



Effective assessment for the degree in social work

Notes of group discussions at event on 5.3.2010

- **What ingredients are needed to construct an effective assessment strategy?**
- **Notes of themed discussions:**
 - A: Ensuring the assignments test specified learning outcomes**
 - B: Assessing practice learning**
 - C: Specifying assessment criteria and grade descriptors**
 - D: Setting and maintaining standards**
- **Heads of Programme/Assessment Leads**
- **External Examiners Network Discussion**

What ingredients are needed to construct an effective assessment strategy?

1. Bear in mind our **duty of care to service users**
2. **Help students to learn from assessment**, which is a tool for development, using
 - tutorials
 - focussing on feedback methods and use (e.g. portable audio feedback; student reflection on feedback; student engagement – specify what feedback they need/want)
 - use synoptic assessment (across modules)
 - exciting assessment methods will produce exciting work
 - developmental process: how do get students into learning
 - need individual approach to constructing learning paths
 - note that students need *time* to reflect, learn independently etc
3. **Manage academic systems**
 - Importance of coherent oversight of programme LO development
 - Modules on programmes need to be better connected to evidence transfer of knowledge: importance of a coherent assessment strategy that links across 3 years and between modules
 - Modules/assessment reflecting skills required
 - Clarifying thresholds for achievement at MA/BA levels
 - Establish clear thresholds with clear evidence → different levels of programme
 - Look at thesholds between BA and MA
 - Sharing criteria about thresholds across Universities and/or regions
 - Validation processes can be unhelpful (e.g. credit rating)
 - Tension between HEI 'business' and values
 - Is the HE assessment 'system' relevant to SW? It should be challenged if necessary (e.g. Group Assessment Group grade may be an important component → links to team working)
 - Multiplicity of learning outcomes can confuse (over 200 in NOS/BMS etc)

4. Be prepared to fail students

- tension between value base & maintaining standards
- pass/fail academic v practice work

5. Look at 'academic' work/function/purpose and how this links to professional practice

- Personal Development portfolios linking into practice may be useful
- Integrating practice into all assessments
 - s/us, employers, PAs
 - HEIs not allowing s/u involvement in assessment (other than PAP)
- Independent role overseeing process
 - Inconsistency in EE role
 - System to oversee scrutiny
- Assessing PL
 - Diversity of criteria
 - Use of assessment grids
 - Importance of ongoing dialogue/debate
 - Consistent and robust marking of PL reports
 - Independent marking by both academic & PA
 - Academic credit needed for work based learning
 - Should contribute to final classification
 - Improvement in student approach to PL & producing report

Question: What will be the impact of the AYE in terms of assessing/ grading PL?

6. Work with stakeholders

- Need to meet the expectations of employers by building the confidence of students to link learning to practice, and be 'ready' to practice.
- Expectations at all 3 levels of the degree should be clear
- Consider the interface between HEIs and employers in specific areas (e.g. I.C.S. and computer use).
- Need to agree standard against which students to be measured at end of programme
- Is the curriculum sufficiently aligned to a job that can be emotionally demanding?
- Does assessment reflect the reality of services?
- Plan and manage service user involvement (e.g. via formative assessment). Their involvement can 'sharpen students understanding'.
- In Scotland partnerships were better maintained – more integrated model (also Wales) – much can be learnt from this. We need *involved* ownership of programmes in partnerships. In some places there are very tight links between LA's and programmes

7. Regulation

Regulators needs to set more explicit standards for EEs & PAs

8. Gatekeep entry requirements, focussing on

- a. Resilience
- b. More defined selection/recruitment procedures
- c. Clarify nature of previous experience required

9. On-going process of assessment and monitoring

- a. "Assessment starts at admission"
- b. Monitoring attendance – many saw links between poor attendance and low marks

10. Staffing issues for academics:

- Importance of leadership
- Induction of academic staff
- Quality of teaching staff on core modules
- Planned assessment CPD events for staff

Notes of themed discussions:

Group Discussion A: Ensuring the assignments test specified learning outcomes

- Useful to focus on Bigg's notions of (a) constructive alignment of assessment, teaching and learning outcomes and (b) the use of quality enhancement as opposed to quality assurance
- Share resources
- Move away from numerical grades
 - Feedback before grades (helps students take it in)
 - Promotes student engagement with feedback
 - Grade focussed & not seeing value of process of feedback
- Model different feedback methods
 - Oral feedback to detect plagiarism
 - Not just about hitting targets
- Effects of modularisation
 - Are there coherent programme LOs?
 - Need to pick up on students using same work in different modules
- Ongoing review of programme specifications & Learning Outcomes, linking to review of module Learning outcomes

Group Discussion B: Assessing practice learning

How do we currently assess PL?

- This varies across programmes/partnerships but generally includes written work, direct observation, portfolio of evidence.
- Some partnerships use a common assessment tool across different programmes
- Variable quality of reports from Practice Teachers (includes other terms in use e.g. practice assessor, educator, facilitator - differences of emphasis acknowledged).
- Some programmes require substantial written evidence from student.
- Assessment can be done jointly by the 'PL team' (student/PT/tutor) though usually tutor is less involved now. Tutors have an important role moderating across a wide range of placements, especially where PTs are not SW qualified.
- Use of link workers/on-site supervisors etc is more widespread - this can lead to student anxiety about who contributes to their assessment
- Second opinion/review processes operate differently. Robust procedures should be in place to review problematic/failing placements and are solution rather than blame focused.

A key question: are we looking primarily for quality or quantity of evidence? Student needs to demonstrate competent practice and produce evidence of this.

What might enhance the assessment process?

- Level descriptors for practice at levels 1, 2 and 3 for a passing/failing student are in use in some programmes. These relate to the NOS and include reflection and values. PTs (and students) are not always clear about criteria and what the language means eg 'critically evaluate'. Evidence indicators might be helpful, but would we want to use the NOS as standards?
- National Practice Curriculum? – more guidance is needed but it was felt that this should not be prescriptive.
- Harmonisation between HEIs requirements would be helpful. Differences between programme requirements can add to the PT's burden/work and discourage them from offering placements, e.g. a national (UK wide) portfolio
- Clarification of what we mean by 'suitability'. We need a more assertive, autonomous workforce. The 'suitability' of SW students was felt to be less of an issue in Scotland. How many HEIs have Fitness to Practice panels and what is their role?
- 'Practice Assessment Panels' are part of the assessment process in most HEIs and have an important role in looking at issues of quality in the provision of practice learning opportunities. The PAP membership should reflect the partnership i.e. academics and people from practice
- Strengthening the partnership between HEIs and employers. This was felt to be crucial in terms of quantity and quality of placements, as well as selection and assessment of students to ensure 'suitability'.
- More flexibility around the number of practice learning days. There was discussion about whether there could be scope to increase the number of PL days for those students that need it. There is already some flexibility in Scotland.

Key Points

- How do we assess PL at different levels?
- How do we assess reflective practice as well as skills and knowledge?
- Do we need a national PL curriculum and portfolio?
- What is the role of the NOS in setting standards for assessing students?
- Do we need common processes across all HEIs e.g. midpoint review, PAP?

Group Discussion C: Specifying assessment criteria and grade descriptors

Links to efficient and fair assessment, feedback and monitoring

- Assessment criteria are fundamentally based on the learning outcomes identified for the module which are in turn derived from the learning outcomes. But, there are problems in identifying general descriptors and level descriptors. There need to be progressive development thresholds for both academic work and practice skills.
- Often ‘weasel words’ such as “discuss”, “critically analyse” are used to specify level, but students do not understand these differences. Students need to be taught what these words mean and to practice and get feedback so that they can really develop an understanding of the differences.
- Assessment of practice skills should also be developmental. Students develop understanding and skills at different times. The example of how artists develop understanding and skills through constant practice and feedback was given. SW students need to understand what skills such as empathy feel like; they need to do it and feel it, not just read about it in a book. This links with development of reflective skills. First students learn to reflect *after* practice and this then leads to reflection *in* practice. This developmental and cyclical learning needs to be measured throughout the course at different levels; it is not just about ticking boxes.
- It is important to build in as many formative assessments as possible, although this can be resource intensive. The value of formative and diagnostic assignments right at the start of the course to get feedback prior to first assessment is essential. This is not just about identifying study needs, but introduces people to professional SW vocabulary and is particularly useful for career changers, overseas students and MA students from other disciplines.

Marking

- Tutors may have their own different interpretations of assessment criteria and descriptors; 2nd marking helps this but regular discussion is also important.
- Students needs clear feedback on how to develop to meet the criteria and perhaps some examples of how this should be done.
- Having too many grading criteria can lead to a tick box approach and sectionalised marking to ensure different elements are included, e.g. values, ADP. It is important to evaluate the evidence presented, not just tick the box. For example students often state that they have worked in an anti-discriminatory way, but give no evidence of **how** they have done this. The tick box approach does not encourage the production of a coherent piece of writing.
- Some HEIs are being pressured to reduce assessments. This has led to combining modules, producing bigger modules with more credits. This may lead to less but longer assignments in order to ensure that all the learning outcomes have been met, or the introduction of a 2 part assessment both parts of which have to be passed.

Different assessment methodologies

Multiple –choice

Some HEIs are being pushed to introduce multiple choice/online assessments which can be quickly processed. These work well as long as the questions are sophisticated enough to reduce the “chance” element. In some cases students may be asked to produce a short statement saying why they made a particular choice.

Exams

Many, but not all, some form of exams, open book, ‘time-constrained tests’, particularly common in testing of law. An example of an expanding case study taken over the 3 years to explore increasing depth of learning was given, and an example of an on-line test for child protection which has to be passed before preparation for assessed practice is confirmed.

Other methods

- Posters and group presentations
- Critiques of video tapes
- Assessed debates
- Role –plays including service users and/or other professionals

Involvement of service users and carers

The involvement of service users and carers in assessing practice (where problems with power/objectivity are experienced) but also assessing academic work varies. In some HEIs service users contribute a % of marks to the overall assessment mark (e.g. 40/ 50%)

Peer assessment

Peer assessment can be useful, but the timing and circumstances need to be carefully considered. For example the level of ability of the students to provide meaningful feedback varies. Often new students will focus only on the positives - but it does help to raise understanding of how assessment criteria are interpreted.

Key points

- Need to bring clarity to the assessment process
- Some use the same criteria for all assignments
- Focus on student engagement with/ownership of learning
- Need to consider employer/S U and carer roles

Group Discussion D: Setting and maintaining standards

1. Suitability – need to agree thresholds at different levels
2. Assessment for readiness for direct practice: variation in practice could be addressed (links to suitability issues)
3. Role of C.C.’s in providing feedback is important: they are beginning to formalize expectations
4. Graduates need to continue to develop
5. Should EEs be involved in the first assessed year in practice (with others)?
6. How can EE feedback to HEI be used to develop student’s capacity for learning?
7. Standards are an issue across HE & note QAA/UUK are exploring this

External Examiners Network Discussion

Key points:

- Being an EE is a variable experience, and very time consuming in relation to the (variable) fee offered.
- Getting to know the programme well can be a slow process.
- Not helpful to only compare the programme to your own programme – need to take a wider view.
- A checklist/triggers might be useful to accompany the SWAP/JUC-SWEC/CC EE Handbook. Find out as much as possible about the programme, using materials sent and ask for more info; try to work closely with the whole team and the other EE, read previous EE reports. It was recommended that there are overlapping of periods of office rather than new externals ending and starting at the same time, in order to preserve and share experience. In PQ programmes there is likely to be only 1 EE: need to speak to previous EE.
- The Handbook can help EEs ask appropriate questions, gather information, be aware of, what to sample etc
- It appears that the number of EEs based in practice is minimal, possibly related to the criteria that universities set in order to be appointed as an EE, and associated with the move away from the dual role of EE/Assessor role when the degree was introduced. The individual contracts and no common reporting to the care councils was seen as a deficit and a loss of a collective/common approach.
- Where there is a practice-based EE it is important to have an equal role – both looking at academic assignments and both should share the sampling of practice learning assessments and/or portfolios.
- Important to have a response from the programmes about specific points raised and ideally an action plan which is monitored, with reasons why recommendations have not been taken up.
- With the focus on individual contracts with universities and no common reporting format the EE role has become more localised/individualised. Some EE report formats are very brief. It is important to include points that are central to Social Work programmes (eg practice learning)
- Ask for the assessment strategy – is it clear, is there a holistic perspective?
- Procedures for sampling of work varies between programmes – varied experiences and expectations - not all EEs are automatically asked to look at all fails, all firsts, borderline work and a sample across the range – but this can end up as a very large sample. EEs should feel able to negotiate with the programme about the work they want to see. Not all are seeing first year work – this is particularly important when ‘readiness/safety to begin practice learning’ is assessed in this year of the programme.

Heads of Programme/Assessment Leads

The following points were discussed:

1. For programmes in England a 'dual' approach is needed – looking to improve current assessment strategies whilst thinking ahead to wholesale change/revalidation/re-approval in the light of changes from the Social Work Reform Board. It is expected that curriculum changes will be introduced from the 2012 intake, so revalidation in the year 2011-12.
2. HEI 'rulings' and 'norms about assessment can and should at times be challenged in the light of what is needed for social work/professional education. One person reported that the NMC requires 100% score in certain areas of the curriculum. One HEI reported that it had challenged a 'softer' approach from the central HEI on a case of plagiarism, where the SW department felt that this represented an issue of honesty and trust that was central to social work ethics.
3. Discussion of 'threshold' students (just scraping through all assignments) was discussed. The process has to be comparable with other honours degrees. Some programmes have a parallel award which does not confer the 'social work' degree, but a BA Hons in (for example) social welfare, which could be an exit route for students. One HEI has a marking criterion in place such that anything implying dangerous practice would automatically fail. A defining criterion for safe practice might be the ability to know when to ask for help/guidance. The question was asked as to whether there is a tension in their role for HEI staff, who have to take a developmental learning enhancement role with students, about making robust assessment decisions.

In relation to **external examiners**, they were considered to be *most helpful* when

- time was made to talk things over
- they acted as a critical friend
- they engaged with the life of the programme (e.g. come to lunch day before Exam Board and meet students/staff). Another programme gave EEs access to its VLE.

Some programmes already made the EE report available to students.

In summary, any actions that de-tokenise and integrate the role of the EE.

This is particularly important for programmes where the SW Exam Board is a small part of a much larger Board (e.g. with nursing/health programmes).

Conversely EEs were experienced as *less helpful* when:

- many references were made to their own programme, especially where these operated in a different context.
- EE reports were not well evidenced.

Where programmes have more than one EE there is a danger that they operate in separate spheres. There was a suggestion that having a Chief External Examiner might help, and/or requirements/expectations that they communicate. Many thought that the EEs should share examining some modules, in particular practice learning.