courses covering general aspects of social work.

Assessment of communication skills

Although most of the modules are assessed based upon essays (approximately 90%), the module on interpersonal communication skills, which is an interdisciplinary module within the Masters in social work, is different. The week-long intensive module sees students from different courses and areas coming together to learn and practice interpersonal communications skills, which is based on role-play. Split into groups of 10, a student takes the part of a counsellor and another student, or sometimes a pair of students, takes role of the client, or clients. The client presents a fictitious scenario that has been given to them by the tutors, and the counsellor responds using the appropriate interpersonal skills. Once completed the students in the group feedback on the session, together with the reflections of those in the client and counsellor roles. This includes what they observed and how it felt. The session is videoed, which is used to scrutinise the student's performance in detail, looking at micro skills. The student must consider the critique of their session and use it to inform their progression and critical reflection.

With the group is a very experienced tutor, who controls and monitors the session, and additionally gives feedback on their performance. The summative assessment is in two parts: 20% is for the student's short written reflection and observation of the skill session (500 words maximum per observation of 1 or 2 micro skills and 500 words on reflection); the remaining 80% is a grade generated by the tutor that covers the student's participation over the whole week. This includes not only their skills but their ability to give and take constructive feedback, appropriate language, their respectful communication

with the group and the staff. They can complete the written assessment at any point they have done their video but it can be left to the end of the week.

The assessment works well because of the skill of the tutors who have to bring together a group of students who have never met beforehand. There needs to be small groups, of no more than 10. Great emphasis is placed on setting the ground rules by the students, since at the start of the week none know any others and there needs to be a huge amount of trust generated very quickly by the tutors. This is essential due to the intensity of the week which can be very nerve-racking. Often strong bonds develop very quickly and connections that form with these groups are very powerful and can continue through the remainder of the programme.

Most of the students have not experienced anything like this before, although they have to have a degree in some related area (e.g. teaching, nursing, psychology) or have voluntary sector counselling experience, and there is a wide array of types of people. They know they are being assessed during the whole week, on the way they are responding, framing criticism, the way they accept feedback, and that they are being videoed and minutely examined in their skills practice down to how they hold their hands, facial expressions. All this adds additional pressure. Donna has learnt that in such an environment it is dangerous to let the students use their own issues and they can run riot with their own experiences. This can end up traumatising themselves and the class.

Feedback from students

The assessment is regarded as being highly authentic and most students are working in the human services field (in disability support roles, or as youth or community workers), but don't have a professional qualification. Although it is a full time course most are working but can't sustain this and fall back to part-time study. The students are typically terrified at the beginning of the module but the evaluation is very positive due to the quality of the staff, who have to be very carefully selected. They need to have taught this material before and be very experienced at giving clear feedback in a very gentle way. They have to be able to challenge, but do so supportively.

Feedback to students

A great deal of feedback is received throughout the week in verbal form from the tutors. Feedback is also given on the final written piece although assessment is more about the whole experience. Assessment like this has

been used since Donna has worked there. There have been refinements, including setting the scenarios for the students. Other changes have been to break up the intensity by the development of a case study DVD by the staff that role plays all the skill that are to be used in the week. At strategic times all the students would be brought together (30-50 students) and a section of the DVD played as a respite. This breaks the intensity and offers a breathing space. There is also continual fine tuning of minor points and elements.

There are no difficulties on the assessment format from the Australian Association of Social workers who are the accrediting body.

Differences between Masters and undergraduate level assessment

When considering undergraduate and Masters level assessment, the skills at undergraduate level are simpler and not as deep, she suggested. At Masters level they have to grasp much more complex interpersonal skills, and a different level of analysis, and back up what they are observing within the literature is expected, together with much more detailed and clearer competences. The students are different at Masters level too, experienced people who have worked in the field. They have much higher expectations and will crack down quickly on anyone who is being disrespectful.

If there were no limitation on assessment innovations then Donna would like more time for assessment, but the size of groups she regards as being fine.

Vignette (ii): Marie Hardy and Steve Jewell

Coventry University

Presentation at the Assimilate Conference, September 2012

Marie and Steve describe how they aim to increase employability of Masters Level students in the Business School where students are engaged in assessing reflective pieces produced while studying on the Coventry Business School Company Internship programme. They describe a 60 credit Masters module in which students spend 10-12 weeks in the UK or overseas undertaking a real business project, in addition to research carried out with employers in the UK and China.

8. A case study from a Post 92 university

Contributed by a Module Leader who wishes to be anonymous.

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham and case study written by Sally Brown

Introduction

The respondent is a module tutor for the HR Management module on an MA in Human Resource Management/Development course at a post-92 university where she teaches a core module on Strategic People Management and Development. Students on the course undertake two core modules, plus two electives together with a 3 months placement, concluding with a 15,000 words dissertation which provides the 180 credits needed for the MA. There are normally five cohorts of students in any year, two of which are part-time, with three cohorts starting in September (around 120 students in total) and two cohorts starting in January (around 75 students in total). For this module there are four staff involved in the teaching team, including the module leader. The format and approach of the module has remained broadly the same in the four years that she has been teaching on it.

Assessment

Her module has three types of assessment: two assignments each worth 25% of the module marks, and a final unseen written closed book exam worth 50% of the marks. The first of the assignments is an applied piece of work, an individual written report on an organisational case study. The second is a group presentation based on the recommendations of the first report, with students self-selecting their groups after they have received grades and feedback for the first assignment. Students receive a group mark for these group presentations. The other core module has a similar mix of assessments, and electives are assessed in a variety of ways.

The course adopts a programme-wide approach to timing of assignments and the Programme Leader submits timings for all module assignments to module leaders in advance, with limited opportunities for renegotiation by Module Leaders. Clashes of deadlines are thus largely avoided, although on occasions, students are required to sit two exams in one week due to logistical issues.

Feedback

The respondent meets the students 2-3 weeks before the submission of the individual report and provides formative feedback on work to date, with around a page of written feedback on the summatively assessed report provided around three weeks after submission of the assignment. For the presentation, she meets students in a 15-minute slot a couple of weeks before the event and talks the students through their presentation outline, helping to ensure that they are working on the right lines. With the exam, students usually get just a grade, although they can request more detailed feedback on their performance if they feel it necessary.

Professional Body requirements

The programme is accredited by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) who require that assessment must include 50% unseen elements, hence the use of exams. Were this not the case, the module tutor would prefer not to use unseen exams, which she regards as inauthentic and believes cause stress to students, leading them to place excessive reliance on memorisation and recall. She describes her students learning various quotes they have identified as being necessary to their answers and then including them whether or not they are relevant to the exam question. Students indicate that they dislike the exam since it requires them to demonstrate in a two-hour period all they have learned in a 24-week module

Quality assurance

There are few admin problems with this module as the Module team schedule in sufficient time to mark exam papers and reports, then to moderate marks for moderation and give student feedback at an agreed time. The module tutor judges that of the assessment methods, the report and presentation work best because they involve an applied case study, enabling students to apply what they have learned in class to real examples. This is popular with students who give these assignments good evaluations. The least popular method on the module is the final unseen exam which students worry about, feeling that they are required to learn 'parrot fashion' and then repeat material. Many students are practitioners in the field and have real world experience, so they tend to have an applied way of thinking rather than an academic style, she suggests. However, she believes they could pass the exam without doing this if they made good use of the learning derived from the first two assignments.

Students complete module examination forms distributed by admin staff but these are not provided to individual module teachers: instead an overview of the course is reviewed annually within departmental meetings.

Employability

Many students on the module are already in full-time or part-time employment in the field as, for example, HR administrators or advisors and some even have their own companies or high-powered consultancies. However, among the five cohorts there are normally two cohorts of international students who normally have no workplace experience in the field, which makes organisation and management of the course quite complex.

Quality enhancement

The module tutor is not convinced of the value of unseen exams as authentic assessment tools since in her own ten years of professional experience in the private sector, she encountered reports and presentations but never written exams. The team were exploring in a review of the programme for presentation in October 2011, the possibility of providing open case studies with either open questions or unseen questions as the basis of the exam instead of an entirely unseen exam format. They felt this might make the assessment more workplace-relevant, if this can be agreed with CIPD, who have indicated there might be some flexibility.

Differences between assessment at undergraduate and Masters level

The respondent sees these as being largely around lower levels of flexibility, due to the requirements of the professional body. The undergraduate modules she teaches (which are not CIPD accredited) include a wider variety of assessment, none of which are unseen exams, and many students elect to undertake those modules for this reason.

9. Jeff Sayer

James Cook University, Australia

Interviewer: Sally Brown

Master of Development Practice

Jeff is leading a new innovative Masters programme designed to prepare students for working lives in sustainable development in developing countries. The first cohort of students started in 2011 on this two year course. The conversation covered the first year assessment practices as the second year assessment strategy was still being refined.

Background

The course is designed to enable students to demonstrate skills across a broad range of disciplines, leading to development of their competence in finding workable solutions to real problems. Under the Australian system that differentiates between Research and Taught Masters programmes, this is a Taught Masters course. The course aims to include significant elements of live project learning with authentic assignments, case studies and field trips. All students come to the course with work experience rather than straight from an undergraduate degree and most are from developing countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Zimbabwe and one student from Australia), with funding largely coming from Aus Aid. Students engage with the tropical learning environment extensively using field trips and the second semester of the second year is spent entirely in the field in Indonesia working on live problems, leading to a jointly authored report of value to the host community, with future cohorts building on the previous students' work cumulatively, leaving behind a positive contribution. Students will be expected during this period to negotiate, facilitate and present responses in a live learning context.

Assessment

The assessment of the first year of this course includes:

1. Individual tasks where each student is allocated a key text in the area of study and asked to write an account of the major issues contained within, with an individual commentary with personal responses to the views expressed. The outcomes are then presented to their peers, with 10 credits (tutor assessed) for the work undertaken.

2. Individual diagnostic profiles of the development problems of a small tropical island, leading to a tutor-assessed PowerPoint presentation and written report (10 + 10 credits).
3. Participation in a two-week, expert-led intensive programme of systems dynamics modelling focussing on students' capability to undertake disaster risk-reduction and climate change adaptation activities (20 credit points).
4. Individual task (with collaboration encouraged) building a systems model as a take-away paper over a week (20 credit points).
5. A semester length independent study leading to an essay 10,000 words long (30 credit points).
6. A poster as for a conference derived from the independent study (10 credit points).
7. A time-constrained, unseen exam (3 hours) comprising a first question using short-answer free response questions and three further essay questions including topic option choice (40 credit points).

Vignette: [iii] Ruth Pilkington

University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)

Presentation at the Assimilate conference September 2012

Ruth uses dialogic assessment at M-level because she argues that Masters programmes increasingly target and recognise professionals learning in and around practice. She proposes that essay assignments have insufficient creativity and breadth to evidence and probe reflective, experiential and work-based learning. Portfolios, and patchwork texts offer a written alternative, but ten years experience has led the MEd team to target dialogue as an assessment tool. Critical discussions involve buddy pairs exploring and evidencing learning. At a more advanced level, focused dialogue involves exploring specific areas of practice and reflection on innovation. Self and peer assessment is encouraged. They support participants in developing self-directed and strategic approaches to skills and knowledge development. Theoretical links are built into the process and scholarly underpinnings are reinforced through the use of annotated bibliographies. The challenging but fulfilling assignment has multiple benefits: staff time/ commitment is equivalent to marking portfolios, feedback is immediate and dialogic, moderation and quality assurance is supported through recordings and sample paired-assessor involvement, stress levels for participants is low and their sense of achievement and motivation is high.

10. Wendy Earles

James Cook University, Australia

Interviewer: Sally Brown

Background

Wendy is the Post Graduate coordinator for the subject area of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University, where she has responsibility for the Independent studies options within a Masters of Social Sciences leading to Human Sciences and Women's Studies majors. Following core research subjects and a selection of major subjects, students can choose independent studies options, rated at 3 credits in the Social Work course or (double) 6 credits in the Women's studies course.

Assessment by independent study

Wendy contacts students on enrolment on the options and negotiates with them topics for the independent study. Most students at this stage are practitioners wishing to upgrade their qualifications and looking for something of value to their current employment, for example, if they notice patterns of outcomes in their current practice, they may wish to research the underlying causes, or they may wish to develop mini-reflective accounts or develop practice resources useable in their workplace. Some other students (e.g. from a Creative Writing course) are looking to deepen their understanding of the area. Some are looking to better understand organisational learning or may be following a particular area of personal interest or passion.

An example of the latter is a student working in the Department of Correctional Services (Parole area) interested in indigenous women and recidivism. Her independent study took the form of a two-stage project, the first half of which scrutinised available data from official statistics and the research literature in the area and constructing a matrix of what different studies tell us on the topic. The second part of the study looked at what research tells us are the reasons for recidivism among indigenous women, which was an under-researched area. The assessment took the form of a journal article format (which the student could possibly submit for publication) worth 6 credits.

Another student, based in the counselling service was working towards a 3 credit option and was interested in eating disorders among young female refugees. She undertook a national and international review of research which

explored experiences beyond developed Western society, on which most studies of eating disorders are based. However, assessment took the form of a meta-synthesis of 5-7 journal articles on the topic, in the form of a synthesis paper. A third student was a Domestic Violence worker who recognised that her service needed a practice guide offering guidance on the very first steps to be taken to provide crisis aid when women first present themselves at the service, covering physical and practical issues including homelessness and child protection. Her work drew on a range of feminist theorists (as this was a feminist service). As this was a 3 credit study, actually producing the practice manual proved too much of a task in the time available, but Wendy advised her to produce as her assessed task an annotated contents list for such a guide, which she could then develop further within her work context.

Wendy indicated that each student comes to the programme with different problem areas to investigate. Some students are doing the programme as a preparatory study prior to commencing a PhD, so in these cases, the independent study is used to produce the literature review for a future study.

Other innovative assessments

Other examples of assessment instruments on this programme include annotated bibliographies and matrices and mind maps. On occasions students may produce presentations of their material for particular audiences, and, if it is not possible to actually make the presentations during the available time for assessment, the presentation can be submitted as for example a PowerPoint presentation as part of the assessment.

Wendy indicated that marking to an agreed standard was possible since she undertook the marking herself, following a period of negotiation with each student. Fortnightly telephone monitoring enables students to keep their work on track, and formative comments on drafts are supplied by Wendy at incremental stages. Grading uses the standard university approach (Pass, Credit, Distinction, High Distinction) although Wendy would prefer a pass/fail approach.

The assessment criteria test whether students can conceptualise problems, conceive a clear way forward for working on the issue, offer developmental advances and synthesise critically the learning from experience.

Most students are using the programmes for continuous professional development and the work undertaken not only benefits the individuals but demonstrates how the university can be of service to the community, working in partnership.

When students are admitted to the Independent Study, Wendy will advise them to seek additional contextual learning opportunities from fellow university staff and from workplace experts. The independent study is popular, but cohort sizes are small (5-6 students at any one time) and constraints within the support methodology militate against increasing the cohort size significantly.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

Wendy suggests that this is difficult to define. Some of her students are progressing from undergraduate studies in relevant areas, where she would expect to see a quantum difference in the level of work but for others, this work is in a subject new to them, and for those students, it is like a second Bachelors degree with work submitted more like that expected on an undergraduate programme but with an expectation of more advanced generic skills.

Vignette [iv]: Susan Stevenson, Pip Bruce Ferguson and Debbie Bright

New Zealand Curriculum Design Institute (NZCDI)

Presentation at the Assimilate conference September 2012

The team have been exploring how best to design an innovative Higher Education professional capacity-building Masters qualification at the NZCDI. They argue that quality education is supported by a coherent and logical philosophy, underpinned by research-based evidence, which is culturally and learner relevant, valid in practice, experiential, interactive, authentic, holistic, and enjoyable for learners. Ten years ago the NZCDI embarked on developing a PG professional qualification pathway to offer international higher education for Curriculum Designers, Academic Managers/Leaders and Curriculum Analysts for the Asian Pacific region. Critical to the Institute's mission and philosophy has been innovative curriculum components such as authentic assessment linked to professional practice, courageous academic defence of the theoretical framework and an assessment methodology adopted to develop work-ready graduates in traditional academic environments. The project uses unique research competency frameworks, assessment approaches formulated to align with and 'live' the NZCDI mission and philosophy and experiential assessments designed to provide evidence of high level professional employment-related characteristics and competencies.

11. Patricia Black

Keele University

Produced by Professor Patricia Black, Professor of Pharmacy Professional Development & Education/Director of Postgraduate Studies, School of Pharmacy, Keele University as a result of email communications with Sally Brown.

Context

The Masters (MSc) year that is offered within the School of Pharmacy is generic across its four main postgraduate programmes (Advanced Professional Practice, Community Pharmacy, Clinical Pharmacy, Prescribing Studies). These programmes are studied part-time, mainly at a distance by practising pharmacists. The MSc year was restructured in 2007 to move away from the conventional 60 credit dissertation year that was proving less and less popular with both students and employers who sponsored their professional development. The re-structure took into account a number of factors affecting education and professional role development for pharmacists to embody an emphasis on the researching professional as a reflective practitioner. It was approved by the University as a 'Professional MSc' that is grounded in an individual's professional practice. It enables pharmacists to focus on an area of interest to them so that they can develop a comprehensive understanding and critical awareness of this at an advanced level and apply their learning to develop their professional practice/ services through scholarship, research and enquiry that will, in parallel, enable them to achieve the standards for a MSc degree. This is achieved through the three modules that form the structure for the MSc year:

1. Advanced Practice Development
2. Researching and Evaluating your Practice
3. Independent Learning Project

These modules are delivered principally using structured distance learning materials and work-based learning.

Assessment

This is undertaken as follows:

1. Advanced Practice Development (APD): 15 credits. Assessment is through the medium of a structured reflective portfolio that includes reflection on learning and professional practice from structured activities relating to negotiated learning outcomes and the practitioner's chosen area for advanced/specialist practice.
2. Researching and Evaluating your Practice (R&EP): 15 credits. The learning outcomes are assessed using a structured written proposal (5,000 words) for the evaluation of a professional service.
3. Independent Learning Project (ILP): 30 credits. This is assessed in a written project report of 10,000 words.

Feedback

Each student is assigned to a tutor/supervisor for each module (usually the same academic throughout if the student is completing all the modules without a break) who will help them to develop their specific learning outcomes for the APD module, their project proposal for the R&EP module and support them when they are conducting the service evaluation for the ILP module. The tutor will provide written feedback of the summative assessment, normally within 4 weeks of submission of the work. Assessments are submitted using Pebble Pad for the APD Reflective Portfolio, Turnitin for the R&EP module and in hard copy by post for the ILP report. Formative feedback, via email, Pebble Pad, telephone or face-to-face is given on request for any module. Structured activities for electronic submission to the tutor form part of formative feedback for the proposal development for the R&EP module and take place over several weeks during the module. There are no particular limitations on assessment required by Professional, Regulatory and Subject Bodies.

Administrative issues linked to assessment

The assessment for the ILP module must be a service evaluation and not research per se so that formal application for research ethics committee approval is not required. All project proposals at the R&EP module stage are scrutinised by the Professional MSc course leader and tutors and the School's Research Ethics and Governance Committee to ensure that the project falls within the remit of a service evaluation.

Potential problems with IT that are beyond the control of the course team but fortunately the School has its own IT team to troubleshoot and resolve problems.

Examples of good practice

The University has recognized the value of the structure of the Professional MSc in developing professional practice and research skills; for example, other Schools have been encouraged to adapt it as a model for their Masters programmes. The team has also been contacted by other Schools of Pharmacy about the model with a view to it being replicated elsewhere.

The course has also been launched by Keele as a stand-alone postgraduate Certificate in Research and Evaluation.

The model used for the structured reflective portfolio was also developed at Keele and has been evaluated and published: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14623941003665810>

Quality enhancement

The re-structured course has resulted in a significant rise in the number of postgraduate pharmacists who continue to study beyond the postgraduate Diploma award to MSc at the university and also attracted pharmacists who have completed a similar Diploma elsewhere and who wish to 'top-up' to the MSc.

Evaluation of the course

The course is evaluated through the University's normal quality assurance procedures that include end-of-course student evaluation and external examiner review.

Differences between undergraduate and Master's level assessment

Pat indicated that she thought that a Master's level assessment should be constructed to allow the student to demonstrate the application of their knowledge and skills to their professional practice for their continuing professional development, and improvement and enhancement of their practice through reflection on their learning and practice.

Undergraduate assessment, she suggested, is largely more about demonstrating knowledge and skills in a theoretical/simulated context, not real-life practice.

12. Cheryl Whiting

Kingston University

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

Cheryl is the course director of Masters in research in clinical practice. It is a government initiative and funded to provide 10 places for students who are practitioners in allied health professions, such as nurse practitioners, midwives, speech and language practitioners, and dieticians. This produces a broad range of student backgrounds. Students get paid their usual wages to study and their employees are reimbursed by the government. It is one year in duration, is full time and has 6 modules, although one is a project dissertation. The five taught modules cover research methods, statistics, applied research, critical appraisal, and project planning and management. It differs from other Masters in research methods because it is aimed specifically at health practitioners (in current practice), to enable them to enhance practice, using evidence based research to improve and inform patient care. An aim is to evaluate their own practice, taking research into it. This not only increases research capacity but also provides an academic careers pathway, leading to a practitioner-researcher and possibly to a PhD.

Assessment

Within the programme there are a variety of assessments, including a research protocol, (considering NHS ethical approval), a management report that looks at health and safety issues, legislative framework, research governance and how this affect their research (e.g. copyright, IPR). Also covered are the wider issues of a project, and considers details of the project they will be undertaking. For example, if they are interviewing a patient at home, a risk assessment is required. There is also a statistics exam that uses a scenario from a research paper. A critical appraisal of two provided papers is also used, where one paper is qualitative and the other quantitative in nature. They have to consider how the papers are relevant to the field, and its value in practice. A research project is undertaken, including planning and management (which is assessed by an oral presentation to a group of invited guests, staff and students). The aim is not necessarily to produce a researcher, but someone who can lead and develop. They seek to create the

environment as found in practice, and so is more than just doing a project: it helps develop them into a professional researcher. An output of this is a poster which could be submitted to conference. There is also an applied research module where the wider issues of research are considered, and the students have to plan a conference, assessing funding bids, and service user involvement. To assess this module the students produce a portfolio of reflections in their abilities in certain skills. There are two components, a module specific choice of five activities from ten (1,000 words per activity), and a generic component that can include pieces of work completed before coming onto the course.

Some of the module specific components include: appraise their personal strength and weaknesses as a researcher, produce an action plan; reflect on their learning having attended a study day or seminar, and to explore knowledge gained and apply it to their own work; appraise the cultural practices in their own department and look to see if this enhances or inhibits the use of research in practice; read an article related to the module and give a rationale on how it adds to their development as a researcher; investigate their capacity for collaborative research and how they work within a group. There is a group activity every 2 weeks where they are given a fictitious scenario in groups, e.g. 'you are a research development group in a fictitious hospital which is facing a cut of 50%. You have to fund-raise cover the deficit, and think about how to do this for the research group'. One solution could be to hold a conference / study day, and the groups have to plan the conference, with draft programme, identify content in line with audience, draft a call for papers, find key speakers, produce a conference pack, marketing, time-line, with finances to give costs and potential income. The assignment is not the product of these activities, but a reflection of them.

Portfolio Assessment

The advantage of the portfolio of reflections is that students have to think for themselves, it is very personal, which makes it difficult to plagiarise. It helps the students face up to what they know and what they don't know, and address how and where are they going to use these skills, and locate where they fit into their practice. It also broadens out their thinking. The results can be very insightful, as students give it a go and address things they have not thought about before.

Feedback from students

Many of the students do not like the assessment; it is something very different, and they have to think more, and apply knowledge to that context. However, it gives evidence of CPD, and a tool that helps you get a job, or move into an academic career. The practitioners tend not to be familiar with reflection and it takes time to learn. The reflections can start with very descriptive writing, e.g. "I did this, or that", and not giving the justification of action in line with theory.

Ten students are in the cohort and they are split into two groups, which rotate over the weeks. Each student gets the scenario a week before they have the group meeting. The following week they present to the other group. Although it is the same problem there are often two very different solutions presented. Within the meetings and presentation there is a facilitator who can give feedback on progress to the group. The presentations can also be used as a showcase and guests can view them. Because the assessments are so different, study support is given before they are submitted, with interim briefings. The students are given guidelines, about what is a portfolio, where does it fit into your professional development for professional registration and qualifications. There are also instructions about layout and the size of the portfolio is limited to a folder. A good quality assessment guide is also included that states the pass mark, the hand in date, a reminder about referencing and plagiarism and rules of the assessment. Although this is in the handbook, they will often not read it there.

Feedback

This is standardised and makes use of a grid. It shows students what is a pass, what is a merit, what is a distinction on each of a number of criteria, e.g., the criteria on the achievement of learning objects (LO) would indicate: a fail is where the majority of LOs have not been achieved, failure to produce a document or if it is inaccurate. A distinction is such that evidence is present for all LOs to have been met. This is colour coded and each student receives a statement regarding a number of sections. Additionally there are additional comments to cover specific information such as coherence, structure, layout, referencing. Good feedback is standardised with feedback about each element and the students are very complementary about the feedback. Cheryl did have a different role (learning teaching and assessment coordinator) and so is fastidious about feedback and to lead by example. When the module was first run, much feedback was broad and generic, and students requested more specific, personalised feedback. At Masters they put a lot more work, energy and effort and deserve good feedback.

13. Chris Garbett

Leeds Metropolitan University

Interviewer: Janice Priestley

Background

Chris as course leader for the MSc in Building Surveying is responsible for a module, 'Managing the Property Asset', which runs across MSc Building Surveying and MSc Facilities Management. Students on the module have to be working in the profession: many are mid-career professionals or recent graduates.

Technology-supported group assessment

The module, as part of a distance learning delivery, uses group work, where students are expected to undertake some combined research which involves a webquest. As a result of that search, they put together a wiki based on their research. They are given a scenario where they are property managers for a firm of accountants and tasked to look at opening a new office in one of two cities. The cities are chosen, by Chris, to ensure that they are not ones in which any of the students are based, so nobody has the benefit of local knowledge. This distance mode of delivery can also help students to develop cross-cultural capabilities so often sought by today's employers.

Chris chooses groups of four students. There are four clearly defined tasks, looking at: office rents, residential market (where the senior staff live whilst setting up the office), quality of life and communications/transport links. The tasks, although related, are all independent and so the group can divide them up amongst themselves such that no student is disadvantaged if another drops out or has to wait for another to complete a task before they can begin their work. All tasks are marked according to the same criteria. Students combine together to produce a wiki with 4-5 pages, which includes an introduction, a page on the office etc., a conclusion and references. Students have to decide who will do what task, conduct their research, write up their findings and come together to produce the wiki for others to contribute to and comment on, then produce an overall conclusion. Finally, each student produces an individual reflection on working with people at a distance.

Some students may have met in workshops but, as far as possible, Chris puts students who have never met in groups together. This makes sure that overseas students are not left isolated among a group of local students who

may know each other. There are also political and cultural sensitivities when allocating groups. In terms of IT skills, as a distance learning course, students are expected to have IT skills already.

Feedback from students

This is very positive. They generally feel that the group work brings them together, on a course where they would have otherwise been somewhat isolated as distance learners. Students realise that there are no free riders and that they will be assessed on their individual contribution. There are areas where the whole group mark can be affected, for example if the group has failed to provide a conclusion when building their wiki, as it is something to which they would all have had the opportunity to contribute. Experience shows that students find the wiki useful and there is some anecdotal evidence that they are now introducing collaborative wikis for projects within their own workplaces. Chris's approach has been introduced into some other modules, as feedback from students has shown that it brings them together and this is useful in the early stages of a course when students particularly need to get to know each other.

Assessment weighting

The assessment is 15% of the module (10 for wiki and 5 for reflection). There are 3 pieces of coursework and an exam with the module. Chris feels that this amount of assessment may be excessive in a face to face course; but is important in a distance learning course as it maybe the only point of contact with some students. Assessment gives students the opportunity to develop and subsequent assessments allow them to take forward feedback from the previous ones and a chance to make up on any shortcomings. The module has been running for a few years, but the wiki is new, with students previously having collaborated on an MS Word document. Chris has also introduced web conferencing, using Elluminate, for tutorials, which has allowed students to 'stay on' (online) afterwards, to collaborate with each other.

Students can place content on the wiki, before submission, for Chris to comment on. After submission Chris gives detailed summative feedback in writing, using a detailed marking grid, which allows students to see the breakdown of the marks (e.g. on referencing, on the like-for-like comparison of the cities, on the reflection). Students also then get audio feedback, recorded on an mp3 player, placed on the virtual learning environment for them to listen to.

Quality assurance issues

At programme level, the professional body is very keen on traditional, unseen, written exams. This can be useful within the distance learning programme as, particularly in some cultures, some students feel that they have not been assessed properly if they have not had a written exam and some students prefer written exams.

Assessing the mark is easy according to Chris, as a detailed grid is used and this also allows for transparency, as students can see where they gained or lost marks. Administratively, Chris is very IT competent and so has no problems with the assessment workload which the module generates. Things have become easier since he began to use the wiki rather than MS Word. External examiners can log into the wiki to see the student work and are very happy to do so. If he was to change anything then Chris would make group work a bigger proportion of the mark. Chris and the students like it the group work assessment but Chris says there is so much to cover in the syllabus at Masters level.

A condition of enrolment is that they are already working in the profession. The assessment is very authentic. Some students commented that in the workplace they are already collaborating with others internationally. Other students commented that where they are not already collaborating at a distance, they certainly expect this to happen in the future.

Potential future changes

Chris would like to introduce group working in every module, but would shuffle the students so that they get to work with a variety of different people and cultures. Working at a distance can have its advantages, in that students behave professionally and don't have non-course issues interfering with their relationships and causing conflict.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

Chris may use the same material in the assessment at a variety of levels. The difference in the levels is in the amount of thought and application which the student needs to apply to the task.

14. Jo Drugan

University of Leeds

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

Jo is module leader for the Computer-Assisted Translation Module, which is a core module of a taught Masters programme. The Masters programme is very much an applied programme which provides training as professional translators. Most of the students have a background in languages, perhaps having studied a language or two at undergraduate level but not necessarily translation. It is quite common for people to undertake the course towards the end of their career as it is a good way to complement their existing subject expertise with translation skills in order to become a domain specialist, for example in engineering, building, and healthcare, where specialist subject knowledge is required alongside language skills. Students usually go on to work as project managers, translators, terminologists or in some other aspect of the profession. The students are given as near real-world 'hands on' experiences as is possible.

The Masters degree has 180 credit points. This module was previously set at 30 credit points, but has been moved up to 45, in order to reflect the intense nature of the work required. The students are split into two groups, with about 25 students per group. The delivery team includes academics, practising translators, localisers and demonstrators (who are graduates of the programme). The fairly high staff/student ratio (6 or 7 staff: 25 students) gives students a great deal of opportunity for supported hands-on practice.

Assessment of team projects

One of the types of assessment on the programme is the team project. This involves students working on real-world scenarios using peer, as well as staff, assessment. The projects account for 20 percent of the module mark. There are normally 5 team projects per year and 4 of these are summatively assessed, each being 5 percent of the module mark. When undertaking peer review, students are asked to allocate a mark and comments rather than a percentage. Jo had undertaken some staff training on peer assessment. She was initially nervous about students doing the assessment but realised that students have the best knowledge of how their peers have worked on,

and contributed to, the projects. A post-graduate demonstrator is assigned to each project team and is able to keep a close eye on things and can form their own views of the marks and feedback. Prior to the first team project, the students are briefed in what they should, and should not, be assessing and what they are, and are not, allowed to take into account. The marks are allocated in performance bands and so rather than have to allocate a particular mark, students are asked to state the level at which they have assessed their peer's performance.

Student responses

Jo was, at first, concerned that students would not want to be critical of their peers and that this could lead to mark inflation, however, in practice she has found that students are more likely to fail peers who have not pulled their weight, have been away, or have failed to do something that they were required to do. Students like the assessment and are keen that the marks on all five of their projects count. The demonstrators hold team meetings with the students in the project team and ensure that have understood what is required at each project round, and give them feedback on their initial impressions of how everyone is working in the team.

Each team has a student as a project manager. The demonstrator gives a mark and comments on each individual in the team. The project manager has, similarly, to give a mark and at least 2 lines of comment on each member of the team. The team has a meeting where they discuss the project and how well people have performed. The team can comment on individuals, e.g. 'I really want to say how brilliantly this person in the team did by helping us with x'. The meeting is minuted and notes sent back to Jo. Most comments are positive. Jo takes an overview of all the comments and feedback received and allocates a mark to each student. It is quite unusual for there to be significant variation in the marks.

Giving feedback to students

When presenting the marks, Jo meets with students individually, for three to four minutes, and asks them their impression of the project, how well they have worked on it and how they could improve. She then gives them feedback, anonymously, from their peers and the demonstrator. Jo's experience is that students usually know when they are receiving negative feedback and recognise where they went wrong.

Quality assurance issues

As the translation profession is unregulated there were no professional body restrictions which could stand in the way of the innovative assessment used on this programme. The university was also supportive of the peer assessment approach. The source material used for the projects changes every time so that students are not able to learn from others what to expect. Jo realises that the assessment is more labour intensive and front loaded than traditional methods but believes that the investment of time in developing the assessment was worthwhile, although it would have been challenging to find time to do it had she not taken a sabbatical.

It is challenging, at the start of the year, to get students to volunteer to be the project manager on the first round of projects as they are quite nervous at putting themselves forward for things; this is not part of some cultures. Despite this, Jo believes that students learn to develop the confidence to put themselves forward throughout the year and so isn't likely to change this. Possible changes to the programme in the future concern the weighting of the module, as students are keen for this to be increased.

15. Rachel Forsyth

Manchester Metropolitan University

Interview conducted by Richard Canham, written up by Sally Brown

Background

The programme Rachel described was a Masters in Academic Practice which is studied part-time by a cohort of around 20 academic staff with a variety of prior experiences, many of whom have some experience of doing research in their own disciplinary context beforehand. However, some have come to the role of academics from industry, or other professional practice, like law, or health care, and so on, so not all staff will have done a higher degree which includes an element of research. The conversation focused on a Level 7, 20 credits Research Methods unit, which aims to give participants an opportunity to get a higher degree, as well as an introduction to academic practice.

Assessment of the unit

The unit has evolved over a period of five years, becoming more formal in its structure and nowadays has summative assessment dispersed throughout the unit. She indicated that when there was just formative assessment in the early stages, participants didn't engage fully with the programme. The unit is also offered more generally across the institution so not all who attend the classes undertake the programme with the aim of achieving a qualification, but all engage in multi-layered staged assessments with formative feedback. The course delivery is all undertaken online and uses a variety of different resources illustrating a number of research methods and each student undertakes a study with an independent focus.

Four components of assessment

These comprise a presentation on research philosophy in a debate format (20%), an annotated reading list (1,000 words or equivalent: 20%), a Poster presentation involving peer assessment (30%) and a Project proposal and reflective commentary (2,000 words or equivalent: 30%). Participants may negotiate an alternative presentation format for the annotated reading list and the project proposal, including the use of video or audio. The annotated reading list requires participants to complete a focused literature search in academic practice and select 5-10 articles for brief review of their quality and

relevance to the proposed research question, and some indication of what follow up is suggested by each article.

The presentation is on a research philosophy allocated to them by the tutor in an area designed to stretch them beyond what they have done previously (which Rachel describes as being 'feasible but silly') and they have to explain how they would address it using a particular research philosophy (20% weighting). So for example, somebody from an Art and Design background might be asked to use a quantitative approach, which is usually what scientists are familiar with, and scientists may be asked to talk about 'realism', which they might never previously have encountered.

Rachel herself comes from a science background and considers it fun to work in challenging domains, hence her asking participants to work in less familiar areas, which they may not enjoy at first but from which they benefit. Feedback on the presentation is provided on a feedback form with which the participants are familiarised in advance, so they are clear about the criteria for assessment.

The poster (30% weighting) is based on their individual research plans, which is peer-assessed, as is the presentation, with Rachel herself and a colleague also participating in assessment. She said that students don't necessarily look forward to the assignment but subsequently indicate that it is the most useful thing that they do on this course. She emphasises to participants in the briefing that the look of the poster is less important than its content, and while participants from an Art and Design background tend to produce highly attractive posters, others produce very basic ones and are not marked down for that.

Each of the previous assignments contributes to the completion of the final project proposal (30% weighting). At this stage participants are offered opportunities to discuss the structure and form of the project proposal and there are very active discussions about what is expected of them, but there is no formal feedback. The study is on a topic related to their own interests and students over the years have produced studies on a very wide range of topics, from the pseudo-scientific to a philosophical debate about diverse elements of academic practice. Participants are encouraged to read one another's work, which is submitted on line to enable them to read widely and is designed to get everyone involved participatively.

Assessment is incremental over the period of production of the proposal, rather than simply being an end-point summative assessment, which means that if they don't engage early on, then they've got a lot more work to do later.

It's designed to be undertaken alongside their normal day jobs, recognising that all participants have competing pressures on their time.

Encouraging engagement

Peer involvement fosters engagement with fellow participants, although having done so in an earlier stage of the programme, Rachel no longer asks students to work in groups. Nevertheless in the few sessions where they come together, they engage very successfully with one another and find this enjoyable, as does Rachel herself, who finds the on-the-spot marking of the posters particularly valuable. She attributes this enjoyment to the fact that everybody is doing something different, focused on their own interests, so every year the dynamic is different, with participants being highly motivated. In some years, teaching colleagues are invited to participate in the poster marking as well as two or three peers plus the tutor herself. Criteria are well established and thoroughly shared, and a feedback form is used to give feedback on posters, which was adapted from a US research project on helping scientists communicate, and live comments are also offered to participants at the time of display.

An overall mark on the posters is provided to students within a week. The project proposal has a maximum word-length of 2,000 words to which they also append an executive reflective commentary. Feedback on this element is also provided promptly so that people can move on to the dissertation stage without too much delay.

The focus of assignments

Assessment on the course is well aligned with participants' experiences and needs, but participants on occasions do this course as a preparation for a change in direction, with some using the opportunity to undertake research based on areas familiar to them, while others pursue different and new directions, for example, workload management, where it is politically less sensitive to work outside their own department. There is a strong focus on selecting the most appropriate research methodology for the area of study. The assessment is designed to give participants confidence in making their own decisions and choices in new and existing areas of work.

Quality enhancement

Rachel indicated that the online element of the unit changes year on year, with the assessment remaining broadly the same. It is more difficult to change assessment within the university than other elements of the programme but she indicated that are reasonably good levels of flexibility within the system to enable enhancements within a robust quality assurance framework. Across programmes she indicated that tutors monitor the assessment strategy, expecting to use a mixture of different types of assessment and it is expected that programme teams should profile their assessments to make sure that students are adequately prepared for assignments and don't get too much of any one type of assessment.

Because the unit is designed for academic staff, there is some pressure on the course team to demonstrate good pedagogic practice and to demonstrate impact on participants' teaching, and Rachel suggested that a number of participants had indicated that they had changed their own practice as a result of doing the course, for example, the inclusion of posters as assessment tools on undergraduate courses.

What identifies Masters level assessment?

When asked what she considers is the biggest difference between assessment at Master's level and at undergraduate level, Rachel indicated that she would expect more independence from Master's level students and would expect to give them more autonomy over selection of topics within assessment, with more opportunities to make choices. She suggested that there shouldn't be a great leap between levels, arguing that it should be progressive.

16. Sheila French

Manchester Metropolitan University

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham and case study written by Sally Brown

Background

Sheila leads a unit on Designing Online Learning, part of a Post-Graduate Qualification in Librarianship and Information Management which is designed for diverse learners including librarians and information managers who are responsible for pedagogy within their libraries or who may have responsibility for designing learning within their organisations. Some will be responsible for course design themselves and others may be responsible for vetting or evaluating courses designed by others. Some students are full-time, others are in employment in the profession and may have five years of practice as a Librarian or Information Manager before undertaking the course.

Assessing on-line learning materials development

Sheila argues that much learning online can have a technical focus and that learning design must primarily be pedagogically well thought-through. The unit aims to give participants an overview of the theory of learning rather than give them solely technology skills. This element is designed to give participants an awareness of the way in which learning comes about, so they focus extensively on examining their own approaches and learning styles through discussion. She also seeks to give them a pedagogical framework within which to design some learning elements, taking into account learning styles and learning theories.

Within the course, participants design a learning package, but only about 20-25 per cent of the mark is awarded for the actual software package (for example, a PowerPoint presentation). The majority of marks are given for the pedagogical design of the assignment. The course is not designed as a 'teaching the teachers' course but could be aimed as such as part of an MA in Education. It aims to give participants a greater awareness of how people learn and give them knowledge of contextual factors like the importance of the layout of the room or the way the mood in class is generated, or in the case of learning on-line, issues around motivation and feedback to the student studying on their own. She argues that factors like cramped rooms, poor planning and organisation or poor atmosphere can interfere with learning and she wants to get participants to think further about these issues. She is aiming

to move participants away from thinking learning must be organised in linear or traditional patterns, towards engaging students in deep learning.

Course participants

These include librarians who have done an undergraduate degree in Librarianship and others from other disciplines now seeking a professional post within Information Management or a library who need a qualification for that purpose. The course was designed to align with current thinking about librarians in the future, making use of some research being undertaken in the department and her own conversations with students, which indicated that librarians and information managers in organisations are frequently responsible for organisational learning.

Assessment on the course

There are two assessments, a reflective learning log and the production of some technology-based teaching materials, which are supported by a sound pedagogic foundation. Students work in groups of 3-4 to write the log, but work individually to produce the product. They are familiarised with basic components like how to write learning objectives, but principally the course involves considerable choice about what the participants produce to hand in, following their own specific interests. Each student works on their own project/topic, of interest to them or their organisation.

Assignments are set in week 4 of the course, after 3 weeks of tuition in which pedagogical ideas are explored, and participants have a fairly open brief on the topic for the assignment, having had sight of sample projects from earlier years. Some of the participants submit assignments related to their jobs, but others go beyond this, for example, an Information Manager working in an Engineering company produced a learning package designed to teach project managers about managing substantial projects. This student did particularly well because she did significant background research on the backgrounds of the Project Managers and tailored their learning packages to meet individual learning styles and needs, whether logic orientated or more subjective in style, and justified her choices for doing so. Another course participant (a Librarian whose mother was a Special Needs teacher) designed a very successful package for one of her mother's students with Down's Syndrome, teaching about coins, so the student working alongside a helper could recognise 10p, 5p and 50p coins.

A third participant, a school Librarian, designed a package on 'How to use our school library', enabling school students to use blended learning

approaches, not just technology. Sheila encourages participants to think about end-users, so this package required the 11-year old students to consider, for example, quite basic concepts like 'Is this book fiction or is it fact?' 'Is it a reference book?' Course participants were also required to design an assessment to determine the extent that learning had taken place.

Formative feedback

The cohort is fairly large (55 participants in 2009, around 30 in 2010). Sheila provides structure for the assignment, with a dates set for participants to outline their chosen tasks and by which they need to identify their learning objectives, enabling optional dialogue before submission. Students are given formative feedback on their objectives, chosen topic and content. She also provides examples of earlier participants' assignments for scrutiny so the current cohort can understand what is expected of them.

The reflective log

This unit has been running for 4 years, with participants undertaking it in some years individually and others in groups, at the suggestion of some students. This was implemented in the year 2010-2011 and the students received a commendation at the exam board from the external examiners. Sheila has found that getting them to reflect in groups has value, with each adding their individual dimension and commenting on the teaching involved too, but some students find the process of reflection very challenging. In 2010 she added a session to help participants better understand reflection, since as numbers in the cohort increase, it is more difficult to get across informally what is required of participants in the group reflection. She argues that this needs to be undertaken dialogically, as just providing written instructions doesn't enable full discussion. The feedback sheet for the assignment is a pro-forma with a set criteria, which Sheila uses as a framework for a feedback discussion and the same applies to the reflective log after the summative assessment.

Quality assurance and enhancement

There are university quality assurance concerns with making dynamic changes to the programme, using Major and Minor modification regulations, for example, about changing between group and individual reflections from year to year. Sheila commented that it is often difficult to achieve this within university timescales, since her reflection on what needed to change within

one year often came too late in the academic year to make the necessary changes before the next academic year. Sheila would like to embed technology skills more fully in the unit to ensure all participants reach equivalent levels for example around web design and PowerPoint. The university as a whole is going through a major curriculum redesign process so that will provide opportunities to review the programme, perhaps moving towards a 30-credit unit. Participant feedback is a powerful stimulus for curriculum enhancement, Sheila argues.

Level issues

For some parts of this programme, Sheila offers this unit to undergraduate and postgraduate students, where they are taught together, and this is something Sheila is uncomfortable about, since the topics concern pedagogy and she is aware that learning objectives for the two groups with different abilities and aspirations should be different. From the academic year 2012 the two groups will be uncoupled to rectify this issue.

Sheila feels that the students on the programme today are much more focused on learning for their occupation, rather than learning for learning's sake. As a professional qualification accredited by the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), this programme provides a valuable addition to their CVs. For this reason, participants are more likely to engage fully if they can see its relevance to their professional practice, even more so than undergraduates, particularly those on the PGCE who are genuinely interested in teaching and learning.

Differences between undergraduate and post-graduate assessment

Sheila would expect the post-graduates to reach the very highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy of educational outcomes and demonstrate fuller synergy, critical analysis and reflection than undergraduates (although some UG students can reach surprisingly high levels of work she says). Postgraduates are more likely, she suggests, to be able to identify the usefulness of the programme in relation to their jobs or future employment. Their skills on entry vary depending on whether they have work experience or come direct from study, including in one case, a doctorate.

17. Teresa Moore

Central Queensland University, Australia

Interview by Sally Brown

Background

Teresa runs a practice based programme, a 'Masters of Learning Management', which is a programme she inherited from the original course designers, entry to which is following a four year degree (or 3 years plus relevant workplace experience). The majority of the students are working classroom teachers who are seeking better job security and advancement.

The student cohort

There are a relatively small number of students enrolled for the course each year. Students then produce a workplace-related Minor Thesis as the culmination of the course, with flexible submission dates. All those joining the Graduate Diploma (which is a pre-Requisite for the Masters programme) are enrolled on a common course code and then are grouped to work with others with similar subject specialty strands including Early Childhood, Executive Leadership and Teaching English as a Foreign Language TEFL. Currently students do not all arrive with a shared understanding of "what a postgraduate student looks like" so therefore have diverse expectations about what is expected from them in terms of level of work, critical thinking, academic writing, and academic conventions.

Future developments

In future Teresa would like to further enhance the assessment to make it more practical, trustworthy and credible. Currently in the Executive Leadership strand the students are doing policy analysis, writing strategic plans as assessment, plus writing future scenarios, but she would like to include more of these kinds of authentic tasks. She has found that students enjoy talking with their colleagues about their assignments and such 'professional conversations' may form part of future assignments.

Designing simulations and other authentic assessments

Assessment on the programme again includes high levels of practical work-based activity, with teachers wishing to move sectors from schools sector to the Early Childhood area starting by shadowing an early Childhood Director then writing up the professional conversations as an assessed log. In another strand, Simulation Learning and Technology, students will be using simulations about learning in a variety of contexts and then going on to design simulations themselves for learning in a variety of context for example mines aviation and so on. It is a competency based programme, so assessment is based on the success of their simulation designs, which are produced for partners sought out by the students.

Included might be annotated bibliographies, personalised Learning Management plans and reflective commentaries on their own learning. Others select say ten articles and produce a synthesis of them that relates to their own working context and some will explore a variety of ethical dilemmas. All assignments are designed to be practical and useful to the students and their employers. Part of the assignment is the production of a national Ethics Approval form for the research undertaken.

Future developments

Originally the work was designed to be to be submitted for presentation to the employers, but the course team were concerned about issues of equivalence, equity and consistency. In the future the course team are looking to move into, for example, assignments concerned with policy analysis, strategic plans and other means of assessing practice.

18. Sue Palmer

Manchester University

Interview conducted with Richard Canham, case study written up by Sally Brown

Background

Sue described a Masters programme enabling students to get Graduate Basis for Recognition (GBR) in Educational Psychology alongside a Masters Degree that ran from 2001 for a number of years. Cohort size over the duration of the programme ranged from around 40 to around 90 and included part-time and full time students, with a proportion of international students.

Sue had wanted to move to a less traditional approach to curriculum delivery and assessment on the Child Development parts of the course so adopted an enquiry-based learning approach. Similar Problem-Based Learning approaches had been much used in Engineering and Medicine, but her EBL approach in Psychology was new. It comprised breaking the topic into six broad areas and having the 40 or so students working in groups of six or seven, researching the topic during weeks 2 to 6 and then in weeks 7-12, making presentations which were in part peer assessed. Assigned tutors were on hand to support each of the groups, but essentially after an initial induction period into Developmental Psychology and information retrieval skills they worked independently from weeks 2 to 12.

Assessment

This was based on posters centring on normal child development issues (emotional development, cognitive, social and moral issues, transitions and education). Examples included effects of divorce on children, children in travellers' groups, children living with parents in same sex partnerships and so on, sometimes using students' own professional experiences.

These were accompanied by student-led seminars in which presenters in groups were expected to present a summary of the key outcomes of their enquiries and answer questions from members of other groups. Groups were mixed up to include full-time and part-time, young and mature and international and home students. Peer assessment and tutor assessment were used and the work was seen as laying foundations for subsequent dissertations.

Student responses

After initial gripes around their confidence in being able to undertake independent Enquiry-Based learning, the students formed very tightly-knit, mutually-supportive groups, with plenty of help being given to international students unaccustomed to working independently, and Sue reported a significant improvement in the quality of work produced (at least one grade higher) compared to earlier traditional approaches.

Posters were displayed for assessment along a corridor, which meant that students from other courses, staff members and professionals coming in to the university saw the work alongside the peers who were assessing them, so learning from the experience was widely shared.

In a second module, on the topic of abnormal child development, students were given opportunities to hear and interrogate experts including therapists and consultants, who would talk students through examples of abnormal development cases as if they were in a case conference, emulating the kind of experiences they would have as educational psychologists.

The assessment comprised each taking one of the syndromes or disorders and researching round the topic, then producing research reports and information packs suitable for parents, teachers and others encountering children with that syndrome, suggesting possible management techniques and potential adaptations at home and school. They had to translate specialist terminology into layman's terms and some found this quite challenging but highly rewarding. The quality of material produced was so high that a number were sent to self-help groups, schools and end users for actual use.

Authentic assessment

Sue believes that this authentic assessment worked so well because the real-life scenarios were meaningful to students and they could see the purpose of the task. She says it made them engage more fully with the theoretical elements of the course, as they could see their importance to real life. Most students on the course had little experience of these kinds of issues, and the assignment gave them insights into things that they would be likely to encounter in their everyday lives as educational psychologists.

Sue was supported in the assessment by the professional practitioners who helped her present material, thereby ensuring that the feedback she gave students was accurate and meaningful. They also helped to formulate the

assessment criteria collaboratively and undertook second marking. While this was sometimes daunting, it was also valuable.

She found it harder to set up than a conventional assignment, but the value in providing opportunities for students to stretch themselves made it worthwhile, as Sue felt that writing for different audiences was an essential element of Masters level work, since it requires a greater depth of understanding. She argues that the differences between undergraduate and M-level assessment lies in depth rather than breadth of study, going well beyond just aiming to pass the assignment. In this kind of assignment she feels they are not just writing for themselves, they are increasing their knowledge and skills bases and doing something of significance. Teaching material to others through the seminar was a core skill.

Potential changes

Sue no longer teaches on the course, but did consider dropping the presentation element of the seminars, as it did from time to time 'take over the session' so there wasn't enough time to discuss questions fully. She tried out instead having students producing handouts for fellow students to be issued the week before to guide the discussions. On the abnormal development module she found the assessment highly satisfactory as it was.

Her work was further developed using innovation grants and other regional research awards in the Manchester area.

19. Daryl Alcock

now retired from Central Queensland University, Australia

Interview by Sally Brown

Daryl contributed in 2011 to an MBA Masters in Management there, which was arranged to provide nine courses over three terms. Assessment was by case studies, essays and an exam. The predominant market for the course was for international students, many of whom used participation on the programme to achieve permanent residency status in Australia.

Short answer assignments

Students in some areas of the Organisational Behaviour course did case studies where they wrote reports as consultants. Home 'Flex' students undertaking blended learning approaches did five 250 word assignments each worth 10 marks (for example, synthesising the results of three journal articles, or discussion tasks, clarifying pros and cons of a case) but this was not regarded as suitable for international students. Others made peer-evaluated group presentations. In major courses in the MBA students completed a capstone course on Strategy Implementation, bringing together learning from across the programme, which was an essay based on decision-making, using case studies, for example, from the Raffles organisation in Singapore. Integrated projects across all three terms were also used for domestic students.

20. Adie Haultain: a student perspective

Waikato Polytechnic, on a Masters program at Massey University, New Zealand

Original conversation with Sally Brown, interview conducted with Richard Canham, case study written up by Sally Brown

Adie described a paper on Cultural Diversity she undertook as a student as part of a Masters programme at Massey University, with three components of assessment. At the outset, students are provided with around 15 learning outcomes for the programme and then required to negotiate assignments which together demonstrated achievement of all outcomes.

Her three chosen assignments comprised a painting representing her own cultural heritage (accompanied by bullet points linking the work to the learning outcomes) a set of fictional letters demonstrating a cultural comparison between Ireland and New Zealand, based on her own letters with a cousin and some historic correspondence from her grandparents' days and a more traditional written assignment. Each assignment was equally weighted.

Adie's comments make it very clear that she found the first two assignments great fun, highly motivating and providing excellent creative and reflective opportunities. Her judgment was that each of the assignments was equally intellectually demanding requiring her to 'go through the same thought processes' of research and seeking understanding. By using different means of demonstrating learning, she found she needed to concentrate on different registers of presentation of her material, which as an adult learner she found developmental.

Formative feedback was given by the tutor on each of the assignments and Adie indicated she felt well supported through the process, helping her to become an independent learner. Adie didn't find deciding for herself on how to demonstrate the outcomes daunting; in fact she relished the opportunity and indicated that the final piece was a lot less fun. She appreciated the element of personal choice about the means of presentation, which she indicated was one element of the difference between undergraduate and Masters level assessment. However, one outcome of her having undertaken the programme is that she is introducing some elements of choice into her own assessment of adult learners.

21. marg gilling

Massey University, New Zealand

Interview by telephone by Sally Brown

Background

The interview was undertaken to follow up the preceding case study, talking to Adie Haultain's tutor, who worked with her on these assignments in 2010.

Quality assurance issues

In previous email conversations about the assessment strategy, marg had indicated that she knew she was taking risks with her approach, but felt that there was an ethical value to this, and this outweighed any concerns about bureaucracy. She expressed concerns about what 'managerialism' is doing to learning and teaching, particularly at graduate level. She indicated that she abhors the takeover of learning by management, and worries that Masters degrees are being streamlined, working towards the lowest common denominator by being reduced to single semester papers, so that students may simplistically "lurch from assignment to assignment". In her view a Masters thesis should include robust scholarship, risk taking, and research, and an acknowledgment of the person actually doing the paper. She argued that there are issues to be addressed about demands and expectations of Masters degrees and particularly questions about whose needs are being met, whose interests are being defined, and especially why.

Radical assessment approaches

marg agreed with Sally that this approach to assessment seems quite innovative, enabling students considerable freedom to choose the means by which they had achieved the learning outcomes of the programme. She didn't feel her approach was particularly radical, but indicated that in the later stages of her professional life she was finding it ever harder to conform to outcomes-based approaches increasingly found in universities. Her personal commitment to social justice and critical theory predicated an approach that focused on the person at the heart of the learning process rather than procedural aspects of assessment. She suggested that some students found this quite hard, but she is keen to encourage them to grow and learn. She argued: "We teach who we are", indicating this was why she was interested in creative approaches, which enable students to work through the 'who and what' and 'how and why' questions. She

said she differs in this area to many of her colleagues, but believes it necessary to get away from the 'sausage machine' of standard academic practices.

Further assessment innovations

She gave two further examples of students using alternative assessment outcomes to illustrate their achievement. One, a retired international rugby coach, carved a walking stick as one of his assignments, and talked about it to his people on his Marae (cultural homeland base). Walking sticks are traditionally used in Maori culture as a means of expressing one's whakapapa or cultural history, so this assignment fitted well with the module on Culture and assignment tasks.

Another student working with 40 inmates in a Drug and Counselling programme worked with them to construct a male creature; the inmates named him 'Bob', using a dressmaking model as the base to illustrate their feelings of identity, culture, and selfhood. The inmates inscribed the figure with Maori and Pacific Island gang tattoos down the thighs, and placed Post-its with negative and positive things about their cultures in a woven bag (kite) and on the back of the model. The student working with four of the inmates participated in an oral assessment process of the product, which became that student's Masters double assignment.

A current student with a mixed cultural background is proposing to write as her assignment a lament, which in Maori culture is a considered cry to the god of the winds who will breathe it out for healing elsewhere, as part of her self-healing process to tackle her own feelings of cultural confusion. This is, in part, to complement middle class academic white ways of expression with first culture tools. Te reo is a legal language in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Student support

marg indicated further concerns that at many Higher Education institutions, we pay insufficient attention to structured support on pastoral matters and this is particularly the case with international students where pressures to achieve high grades are intense and they may be unfamiliar with the academic structures of the institutions where they study. Her person-centred approach to Masters level teaching and assessment is designed to partially compensate for this, focusing on the person in a way that much conventional academia does not and looking particularly at how family/whanau/aiga relationships work, which does not form part of disciplines such as Economics, nor, sometimes

Education. She is very interested in concepts of 'teaching as a relationship', changing the power balance from the conventionally unequal lecturer-student relationship, to a more egalitarian person-person model, whilst not denying in Freire's terms, where the responsibility of 'teacher' lies.

marg talked about the difficulty of getting some students, who had on previous assignments at the College of Education been banned from using the pronoun 'I' in essays, to adopt the first person singular in her assignments. In her view, a critical essay is one that asks complex, messy, and unanswerable questions. Where students chose traditional essays on this programme rather than innovative means to demonstrate their achievements, she indicated that she expected them to be undertaken robustly and go well beyond superficial, descriptive writing towards exploration and self-expression.

When asked about demonstrating to colleagues that her assignments are at M rather than undergraduate level, she laughed loudly. She uses both internal and external colleagues from other universities to moderate assignments and ensure that they are of an 'appropriate' level. She indicated some concerns about inter-assessor reliability at all levels in university assessment, particularly at M level.

Differences between M level and undergraduate level criteria

marg agreed that the matter is contested. Her approach foregrounds critical questioning and originality within assignments, going beyond reportage and discussion and feeding back what 'the literature' says, to explore social construction of identity and culture. Although she dislikes the term 'reflection' she argues for students to demonstrate in their assignments their ability to go beyond the merely descriptive towards a competent demonstration of the issues involved and a meaningful way of addressing them through the assignment.

Other issues discussed included of defining 'learning' as such and proposed that "an academic takes knowledge from books, whereas an intellectual extracts knowledge and uses it to smash open the windows and create new knowledge". She abhors, too, the traditional bipolarisation of research into qualitative and quantitative approaches and would expect to see an integration of both in her M level assignments.

22. Ann Wilson and Rose Trevelyan

University of New South Wales, Australia

Drafted by Ann Wilson, Learning and Teaching Unit, University of New South Wales, Australia and Rose Trevelyan, AGSM MBA Programs, University of New South Wales, Australia to template provided by Sally Brown.

Patchwork text in an MBA programme

The Executive MBA (EMBA), a part time Masters programme at the Australian Graduate School of Management, University of NSW is accredited, as many business schools are, by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB]. Accreditation means that the school and the programme undertake regular reviews of the programme offerings. As part of such a regular revision of the EMBA, the four courses comprising the final year were redesigned. The 'silo' nature of these four courses meant that the knowledge and skills developed in one course were not revisited by students or teachers in subsequent courses. Additionally, and related to the issue, was the fact that much time was spent on providing feedback to students on individual pieces of assessment, but this feedback was never used again, or revisited in subsequent courses. Further, because the four modules were separate, the work undertaken in each was necessarily brief, in order to be completed inside one semester. The course needed a more authentic assessment, and this was possible if the assessment strategy ran across the four courses of the programme.

Assessment by Patchwork text

This provided a solution to these issues, in a form of assessment that was both authentic and holistic, the assessment could constitute a useful summary of student work across a modular course delivery and would require students to review and use feedback.

A special issue of Innovations in Education & Teaching International (2003) showcased the range of situations and disciplines in which patchwork text has been used. In the conclusion to this edition, Jan Parker wrote: "Patchworking gives attention and status to the writing – of experience, of reflection, of analysis, of synthesis, of criticism: writing is used demonstrably for learning, not merely as a demonstration of learning or for assessment. Writing itself becomes a learning process, not merely a result or 'proof' of learning.."

In the MBA programme there are two types of patchwork text used across the four modules:

Comprehensive Strategy Document, is a series of papers in which students develop recommendations for a business strategy, across three points in the life cycle of the organisation. Personal Management Development analysis, is a series of papers in which students explore their personal management development over the year of the course

The assessment strategy for the whole course is presented in Figure 1 below.

Each of the four courses in the final year of the EMBA, called the Strategic Management Year (SMY), has assessment that focuses on the business strategy

Strategic Management Year Assessment Schedule

Strategic Management 1		Strategic Management 2		Strategic Management 3		Strategic Management 4	
Strategy formulation paper <i>Individual submission</i>	50%	Strategy implementation paper <i>Individual submission</i>	50%	Strategy paper for growing the business <i>Individual submission</i>	40%	Final project <i>Individual submission</i>	30%
Report on interview with general manager or entrepreneur <i>Course team submission</i>	10%	Leadership self-reflection paper <i>Individual submission</i>	10%	Leadership action paper <i>Individual submission</i>	20%	Transformation strategy paper <i>Individual submission</i>	40%
Residential problem analysis <i>Course team submission</i>	40%	Residential problem analysis <i>Course team submission</i>	40%	Residential problem analysis <i>Course team submission</i>	40%	Residential problem analysis <i>Course team submission</i>	30%
Peer feedback on contribution to course teams <i>Individual submission</i>	P/F	Peer feedback on contribution to course teams <i>Individual submission</i>	P/F	Peer feedback on contribution to course teams <i>Individual submission</i>	P/F	Peer feedback on contribution to course teams <i>Individual submission</i>	P/F
						Book Review <i>To be completed at any point during SM Year</i>	P/F
Total	100%	Total	100%	Total	100%	Total	100%

of an organisation, using concepts and frameworks from that course. In courses 1, 2 and 3 students submit their assignment for marking and receive feedback on this. In the final course, Strategic Management 4, they are required to use this feedback to develop a final strategy document for their organisation. These are the 'patches' that form the patchwork text, woven together at the end of the programme in much the same ways as a patchwork quilt might be.

Another 'patch' focuses on the development of students' general management skills, and their skills of self-reflection. There is both a content outcome (improved general management skills) and a process outcome (improved self-reflective skills). Using some key skills and behaviours identified in the literature, and an interview with a general manager, students set themselves personal development goals for the course. In the first 'patch', students submit a team report on general management skills, in the second 'patch', students present their insights in a collaborative team setting, in the third 'patch', an individual assignment, students state and justify a set of personal development goals, and the final patch is a reflection on progress towards these goals.

The course is delivered to a cohort of around 40 students who have completed the Graduate Diploma in Management, which comprises 8 subjects, with an overall credit average. Cohorts then move through the four courses of SMY consecutively. Each course of the SMY consists of a 4-5 day residential programme, with students provided with course materials, including readings and assessment, prior to the residential. Students are expected to have read and completed any activities prior to attending the residential. Assessments are completed after the residential session.

Marking and giving feedback

The role of feedback is a central element of the patchwork text, in the format that has been developed in this Masters program. Students are required to submit their first 'patch' – for which they get feedback and can then resubmit refined 'patches' until the assessment task is completed. This means that the task of providing this feedback requires not only the reading of one piece of assessment, but re-reading by the marked work of earlier 'patches'. Fortunately in this programme an allocation of funding is provided to employ contract markers, and at an enhanced rate as they are required to review earlier work and compare student use of feedback. All student work is lodged online, and markers are provided with access to it, along with comprehensive marking criteria. Markers are expected to return work to students within two weeks of the submission date, and this requirement is largely met. The feedback is provided online with the return of the assignment, through the LMS drop box facility. At present the

team uses Blackboard as the LMS. In the final evaluation they ask students if they feel that the feedback is useful, and on average the response to the statement 'Feedback on each assessment was constructive and helpful' is 70% positive and 30% neutral or negative. This is the same range reported by MacLellan (2001). They intend to research this issue further, identifying enhancements that might improve the students' response to this statement. The value that students attach to the inclusion of dialogue around feedback and assessment is well supported in the literature (Carless, 2006, Nichol, 2010). Changes to the assessment that enabled markers to provide dialogue to students around the assessment would be a worthwhile issue to explore. A further issue is the closure of the feedback loop between markers and teachers. At present, although the teachers are able to access student work through the online system, the teachers are not provided with feedback from the markers on the issues arising from marking a cohorts' work.

Evaluation

The course is evaluated using the quiz tool in Blackboard, and students have provided some qualitative statements also. The evaluation is completed by over 95% of students in any one cohort, and has been conducted since the commencement of the program with the same completion rates. A specific question is asked about the patchwork text: 'The SM4 project (the final patch, woven together) gave me a valuable opportunity to create a comprehensive strategy document': Cohort 1: 62% yes, 38% no or undecided, Cohort 2: 68% yes, 32% no or undecided, Cohort 3: 83% yes, 27% no or undecided, Cohort 4: 67% yes, 33% no or undecided. There would appear to be a correlation between student perception of the usefulness of the feedback they receive and their positive reaction to the final strategy paper, where the three patches are woven together. Further research on the link between feedback and student perception of the value of assessment needs to be undertaken.

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23. Ken Kwong

Central Queensland University, Australia

Interview by Sally Brown

Background

Ken is Program Coordinator for two Masters Degrees in Railway, (Railway Signalling and Telecommunications, and Rail Operations Management) at Central Queensland University, each of which recruits small numbers of students (fewer than 100). Both degrees are offered in distance mode enrolment only. Most subjects in these degrees are taught by practising industry professionals in the railway industry. There are exit qualifications of Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma for the Master degree. Admission/progress to the Masters year requires the completion of two years of coursework with achievement at above credit level. The Graduate Diploma of Railway Signalling qualification is accepted by the UK Institution of Railway Signal Engineers as equivalent to passing their institutional examination for purpose of corporate membership (See <http://www.irse.org/>; <http://irse.org.au/education>). The range of postgraduate engineering programs offered by the CQU can be found in the CQU Student Handbook <http://handbook.cqu.edu.au/Handbook/programs.jsp?group=35>.

Portfolio assessment

For all Railway Signalling subjects, Assessment is 100% by a portfolio, with all course work completed to a professional acceptable level as a base requirements for the award of a Credit grade. The programme incorporates high levels of personal reflection as an integral part of the learning outcomes, and students are asked to submit reflective journals and workbook as part of their weekly submissions. Model answers are provided to review questions, and students are encouraged to reflect on any discrepancies between these and their own answers. In addition, short weekly assignment questions are set for students to demonstrate their ability to apply learnt skills and knowledge to unfamiliar situations.

Group assessment

The curriculum is designed with group work as a core assessment component, with teams working together on hypothetical scenarios in the form of case studies. Team membership is rotated to ensure maximum exposure to the rest of the class for purpose of professional networking, and to build cooperative behaviour. Team projects are worked on weekly from week 1 of each term with two progress reports milestones. The final team report is submitted at Week 11. This is followed by class sharing of team submissions in the class forum website for peer commentary and responses. Effective personal reflection is essential for students to achieve the grade of Distinction or higher. The sixth subject in the program is project work, with assessment based on the completion of a research/investigation project and the submission of a formal report, to be following by presentation at a Graduate Conference.

Further assignments

The third year of the Masters degree comprises a minor thesis. A key criterion for the thesis is how useful the outcomes are to the railway industry/their own organisation. A grade is awarded following the thesis being examined by two industry-based reviewers, as to the extent and impact of the investigation findings. As a general rule, the more significant the impact, the higher the grade.

Assessment for the Rail Operations Management program is more conventional, and is similar to other postgraduate engineering subjects offered by the CQU. Students complete typically three essay-type assignments during term and are assessed by their aggregate marks.

24. Colin Damm

Northumbria University

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham, Case study prepared by Sally Brown

Background

Colin is the Programme Leader for an MSc in Computing and Information Technology by Distance Learning at the Northumbria University (formerly the MSc in Information Technology by Distance Learning). The course is designed to be attractive to computing and IT practitioners wishing to advance into management roles, and to act as an introduction to the main elements of computing and IT to those wanting to enter the profession. There are currently 40-45 students enrolled on the course, of whom around 25 are really active, as is common with distance learning programmes.

Assessment

Forms of assessment currently used on the course are diverse. Formerly they used exams, but distance learning made this rather challenging in administrative terms. Types of assignments are agreed by module teams, and tend to build up to portfolios, which comprise several elements. Only three of the modules have practical computing content, the rest are more theoretical, for those students intending to go into management. Where there is practical work in the modules, the assignments have to include theoretical elements also. For example, for the component 'Strategic management with information systems', the required portfolio consists of 5-6 separate activities. These might include, for example, each student picking a big-name company such as Apple, Dell, Ford Motor Company and so on where there is plenty of published information available for them to study, and researching the company with regard to those 5 or 6 aspects.

Authentic assignments

The 'IT Consultant' module involves students doing some authentic consultancy work. They have to find someone external to the university (not family or employers) who will be a real client, and produce a report or develop a piece of software for this person as part of the module. The deliverable itself is not marked, as products and clients vary enormously, which Colin regarded as a potential source of unfairness. Some students

for example could be given very sophisticated tasks by clients, for example, while others might be doing much lesser ones. They all however write critical reviews of the consultancy product they have delivered, reviewing their own involvement with the project, the module itself, as well as producing a business plan for the establishment of a consultancy company. Such reviews need to be rigorous and reflective.

All assessment is individual rather than in groups, since it is taught distance learning. The dissertation is worth 60 credits, that is, worth one third of the course marks. Students are offered a choice of two types of dissertation/project. One must include a piece of practical work which is a requirement of the British Computing Society (BCS). Other students however prefer a more business-oriented dissertation, which is all research based.

Feedback

Students can get formative feedback all the way through on regular submissions, for example on a weekly to fortnightly basis so they feel supported, although some students save all the work to the end and do not gain this benefit. The format of the feedback is offered in various ways, depending how individual lecturers work. Some annotate hard copies of submitted documents, others use a feedback sheet up to two pages in length, in either case aiming to return work within two weeks. Feedback is individual, but Colin has considered offering generic feedback in the future. In the module 'Database Modelling' a fellow lecturer put up sample solutions as generic feedback on the course web pages.

Professional and Subject Board requirements

The course cannot use multi-choice questions for summative assessments as this is considered unsuitable for postgraduate students, but Colin would ideally like to use it as it for interim formative assessments as this enables feedback to be given more quickly. Because all the students are part-time over the three years, students can only do one module at a time in general (20 credits per semester, with three semesters per year).

Administrative issues

There are very few problems with assessment, as distance learning students tend to do rather well (compared to face-to-face students). Submission of assignments sometimes causes administrative problems, as there were no

overall rules about how this should be handled. Staff have formerly used Blackboard's drop box, assignment handler, or allowed email submission and hard copy to be posted to the School office. This caused some problems as there was no personal record associated with some of these. One distance learning student complained when the office was closed and unavailable to receive submissions at 5pm on a Friday when he brought in an assignment. This caused a rethink, with the result that the course team decided that all assignments will be submitted via assignment handler in Blackboard. Unfortunately this also caused problems. They then tried a system where students emailed their assignments to the School Office for local printing, but this again did not work very well. This is still not resolved.

Good practice

Colin feels this is when assignments can be split into parts, spread over a period of weeks, rather than handing in something at the end. Full time students can come in to see staff and ask 'Can you have a quick look at this?', so for distance learning students they decided to provide three or four points in the module where students can get interim feedback in the progress of their work.

Quality enhancement

Colin indicated that distance learning students tend to do better than face-to-face student. He thinks this is because, firstly, full time students tend to have limited experience or background knowledge of computing, whereas distance learning students are often working in the field. Secondly, he felt this was because distance learning students, who are mainly in full-time employment, tend to have a more mature attitude to study.

Colin indicated that assessment on the programme is evolving all the time. When the course first started they had exams, but distance learners had to find a suitable exam venue for themselves e.g. through British Council for overseas students, or at a local university or school for UK students. The course team needed to be confident about the security of exam venues, and there were further concerns because students had to pay for fees themselves for the exam venues. However, with distance learners, the assessment tasks tended to be the only times students got real feedback contact with members of staff, so they felt it was important to remedy this by building in more feedback opportunities and reducing the reliance on exams. Grades have tended to remain reasonably consistent over the years.

Skills development

Assignments tend to map well on to the skills which students need in work contexts. He suggested that the course attracts two kinds of students, one of which could be a manager of an IT department, expected to supervise newer, technically knowledgeable employees. Others, who tend to be technical practitioners, are often seeking to progress in their careers, so they produce excellent practical work, but are learning new material when they come to the management-focussed modules.

Evaluation of the course

Although course feedback is regularly sought, students complete relatively few evaluations of the course. Most students who do respond are reasonably happy with the course and Colin gets a majority of favourable comments. During the last BCS accreditation visit, all students were asked for feedback on the course, but only 4 replies were received, 3 of which were favourable. Parallel full time courses being accredited by BCS offered face-to-face meetings with their students, where catering was provided but this wasn't applicable to the distance learners. The one student who was less satisfied wanted a more technical course than this one – he had arguably chosen the wrong course.

The difference between Undergraduate and Masters level assessment Colin saw this as being concerned with critical appraisal, which he sees as the main difference between assessment at Masters level and Undergraduate level.

25. Mark Foss

Nottingham University

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham, case study prepared by Sally Brown

Background

Mark leads an MSc in Advanced Clinical practice at The University of Nottingham, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Physiotherapy in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, which he describes as part of the national doctor replacement agenda. There are two parallel Masters programmes with 'advanced' in their title reflecting views of what advanced practice is. The programme which Mark leads prepares nurses to take over the role of a doctor, whilst the other might be characterised as 'advancing' nursing. The MSc Advanced Clinical Practice is closely related to the training offered in medical schools for doctors, and in that sense it is not 'advanced' practice so much as basic medical practice. The course is taught by a team of three, Mark himself together with a medical anatomist and an emergency department consultant, who is an Associate Professor. The cohort size is normally 20.

Assessment

The programme offers a variety of traditional and non-traditional assessment methods: traditional subjects like anatomy and physiology are assessed through unseen time-constrained exams, similar to those undertaken in medical schools, and there are assessments of professional issues and ethical issues in the first two modules assessed by traditional essays.

Skills are tested through objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) in the same way that medical students are. In these assessments, students take histories of or examine real or trained simulated patients.

There is also a work-based learning (WBL) module in which students develop competences in their own areas of practice which are assessed by direct observation. Students maintain a portfolio of evidence related to achievement of competencies which includes two reflective exercises.

Further assessment includes objective structured long examination records (OSLERs) in which students are assessed by medical consultants in the real life situations and clinical vivas (oral, face-to-face assessments) in which students are questioned about their actions in practice.

A further element of assessment is a dissertation, which is not quite traditional in its format. It is centred on the students practice and is linked to the work based learning components. The dissertation involves examining the evidence for their practice and the nature of advanced practice. These elements are then used to demonstrate that the student is an advanced practitioner.

All modules are assessed independently and each component of a modular assessment has to be passed.

Consistency issues with dissertations

Mark indicated that dissertations students produce are rather different from the kinds normally undertaken on traditional Masters programmes, but there are precedents in terms of degrees in music or the performing arts in which there is a skill element. This causes some problems for students who can't just go into the library and look at dissertations in related subjects, hoping for models to emulate.

Academic credit for skills development

The first two modules represent 30 credits each, of which the anatomy and physiology exam is worth 20%, the professional studies/ethics essay is worth 20% with the remaining 60% allocated to assessing skills through OSCEs. The work based learning portfolio and dissertation are worth 60 credits each. The dissertation is linked to skills development, since students would be unable to produce the dissertation unless they had acquired the relevant clinical skills. There have been discussions within the postgraduate registry about the precise nature of what comprises a Masters degree, which have explored the balance of clinical skills and theoretical knowledge and to some extent whether skills acquisition should be assessed on a pass or fail basis rather than contribute to the mark for the academic award. However, this idea was rejected since straightforward academic competence would be insufficient for the advanced practitioner role.

Exams

Those used on the programme include conventional multiple choice questions (MCQs) and short answer type questions. Elsewhere in medical education, some academics prefer to use true/false questions, with negative marking for wrong answers, but on this programme conventional selection of one correct option out of 5 being the mode preferred.

Group work

Although skills development is undertaken in groups, all assessment is individual. Mark indicated that OSCEs are demanding, with students moving onto tasks at precise times indicated by a signal. There is normally 9 minutes for the task (taking a medical history or performing a medical examination) and 3 minutes to present the findings.

Vivas

Mark considers these a highly authentic form of assessment which provide opportunities for the examiner to probe understanding around a set of questions, which Mark feels sometimes provides a truer picture of student capability than other forms of assessment. Vivas are however a matter of debate among colleagues, some of whom question the objectivity of them.

Feedback to students

In exams, students are not allowed to keep their exam scripts but they are encouraged to seek feedback from the staff. Feedback on the OSCEs comes direct from the examiners. In work based learning settings, skills are assessed jointly by the employer supervisor and the consultant sent out from the course. Workplace supervisors are also medical consultants or GPs when students are working in the community. Feedback on dissertations is provided by the dissertation supervisor at tutorials when draft sections of work may be reviewed. Supervisors are discouraged from reviewing the same sections more than once.

Pacing

Students have a degree of control over the pacing of their studies in the second year where study days are offered but attendance is not required. The course is offered part time, with some students taking take four years and most completing in three years.

Issues for consideration

Mark indicated that there are tensions due to the fact that the programme is at Masters level but here is a higher skills component than one might normally expect at Masters level. Nevertheless he is confident that this is what is necessary for an advanced practitioner programme, since graduates

will work in contexts where the expectation is that their skills will match those of the doctors they are replacing. He expressed concern that some other similar programmes have an adequate theoretical component for a Masters level degree but with too low a concentration on skills. He indicated that some students are currently working in roles with the advanced practitioner title who are uncomfortable with their own skills levels. Conversely, he expressed some concerns that having a high and demanding skills component means that components normally expected on Masters programmes are omitted. For example, the programme does not offer the traditional research skills training.

Additionally, he expressed worries that advanced practitioner positions are created by health service employers with inadequate training, and that there is no accepted standard for what advance practice comprises.

The course is regarded as challenging but Mark regards this as appropriate since the advanced practitioners cannot sidestep the issue that they are working in place of medical practitioners and need to match those standards of practice.

Administration matters

The OSCES require significant administration, since they use real and simulated patients and require suitable contexts (skills training areas). There are heavy administration requirements and costs in relation to employing medical consultants.

Challenges for the future

These largely relate to funding, since at the time of the interview there was uncertainty about how sustainable the funding allocation will be. Mark indicated that where nurses were accustomed to having their training needs met by NHS funding, in the future there might need to be more self-funding.

Further challenges relate to ensuring consistency of student support by workplace supervisors: the relationship works well when employers are committed to providing adequate and suitable support, but less well so when support is intermittent or suddenly withdrawn due to changing priorities. At its best, this learning context is ideal for employers and students, with learning activities tailored to individual student contexts and employer requirements, but this is heavily dependent on a close a productive partnership between the employers, the students and the university.

Similarly there are consistency issues which relate to the judgments made by the workplace supervisors. Written guidance is sent out to prospective supervisors, who might be consultants in any context including acute medicine, community practices, GP surgeries and so on. Difficulties can arise for example in walk in centres where there is no medical supervision for the practitioners.

Quality Enhancement

Mark was reasonably content with the way the course is currently running but in the future would like to have greater access to simulations suites that more adequately simulate emergency departments or doctors surgeries. He would like also to make closer links between what is taught in physiology and skills by having a greater pathology component, although he is confident that anatomy teaching currently links in very well.

Funding for the future

This is one of the key issues for the course, as the funding for the programme may be more locally determined by a number of different directorates within each NHS trusts who have diverse views on the role of advanced practitioners.

Evaluation

Students complete evaluations of the individual lecturer for each module and the course as a whole. While most students are very happy with the skills development, many find the workloads challenging and the subject matter demanding. There have also been some concerns expressed about the level of employer support, particularly busy supervisors who don't prioritise supervision.

The difference between undergraduate level assessment and Masters level

In Mark's view the differentiation between levels is provided by the degree of analysis and synthesis required, particularly within the dissertation, and he is concerned to ensure that this programme provides challenges for students at the appropriate level.

26. Lesley Jayne Eales-Reynolds

Portsmouth University (now at Kingston University)

From email communication with Sally Brown

Lesley Jayne led the Masters Level Immunology course when she worked at Portsmouth University, and used an asynchronous discussion board on which students are required to contribute meaningfully. They then have to write a reflective piece on what they've learned, who helped them to learn it and how they'd assured themselves the information was accurate. They also had to write a critical evaluation of a current research paper with their arguments based on the evidence provided by existing research within the area. This appears to be a significant contributing factor to the success of the assignment because they each chose a subject area that interested them and then spent a lot of time 'teaching each other' about their areas of interest.

When they hit a problem or an aspect about which they were confused, the students helped each other through their own research and knowledge. If they did not contribute 'meaningfully' they could not pass that element of the assessment (i.e. the 50%).

The remaining assessment was an oral presentation and a poster (similar to academic conference presentations and poster sessions) on a relevant topic in pairs. Each had to respond to questions and demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the whole topic, not just the part that they had undertaken. They were also required to attend their colleagues' presentations and to interrogate them but were not assessed on this.

27. Charles Juwah

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

Interview undertaken by Darcy Amamou. Case study prepared by Sally Brown

Background

The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen is a post 1992 university, which is ranked highly in various league tables, priding itself in preparing students for the world of work.

Assessment of Masters level programmes at RGU

Charles indicated that assessment is designed to help learners focus on achieving intended learning outcomes relating to knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as developing graduate attributes and employment skills. He indicated that the university is committed to developing lifelong learners who are reflective practitioners.

Quality assurance and enhancement

Approval processes for taught Masters programmes are undertaken to a common format with other programmes across the university, with responsibility lying with Heads of School, but this is delegated to the principal examiner or course leader for each programme, to ensure that summative assessment is appropriate. This person collates information about assessment on each programme, and submits this with marking schemes or model answers, to external examiners for comments and suggestions for improvement. These are then incorporated as necessary, before being signed off by the course leader to ensure they are appropriate, complete, accurate and up to date. Details of the university's assessment procedures are included in the assessment handbook for internal use, complying with university policy publicly available on the website. Quality assurance for assessing at Masters level is further ensured by double-marking of assignments and approval of assessment strategies by assessment boards. Quality Assurance Guidelines are mapped against the university processes, together with the relevant subject benchmarks, and related professional body requirements. Each assessment board produces an annual report including the involvement of the external examiner, who provides feedback on the assessment process for each particular year. Assessment teams are required to respond to this report.

Professional and Subject Bodies

These bodies are consulted from the outset when new courses are being designed, and the assessment for each programme is designed in collaboration with these bodies from the first instance, to avoid any conflicts arising.

Good practice

Charles argues that the range and diversity of assessment on Masters programmes works well, but a further strength of RGU Masters programmes is the integration of authentic assessment tasks, simulating real-live activities related to their work roles. Wherever possible, assessments are linked to industrial activities. To further enhance assessment at M-level, Charles would make assessment tasks more authentic, allowing students to display the optimum of their ability, but more importantly, using assessment to promote students' learning.

Examples of Masters programmes with innovative assessment

These include Charles' own course, a postgraduate Certificate programme for new and experienced lecturers, which doesn't just use essays but requires a portfolio of evidence, which includes records of peer-observation of teaching. Essays are used to evaluate students' abilities to link research evidence to teaching. The portfolio includes reflective logs in relation to participants' own teaching and learning. Elsewhere in the university, in Art and Design, and Architecture, assessment of taught Masters level programmes includes production of artefacts, and critique of students' own, and each others' artefacts.

The difference between assessment at taught Masters and undergraduate level. Charles listed four elements of difference. He argued that at Masters level:

- (1) The level of knowledge required should be wider than at undergraduate level, Masters students being regarded as being at the forefront of the field.
- (2) The depth of insight and knowledge required should be higher.
- (3) The level of complexity of subject material should be higher.
- (4) Students' ability to make decisions and judgement should be greater, and links to accountability and autonomy should be much higher than at undergraduate level, since, he suggested, Masters students are regarded as being professionals, compared to students at undergraduate level who are regarded as learners.

28. Anthony Rosie

Sheffield Hallam University

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

During the academic year 2009/10 an M.Res module on the Philosophy of Research was run for the first time. This module came out of an MA in Social Science Research that had run at Sheffield Hallam University for over ten years, and was awarded ESRC recognition in 1998. The development of the module had produced a number of changes and it contained a more philosophical context, and considered philosophical issues in a research context. The module is taken by people on the M.Res but also by PhD students in the social sciences across the university. This leads to a very wide range of backgrounds, from a student whose background was in building and surveying, to students who works on flood management, ancient hedges in the Fenlands, or occupational therapy. However, it can be this spread that make teaching the module so interesting.

Curriculum focus

The teaching of the module is split between sociology tutors who lead the module and psychology tutors who contribute some specialist input. The module primarily focuses on research design, studying experimental, survey, action research, ethnographic designs in the context of ontologies and epistemologies. The module assessment is a research design for a disaster recovery, similar to that which could be given to a disaster agency or a public body. Two different methods have to be given and compared, and an experimental method must be included. Ethical considerations have to be addressed. The disaster can be from any time period, or even fictitious, and so, even though there is work on some high profile natural disasters, such as the tsunamis and Hurricane Katrina, there are also a wide range of situations considered, such as looking at the Holocaust, the Sheffield floods of the nineteenth century and also from 2008. The detail of the disaster is not the focus, but the research design and their analysis in philosophical context forms the core.

Assessment

This is split into two parts: the first report (giving 40% of the module marks) requires a brief description of the scenario with approaches to management and response, together with two ontologies and epistemologies. A comparison of the approaches completes the report. Feedback from this report by both the tutor and at least one peer is obtained before the second part of the assignment is completed (providing the remaining 60% of the module's mark). This contains a reflection on the feedback, together with a discussion of the ethical issues involved, using references to the first report where appropriate.

Responses from students

The initial reaction of the students is to "freak out". However, once they start, the assessment allows the students to have a focus, and helps attach theoretical ideas to a real issue. They began to debate relationships between political decision-making and research, and not just in resource and resource-allocation, but the strength and limits. The constraints that any local authority, government or international NGO are investigated and it becomes a very practical activity, a different type of conversation. The resultant work has been excellent and the external examiners are delighted by it.

A similar approach requiring formative work was used on an undergraduate module with 50 students. Anthony obtained a 100% submission of formative work last year by making sure that it was a serious piece of work, which although it did not count formatively towards the grade, was necessary for the final assessment to be completed. Considerable 'nagging' was also employed. The module team are highly student-centred and guarantee that all submitted work, whether formative or summative will receive feedback within a week, and this very quick return also helps to make the formative work more relevant.

On the postgraduate course with 15-17 students taking the module each year with 75% of the students go on to undertake a PhD, and the remaining students typically progress to a research environment, the assessment is also authentic and relevant. Good, clear assessment criteria are set from the start, which is essential so all know what is expected and to calm initial fears. Again there is rapid feedback response to drafts and feedback on all pieces within a week.

Evaluation

The work involved does make it an intensive module to teach. However, the module has been highly successful with only one re-sit over a two year period. At a time when colleagues are under pressure of re-sits this module gains from the reduced number of re-sits. Additionally, in the similar style of assessment set on an undergraduate course historical-comparative sociology module, there was a significantly higher number of students gaining grades of 65% and over, as well as an increase in the pass rate. The course leader was supportive and the module passed validation.

A conscious decision to go part-time and to concentrate on teaching, to enjoy it and be as productive as possible gave Anthony the time to think, rather than spending all available time 'doing'. This enabled the innovation on the module and assessment. Anthony feels that it is this need to spend all available time 'doing' that prevents colleagues from innovating.

As previously stated, a version of the module and assessment was run at a final undergraduate level. Scaling the assessment to 60 students worked well and it was a very successful module.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

The biggest of these according to Anthony was the type of questions the students asked: 'is this on the right track?' for a Masters student at the outset, compared to, 'is this what you want?' from an undergraduate. The undergraduates do not easily take responsibility for their own work. Consequently the Masters students are much easier. However, the records of tutorial and feedback show that for the Masters' students individual tutorials requested early on the module reduce from 40% to less than 10%. For the undergraduates the initial rate is higher at the outset but it reduces to a similar level and the student evaluations show they move from feeling it is an 'out of control' assessment to one that is of great personal and practical benefit. The Masters students also all commented through the module evaluation on how valuable they found the task for their course and their studies.

29. Ken Simpson

Unitec, Auckland, New Zealand

Interviewer: Sally Brown

Background

Ken is programme leader (Postgraduate) at Faculty of Creative Industries and Business at Unitec, New Zealand. Examples come from a Masters in Business (which is not an MBA) which has a research component. The Masters programme has two entries per year, with around 35-40 students per cohort. Ken believes that around 10% of the students will be highly capable 'stars', 80% will be competent rather than exceptional, while 10% will struggle from the outset and may ultimately fail to complete.

Student cohort

Around half of those students are local residents, who have hit a glass ceiling and feel they need an M-level qualification. The age range is 30-50, and all are graduates, but not all have business backgrounds. The other half are international students, the largest group of whom come from India, but other nations too join the programme, all having degrees already, many seeking residency since they get immigration qualifying points for a Postgraduate qualification. There is strong recruitment for the course, so Ken's approach is not to recruit students if he isn't confident that they are up to the course. The English language requirement is IELTS score of 6.5, with no single score below 6.

Assessment

Full time students do 120 credits, undertaken as 4 x 30-credit courses. Within a 30-credit course, there are typically 3 assessment items, very few of which are examinations. However one example of an exam is where students are given a case study ten days before the exam, with questions to answer in the 3-hour end point exam. The more standard assessment tends to be business-oriented case-study analysis, some of which use Harvard case studies, but the majority are single-use case studies authored by Ken and his colleagues. Each assignment is course-specific, i.e. there are no synoptic assignments. The Masters programme doesn't have major studies areas, but does have streams, so students can completely avoid whole areas of study that you might normally find on an MBA, e.g. finance or HR. The Masters

uses few theoretical essay-type questions. Typical home students are local and self-employed, or work in small businesses. They are largely doing a Masters programme to get better at what they do in the workplace. Theory is seen on this course as a starting point, not the end point, and its purpose is to be adapted and used in real-life contexts.

Innovative assessment example 1

This is a core course in Business Strategy and uses an incremental assessment approach, with two short preliminary assignments, and then a final assignment in two parts. Approximately one third of the final grade is awarded for cumulative performance in 5 discussion questions posed to students intermittently over a period of 12 weeks. Each question is posted on an open Wiki, to which students must contribute five times. The topics are based on current affairs from the news, and each student must make an initial post of 500 words and then make substantive and constructive comments on each others' posts. This is undertaken on Moodle. Self-reflection is important.

The average age of students is early 30s, very few are under 25 or over 50. Ken believes that they need life experience in order to get the most from the course, and that they need to be confident in using IT. He seeks an articulated point of view rather than an answer. International students tend to take some time to see the point of the exercise, but when they do, they often tend to do better than locals. These are mainly Indian students, there are fewer Chinese students, some of whom tend to struggle with this particular form of assessment.

Innovative assessment example 2 Business Capability Assessment

Ken selects a few students each year, and offers around 5 of them the opportunity to do a real assignment with an industry body. Working with real firms, in this case Flooring products retailers (e.g. carpet and vinyl), they provide live consultancy in real time. The business owner undertakes a self-assessment rather like an MOT test, evaluating business processes, finance, customer orientation and staffing. Students then work on an ad-hoc basis to form an opinion of the business, and write a report for the company, then present this verbally, with recommendations.

Ken describes the level of trust by the employers as phenomenal, and the industrialists really appreciate it. Students find it extraordinarily testing and valuable. They can ask for help from the steering group which includes Unitec

staff, employers and students, and can get and give intense and intensive feedback. One example of robust feedback they gave to a company was that of a boss who appeared to be frightened of his own staff. The boss concerned was surprised by the feedback, but in due course recognised the truth of it.

Ken can only offer five of the 35 students this opportunity for logistical reasons, but he may be able to expand it in the future in another industry. He regards it as a high risk activity, and chooses those who participate based on his judgement of the calibre of student, choosing not necessarily the best students academically, but the best people – that is students who are streetwise as he puts it. He hasn't yet received any complaints from students who haven't been picked, but if a student were to complain he would consider whether that particular student could be considered for such an opportunity. He regards it as a real benefit to do this, as it is a scholarship opportunity, since the Flooring Industry Training Organisation (ITO) pays for students chosen to do this. Some who undertake this opportunity may well go on to do PhDs. Students find this opportunity exhilarating and exciting. They lose sleep over it, but find it very valuable and it sometimes leads to employment, as employers use this as an opportunity for talent-spotting.

Quality assurance

Unitec had at the time of the interview recently failed in its attempts to become a University, and because of this, the institution had what Ken described as an extreme quality assurance culture, with a very robust internal moderation system. For this reason, quality assurance on this Masters degree has been carefully undertaken.

How does assessment at Masters level differ from undergraduate level?

Ken's view was that this relates to the higher end of the Bloom's taxonomy hierarchy, in that everything in this example is around the application and development of students' own theoretical ideas, and therefore it is off the top end of the Bloom hierarchy. Ken believes that the real value of this particular exercise is that students can see that the world described in textbooks doesn't exist in real life, in that there are lots of variables, and high-level complexity in small businesses in the real world. The task emphasises the importance of interpersonal skills in small businesses and family businesses.

30. Loykie Lominé

University of Winchester

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

The University of Winchester offers a Masters of Arts in Cultural and Arts Management, which has been established for five years. It is a professionally-oriented MA, designed for the professional development of its students, and so concentrates on the practicalities of work at management level in artistic and cultural organisations. Most students have previous work experience, such as in theatres or art galleries, with most studying part-time.

Authentic assessment

The assessment strategy of such a professional MA aims to be as authentic as possible, and so a decision was made not to use traditional exams or essays, since these are not used in “the real world”. The methods of communication and content used for the assessment are as close as possible to methods used in a work environment. Whenever possible, the output of the assessment is directly useable. For example, if a student is the manager of a small theatre employing many volunteers, one assessment may be to write a volunteer policy that could be used within the workplace. The aim is not to create extra work for the students, but to have assessments that are directly relevant for them. Students engage much more than they would with a theoretical exercise that may take 50 hours writing and cannot be of direct use. Additionally it makes them aware of how to integrate theory and practice.

Care is taken to use assessment criteria that match those of real situations. For example, a module that asks students to write a funding bid would be assessed by tutors as if they were the real panel, using the same criteria as the National Lottery or The Arts Council. The students do not feel they are being assessed as students, but as professionals.

The range of assessments includes the audit of an artistic or cultural organisation, a business plan or bid or funding application, a reflective portfolio of evidence of professional development, a 4,000 words report on macro-environment affecting cultural and arts management, a 1 hr professional seminar and a substantial professional project in the field of arts and cultural management; that latter element corresponds to the final dissertation of more-traditional Masters.

With all aspects of the assessment applied to specific artistic and cultural organisations, and with the students in different professional contexts, it is not possible to have group projects whilst maintaining relevance for each student, so all the assignments are completed individually.

As professionals who frequently treat the MA assessments like work projects, students tend to get very high marks, often above 70 or 80 per cent. They produce work to a very high standard; the second and external examiners understand the situations and support the high grades.

Feedback

For each assignment, students receive 500 words feedback within three weeks. This generates a considerable amount of work, but because each project is different, it is more interesting that marking a batch of essays, all on the same topic.

Tutorials are usually done online using Skype, as face-to-face format became difficult with the increasing number of students (40 students in 2011-2012). During tutorials the ongoing projects are discussed and drafts can be considered and discussed.

For such a range of assessment types, some beyond the traditional Masters assessments, students are told in class about the expectations and criteria. Examples of previous work are also showed, so students have an idea of what has been done before. Students have never expressed a desire for formative exercises, which would be like a dress rehearsal.

Student responses

With a wide range of professional backgrounds, different students find different assignments harder or easier. For example, an assessment based on a one-hour seminar may be more natural for students who are from the performing arts and who may often deliver workshops. However, this contrasts with a fine arts student who could be terrified to talk in front of an audience, while being very happy one-to-one. There are also students who may find it easier to prepare a portfolio of evidence, which is more familiar to them. All students will find some of the tasks easier than others, although there has not been the situation where a student found every assignment easy (they would not need to do the MA!) or a student saying ‘I cannot do anything, this is way too difficult’. The only issue when getting the course

validated was a University regulation stating that it is not possible to assess only a spoken seminar. Students' presentations consequently also include a written report with a critical evaluation of the presentation.

Quality assurance issues

The issue of whether to use predominantly essays or exams was not raised, because Loykie is based in a Faculty of Arts, where other courses do not have exams; this is not part of the tradition in that field. The professional dimension of the MA would not be congruent with a dissertation, so a professional project takes its place, for example setting up a theatre company, preparing and curating an exhibition, or organising a fund-raising event. A dissertation, which is in effect a very long essay, would not fit the professional ambition of the programme nor its overall aim which is "to prepare students to work successfully at management level in artistic and cultural organisations".

Potential changes

Even though the course is to be re-validated this year, there are few plans to make any change, especially regarding the assessment strategy that works very well. There have been a number of external enquiries, both elsewhere in the UK and further afield, and so an online version is a possible strategic development.

Differences between assessment at undergraduate and Masters level

Loykie feels that the assessment of the final year of a degree is close to that at Master's level; it is more of a continuum than a marked jump. Assessment criteria may be stricter, using criteria which emphasise more critical thinking skills, but without a marked change to those used in undergraduate assessments.

In France, one can do a qualification in two years, which corresponds to a Diploma, and with an extra year's study, becomes a degree. An additional year leads to a Masters, and on to a PhD with more study: there is not a mental barrier between undergraduate and postgraduate but a continuum.

31. Colin Price

University of Worcester

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

Colin ran a MSc module entitled 'History and Philosophy of Computing,' which stopped 3 years prior to the interview. The module looked at computing and its history in a philosophical manner. For example, he argued, the computer was not invented but discovered, from early logic of Lybniz, progressing to Bull, Shannon, Hilbert, and Turing, and the Turing Machine. The Turing Machine proved the constructs of programming languages, Colin suggested. The module was designed to debunk some notions and explain where computers come from. For example, he suggested, you cannot prove a complex programme will work until it does so.

Curriculum

When considering networks, most think of the internet first of all, but the module looked at networks from an abstract point of view, considering the different structures e.g. random (which was the model for 40 years or so), scale-free and small world networks. The module did not look at technical aspects.

Assessment

Four position papers were spread through the semester, each of which was 1,000 words in length. Students were given open questions, such as, 'What is computation?' or 'What can the computer do outside the office?' They were then encouraged to think about the question based on classroom theory. They were given the question in week three, and a draft answer was to be completed by week four.

Peer review

Copies of the draft were brought to a class session and each student peer reviewed each other's paper, giving feedback (typically to 10 fellow students). Only peer review was given at this stage, and while the tutor was present to give guidance where necessary, in practice little input from the tutor was needed. The final paper was submitted for grading on week five, and the next proposition paper was also given out then to continue the cycle of work. The submitted paper's grade and feedback was returned within a week by the tutor, which counted towards the module grade. No end of module assessment was necessary.

Student responses

The assessment worked well because the students appreciated the content of the course and nature of the position paper, which were academic in format, and students had never been asked to work in this way previously. The students felt they were working in a way in which research scientists work, by peer reviewing each other's papers and creating a situated learning environment where they were playing the roles of academic peers. Most students, however, did not proceed to a research role, but went on to further education, working in industry, or to aid promotion in their current jobs.

Potential changes

Colin felt that there was no better way to assess this module and other colleagues have asked if they can use a similar technique. However, an improvement could be the inclusion of a presentational element to produce a 5 paper mini-conference. A one-to-one viva could be used as well, since the spoken word, not the written word, is in his view the primary form of communication. Hence, this would be more in line with everyday communications.

In his experience, weaker students tended to do better in vivas than written work, since they give tutors flexibility to find out what the students know, not what they don't know. Tutors can then reframe the question slightly to elicit answers without using concepts with which the students were unfamiliar. Within a mini-conference, five students with 10 minutes each could be assessed in about an hour, and the outputs could be recorded for moderation. When devising the programme, there were no problems in gaining approval and the externals loved the assessment format. The module and assessment format have also been successfully applied to a level six course.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

These, Colin suggested, lay only in the assessment criteria. The MSc papers and reviews were better in his experience than most undergraduate ones, with improved research, references, and reviews. The M-level students showed a greater ability to work with sources, the ability to cite, and use critical analysis of sources and material. However, the better undergraduate students worked at a similar level.

32. Philip Warwick

University of York

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

Philip is the Head of the Taught Masters Programmes at The York Management School within the University of York. This year 223 students are attending its seven programmes, which include a conversion programme to MA in Management, for those who have not studied management before, and six specialist management courses. These specialist courses are: finance, accounting, HR, health management, corporate social responsibility, international business and strategic management. The largest programme is the MA in Management, with a typical cohort of about 70 students, 85% of which are international students. The majority of the intake (60-65%) are from the People's Republic of China; word of mouth is very important in marketing to potential students in China.

The student cohort

The number of international students has increased recently, which may be a result of the recession, the University's good league table placing and York's reputation as a nice safe historic city in which to study. Many feel a Masters degree from a high ranked English University will improve employability and an increase in Masters popularity appears to be mirrored around the country. The increase in numbers is pushing the boundaries of what the school can manage, and admissions closed very quickly this year.

Philip suggested that the taught Masters is a bit of a 'Cinderella' qualification for much of the HE sector where primacy is given to research and undergraduates.

Diverse assessment

Most of the assessment across the programmes follows the tradition of the 2-3 hour closed book exam, the 3,000 word essay and a 12,000 word dissertation. However, having a variety of assessments allows students to show their strengths, and there are a small number of open book assessments. Students do at least two assessed presentations during the year, with the more practical subjects tending to have the more innovative assessment.

In the first term the use of a presentation allows students to see others'

work, and helps them to realise how much work they will have to do and can shock some into doing more. Students can get worried about presentations but the use of groups allows roles to be divided and is less pressured.

Assessment induction

Students are encouraged to submit a formative essay in the autumn, to allow a practice piece with feedback before the first summative assessment. Even with this safeguards Philip feels that the assessments are very stressful, particularly as many students have not been assessed in this manner before. Everyone has probably done an exam, but there may be many who have not written a long essay in English. Philip makes it clear during induction that the Management School recognises that all the students have been very successful in their prior education. However, those skills may have to be translated into a different assessment system. In a typical undergraduate programme, the first year can allow students to become accustomed to the university and assessments, through a gentle break-in period. This is not possible on a one-year Masters, where one has to hit the ground running, so the formative assessment is even more important.

Language issues

With so many students whose first language is not English, oral presentations on this programme are not expected to be in perfect BBC English. The aim should be to be understood and to get the message over: the language of international business is poor English. This should not give a poor impression but course tutors believe it is better to share ideas than to say nothing at all.

This is different in written assignments, and providing the marker is able to understand the content, poor grammatical English should be penalised but only once. These are international programmes and need to have a different standard of English than an English degree.

Assessing reflection

In the Entrepreneurship and Intrapreneurship module, a reflective practice assessment is used as part of a portfolio that includes a group presentation, a group report together with the reflective writing. Some students find it difficult to 'get their heads around' such a different kind of assessment. Although no formative assessment was provided, samples of previous years'

work were supplied to provide a model, and an example of reflective writing to overcome the novel nature of the assessment. The reflective assessment is also later in the year, covering the whole module. The module contains a large group element which provided ample opportunity to reflect on the group dynamic, how it came together and their personal development.

Quality assurance issues

All assessments have to be approved by the university teaching committee with unusual elements being considered by the teaching committee within the department. There is nothing stopping people being creative providing they can make a suitable case. However, it is important to maintain standards and York tends to be somewhat conservative, with a risk-averse culture. There is a temptation to get students to sit exams, which are regarded as less risky, perceived to take less time to mark, and, together with the time it takes to redesign assessment, these are the main constraints on creativity at York and the HE sector.

There is a question regarding the time taken for development of innovative assessment: there have been some fantastic schemes in other departments, Philip suggested, but these take additional resources and there are issues of scale. However it depends on how and what is done. Currently the smaller modules, on such a wide range of subjects found in the MA, tend towards over-assessment and use of a cocktail of assessment types could be more practical if the number of assessment points could be reduced, possibly by grouping modules together.

The size of the programmes cohorts is also an issue, and Philip suggested that assessors get programmed into ways of survival. The financial importance of M-level students to the university forces the university to find ways to reduce risk, with the need to keep that income stream going. In a 20 person programme, in a small university, the risks would not be as great, and assessment innovation could be freer. He indicated that one is always aware that the students are paying large sums of money and questioned whether this will become similar with undergraduates in the future.

Feedback on assessment

This varies: presentations get instant feedback, but limited as it is pre-mark. Students receive a short group report with their mark at the end of the module; reflective writing statements will get written feedback; group reports will get a group feedback sheet. There is a huge amount of time required to generate the required amount of feedback. Philip worries that students are not using the feedback sufficiently. They have tried audio feedback, but cannot say which is the best format. The NSS has made feedback an obsession, he suggested, proposing that tutors give so much feedback but query how much do the students actually take in. A hundred scripts per tutor with a written feedback report is a considerable workload, he argued, and suggested that NSS scores do not truly reflect the work put in.

Employability

Many Masters graduates have been employed in financial services in past years both internationally and in the UK, although this pattern has not been the case in 2010. Few of the 2010 Masters students had found career jobs by the end of the year. Two to three years ago graduates may struggle but after a few months found something.

Authentic assessment

A worry with the use of essays and exams is the way they relate to the work found in employment, he argued, proposing that a more authentic assessment approach, which maps better onto employment skills, should have a higher emphasis on group and project work, together with presentations and reports. However, due to the large numbers of students, the majority of modules on this course still use exams. Of the 180 credits in the MA, all but 30-40 are assessed by essay or exam. There is the feeling that some element of traditional, closed book exam is necessary to demonstrate that students aren't borrowing material, or getting others to do it for them.

Potential future developments

If there were no restrictions Philip would like to see a module or two use an oral exam like some European models. The use of more project work would improve the employability issues. Also he would like a bigger range of assessment types, so that students can excel in one form.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

Philip argued that the way a Masters level assessment is set is very similar to an undergraduate assessment; the tasks may not be very different. However, third year undergraduates have got used to the academic traditions and many know what is needed to get the really good marks. Unless Masters students have come through the system, then this is not the case and fewer get the very highest grades at M-level. Staff may assume that the students have the prior experience with, for example, essay writing, when they do not. Staff do not always necessarily explain precisely what is expected to demonstrate the critical evaluation skills that they need to get over 70%. It could be questioned whether this is the role of staff on a Masters programme.

As an assessor of Masters students, when compared to an undergraduate student, he would like to see greater insights required into the business environment, demonstrating how the course and the associated case studies link with a real world environment. There needs to be a higher level of awareness, including contextual information, and an ability of make strategic links. This effectively progresses up Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, he suggested, with students demonstrating the ability to apply and synthesis their knowledge.

33. Marion Palmer

Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Ireland

Interviewer: Richard Canham

Background

Marion is the Head of the Department of Learning Sciences at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology. Within the department is a Masters course on cyberpsychology. Psychology explores the way people think and behave and the new and emerging field of cyberpsychology looks at how people behave when they are online. People are online a lot of the time and we are now beginning to understand just how profoundly this is changing people. This was the first programme on cyberpsychology in Ireland and the UK and has run since 2007.

Assessment

With a background in teaching and learning, Marion wanted to get the assessment of the cyberpsychology programme right, something that is difficult and does not always happen. The programme team, particularly the programme coordinator, decided that there would be no exams: they didn't feel they were a suitable method of assessment for Masters level students and so a fundamental assessment principle became the absence of exams. However, this was contradictory to a strenuous validation process that assumed exams would be present. At the validation stage, sample assignments were presented to the validation panel and the programme was approved based on this approach to assessment. Traditionally exams would be reviewed by external examiners and this was replicated using the non-exam assessment: the assessments were and are sent to external examiners each year for comment in advance of issuing to students.

Quality assurance

The assessments are integral to the programme design and aligned with the learning outcomes. All the assessments have to enable students to provide evidence that they have achieved the learning outcomes at Level 9 (master's level) of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications www.nfq.ie. The most appropriate assessment type was selected for each module, working from the programme level down. An essay may be considered most appropriate for

knowledge breadth, but for know-how and skills, a research proposal could be more appropriate. This programme approach adopted in 2007 is now required (HETAC, 2009, pp. 13-14).

Authenticity of assessments

This is also very important, so that the tasks map well to an employment or work environment. The range of assessments used includes essays, presentations (group and individual), online purchase analysis, article evaluation, research project proposal, wiki, in-class evaluation and a dissertation. The subject range used within the assessments is very flexible and aims to be in line with the student's field of work or interest. With so many different assessment types, and with a cohort of students that are often returning to study after a considerable gap, workshops and readings on the different assessment types are included within the modules to enable students to develop the skills required.

With all the assessments set in advance this allows the students to be given details of every assessment, including deadlines, at the very start of the programme each year. At the beginning, some staff preferred to set the assessment once they knew the students, but the requirement to send the assessments to external assessors as part of validation process meant that this was not possible. However, Marion actually found it liberating to know that all the assessments were set in advance, and in practice, once the new system was tried the remaining staff agreed. The assessments are set just after the current year's assignments have been marked, shortly after the exam board, so adjustments can be made while the memories are fresh. The planning cycle is developing well. The students tend to like having so much information provided; most are in employment and so can use advance information to enable them to fit assessments around work and other commitments.

Student support

It has been noticed that even at Masters level the students still need to be scaffolded and supported. As the programme has evolved, students seek feedback at all stages of the assessment process and informal formative assessment occurs all the time. Feedback and the grade of summative assignments are deliberately returned separately, with feedback being given within three weeks and the grade within five. Hence the feedback is considered more fully by students.

Innovative assessment supported by technology

One of the most innovative assessments is a wiki based assignment on the Applied Cyberpsychology module. Together with a reflective and analytical report on the process, students have to develop an online resource (a wiki) on an area of educational/organisational cyberpsychology. Collaborators are asked to add to the wiki, which was reviewed and edited by the students. This gave the students an understanding and familiarity of web 2.0 technologies and collaborative working.

Students' initial lack of experience made them fearful of the assignment, and they found it overwhelming when they began, asking numerous questions. However, a survey of the students on completion showed that there was a strong agreement that it was a valuable learning experience, and that it sparked an interest in wikis and educational/organisational cyberpsychology. Most were positive in their evaluation.

There were some practical issues with the range of different wikis produced, and gaining access to them by staff members and examiners. Also the level of interaction by participants was lower than hoped, particularly in the most accomplished and polished wikis. As the programme has changed and developed this assignment has been retained on the advice of the external examiners.

Differences between assessment at undergraduate level and Masters

Marion feels that this is the degree to which the students have to employ critical thinking. In the past this may not have been as important. Tutors no longer disseminate information, not giving access to the knowledge, but provide students with the tools to interrogate the knowledge. Hence, the assessment has to be 'to show can you interrogate the knowledge'.

Reference

Higher Education and Training Awards Council (2009) Assessment and Standards. Dublin: HETAC. Available from http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Assessment_and_Standards_2009%20Published.pdf.

34. Lindsay Simpson

James Cook University, Queensland, Australia

Interview undertaken and case study written by Sally Brown

Introduction

Lindsay Simpson at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia has since 2006 been running a Master of Arts (Writing) programme with a major in Writing and Journalism, on which approximately 45 students are enrolled, with around 8-12 in a class at any time. Students undertake a Graduate Certificate worth 12 credit points, then a Graduate diploma (12 credit points), covering a wide variety of writing genres including fiction and non-fiction, before undertaking a further 12 credit points leading to a Masters degree. It is likely that this will lead to the potential to do a PhD, following a Grad Cert in Research Methods.

Rationale

The course was designed by Lindsay having reviewed similar programmes elsewhere and taking account of her own experiences as a learner at this and doctorate level, and as published author and co-author of eight books. She also draws on the work of the AAWP, The Australian (now Australasian) Association of Writing Practitioners.

Student body

Students undertaking the programme have undergraduate degrees in a wide variety of disciplines and some enter with no undergraduate degree but extensive professional writing experience. They have a wide age range (40+ to currently 75).

The two 6 credit papers, the Writing Project and Exegesis, are compulsory for the Masters programme.

Assessment

The challenge as Lindsay sees it is to assess the students meaningfully (which for her means giving detailed feedback on multiple drafts) without this being overwhelmingly time-consuming for the tutor. This is a core-teaching component and demonstrates an integrated approach to assessment within the curriculum.

The Writing Project is a 10-11,000-word assignment with topics and approaches negotiated with the tutor. Formative feedback is given on two preliminary drafts before the third draft is submitted for summative assessment. Alongside this, students are required to write and submit an assessed reflective journal in which they analyse and critique the processes by which they have completed the assignment.

Using technology to support assessment

Students are encouraged (but not required) to contribute to a class discussion board, through which students (many of whom are distantly located from the university and each other, including internationally) can communicate and discuss issues around writing. Contributions to the discussion board are currently not assessed. Lindsay added this element as a means of helping students who might not have undertaken this kind of reflection before to get used to articulating their ideas about writing practice. 20% of the marks are given for the first draft, 25% for the second draft and 35% for the third draft, with the final 20% being given for the 2,000 word long reflective journal. This can take the form of a daily reflective diary or other formats and provides opportunities for them to document and review ethical, legal and practical issues around writing, and to apply an analytical and scholarly approach to the work.

The Exegesis is an assignment stemming from the creative writing work and for which the reflective journal forms a sound foundation. Assessing the course is challenging for the tutor, since students write in a very wide variety of genres, so this activity allows them equivalently to demonstrate they are reflective practitioners with high levels of critical analysis of their reading and their own writing. The course guidance documentation, which Lindsay will supply, provides more detail.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level

In Lindsay's view, the difference between work at this level and undergraduate level work lies in the greater emphasis on critically evaluating and evidencing development, criticality and learning. Many students on the course have not undertaken research recently (or at all) so some tend to struggle with the Exegesis and hence the importance of earlier reflective work and of formative feedback on two preliminary drafts of the exegesis.

35. Simon O'Leary

Regent's College London

Mini-case study by Assimilate conference presenter prepared by Sally Brown from email notes.

Background

Simon teaches on the MA Luxury Brand Management and describes the final module here.

Assessment

For 60 credits, out of a total of 180 credits for the degree, the student prepares either a Dissertation Report of 15,000 words or works with a client on a Consultancy Project to produce a 10,000 word Client Report, a 2,500 word Reflective Journal and a 30 minute presentation. For the Dissertation Report, written feedback is provided within 3 weeks of submission and, for the Consultancy Project, immediate verbal feedback is given on the presentation and written feedback on all three components within 3 weeks of submission. There are no particular assessment requirements made by Professional, Regulatory and Subject Bodies and standard programme validation procedures are followed. The module requires two markers at each stage to ensure reliability and consistency.

Good practice

In the Consultancy Project, the client is invited to the presentation and job offers have resulted on occasion as a result of the impressive work achieved by the students. The external examiner has highlighted this aspect of assessment as a key feature of the programme. Each module, and the programme as a whole, is evaluated by the students and by the external examiners.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

Simon indicated that, for him, the broad difference is that the focus of his undergraduate programmes is on learning while the focus of the postgraduate programmes is on applications, and their assessment methods need to recognise this.

36. Emma Bond and Jessica Clark

University Campus Suffolk (UCS)

Case Study provided by authors, Assimilate Conference presenters

Introduction

UCS is a relatively new initiative to have university education in Suffolk. It has a commitment to widening participation and students come from a variety of social and educational backgrounds and have a wide range of academic ability and levels of achievement. Emma and Jess teach on the newly developed MA Childhood and Youth Studies Course at UCS. They designed the course last year in response to a growing demand for a transdisciplinary Post-Graduate course. The MA Childhood and Youth Studies is based on an informed and critical approach to the academic study of childhood and youth and is intended to reflect both the desires and ambitions of postgraduate students and the philosophical traditions and current developments in the social studies of childhood and youth.

The programme

Emma and Jess also teach undergraduate courses in the social sciences, which adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the exploration of social life drawing on sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, geography, criminology, politics and social policy. They have previously introduced creative assessment in a number of undergraduate modules which resulted in increased engagement in assessment, improved success and with very positive feedback from students. The Masters' modules similarly have a strong academic focus and facilitate a number of important academic skills such as reflection, critical thinking and autonomous learning and have been developed for postgraduate students or senior professionals interested in specialised or advanced study. Delivered on a flexible, blended learning basis, the course offers students the opportunity to study on either a full-time or part-time basis and has been designed to accommodate the needs of both new and recent graduates and those wishing to return to study or change careers. The course team come from a variety of disciplines, have a commitment to high quality teaching and incorporate a wide variety of technological tools and learning and teaching techniques to form a collaborative space that enables a seamless transition between classroom based and online learning through new media technologies.

Whilst some students are avid users of a variety of new and social media platforms some are unfamiliar with online technologies and felt somewhat daunted by the prospect of learning in a different way as one student explained: "Despite living in a home environment where there is more modern technology than Dixons, my comfort zone was purely email and online shopping".

These technology-related anxieties often were combined with uncertainty in relation to writing essays, referencing, M level standards and concerns over being out of education for significant periods of time. Faced with what could be considerable barriers to learning, and indeed to succeeding on the course, Emma and Jess were keen to devise assessment strategies that encouraged knowledge and understanding of the critical and theoretical aspects of the course but which also developed student's academic writing and IT skills, media literacy, confidence and originality, skills which are essential to M Level study and for graduates to take into contemporary workplaces.

Innovative assessment

Having used blogs to great success in undergraduate modules where they were a place for students to debate, posting images, exploring formative tasks and discussing summative assessments, it was decided to use them for an assessment in the first MA module. Students were required to undertake six blog entries, one per week, in response to a question based on a taught conceptual or theoretical element studied in the module. The blogs were public so the students could see each other's work and Emma, as module tutor, could respond and comment on each blog entry quickly and effectively to provide timely feedback easily to the students. The blog entries could then be amended or added to in response to the feedback being finally submitted at the end for summative assessment of the module.

The students' learning experience in relation to assessment was thus almost immediate at the start of the course. They quickly saw what was expected at this level, how to write precisely, reference and construct a logical argument in response to each question based on appropriate academic sources. Ongoing feedback led to a rapid development of critical thinking, student engagement with module theory and confidence in their ability to succeed at M level study.

The blogs are just one example of a range of innovative, creative assessment strategies that Emma, Jess and the course team, employ on the MA course. Other examples include a briefing paper to a government minister; a

creative presentation (no PowerPoint allowed!) and the development of a digital educational tool. This approach to assessment is complemented by parallel creative teaching and learning strategies which exploit a variety of mechanisms and tools to make the most effective use of blended learning as the mode of delivery.

Extensive online resources and activities and audio/visual online lectures are combined with taught sessions in graduate school spaces with smart boards, projectors and ready access to individual PCs, as well as round tables, easy chairs and literally the ability to write all over the walls (with wipe clean paint!). These learning and teaching methods provide effective and dynamic spaces for engaging students and effectively promoting student learning through creative assessment. The ethos of creative course design and learning and teaching supports the effective use of creative assessment across the Masters modules, promoting and facilitating an overall knowledge sharing philosophy.

Vignette [v]: Paul Crowther and Peter Lake **Sheffield Hallam University**

Presentation at the Assimilate Conference, September 2012

Paul and Peter in the computing department at Sheffield Hallam have been successfully trialling MSc dissertation by portfolio for more than a year. The trials have been seen by all the participatory students as a success. Nonetheless a number of issues remain, not least of which is the relatively low number of students who select portfolio over traditional approaches. One of the reasons for this may be that in attempting to be scrupulously fair to all students, the marking scheme used is identical to those traditionally used. There is some concern that this may be helping to confuse both students and potential supervisors in that it does not allow the portfolio to have its own identity as a valid method. They are exploring how to improve this by, for example, considering whether a literature review is a necessary component, what kinds of artefacts can be used to demonstrate learning outcomes, whether assessment criteria should be varied when students choose portfolios rather than traditional dissertations, and how consistency and fairness can be assured.

37. Phil Burge

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

Interview by Richard Canham, case study prepared by Sally Brown

Introduction

Phil Burge is the Course Leader for the full-time MBA course, and the related MBA (Oil and Gas Management) at the Robert Gordon University. The case study reflects practice in 2011 at the time the interview took place.

Assessment

This is predominantly undertaken through coursework, which may be one or a multiple of elements within each module. Some modules use portfolio assessment, and other assessment elements include presentations, team reports, reflective reports, and in addition there are two exams. On this course a dissertation is no longer used, but a consultancy report using a client company is undertaken instead. There is lots of group work, as well as individual assessment. One of the exams is a closed-book exam, and one was an open book exam at the time of interview, but the team subsequently moved away from that because it had not really been successful, since they felt they didn't provide students with enough understanding of what an open book exam entails, and they literally 'take a book in' and use it in unsophisticated ways. Most coursework is in the form of integrative reports, with the aim of ensuring that students integrate knowledge acquired beyond the individual module. These can be written in the form of a management report, involving transferable skills.

Feedback

Phil indicated that generally feedback on coursework is in the form of typed commentaries against the assessment criteria. Feedback on exams is also provided sometimes, but not as a general rule. According to the RGU regulations, feedback should be returned to students within four weeks of assessment hand-in. The level of detail of feedback given to students by different tutors is very variable.

Formative feedback on draft assignments is not provided due to the volume of work which would be required if this were the case but there is a written assessment brief, which is explained fully by lecturers during a lecture.

Evaluation

According to students, the usefulness of feedback is very variable, and the most common student complaints are in this area. Phil has used generic feedback to groups in his own work, but suggests this is not done as a general process across the course.

Professional and Subject Body requirements

MBA courses accredited by AMBA (the Association of MBAs), require some exams but AMBA's understanding of 'exams' is traditional, and checks are on issues such as ensuring that the people who are sitting the exam are indeed the students being assessed.

Administrative matters

Phil said that the course team tried to optimise the timing of assessments to avoid excessive concurrent workloads, but that this had not been fully achieved. At no point however is more than one module being assessed at the same time, so integrative reports are set within individual modules, where some of the work goes beyond the module content, but integrative assignments of multiple modules are not undertaken. The main administrative issue with assessment is around the sheer volume of assignments to be handled, since no-one has moved yet to a paperless office and the content of the curriculum has increased over the years. The team are reluctant to reduce the quantity of assessment because of the administrative burden, so there is a balance to be struck.

Good practice

On this MBA the two elements which work particularly well are the final consultancy project and the business simulation games. The former is successful because at this stage students realise that what they have been learning has practical applications and they are working with live clients. The business simulation games help to cement ideas in students minds, and students enjoy doing these and find them challenging. Dissertations tend to be very academic oriented, and Phil indicated that it proved a hard task to help students to demonstrate good research skills. The project represents half the assessment weight of the dissertations, enabling the team to incorporate research skills within the curriculum. Students also tend to appreciate the portfolio approach, where smaller elements of assessment add up to something bigger.

Quality enhancement

Issues centre on the relentless volume of assignments, the 'tyranny of assessment', which has grown over the seven years Phil has been associated with the course. Two MBA students said at the end of the first assessment 'We're glad that's over, now we've got time to learn something'. Students progressively become more strategic and assessment-focused, and think 'what do I have to do to get the grade?' rather than 'what do I have to learn in order to get the grade?' This is not least because every individual module has to be assessed. If there were no limitations on how the course was assessed Phil would cut back the assessment to a single assignment, which would be a combination of a portfolio of evidence and a viva, which would entail using one-to-one tutorials, to help the students to learn and develop, and to be transformed into the people they wished to be (and the people the course team might wish them to become). However, he felt that the associated risks might make this unviable. He reflected on his own experiences as a student, where after the second term there was no assessment until final exams, and feedback was very limited, which had implications for students poor at organising their study workload.

Employability

All students (who are full time) have previous management experience, and return to such posts with enhanced skills, particularly in terms of transferable skills, such as communication, the ability to argue fluently, effective use of references, good style of writing, presentation skills and so on.

The difference between assessment on taught Masters and undergraduate levels Phil considered the differences to be minimal since all the Masters courses are conversion courses, which in content level are on a par with final level of undergraduate study, the principal differences being in level and depth.

38. Úna Kealy

Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland

Interview by Richard Canham, case study prepared by Sally Brown

Introduction

Úna is Programme Leader for an MA in Arts and Heritage Management at WIT, a full-time one-year programme completed over three semesters, and she provides a thorough overview of how the programme works in all of its parts. At the time of the interview, the programme was in its third year, and was the only taught Masters programme in the Department of Creative and Performing Arts in WIT. There was not any shared assessment methodology or criteria in the Department, so Úna developed her own for this programme. Úna facilitates two modules (Arts and Context, 1 and 2, in Semesters 1 and 2), and co-facilitates another (Research Methods component of a Professional Development and Research Module). These are offered over two hour sessions per week for a 5 credit module, and three hours per week for the Professional Development Module.

Assessment

In the first year of the Arts and Context Module, assessment was formerly very traditional, using essays, and in the second semester an oral presentation (an 'Academic Paper'), which did not work as well as Úna would have wished, as students were not sufficiently well-prepared on how to present in an academic style. The students were experienced and mature, but felt out of place in an academic environment. The paper presented by students was adequate but the level of presentation style was unacceptable, even from people who were very persuasive presenters in other contexts. In the second year Úna reviewed the assessment and instead asked the Arts in Context student group to present a five-minute case-study example, and then required them to discuss various aspects of theories relating to their case studies in a discussion which was recorded. The students wrote the assignment brief in conjunction with Úna, and shared the different components of the assignments.

There were four components. Students were required to:

(1) Prepare and present the case study, with seven students in the group, five minutes each, each student choosing one example of 'theory in practice' and discussing how it was in fact theory in practice.

(2) Participate in an assessed discussion (recorded) for around an hour (not a debate). They had had a preparatory session on 'democratic discussion' previously. They also had had a rehearsed discussion as practice. The level of preparation made a huge difference to the success of the assignment. The discussion was self-directed, with Úna taking a back-seat, but she assessed students' contributions to it.

(3) Listen to the assessed discussion on Moodle, and assess (anonymously) one of their peers' performances in that discussion. They were given written instructions on how best to go about assessing their peer, using principles of constructive criticism, covering what was positive in the first instance, and then how the student might consolidate those strengths, and only then where the student might have been more successful. This was allocated 5% (out of 70% for the whole assignment) that they could award to their peers. Úna remarked that with hindsight she would now grade the critique itself as students tended to be overly generous, and marks did not always fit with the paragraph they had written to support their mark.

(4) The final element they had to submit was their notes. Feedback from the external examiner had been 'how can I assess the mark on a presentation?'. Therefore, Úna's aim was that everything was to be auditable. Student feedback was anonymised, with each student getting a copy of the feedback from their peer, as well as feedback from Úna herself.

Scalability to larger numbers of students

Úna feels that the discussion 'takes the heat off' everyone, and could work with a larger group, but it would take time to do the presentations. However she feels it could be done with a paper rather than a presented case-study. It was easier to mark the presentations as she was not involved in facilitating the discussion. It would have been much easier to write an overall essay brief, but the actual marking was easier than marking (for example) eight 3,000-word essays.

Good practice

The sense of commitment to the assignment as a whole was special, the students put a huge amount of work and thought into the preparation and evaluation of the assignments. Úna was the only tutor on this particular module, and said she got a great deal of satisfaction from teaching this module, not least because she considered the previous year's programme had been less than satisfactory.

Feedback and evaluation

Students received written feedback and a mark from Úna after the discussion. The assessment design had been passed to the external examiner as normal (and discussed with some colleagues), but no feedback had been received from him/her, so Úna proceeded as described above. Feedback from students was positive: the team recorded a session the following week to evaluate student views on the process, and overall students were positively disposed towards it, and indicated that they felt it should be employed with subsequent groups.

Employability

Úna commented that the situation for graduates in the year of the interview was dire. 'We don't get stats so we don't know where they all are now, but those who were working are continuing to work in that field' she indicated. The intention was that the assessment mapped well onto what students would be required to demonstrate in the field, and was practically relevant.

Enhancement

In the future, Úna said she would like to work more with the students on how to give useful feedback to each other, and she would cut the presentation element and just have the discussion element. She would keep the handing-in of the notes. She might allow them to extend the discussion time so they could bring in the case-studies into the discussion better. If conditions allowed, she would take students off site for the presentation. She'd done that to some extent in another context by getting students to work with Architecture students to develop a heritage site in the city. This worked well.

The differences between undergraduate and postgraduate assessment.

Using the Irish framework where level 9 equates to UK Masters level, Úna suggested that 'Level 8 students know a little about a lot, Level 9 students know a bit more about a bit less, and level 10 students know a lot about a little'. Crucial at Level 9 she argued is 'the students' ability to see how theory and practice can complement one another and develop one another. It's about application and understanding things in the abstract and concrete, and how these can relate to each other and complicate each other, and it's about being able to take a leadership role, and understand knowledge in greater complexity'.

39. Debbie Anderson

Kingston University

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham and case study written by Sally Brown

Introduction

Debbie is Module Leader for a module on Integrated Marketing Communication within an MA in Marketing at Kingston University, which has some alternative pathways including an MA in Marketing Communications and Advertising, MA in Corporate Communications and so on. This is a Core module delivered in the first semester (i.e. September to December), with a class size of around 80. The case study describes the context in 2011 when the original interview took place.

Assessment

At the very start of the course, students undertake small unassessed tasks which involve them presenting researched material to their peers and receiving feedback on it. The module involves two summative assignments, the first of which involves students working in groups of 5-6 students, selected to include both international and home students who undertake an assignment worth 40% of the overall mark for the module. They have considered allowing students to self select for the group tasks, but consider there to be few benefits to doing so. Students are required to write a Communications plan for a brand they have identified as being in need of help. The output is a group-produced Business report, and the work involved is mainly hands-on, with limited theory inputs, handed in half way through the module. This is a very practical task, designed to counter-balance other more theoretical parts of the course at this stage, and provides a useful focus for students to talk about in employment interviews.

The second assignment, worth 60% of the marks overall is an individual literature review on a choice of one of three topics provided by the tutor, undertaken over around a 3-4 week period. Students then take the output of this work into a 90 minute class test (which is not a formal invigilated exam) where Debbie gives them a selection of mini scenarios and asks them to write a recommendation to the Marketing Director of the company in question, based on what they have understood through undertaking the literature review. For example, in one year the task was to write on the topic of the strategic value of sales promotion of a brand. Other topics have included writing about mobile marketing communications and product placement and so on.

Experts and novices

Within this second assignment, the Literature review itself is worth 45%, the test is worth 45% and the final 10% is given for participation in a class activity at week three of the five weeks, termed the 'Experts and Novices' session. Each student will have been asked to read five allocated journal articles on one of three topics, with around a third of the students choosing each topic. In each of the three sessions, the group who have prepared the topic of the day take the role of Experts and are allocated two other students ('Novices') who they will be expected to brief and advise on current thinking in the area, working in small groups. The role of the tutors (Debbie and a colleague) is to listen to what is going on, answer any questions and check that the 'Experts' have done their preparation. At the end of the session, Debbie gathers one or two of the references from each group to compile into a shared resource for use by the whole group and identifies the main issues discussed on the white board or as a poster.

The task was originally designed to deter plagiarism and to get students (particularly international students) to read articles in detail, to apply critical thinking and to see things from different perspectives in a safe environment. Knowing they have to explain material to colleagues makes the task more challenging and more rewarding.

At the end of each of the three sessions, students are given proformas on which to write a mini evaluation identifying what they had learned from the sessions and evaluating the sessions as a whole. These proformas then inform the decision of the tutor on the allocation of the 10% marks given for this element, taken in conjunction with observation of students' active presence in sessions and whether they had read the papers and prepared well.

Students then write up their individual literature reviews for submission with the proforma in a wallet. They obviously need more than the basic five papers for their literature review assignment, but this session gives them an excellent foundation on which to build. Debbie finds that students become more confident and better critical thinkers as a result, learning from their peers as well as from their reading. She was even more convinced of the impact of the approach, having heard a colleague at an exam board commenting favourably on students' improved use of literature reviews and the fact that they were working together in groups on them. Debbie is using a small grant from the Higher Education Academy to review and develop the process further, using focus groups of students, with the aim of disseminating the ideas more widely.

The programme as a whole

Debbie regards the whole programme as innovative but says, even though it is modular, it has many of qualities of a traditional linear programme, with good conversations between the staff involved in teaching the programme and plenty of links between the modules so there is strong course cohesion, with most of the students having plenty of time together. Three modules use exams. All students do a final dissertation worth around a third of the overall marks for the course, and Debbie feels that her assignments help students develop their critical thinking and literature review capacities considerably in preparation for this.

Feedback to students

This is provided by staff on proformas where written comments can be given against the set criteria. There are currently few opportunities for formative feedback on drafts and, were there no restrictions on time, this is an area which Debbie might consider exploring. However, the university has an Academic Skills drop-in desk where students can take written work for advice on grammar, structure, punctuation and so on.

Ongoing verbal feedback is given by the tutor during the group tasks on an *ad hoc* basis. Within the course, no feedback is given on exam scripts unless students have failed: students can get feedback on request to explain the mark given but there are no opportunities to negotiate the grade awarded. Students having to undertake resit exams are advised on where they went wrong on request.

Quality assurance

The course team have considerable flexibility on assessment in the programme and they use a combination of individual and group assessment: the university does not permit giving marks for attendance, although the mark given for active participation is considered acceptable. The programme as originally validated had more exams than is currently the case, so such changes had to be taken through the university approvals process. There are no Professional or Subject Bodies involved in this course so there are no restrictions on that front. In terms of timing of assignments, the Programme leader for the course issues an assessment schedule at beginning of the year which is agreed and then adhered to by the course team. Student evaluations of the programme are usually very positive.

Quality enhancement

Over the six years the course has been running, the main changes have been to reduce the number of exams and to introduce some innovations like the 'Experts and Novices' task and innovations to the half module which was previously called PDP and is now called 'Planning your career in Marketing and Communications'. This involves students doing a portfolio and engaging in class sessions where module leaders bring in colleagues from industry to help students present themselves effectively and run competitions in conjunction with the university's employability team. If she were to change the programme in the future, she would prefer to have more opportunities to debrief students after the assignments are completed, to maximise learning opportunities.

Employability of graduates

The majority of graduates from this programme go on to roles in the Marketing industry such as Junior Brand Managers, Junior Marketing Assistants and Graduate training programmes with big companies, with a tiny proportion going onto higher degrees. Students are largely advised to get further practical experience before going in to research. Graduates' capabilities are mapped on to the university's Employability Skills Matrix, and the match is usually good. Many of the staff teaching the programme are ex-practitioners in the marketing field, so this is advantageous.

Differences between assessing students at undergraduate and Masters level

While Debbie indicated that excellent undergraduate students often achieve work that could be viewed as being at Masters level, she perceives the principal differences between the levels as being concerned with the depth and level of outcomes achieved, the opportunity for students to choose the focus of their study and the extent of critical analysis demonstrated.

40. Jude Stephens

Queens University Belfast

Drafted by Sally Brown based on a presentation given by Dr Jude Stephens of the Gibson Institute for Land, Food & Environment at the QUB 2012 Learning and Teaching Conference.

Background

The MSc Leadership for Sustainable Development programme at QUB has a strong focus on learning on the job and applying knowledge derived from the course to the real world. On this programme students complete three 8-week placements in the Non-Governmental, Governance and Business/Finance sectors.

In the setting up of placements, students consider and discuss areas of interest prior to the Placement preparation week and they then identify and approach a potential host organization where they agree on projects and objectives. Students are given mock interviews for the placements and personal learning outcomes for the placement are pinpointed. Students are also given sector briefings in advance of placements as contextual guidance.

Placement assessment

Students are required to write a 5,000 word report on the project as well as completing and returning weekly e-diaries. On return from placement, students each give a 15 minute presentation during which they are expected to provide a critical analysis of skills developed. They also participate in a debriefing seminar and make recommendations for the sector based on their experiences. Placement hosts provide feedback to students on their contributions.

Benefits to the student

The placement provides a valuable introduction to the sector and exposes students to what the world of work is really like. They gain an insider view of 'office politics' and are able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as likes and dislikes. The placement provides them with opportunities for networking and to explore future employment possibilities. Importantly it also allows them to challenge their own beliefs through self-reflection and

analysis. They achieve tangible evidence of their own skills and qualities plus an enhanced CV and references they can later use when seeking employment. There tends to be a notable increase in their self-confidence in their own abilities and they also have opportunities to develop particular skills. Where a placement is particularly successful, they enjoy feeling they have left a legacy behind in what feels like a dry run for actual work situations.

Benefits to the host organisation

For placement providers, these placements offer opportunities to execute existing shelved projects which might not otherwise be tackled and there are also chances to examine previously unconsidered areas. Students on placement can be useful in the identification of sustainability issues as well as any problems within the organisation, and they explore a range of solutions to real issues. Unexpected benefits can include providing fresh perspectives and from time to time can offer refreshing challenges to the organisation's status quo. The placements provide useful links to the University, with potential for shared research projects. The quality of the final professional document produced can be very high. Placement providers include Sunseed in the NGO sector, Belfast City Council in the Governance sector and Delta Print and Packaging in the Business sector.

Problems and issues

These can include poor relationships between students on placements and their supervisors and a sensation one student working in an organisation described as being like 'Nailing a jellyfish', that is, working in nebulous and poorly defined contexts. On occasions, students are faced with being given inappropriate tasks and there being false expectations of what can be achieved, particularly when there is insufficient guidance from supervisors. Students working away from home, especially abroad, can experience homesickness and changes in the host organisation can disrupt placements. However, in the words of one student:

"In all three placements, the process of connecting ideas and theory to practice has been invaluable. It helped reiterate what sustainability really means and what it entails. Be it the NGO, governance or business sector, the philosophy for the future remains the same – that we humans cannot exist in a bubble divorced from the reality of our place in the natural world."

41. Jonathan Moizer

University of Plymouth

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham, case study prepared by Sally Brown

Introduction

Jonathan is Postgraduate Teaching Coordinator at the Graduate School, and oversees the Postgraduate Certificate in Management Studies, the Postgraduate Diploma in Management Studies, and the MBA top-up, three separate programmes integrated in a pipeline of study. All students are part-time and include local and regional managers.

Assessment

There is a range of assessments, but Jonathan thinks that students tend to respond best to problem-based assessment. There are still some exams, in much reduced quantity from previously, but the assessment is essentially coursework based, requiring students to look at a problem in their workplace, giving them the opportunity to apply theory to their own contexts. Simulation games and role play are also used as a means of bringing subject content alive and encouraging students to take a real-world form. Assessments might take the form of an essay, or design of a costing system using a spreadsheet model, or a debriefing on a simulation exercise they've done, or investigation of a particular system at work, and so on. This is the difference between the assessment of these students and that of the full-time taught Masters students; with the part time students the team try to make a difference in the work context to get a win-win situation.

There is a mixture of group and individually based assessments, though most assessment is individual. The university limits the weighting of group assessment to a maximum of 30%. For some students, completion of the Certificate and Diploma parts of the course is all they want or need, but those who progress to the MBA (which is 180 M-level credits, the Certificate and Diploma parts being 60 credits each), the MBA topic is by research only, and these students have to produce a dissertation.

Examinations here mean timed assessments such as class tests: in the first two years, these tend to be in the minority, but the team believe that the

exam/test format does not link well to the overall learning outcomes of the individual modules, and this is why coursework assessments predominate. Taught modules are only 10 credits, but there is a 20-credit dissertation module in the diploma. The course team privilege breadth over depth, so they tend to use the amount of assessment expected for a small module, which may be one major piece of assessment or two smaller assessments, typically two assessments per module.

Feedback

There is a staff-student compact where feedback is returned within a four-week period. Feedback at the moment is all written: there is no standard marking proforma, as staff tend to develop their own, based on the assessment criteria for the assessments. At the time of the interview, the team were considering using audio feedback, and electronic submission and marking. The university policy is that all written assessment will be handled electronically within the next three years.

On a personal level, Jonathan does not encourage the giving of feedback on drafts, but is happy to clarify the assignment questions and provide guidance on what is required, but frowns on the practice of looking at work in progress, and declines to do so.

Evaluation

Jonathan suggests that the first term of the Certificate can be a 'baptism of fire', for students who may have never studied in higher education, or may have been out of study for 20 years, so satisfaction at this level may not be high. Satisfaction levels start to improve in the second year when they go into the Diploma, when they further develop their learning skills and learn to make connections. Students may be out of practice at first, and come in with the view that what they are doing on the programme is 'training' rather than anything more complex, but they progressively take a more customer-orientated perspective and gradually move towards a client perspective as they progress after a year.

There tends to be lower satisfaction with feedback than with other aspects of the programme, in line with the national picture as indicated by the NSS. The timeliness of feedback is not particularly well regarded by students, nor is the level to which the feedback helps students to reflect, however external examiners are very positive about the rigour and quality of the feedback.

Jonathan says his own feedback is well received, and he explains to students how they have achieved their mark and how they could have improved.

Professional and Subject Bodies

There are no professional bodies involved in accrediting the programme currently, though the team were looking at the CMI (Chartered Management Institute) to accredit the MBA part of the programme at the time of the interview.

Employability

All students are in employment, as this is a prerequisite for the course and additionally they need to have several years relevant experience. The team believes that this is a relevant route to postgraduate education for people who might have gone straight into work after higher education. The components that make up the Masters programme (Certificate, Diploma then MBA) provide a 3-year route of study, and the course team tend to see progression and transformation in their students, typically with students coming in on lower-management roles and exiting the programme on middle-management roles in the public sector, not-for-profit and private sector companies.

Administrative matters

The team leave staff to create their own resources, and organise the timing of their particular assessments, though they have encouraged some staff to bring forward their assessments to avoid bunching, and to allow students who haven't studied the subject before to get some feedback before they get too far into the programme. 'Nobody likes being assessed', Jonathan suggested so there will always be a level of dissatisfaction regarding the nature and timing of assessments or the feedback.

Numbers are very small, so there are no substantial administrative problems with assessments. The university provides a Coursework Submission Desk in the department, where they have cited health and safety issues on the volume of work coming in, but Jonathan suggests that if they go forward to electronic submission this problem won't exist.

Quality assurance and enhancement

Jonathan feels that a strength of the course is its relevance to participants' work environments, and to issues in their public sector environment. If the team were to make changes in assessment, they might like to explore how to ensure that when the assessment is highly theoretical and abstract, it can be made more accessible for students. He indicated that the team have to recognise that students regard their studies as Continuous Professional Development, and so need to ensure that assessment improves thinking skills and critical analysis in the workplace, since such assessments are better received.

Assessments on the course have always have employment-related elements, so there has been no need to change them much in recent years, compared with changes that have been made in undergraduate assessments. Given a completely free hand to change assessment, Jonathan would make it more bespoke and individual, and include a much higher level of oral assessment. He indicated that there is already a lot of formative oral assessment on the course, but indicated that summative assessment tends still to be exclusively written, and he would prefer to break links with instrumental learning processes. He considers oral continuous assessment to be more appropriate than the more episodic summative assessment currently in use.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

The main difference Jonathan suggests is that these assignments have higher application to real-world settings. He indicates that their students have access to a whole store of data, information and knowledge they can draw on, which a full-time student cannot use.

42. Sara Garratt

Canterbury Christ Church University

Interview undertaken by Richard Canham and case study written by Sally Brown

Background

Sara has overall responsibility for a group of Post Graduate qualifications at Canterbury Christ Church University in the Business Faculty. Until relatively recently she was Director of the full-time MSc programmes for Business, Marketing, Finance and Human Resource Studies subject areas in the faculty, with around 50 students studying on these programmes. Students in the faculty also study part time, coming primarily from public services including the Police, Local Government and Health Services, including dedicated courses, for example, for a single Primary Care Trust

Assessment

The courses involve a good diversity of assessment methods including essays, presentations, group work, projects, Wikis, blogs and case studies, and Finance subjects also use open-book exams, as that is what is required by the relevant professional bodies. The kinds of project work undertaken varies from subject to subject but most require some element of group work and group assignments, together with individual work and normally a final individual written report

For the Wikis (led by John Taylor) they use Blackboard as their VLE and this works very well to enable groups to work together at a distance, which is particularly useful on the Executive MBA. Assessed group discussion boards on Blackboard (led by Chris Warren) are also used. While some of the modules use only final summative assessment, Sara herself uses continuous assessment from the start of each module. For example, in the Management and Leadership module, students working in teams undertake tasks and present outcomes throughout the module, with each individual producing a reflective log focusing on process at the end of the module.

Full-time postgraduate Students undertake three modules at a time and there is a concerted effort to ensure that all students experience a range of assessment methods. The course teams are working to assure consistency

of approach by ensuring that report structures for written reports are the same across modules. There are ten week terms, and students submit assignments at the start of each subsequent term, so they have plenty of time over vacations to prepare their work,. Sara divides her 20 credits Research Methods module into 3 parts, with the first delivered over the first three weeks , focussing intensively on academic writing , referencing and other academic skills so students have a good understanding from the outset of what academic conventions at Masters level look like. Small tasks are set with plenty of feedback at this stage.

Professional Body requirements

Courses in the department may lead to the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) and Chartered Management Institute (CMI) accredited status, and so assessment must align with their requirements. In the case of CMI, what they require is that the university maps its assessments against the professional body requirements, and the course teams are exploring ways of enabling any students wishing additionally to achieve CMI accreditation to have structured opportunities to produce any additional work required to satisfy these.

Feedback

The university operates a 3-week turnaround policy for feedback and the course team are experimenting with giving feedback electronically at Masters level using pre-prepared statement banks (as is already used extensively at undergraduate level), although some students have said they prefer a more personal touch. Students mainly receive detailed individual written feedback, and some tutors also offer generic feedback through the VLE. Additionally students can request further individual feedback if they feel they need it.

Students are not normally given feedback on drafts, but practice varies from tutor to tutor. Some staff encourage students to submit plans of work, so long as this is done in reasonable time to enable staff to talk them through them.

Staff are working to assure consistency on the amount of feedback given: currently some staff give extensive written feedback and others more curtailed comments. Sara is keen that they focus on feedback that is useful to the students and on what they will actually read.

Authentic assessment

There is currently discussion in the department about the extent to which essays and reports should be used, as there is a desire to align assignment forms to match the requirements of the students' employment contexts. There is a desire to balance the need to demonstrate academic capability with the wish to reflect the kinds of tasks students are likely to encounter in their own organisations. Sara and colleagues are interested in addressing issues of over assessment using traditional methods and moving from dissertations as merely academic tasks for post experience students towards consultancy models that are of demonstrable value to the students at work.

Currently the dissertations of Executive MBA students are termed Business Consultancy, and to achieve them students need a sponsor who will give them a real life project, the outcomes of which are presented to their management teams. The task involves not just writing about the problems encountered in the abstract but also about the consultancy process itself, and how the task maps onto their work situations in practice.

Quality Enhancement

The principal improvement to the full-time MSc being undertaken currently is a review of the way that group work is undertaken to ensure that there is always an appropriate mix of home and international students working on each group task. In the past, there were problems with students working in single nation groups, but now the tutors actively ensure that groups are mixed and rotated, with for example, students on Marketing programmes work in groups that involve both those with experience in the area and those with none.

Another topic under discussion relates to the group project presentations: there is now a greater emphasis on reflection on the processes involved in this assignment and on learning from the experience. Discussion also continues on the extent to which essays are a valuable component of the assessment diet; the current over emphasis on 3,000 word essays is being reviewed, exploring how best to bring out students' critical thinking, perhaps through different kinds of report which focus better on evidence of capability. Additionally the requirement to do an additional written task on top of the already demanding task of preparing and delivering a presentation is being considered.

The difference between assessment at Masters and undergraduate levels

Sara indicated that she considered this to be a continuum, with some undergraduate students currently achieving Masters level work. Primarily she suggested that major differences are around the requirement for Masters students to think strategically, and to be able to propose ideas that are actionable in real life, rather than just in theoretical contexts. She argued that their research recommendations shouldn't be naïve and should demonstrate a deep understanding of the real world.

Vignette [vi]: Debbie Casey, Liz Clark & Sunita Morris

Leeds Metropolitan University

Presentation at the Assimilate Conference, September 2012

The value of higher education for nurses has been the subject of considerable debate over last 30 year. Issues of contention centre around the relationship between education and patient outcomes and quality of care. There has even been a suggestion that education encourages nurses to disengage from caring in the “too posh to wash debate.” Debbie, Liz and Sunita in the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences contend that there is a strong relationship between robust clinical leadership and excellence in practice. Clinical leadership is clearly about demonstrating expertise in complex decision making. This includes making decisions utilising critical thinking and problem solving skills. Critical thinking and problem solving skills are recognised as key outcomes of Masters level study. The QAA assert that: “They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative, in complex and unpredictable professional environments” (QAA 2008). A debate around the issues raised by this was the focus of their conference presentation.

43. Michael Hall

Teesside University

Interview by Janice Priestley, case study prepared by Sally Brown

Michael is involved as a programme leader of the ‘MA Future Design’ which grew out of a programme ‘MA in Design’ at Teesside University. The course has been running for about 10 years, and staffing and award names and venues have all changed. The venue is now surrounded by research units and start-up young companies, and the University Fellowship scheme, all of which impact on the nature of the course, leading to a very professional environment which has the feel of a design-studio, and makes students feel that they are presenting to designers: the overall effect is a big influence on how work is presented for assessment.

Assessment

In-course assessment is the assessment format used in the programme, assessed formatively and then summatively at the end. The formative assessment is essentially an initial assessment of the same material, which is then revisited at the end as summative assessment. If students are in danger of not passing, they are told about this formatively, so they can improve their work. Michael suggested that the formative assessment stage is just something to inform the overall marking at the end of the programme. All assessment is individual, including on a module involving group work where students are again assessed individually. Assessment is a combination of written assessment and designs, which is part of the illustrated design project work. On the MA course there are only four modules which are assessed, two running concurrently in the early part of the course, but the assessments of these is carefully scheduled so students don't feel overburdened with assessment at this time.

Feedback

Students get continuous oral feedback throughout their studies in studios and in group work, but written feedback on the assignments is based on the students' performance against the learning outcomes, and notes are provided offering suggested improvements. Connections are made between students' own professions and the direction they are taking within their own work. In some cases, the complex language of learning outcomes has to be translated for the students in terms of ‘what will this mean to you?’. Michael explained that he tries

to let students know why they are doing particular things, as it is important that they have their own understanding of what they are expecting to achieve.

Face-to-face feedback occurs in studios, but is recorded if students have special needs requiring this to be done. They also use blogs and electronic conversations with students, who can get feedback on work in progress. There is one module involving group work, and within this module some self- and peer-evaluation goes on as well.

Good practice

At some sessions early on, students are talked through the assessment criteria and the processes of assessing their own work, and developing their own assessment criteria. In a big group, students write up on a board what they think is going to be important in the module that they're working on together. At the end of the module they judge how each of them has measured up to the criteria they identified. This helps them to understand the criteria which the course team use to assess their work. Students very efficiently present their work at short interim presentations about half-way through a module. For final presentations of work the team have two or three members of staff present, allowing fairly immediate decisions on the standard of work, and discussion between assessors. The assignment that is summatively assessed at the end is the one that has been submitted, and at this point the course team have to discount what they have seen along the way, and assess that which has been presented finally. Michael indicated that they sometimes know about aspects of the work that students have done in interim tasks, and ask students 'have you forgotten to put this in?' during the summative assessment process. They timetable the external examiner's visit so he can look at handed-in work, and only after that can the marks go to the assessment board.

Quality enhancement

At the time of the interview, the team were still refining the module using self- and peer-assessment, and were planning to help students to demonstrate higher levels of objectivity needed in these processes. In Design, Michael indicated that it is important for students to realise that in industry they will often get two or three things to do at once, and that he regards it as important to simulate that experience, at the same time encouraging students to make time to really concentrate on each task in hand.

Employability

Michael explained that they try to keep up with the industry expectation of design work, and so assessment is focussed on students' portfolios of work, and as the portfolios they exit with are their passports to employment, in this way industry dictates how they assess students. There is a diverse range of professional bodies that they have contact with, different bodies relating to different students in a wide range, but none make specific demands on the course requiring particular forms of assessment. The team emphasise that design is just one aspect of a broad area in cultural and creative industries, and Michael suggests that a strong emphasis on Enterprise encourages students to look for commercial and social enterprise opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities, where adaptability and flexibility are ever more important. One module called 'Professional skills and enterprise' brings assessment to bear on this, looking for evidence that students have identified professional and marketing aspects of their work. Michael expressed a wish to help students to get more experienced on the production side of their work, as design students are often involved in thinking through the ideas underpinning their work, but are not sufficiently engaged into the production issues that are vital to employers. The team aim to get students involved in live projects where there is something to be produced.

Evaluation

Students evaluate each module, and are generally positive, and the course gets good results in the National Student Survey. There is also a Programme Board at which students give feedback, including on any issues relating to assessment. The team gets to know the students as people, and they get to know the team, since there is plenty of human face-to-face contact throughout. 'The learning comes from the contacts with people' Michael suggested.

Differences between undergraduate and Masters level

Students understanding of what is expected of them at Masters level is something that the external examiner always addresses during his visits, when he talks to students, and students usually convince him that they have an understanding of what is expected at postgraduate level. Michael summarised what is expected at Masters level as being a greater level of autonomy, a more mature approach to research, and a broader and deeper approach to research, plus development of additional skills to those already established, in the specialist area.

44. Judith Kuit

Sunderland University

Interview by Richard Canham, case study prepared by Sally Brown

Introduction

This case study was based on an interview undertaken in 2011, when Judith was programme leader of the MA in Teaching in Higher Education for staff at Sunderland University, undertaken part-time over three years. It represents a snapshot of practice at that time. There was a Certificate Stage which was mandatory for new teaching staff, who could then do the optional Diploma stage in their second year, and then, if they wished, go on to the MA in their third year. All students were therefore part-time, and are lecturers or visiting lecturers at the university.

Cohort size varied from year to year, with from ten to twenty five participants each year, and some staff did it only because they have to, and others did it because they wanted to. When TQEF (Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding) was available to universities from HEFCE, the university tended to waive the fees for staff who wanted to do the programme. Later the team tended to have lower numbers on the programme, which was restricted to those staff who were required to do it. The module leader acted as a personal tutor and backed up staff individually as needed.

Assessment

All of the assignments were about applying the theory to their practice, so students used their own subject teaching as the research tool, and all assignments related to their individual practice. There were no exams, only coursework, and in the third year (the MA stage) there was a dissertation. Coursework was almost all in the form of written assignments. For example, for the assignment on student assessment, course participants did some research with students, such as using a questionnaire, and wrote that up as an assignment linking their work to the literature in the field. There were three assignments in each 30-credit module, and two modules in each year, so there were 13 assignments in all. The dissertation was worth 60 credits, so all the assignments were equally rated apart from the dissertation.

Feedback

This was provided on drafts where interim feedback was offered formatively once for each assignment, though not all students made use of this opportunity. Then written feedback comments were provided on the

submitted final version. Participants were not necessarily familiar with the various sorts of assignments used on the course, as the programme was based in Education, and for example, staff in the area of Maths might not be familiar with lengthy reflective writing, and sometimes struggled with it. There were different types of assignments, but all were written, and feedback from one assignment might have been relevant to the next, though this was not a direct intention. Generic feedback was not used, it was all individual.

Theoretically feedback was intended to be given within four weeks of the two deadlines in February and June, but academic staff couldn't always meet the deadlines, so it could take longer. Feedback in each case was at the end of the module (for all three assignments in that module), so there was little opportunity for feedback to impact on assignments within the module. Lots of staff left at the programme at Certificate level, and were not unduly concerned about the feedback at the end of this. The programme was block taught, with one module in September, with an assignment deadline in February, and the second module starting in January with an assignment deadline in June. For each module, all three assignments were submitted together. There was no group work.

Professional and Subject Body requirements

The relevant professional body was the Higher Education Academy, who were somewhat prescriptive about the content being assessed, for example Professional Values, but not prescriptive about how the content is assessed. This was different to other programmes, in Judith's experience, where some Professional bodies insist on the inclusion of exams. The programme was more about personal development, to which exams don't lend themselves well.

Assignments mapped well onto the participants work, which was a requirement for accreditation. There could nevertheless still be some problems, for example with science staff, who were confident in describing practice, but were reluctant to be sufficiently reflective. Some staff struggled with the subjective approach required, which would be something unfamiliar in their own disciplines.

Coordination of assessment across modules involved some organisation, as participants began the second module before submitting the three assignments on the first one. Some staff behaved similarly to students, and sought to get extensions and mitigation, sometimes for years. Judith believes that all of the things staff complain about concerning their students doing, they often did themselves! Some staff were also doing PhDs at the same time, and because of the mandatory element of this programme for new lecturers, staff sometimes were not given sufficient time off to do both.

Administrative issues

The most common issue related to mitigation, which resulted in a long 'tail' of students who had not completed the programme. Students could 'trail' year on year, and could submit assignments they did previously without penalty.

Good practice

The personalisation of the programme worked well, as assignments were not done in isolation but related directly to the participants own teaching experiences. For example the module on assessment got them to look at how well assessment was working in their own contexts, and they discussed views with colleagues and with students, which Judith argued does not tend to happen outside this sort of programme. Doing the assessment module made a positive difference to their own practice. The course team considered that exams would not work well on a programme of this type, so were not used.

Quality enhancement

At the time of the interview, the course team were reviewing an autobiographical element of the programme, which was not working particularly well. Exams were discontinued five or six years previously when the programme evolved from Cert Ed to Postgraduate level, and things became more authentic, reflective and more closely related to practice.

For further enhancement, Judith considered that the subjects of the assessment could be opened up more, perhaps something which enabled a cross-faculty approach could be introduced. Cross-fertilisation between disciplines could be valuable, she believed. Peer review tended to remain within the subject area, and much could be learned from peer observation involving staff in different subject areas she argued.

Evaluation

Feedback from course participants was usually very positive. Two issues came up in the year preceding the interview. Students found the assessments very useful in terms of their professional practice, and found that they changed their own views on assessment. They did not like electronic assessment, but did not explain why not. They did not like the block structure, and would have preferred to have something more regularly paced. They also did not like some of the things which were covered in the modules but which were not assessed, asking 'why have I done this then?'.
 They enjoyed finding out about formative assessment as some had not met this in their own disciplines. They liked the way the topics of the three assignments were all distinct and separate at the same time. They wanted more guidance in relation to the assessment itself, and did not understand the language of assessment at times. The assignments were just pass/fail, and some students would have found grading more motivating, a view backed up by the external examiner.

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The differences between undergraduate and Masters level assessment

Judith suggested that M-level assessment should be more critically evaluative and there should be a lot more independence in approaches to study, with data generation being undertaken by students themselves. In other contexts Masters level is about working at the forefront of a discipline, she suggested.

Vignette [vii]: Andrew Bell and Anthony Olomolaiye

Coventry University

Presentation at the Assimilate conference September 2012

Andrew and Anthony work on a Project Management module in the department of Engineering Management where there are currently 14 Master-Level courses and around 450 Post-Graduate students. The original assessment for the module was a 3000 word essay; however the requirement to return assessed work fast meant that the team moved to trialling various incremental assessment over the past 3 academic years including group projects, simulations, gateway events, software use, in-class tests, and presentations. Each year the teaching team reviewed the assessment techniques and refined how they could be improved for the forthcoming semester. The proportions of individual and group work also changed through the years. Advantages for the student include feedback on many smaller assessments over the duration of the semester. Assessment is more "bite-sized" and reflects real life employment tasks in the subject area. Assessments are also spread throughout the semester ensuring that there are no peaks. For staff, assessment marking load is spread over a longer period, and has a variety of content.

NATIONAL OVERVIEW A: Helene Marsh

James Cook University, Australia

Interviewer: Sally Brown

Background information about how Masters degrees are organised in Australia currently

Types of Masters programmes

Helene indicated that there are two main kinds of Masters in Australia, Taught (coursework) Masters and Research Masters. The government regards Research Masters as contributing to the creation of knowledge and hence are a public good, funded by the state for domestic students (mostly paid in arrears on completion of the programme, so there is an incentive to maximise completions). However, until recently, Taught Masters were regarded as principally a private good, since many were in professional disciplines like Accountancy and Law that lead to better employment prospects, so the costs largely fell to the student and could be offset against their tax.

Changes in recent years at the University of Melbourne where students now do generic undergraduate degrees and then specialise at Masters Level have led to some exceptions being made and places on such taught Masters being funded through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme. It is a matter of debate whether such an approach will be rolled out more widely. International students pay fees set by universities for both Taught and Research Masters programmes.

Research Masters

These are normally assessed by thesis and must have at least one examiner external to the university. Traditionally many of these examiners have been from outside Australia (now mostly from the US or UK; originally they were usually from England). Normally the thesis is examined without a viva, based on the text alone, upon which the external examiner is required to make a detailed written judgement. A modest fee is paid for this task. The supervisory team usually makes extensive comments on drafts of the thesis at the development stage and prior to submission there is frequently an internal viva. It is not uncommon for Masters Students to purchase editorial support for their theses and the Australian Council of Editing provides guidance on the boundaries of this work.

Students normally are expected to give a seminar on their research topic where they are publicly questioned (comparable to the public component of the oral exam used in the United States).

Under the Australian system, some universities offer Honours as an optional year after undergraduate studies, based on project work and this often used to then be topped up to a Masters by Research. The Research Masters is less used than previously, since most potential students nowadays register directly for a PhD, for which they need a First Class Honours undergraduate degree or equivalent. Another accepted route into Doctoral Studies is by having a Research Masters with excellent references or Course Work Masters with high research components or where there have been resultant publications.

Course Work Masters

Most of these are assessed fairly traditionally by exams and essays, sometimes with a Research Component normally in the form of a dissertation, which on this type of Masters is normally internally rather than externally assessed. Some students go on to publish outcomes of this research nevertheless.

Course work Masters are administered by Faculties and Helene suggested they are not as rigorously quality assured as Research Masters, which are normally administered by University Research Offices or increasingly by Graduate Schools.

Portfolios are commonly used as assessment instruments in Masters Programmes in the creative domain, including video and audio as well as text and image.

Professional Masters

This is a third type of Masters programme where students of say, Medicine, can get Masters level credit, although this is regarded as a contentious issue. The Australian Qualifications Framework provides important background information here.

National Overview B: Hetty Grunefeld

Utrecht University, Netherlands

Interview by Sally Brown

Background information about how Masters degrees are organised in the Netherlands currently

In the Netherlands, students pay annual fees on Masters programmes which for 2011-2012 was €1.713. From 2102 onwards, international students from outside Europe will pay much more: €14.280 (for Arts & Humanities programmes), €17.700 (for Science & Biomedical science) and €19.280 (for Medicine). Most students and their families pay the fees themselves: there may be some employers who help paying these fees, but not many. There are several types of Masters degree programmes at the research universities like Utrecht.

Taught Masters programmes

These last mostly one year. The entry requirement is completion of an appropriate undergraduate programme. Individual Masters programmes may require more specific knowledge or skills. Anyone with an undergraduate degree from a Dutch university can join at least one Masters programme without any further entry requirements, and that is guaranteed in the law.

Research Masters

These programmes last mostly two years. These programmes usually require a certain amount of credits in the specific subject. In Utrecht some programmes require that you belong to the top 10% of the graduating students in your programme, or have a Grade Point Average of 7 (on a scale 1-10) or higher.

Teacher training programmes

These programmes for teaching in Secondary Education last two years, one specializing in the subject to be taught, the other learning professional skills.

Universities of Applied Sciences (UforAS) in the Netherlands also offer Masters degree programmes. These are mostly part-time programmes, resulting in the achievement of a total of 60 European Credit Transfer points in a two year period. Entry requirements usually include an undergraduate degree from a university of Applied Sciences, plus some years of work experience, and/or being currently working in the subject field (e.g. Education Masters). Many students

continue at the same institution for higher degrees, but more and more students move to another city and another university for their Masters programmes. The University of Amsterdam, for example, is very popular with Masters students graduating with undergraduate degrees from elsewhere in the country.

Bologna implications

Masters degrees in the Netherlands fully align with the Bologna process. However, at research universities like Utrecht, most people regard an undergraduate degree as an insufficient qualification for a good position in the labour market – which was also a Bologna ambition. Employers seem also reluctant to hire undergraduates from Research universities without further qualifications, which may be a leftover from pre-Bologna times when university education was regarded as complete only with at least a 4-year programme. Universities in the Netherlands don't actually currently plan the undergraduate programme with good employability as a principal outcome.

Research and Taught Masters degrees are regarded as different from one another, but universities in the Netherlands have different definitions for 'Research Masters'. Most of these Research Masters are still taught programmes, but are focused on research skills, and include a variety of research projects. It is expected that students in Research Masters will go on to apply for PhD studentships, and in some cases a PhD project can be finished earlier as a result of having undertaken a prior Research Masters.

Students do not commonly do a Post Grad Cert, a Post Grad Diploma, and then top up to a Masters in the Netherlands, as few offer exit qualifications at these levels, although the Open University of the Netherlands offers certificates for completed modules that can be combined to obtain a Degree. Most students from Research universities will continue to do a Masters programme on graduation, whereas most students from UforASs will go into work directly after graduation, while some do continue to do a Masters degree at a research university. In professional disciplines like Education, practice is changing. The government has publicized opportunities in recent years for candidates to apply for funding of further studies towards (Research) Masters degrees for teachers with an undergraduate degree in teaching from a UforAS.

NATIONAL OVERVIEW C: Lone Krogh

Aalborg University, Denmark

Interview by Phil Race

Background information about how Masters degrees are organised in Denmark currently.

Lone provided an overview of Masters and Candidate Programmes at Aalborg University, which is principally a research university. There are Danish as well as international students. In Denmark they have 2 kinds of Masters programmes:

Candidate education

This follows the Bologna 3 + 2 + 3(PhD) model for undergraduate Masters and PhD, (with 60 European Credit Transfer points (ECTS) per year at undergraduate and Masters level); the last 3 PhD level years are undertaken by very few.

'Candidate education' is therefore the highest level in the Danish Higher Education System (other than the PhD degree). It is free for students to follow formal education in Denmark.

Masters education by part time study (half time)

These run over two years and amount to 60 ECTS point. To be admitted to the programme, students are required to have an education at Bachelor level and have at least two years of relevant work experience. This Masters education is the highest level offered within the so called 'parallel competence' system in Higher Education. Students pay a proportion of the fee themselves, and this is often financed by their employers.

Assessment

The assessment system consists of a final oral assessment, which is often based on written assignments or projects as well as written exams. At the oral exam, the individual student, the examiner and an internal or external examiner are present and this is the same in both types of programmes. Some innovations with exam formats are being developed currently.

Overview of assessment strategies

As mentioned above, Aalborg University offers Candidate and Masters programmes, which are Research-based. Students are assessed orally on projects individually, and oral exams are more widely used than in the UK: normally an oral exam lasts around 30 minutes and there are very often two examiners, one internal and one external. The majority of the mark is based on written work, but oral assessments can move the result up or down by one grade or so.

In addition, students are expected to undertake lots of coursework assessments, essays, assignments and lab work in sciences. Some disciplines include peer feedback, but this is not part of the measurement process. The students get supervision and feedback during the work with their projects.

Quality assurance

Since 2007 national regulations insist that students may not be assessed in groups and that only individual exams are allowed, although this is currently being reviewed. All exams in Denmark are public ones, which means that parents can if they wish attend to ensure they are happy with the process (although this is very seldom done however). Quality assurance is undertaken by national accreditation of the institution (ACE), by reviewing regulations and accepting new educational programmes. Evaluation of teaching has to be visible to the public, is quality controlled by the relevant Head of Department, and results of students evaluation are shown to external accreditation bodies.

Deans are responsible for compliance internally, but there are no national benchmarking requirements to comply with, other than overall regulations: learning outcomes for particular programmes have to be accepted by the accrediting institution. There are a range of professional bodies, which are independent of the government, but which may influence the government.

Aalborg is a university that is renowned for its Problem Based Learning approach, so students tend to demonstrate high levels of competences in their assessed work, due to the nature of their study approaches.

Potential enhancements

Lone herself would welcome a return to allowing students to be assessed in groups, since this seems appropriate for a problem-based approach and the question of alignment but if this were the case, she would make sure that the learning goals were very explicit for the students, and that assessment was done in a very professional way.

Student satisfaction

This varies across Candidate and Masters Programmes at Aalborg, and collection and analysis of data is at department level.

Most of the teachers on Masters programmes are researchers, and most of the teaching is more and less research based. Teachers' main interest tends very often to be research rather than teaching which is something many regard as something they 'have to do', although actually teaching makes up 50 % of their job. The main training in professional development the staff get is the 'Assistant Professors' programme which prepares them for teaching at university level. The University doesn't get money for students until they've passed their final exams, therefore teaching has to be good but this provides some problems in that funding comes into departments so late.

Students are present at study boards, where they can discuss problems and developments and there are also specific meetings within programme teams, where results of teacher evaluations can be discussed. These tend to be more focused after accreditation. If problems arise, these are firstly addressed by the study leader and if unresolved, they are addressed by the department head. Solutions to issues raised by dissatisfied students include sending people on pedagogic courses, having teaching observed by colleagues, and potentially some adjustment to the individual's teaching load. Responsibility for resolving such problems lies with the relevant Head of Department. However, satisfaction can depend on how students are asked the questions within an evaluation process.

Good practice

Through the project, the team has identified a number of features that we regard as indicative of good practice, which are exemplified in these case studies. These include:

- Offering highly authentic assignments, constructively aligned to programme outcomes;
- Having multiple assessments which build incrementally to final submission. This tends to offer more support to students than a single final dissertation;
- Offering plenty of feedback opportunities, giving students the chance to benefit from advice to improve performance;
- Using assignments that require teamwork and group activity as well as individual effort;
- Providing opportunities for peer engagement and peer feedback;
- Providing assignments that foster employability, since many students undertaking Masters programmes are aiming to enhance their career opportunities;
- Engaging employers in designing, undertaking or assessing assignments, providing incentives to students and also on occasions making direct links to potential future employers;
- Enhancing and supporting assessment through the uses of relevant technologies including using virtual learning environments, wikis and blogs.

In exploring assessment at this level, the project team identified a number of useful questions, derived from our experiences of good practice, for curriculum designers to ask themselves to enhance the authenticity and utility of assignments. We propose that you ask:

- Are students who may have been away from learning for some years, or have entered programmes from different national contexts where pedagogical paradigms are different, appropriately inducted into expectations around assessment in this particular learning environment?
- Are tasks closely aligned to the learning outcomes, so that there is a clear correlation between the knowledge and skills outlines in programme documentation and the assessed activities of students?

- Are the approaches and methods in use fit-for-purpose for the level and subject of study, and have they been systematically designed to promote student learning?
- Are assignments appropriately paced throughout the learning programme, with incremental opportunities available to enable students to enhance their performance as a result of guidance given, or are assignments end-point 'sudden death' activities giving few opportunities to address deficiencies and remediate failure?
- Are there plenty of opportunities for formative assessment, especially for students struggling to gauge the level of study?
- Is there excessive bunching of the assessment workload that is highly stressful for students and unmanageable for staff?
- Are students over-assessed, with multiple assignments for different modules? Are word counts for each assignment appropriate? Is word length used as a proxy for quality, complexity and level in criteria?
- Are programme level assignments included, enabling students to integrate knowledge and skills from across the whole programme?
- Are assignments uninspiring / tame / excessively traditional?

Conclusions

Good Masters curriculum and assessment design is important to enhance recruitment and success rates. From our research the project team would argue that authentic learning opportunities and assessment tasks are highly prized by students and that it is not just possible but imperative that course designers use a diverse variety of highly effective assessment methods to assess students at M-level. The project team have been impressed by the range and value of the diverse approaches to M-level assessment encountered and we trust that this compendium will be valuable to users.

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