

LTSN Generic Centre

Assessment Series No 1



Assessment: A Guide for Senior Managers

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Generic Centre Guides and Briefings

Welcome to the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre's series of Assessment Guides and Briefings. They aim to provide a series of overviews of important issues and practices in the field of assessment for the higher education community.

The Assessment Guides are intended for colleagues with particular roles and for students, as their titles suggest. The Briefings are primarily intended for lecturers and other staff involved in supporting learning.

The Assessment Series is a snapshot of a field in which development is likely to be rapid, and will be supplemented by specific case studies produced by the LTSN Subject Centres.

The series was developed by Brenda Smith and Richard Blackwell of the LTSN Generic Centre with the support of Professor Mantz Yorke. Experts in the field were commissioned for each title to ensure that the series would be authoritative. Authors were invited to approach the issue in their own way and no attempt was made to impose a uniform template.

The series editors are grateful to colleagues in LTSN Subject Centres and other senior colleagues who refereed the series, and of course to the authors for enabling its publication.

We hope that you will enjoy the Assessment Series and find it interesting and thought-provoking. We welcome your feedback and any suggestions you may have for future work in the area of assessment.

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Leadership and the management of assessment

Summary

This paper addresses an aspect of higher education that has received little attention hitherto. In focusing on leadership in respect of assessment, a contrast is being made with management and administration (though the use of last two terms varies across the sector). Leadership is construed in terms of two main features – the envisioning of possibilities and the acquisition of sufficient support to bring about envisioned change. It is argued that the leader needs to go beyond ensuring routine compliance with external and internal regulatory frameworks to identify ways in which assessment practices might be developed.

Leadership in assessment is related in the first instance to a number of strategic questions that demand reflective analysis about how well assessment 'works' in the institution, and what might need to be done. The paper then considers a number of practical assessment-related issues which have a contemporary relevance – the pressures perceived by staff; the balance between formative and summative assessment, and its implications for learning and retention; the assessment of students with

disabilities; employability; computer-aided assessment; plagiarism; and (of less immediate relevance but looming nevertheless) the potential impact of the Bologna Declaration.

There are a number of technicalities regarding grading and degree award algorithms that are not well understood. These are discussed briefly in the text and the discussion is elaborated in an Appendix. Staff development is a key element in the development of assessment practice, but its functioning is multi-centred and hence implies a collaborative approach if it is to be maximally successful.

What this paper is about, and what it is not

This paper focuses on leadership in, and the management of, assessment rather than on assessment itself. Many higher education staff have leadership and/or managerial roles in respect of assessment – the pro vice chancellor responsible for academic affairs¹, the head of department and the examinations officer, to identify but three. It is for colleagues such as these that this paper has been written. However, most academics – at one time or another – have to operate in a managerial role in respect of assessments, even if at times some exert leadership (in proposing a new assessment method, for example) and/or deal with the administration of established procedures (such as those concerned with the invigilation of examinations). In addition, those with responsibilities for quality assurance and educational development need to be aware of the issues in order that they may contribute to institutional development.

This paper is not intended as a 'how to do it' manual for leadership in assessment, since institutional needs are too diverse for a short paper to provide adequate coverage. Rather, the intention is to offer to those in (or aspiring to) leadership roles regarding assessment some observations on issues which are emerging, or could emerge in the medium term, as important in higher education. The issues discussed in this paper are indicative rather than comprehensive – prompts for reflection and possible action rather than prescriptions.

Why focus on leadership and management?

Whilst there is now quite a range of books that deal with various practicalities regarding assessment², leadership and management in the field of assessment has received surprisingly little attention³. Three sources discuss leadership and management, albeit from varying viewpoints. S Brown and Knight (1994) commit a section of their book to 'Assessments and organisations', and Yorke (1998) discusses factors affecting the effectiveness of assessment processes in an educational environment in which attention is increasingly needed to ensure that what takes place is sufficiently robust to withstand scrutiny (which could be litigious). More recently, Knight and Trowler (2001) devote a chapter of their book on departmental leadership to 'Leading and assessment', and suggest a number of actions which departmental leaders might take. Many of these actions also have relevance for the leader at institutional level.

In recent times the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] has published a range of documents that bear on the assessment process: there are guidelines on programme specification, subject benchmark statements and a code of practice, all of which are having their influence on higher education. The QAA Code of Practice is, to a considerable extent, self-explanatory (though the section relating to postgraduate research programmes is less so), and concentrates on 'getting the systems right', but leaves open a number of assessment issues for which it would be inappropriate for the Agency to

¹ Institutions vary in the terms they use for post-holders, and duties are distributed differently amongst post-holders. Readers are asked to make translations appropriate to their own institutions

² Amongst these can be found S Brown and Knight (1994); S Brown and Glasner (1999); G Brown et al (1997); and Heywood (2000)

³ Books on leadership per se, such as Middlehurst (1993) and Ramsden (1998) deal with the topic in general terms and do not address specific issues.

construct specifications. The QAA documentation on benchmarks varies between subjects in the degree of detail regarding assessment, but focuses (in assessment terms) on the things that might be assessed rather than on systems for assessment or assessment methodology.

It is timely to stand back a little from the quotidian pressure of regulatory frameworks and to reflect on the implications of recent developments for the assessment system. The actual practice of assessment is too broad an issue to be contained within the bounds of a relatively short paper – and, anyway, other authors in this series are dealing with a number of aspects of practice.

Plato and Aristotle still hold considerable sway

In assessment, there is an often unacknowledged underlying tension between absolutism and relativism with respect to standards⁴. G Brown et al (1997, pp.253-4) trace this back to Greek philosophy and the tension between Plato's espousal of absolutism and Aristotle's relativism. For a long while, the honours degree in the UK was construed in Platonic terms within the higher education system (a 2.1 was a 2.1 wherever it was gained), even though the outside world overlaid this with a heavy relativism (a 2.1 from the University of Tradition was often deemed to be 'better' than a 2.1 from the former Shippingport Polytechnic). The external examiner was expected to be a guarantor of standards implicitly construed in Platonic terms, though in

practice very few externals had the width of experience (even when the university sector enrolled 6 per cent of the age-cohort) to offer a fully Platonic perspective.

Now we are less Platonic in our arguments about honours degrees, though the development of subject benchmark statements offers a kind of Platonic platform on which an Aristotelian superstructure can (and no doubt will) be erected. The balance in the role of the external examiner, particularly in modular schemes, is shifting in the direction of the appraisal of the systems through which standards are being defined and maintained – if there is a Platonism in existence here, then it is being exercised increasingly in respect of assessment *systems*⁵.

The QAA's approach to academic review is – on the face of it – distinctly Aristotelian, since judgements are intended to be made with reference to the institution's own aims and objectives. However, many academics believe that, and act as if, the QAA review process consists of a normative template – a view given reinforcement by the need to refer to the application of subject benchmark statements. This normative/Platonic perception makes it more difficult for leaders in an institution to be innovative (which implies taking risks). This is an undesirable by-product of external scrutiny at a time when the national competitiveness agenda is implicitly asking institutions to stimulate innovation.

The need to tack between Plato and Aristotle makes leadership and management in respect of assessment particularly challenging.

⁴ Cultural theorists would no doubt prefer a more thoroughgoing relativism than is represented in the contrast presented here, and would – as, say, Foucault – also wish to engage in an analysis of the underlying power relations. However, the aim here is restricted to drawing attention to the tension between absolutism and relativism in discussions of standards.

⁵ And less in respect of students' actual work.

Leadership, management, administration – and subsidiarity

The terms 'leadership', 'management' and 'administration' often get confused because of their overlapping nature (symbolised in Figure 1), but they have different implications for the assessment process. To add to the difficulty, the use of the terms varies between institutions. Hence readers of this section are asked to make whatever translations are appropriate to their own institutional circumstances.



Figure 1. The permeability of the boundaries between leadership, management and administration.

Leadership here is taken to refer particularly to the capacity to envision or pick up new possibilities and to inspire others to join in pursuing them. The emphasis is on the first of the four components of leadership identified by Ramsden (1998), which itself is a composite of vision, strategy and planning⁶. Management refers to the capacity to set up and ensure the correct functioning of systems to deliver the intended policy. Administration relates to the day-to-day operation of the system. There is a

loose correlation between these terms and position in any institutional hierarchy, but for example leadership behaviour is not confined to the upper echelon since anyone in the institution could have the imagination to suggest change and the skills to construct a coalition sufficient to see that change through to fulfilment.

A characteristic of higher education is the looseness of coupling between institutional organisational units. Whilst some institutions' structures may on paper appear to be rigidly hierarchical, in practice sub-units at any level typically enjoy a considerable amount of autonomy. That autonomy is constrained in two main ways. First, there are the external regulatory frameworks, such as the requirements of the QAA and of professional and statutory regulatory bodies. Second, there is institutional policy. The exercise of leadership and management in the institution is complex, in that it has to find a way of balancing the competing expectations of the external world, the institution and the desire for academic autonomy. The field of assessment is just one arena in which the tension has to be handled.

The management of the assessment system requires partnership. Few can hold the detail of a whole system in their heads, and success in managing the system is likely to depend on the extent to which those with responsibilities in respect of parts of the assessment process work constructively together. Whilst it is relatively easy to specify the components of an assessment system, and to ensure that in each

⁶ Ramsden (1998, p.132ff) identifies four components of effective leadership: vision, strategy and planning; enabling colleagues to achieve goals; recognising and developing colleagues' performance; and self-development.

the relevant precepts and expectations are taken into account, the need is for a 'meta-system' that ensures – often through working practices rather than through formally-written constitutions – that the various components work in harmony. Teamwork is more difficult to achieve in reality than in rhetoric.

Yet whilst there is a need for collegial coherence, institutional assessment processes typically embody a measure of subsidiarity – academic units often have considerable autonomy within an overall framework. The effective operation of the system requires that local autonomy does not compromise the system as a whole. An area in which autonomy is problematic is where an institution allows academic units to use more than one grading scheme: subject review panellists have tended not to be impressed where there is variety in approach to grading, and the issue is more acute when the institution operates a modular scheme – how, under such a liberal dispensation regarding grading, can claims for comparability be sustained? One institution has established a baseline of practice from which no departure is allowed: colleagues may introduce superior practice, but everyone is expected to work to the baseline requirements.

In some institutions the role of pro vice chancellor (or its equivalent) is clearly defined, but in others it is ambiguous. Middlehurst (1993, p.102ff) captures the ambiguity of this role in the universities that existed prior to 1992, noting that circumstances at that time were

pressing the PVC into an increasingly managerial position. The landscape of higher education has changed greatly since Middlehurst's study, and it is reasonably safe to suggest that the trend she identified has been given further momentum in respect of PVC-like roles across the spectrum of institutions.

There are three dangers. The first is that concentration on management may distract attention from leadership. Seeing that systems are structured and operating as they should is not an inconsiderable task, a former Prime Minister might say. This is a response to the question 'Are we doing things right?', but not to the bolder question 'Are we doing the right things?', which is where leadership comes in.

Secondly, the distinction between the role of senior manager and that of chair of an examination board may become blurred, with implications for accountability. There have been well-publicised occasions when a senior manager has taken a decision to lower a pass-mark for a set of students who had been disadvantaged by unexpected adverse institutional circumstances⁷. It has not always been clear whether these represented principled decisions of the academic bodies responsible or managerial fiats intended to deal quickly with a difficult issue. Whatever the case might be, the need for accountability requires that the action taken be defensible and procedurally correct, and hence that the protagonist has a clear appreciation of his or her role in the matter.

⁷ It is debatable whether lowering the pass-mark (or raising marks by, say, 5% all round) is defensible, since powerful argument to the contrary can be put forward. There is more to this kind of issue – which is one among a number in respect of which 'chair's action' may be invoked – than can be addressed in this paper.

Thirdly, danger is present when responsibilities are divided. If the academic portfolio is separated from the quality assurance portfolio, care needs to be taken to ensure that any relevant lessons derived from internal and external quality assurance activity feed back into *institutional* thinking about academic matters (they may be, routinely, fed back into departments and programmes). Joined-up action, as well as joined-up thinking.

Some strategic questions

At senior level in an institution, leadership in the field of assessment is concerned with the construction of responses to a number of strategic questions.

- Does the institutional policy or mission imply that its general approach to assessment should be changed? And, if so, in what way(s)?
- Are there any general institutional weaknesses in assessment (such as might have emerged from subject reviews or from internal reflection on practices and procedures) which need to be tackled?
- Since assessment is, by general consent, the least well understood and enacted aspect of curricula, what developmental activity needs to be instigated?
- In dealing with the preceding questions, is best use being made of existing expertise, both 'in-house' and from outside. And if not, why not?
- What, if anything, needs to be done to make the institutional system that surrounds assessment function effectively and be compliant with external expectations?

- How does the *institution* keep abreast of developments in assessment both nationally and internationally?
- How does the institution learn from its diverse experiences regarding assessment, and develop?⁸ (And how can this learning assist the development of *supra*-institutional systems, such as the regulatory framework constructed by the QAA?)

The list of questions is generic rather than specific to senior managers, since it can be rewritten in broadly similar terms for the department or the programme of study. An exception might be made for Bullet 5, since as one moves 'down' the institution the issue is probably more one of management than leadership.

The corresponding managerial questions are a little more prosaic, but no less important, and include the following.

- In the assessment system, are the responsibilities of relevant postholders defined; how well do these responsibilities interlock; and are there any 'holes' which could cause trouble?
- Are the assessment regulations watertight (and have no internal holes or contradictions)?
- Are the QAA Code of Practice and subject benchmark statements widely understood and taken into account within the institution, in so far as they refer to assessment?
- Are the duties of examination boards clearly delineated, and do they interlock (without 'gaps', unnecessary duplication or complications)?

⁸ One senior manager commented at this point that, in his experience, this was a noticeable weakness in the HE sector, despite its obvious importance. Opportunities were often missed to make internal comparisons, such as those relating to retention rates in different academic organisational units.

- Is the flow of information regarding assessment accurate, timely and appropriate to the task in hand? (This includes information to students and staff about assessments, and to examination boards. It will also encompass guidance regarding inter alia, plagiarism and arrangements for students with disabilities.)
- Does the external examiner system function properly (including action regarding points raised, and feedback to externals)?
- Does the system for student complaints and appeals regarding assessment function properly?

This list could have been extended considerably, but would have resulted in little more than a reproduction of Section 6 of the QAA Code of Practice ('Assessment of students') and the relevant parts of other Sections⁹. The QAA Code (which has been distilled from many managers' experience in higher education) contains helpful and important guidance for those who have managerial roles in higher education.

A consequence of the student's increasingly consumer-like role in higher education will surely be to demand increasing transparency in assessment – clarity in learning outcomes, assessment criteria, judgements against the criteria, and so on. The evolution of the student's role may – if pushed to the limit – increasingly involve litigation. One example illustrates the significance of the point. A

student raised over time a sequence of appeals regarding results. These were mainly upheld and appropriate resit opportunities provided. However, this student's honours degree classification was insufficient for the chosen career. The student appealed on the grounds of material irregularity, but despite a minor procedural irregularity the appeal was not upheld. The case eventually went to judicial review, where the plaintiff's claim was dismissed. Legal costs were estimated to be in excess of £30,000 – these being on top of the various unquantified opportunity costs associated with both the preceding appeals and the judicial review. No appeals system can be cost-free, but a good system can minimise an expenditure of effort and money that could with greater profit be directed elsewhere.

The QAA Code of Practice omits two things which, to be fair to it, were never intended to be covered. The first is the need for contingency planning and back-up systems. The ill-fated Apollo 13 astronauts would never have got back safely from the moon had there not been substantial back-up to the command module's primary mechanical systems. The wise manager is aware that, potentially, 'if it can go wrong, it will' and adopts the motto of the Scouts: 'Be prepared'.

The second omission relates to leadership in respect of assessment, towards which this paper now returns.

⁹ Those dealing with the following in particular: Student complaints and appeals; Students with disabilities; Postgraduate research programmes; External examining; Programme approval, monitoring and review. The Guidelines for programme specification and on the quality assurance of distance learning will also have relevance.

Some contemporary issues which could have implications for leadership

This section deals indicatively rather than comprehensively with a number of issues that leaders are already facing, or can be expected to face in the near future. The topics covered constitute a sample of the larger number that could have been listed, but all have been highlighted as of significance for the academic leader in contemporary higher education in the UK.

Pressure on staff

It is a truism to point to the increase in the academic's workload in recent years but, truism or not, the matter continues to cause concern¹⁰. In his companion paper, Chris Rust offers a number of ways in which the burden of assessment on academics could be reduced without reduction in the *quality* of assessment¹¹. There is little to be gained here by going over the detail of Rust's suggestions, which appear under the following six headings:

1. Front-ending (briefly, making clear at the start what is expected)
2. 'Do it in class'
3. Self- and peer-assessment
4. Group assessment
5. Mechanise the assessment
6. Strategic reduction (assessing economically but still validly: one approach is to cut out repetition; another is to identify where quick assessment methods such as multiple-choice tests could be used cost-effectively)

A very (arguably, *the most*) important point in Rust's paper is his emphasis on quality as opposed to quantity in assessment. Yet his suggestions are designed to fit the shape of the existing 'container' that is a curriculum in higher education. Suppose, instead, that the concern for quality in respect of the total student experience led to thoughts that the shape of the container could, with advantage, be made different. A strategic thinker might argue that, in the information age, much typically-lectured content can be obtained through hard-copy publishing and/or electronic media, and that anyway lecturing is not a particularly effective method for developing students' knowledge and understanding¹². Students would be likely to benefit more from a reduction in lecturing and an increase in the amount of formative feedback they receive on work. So the strategic issue can be construed as extending beyond the boundary defined by the word 'assessment' and, instead, as spilling over into the broader terrain of 'the student experience'. The challenge of reshaping curricula to a significant extent should not be underestimated, but unless the academy can find ways of 'working smarter, not harder' (as the BT ad once had it) within or beyond the confines of the existing container, the pressure on staff will relentlessly increase.

Formative and summative assessment

Another issue, not unrelated to the previous one, is the balance between formative and summative assessment in programmes. Assessment has three first order functions

¹⁰ Some comments on an earlier draft of this paper suggested that 'pressure on staff' should not be placed first. However, an empathic acknowledgement of the position in which others perceive themselves to be ('I appreciate how it is for you') is psychologically a useful point of departure when attempting to exercise leadership. For this reason, the original ordering has been retained.

¹¹ See Rust (2001).

¹² For a thoroughly researched justification of the point, see Bligh (1998).

(diagnosis, support for learning and certification of learning) and one second order function (for quality assurance purposes). The first order functions can themselves be subdivided according to whether they are aimed at the development of learning or at attesting to the performances of the students¹³. The introduction of semesterisation and modularisation has led to an increase in the amount of summative assessment and a corresponding decrease in the amount of formative assessment. The educationist's view is that feedback on performance is a necessary condition of learning, and so any reduction in the amount of formative assessment is likely to disadvantage the student. The recent moves in QAA thinking towards a focus on the programme (in programme specifications and subject benchmark statements) offer the prospect of a reopening of institutional policy regarding assessment, in which the formative could regain some of the ground that it has lost to the summative.

The issue is of particular importance in the first year of a full-time programme. Non-completion is higher in those institutions in which there is a high proportion of entrants who are 'mature' and who come from the lower socio-economic groups (see HEFCE, 1999; 2000). The correlations implicitly ask whether it is wise to face these types of student – or any student, for that matter – with summative assessments some three months after entry, since it may well take more time for them to come to terms with the different learning environment and expectations of higher education. A poor performance at the outset could be very

discouraging to a student who has a fragile self-confidence. Further, failure carries with it the burden of 'failing and trailing' study units, which adds extra pressure on those who are manifestly struggling – and for what purpose, since the first year is typically a qualifying year for an honours degree? In educational terms, early summative assessment is inimical to learning.

A shift towards more formative assessment has a number of implications beyond the learning of individual students. It would require other matters to be addressed, such as

- how to deal with the student who wants to terminate study of a topic at the end of the first semester, and gain credit;
- how to ensure equity when the same module is taught in both the first and the second semester, when assessment in the first semester is primarily formative;
- how to ensure that students do adequate work for formative assessments (given that pressures such as those relating to paid employment may lead to work perceived as 'non-essential' being left undone);
- how to ensure that formative assessment is maximally effective (a matter not only of ensuring that staff give good feedback but also that the student turns the feedback to good account).

Dealing with questions such as these is not merely technical adjustment, but could imply fundamental changes in approach that impact across the institution – and hence involves leadership.

¹³ Whilst these are sometimes reduced to formative and summative assessment, respectively, the boundary between the formative and the summative is blurred. Assessments whose primary purpose is formative may nevertheless count towards an award, and summative assessments can have a formative effect.

Students with disabilities

Recent legislation on Special Educational Needs and Disability¹⁴ gives force to expectations (already expressed in the QAA Code of Practice, Section 3) that students with disabilities should not be treated less favourably than those who do not have disabilities. Institutions are *required* to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to assessment practices such that students with disabilities have an equivalent opportunity to demonstrate their attainment of learning outcomes.

Whilst the policy is easy to state, its implementation demands thought and detailed planning. The companion paper by Hurst (2001) deals with the subject in some detail. From the point of view of leadership, there are a number of general matters to be considered (some of which relate in general to the presence in the institution of students with disabilities, rather than to assessment in particular).

- The development of a welcoming and supportive attitude across the institution. This includes raising the general level of awareness of the nature of disabilities and of the ways in which students can best be supported¹⁵. There is also an implication that programmes of professional development will include updating.

- Making maximally effective use of the monies made available to institutions for students with disabilities, and being able to justify this to any relevant auditing body, such as a funding council.
- Seeing that assessment expectations are appraised from the point of view of best educational practice, and that curricula are adjusted as appropriate, rather than simply expecting existing assessment requirements to be amended in order to cater for students with disabilities.
- Ensuring that reasonable adjustments are made to assessment procedures (as noted earlier), and that the reasonableness of the adjustments can be justified.

Employability

A third contemporary issue addressed here is the assessment of 'employability'. This is increasingly seen by government as a desirable outcome of higher education, though the performance indicator that is being used is whether a student gets a (any) job, rather than the more subtle and less definable index of whether the student has developed the qualities and skills necessary to succeed in a 'graduate job'¹⁶.

However, many of the dimensions of employability do not fit well into the modes of assessment that are typically applied to disciplinary study. Although a number of employability-related outcomes are mentioned in QAA subject benchmark statements¹⁷,

¹⁴ See www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.pdf. An annotated version of the Act can be found at www.student.city.ac.uk/~cx639/send2.htm and underpinning research by Ozcan Konur at www.student.city.ac.uk/~cx639/index.htm

¹⁵ The TECHDIS website will, as it develops, hold information and advice on assistive technology: www.techdis.ac.uk

¹⁶ Note that the National Qualifications Framework (QAA, 2001) refers to qualities and skills necessary for employment, which arguably go beyond the Dearing recommendations in respect of key and other skills (see NCHE, 1997, Recommendation 21).

¹⁷ See Yorke (2001) for an analysis of the first 22 subject benchmark statements, in which a fair proportion of the employability-related outcomes is picked up.

it is difficult to grade qualities such as initiative or skills such as working with others in the same way, and to the same level of accuracy, as subject-specific performances are graded¹⁸.

To deal satisfactorily with the assessment of employability seems to need a different approach to assessment that would entail changes to both procedures and practice. Yorke (1998a) argued, in the context of the broader construct of 'capability', that assessment should focus on the student's claim that he or she had met the criteria for the award under consideration, and not on trying to grade the various components of the student's performance (against which powerful arguments relating inter alia to validity, reliability, affordability and ethics can be levied).

The argument can be transferred to employability. The student could construct a portfolio of evidence that he or she had demonstrated adequate coverage of the facets of employability, and make a claim cross-referenced to it. Performance (in employability terms, especially) is context-related, and is difficult to pre-specify tightly. It is also multi-dimensional, as the 'Graduate Attributes Profile' (HEQC, 1997) demonstrates. Students will want to weight their claim according to their experiences and future desires – an intending research historian would accentuate different characteristics of employability from an intending sales executive or schoolteacher. The problem for the institution is that this approach does not fit well with current

approaches to assessment, whether or not the programme is modular in nature. The implications of a move in the suggested direction has obvious implications for academic and curricular leadership.

Computer-aided assessment

Some see computers as a way of diminishing the pressures of assessing large numbers of students. The speed with which computerised assessments can generate results offers the prospect of both effectiveness and efficiency. The use of computers in testing pushes the locus of effort to the front-end of the assessment process, whereas the effort associated with the traditional examination or coursework assignment tends to be concentrated on the marking of scripts.

Computer-aided assessment¹⁹ can be of particular value where there is little ambiguity regarding the correct answer, as is the case with scientific and technical subjects. Low-level items are relatively quick and straightforward to construct, as are plausible 'distractors' to the correct answer. This could be seen as a mechanisation of in-class testing: there is considerable potential here for fast, formative assessment within study-units, where the desire is to help students to discern whether or not they have learned the relevant subject matter. An additional consideration is, of course, what is to be provided to assist those students who are having difficulty.

¹⁸ One should not be too sanguine about the assessment of subject-specific performances, since this embeds a range of often unacknowledged assumptions relating aspects such as to the subject matter being assessed, the exercise of choice by the student, the technical quality of the grading scale, and the way that the grading scale is being used in practice.

¹⁹ The website of the Computer-aided Assessment Centre at www.caacentre.ac.uk holds bibliographic information which may be useful, though there are relatively few articles post-dating 1999. Bull and McKenna (2000) provide helpful guidance in respect of some managerial/administrative aspects of computer-assisted assessment as well as covering some basic ground relating to test item construction.

Where summative assessment is concerned, perhaps the biggest problem lies in the construction of an item-bank of appropriate size to allow various samples to be drawn from it in order that students may not become familiar with the contents (and, possibly, pass on their knowledge to others). For cost/benefit reasons, this is more likely to be a supra-institutional than an intra-institutional matter – but the widely held desire for academic freedom and autonomy might militate against the developmental activity that would be needed to construct an appropriate item bank.

For any kind of computerised assessment, the time needed to construct items increases sharply with the complexity of the educational demand. The effort/payoff ratio can easily increase to a point at which the exercise is simply not worthwhile, and other approaches become relatively more attractive.

Whilst cost/benefit analyses have to be undertaken in respect of introducing computerisation into the assessment process, there is a danger that this component of curriculum will be treated in isolation. Strategically, the need may well be for a more wide-ranging consideration of curriculum structure and implementation than a relatively narrow focus on one component would permit.

Plagiarism

In recent years, plagiarism has become an increasingly prominent issue in higher education that smudges into the broader area of cheating. Three significant contributing features to the increased prominence of plagiarism are probably

- the growth in student numbers in UK institutions (and the related rise in the student/staff ratio)
- the pressure on students' time as they balance their studies with the need to fund themselves through higher education by taking paid employment
- the increasing availability of material on the worldwide web.

Academic staff are in a less good position to know whether work is likely to be that of an individual student, since their opportunities for personal contact have been reduced. The unitisation of programmes tends to exacerbate the problem.

Some plagiarism is inadvertent – students do not always appreciate what is and what is not allowed. Conventions for school work differ, and what may have been accepted at school (such as non-attribution of sources) may not be approved in higher education: Ashworth et al (1997) provide evidence of student misunderstanding regarding cheating in general. Part of the problem may be due to conflicting signals given to students. As enterprise and employability have been given greater prominence in higher education, so expectations regarding collaborative working and teamwork have been raised. In some contexts, collaboration is promoted as a good



thing, in others it is condemned: are students given sufficient guidance regarding the context-dependence of potentially plagiaristic behaviour?

Other plagiarism is deliberate, but definitive data on its extent are, for obvious reasons, difficult to obtain. Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995) surveyed staff and student *perceptions* of cheating in two psychology departments, and found that a number of aspects of plagiarism were perceived as relatively non-serious. Of the plagiaristic behaviours that cannot be construed as inadvertent misdemeanours, the submission of work that is not the student's own – whether purchased from a former student or via the internet or copied from a peer – is probably the most important from the perspective of the institution being able to underwrite the awards it makes.

Software is beginning to become available that allows checks to be made on word-processed submissions²⁰. For example, chunks of material which have been downloaded from website providers and/or are stylistically different from the student's known work can be identified, as can material that is common to a number of student assignments. Regarding the latter, it was reported that in one module the tutor let it be known that student assignments would all be run through such software (in fact, the tutor concerned did not actually have the software to do what had been promised). That year, the results were noticeably lower than had previously been the case: did the threat of exposure cause greater scrupulousness on the

part of the students, or was it simply a cohort that was weaker than normal?

Leadership and management have two main facets that add to existing institutional regulations relating to, and procedures for dealing with, plagiarism and cheating:

- informing students about plagiarism, and establishing a climate across the institution which is discouraging to it
- establishing and implementing systems that increase the probability that plagiarism will be detected.

It is probably over-optimistic to expect that the promotion of a positive learning climate will be sufficient to reduce plagiarism to a significant extent. Changes to assessment practice could 'naturally' make plagiarism less likely – but these changes may have to be quite radical.

The European dimension

In 1999 the Education Ministers of the European Union signed the Bologna Declaration which refers to the adoption of 'a system of easily readable and comparable degrees' as one contribution to the economic development of the Union. Whilst this is not primarily an assessment matter, it does connect with assessment. Those who have been responsible for students on placements abroad, for international exchanges, and for internationally franchised or distance-learning programmes know that grading practices vary around the world, reflecting national cultures.

²⁰ See Utley (2000) who reports a JISC initiative to combat plagiarism. The JISC website covers this rapidly developing issue, and current material can be found at www.jisc.ac.uk/mle/plagiarism. There is useful material on plagiarism with some pointers to solutions on the ILT website www.ilt.ac.uk (search for 'plagiarism') and at www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/Interactions/vol4no2/evans.htm

²¹ The text of the 'Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education Convened in Bologna on the 19th June 1999' can be found electronically at www.med-net.nl/topics/news/bologna.htm

Some countries, such as the US and Italy, use grading schemes which result in grade distributions that are heavily skewed towards the upper end. This contrasts with typical UK practice, where the distribution of grades tends to peak at around 60% (or its grade-point equivalent). There are thus difficulties in translating results from one system to another, when expressions of standards have to be made in respect of the same student in two different public contexts. Not quite assessment, but nevertheless not unrelated to it, is the issue of the alignment of credit in respect of outcomes achieved in differing international milieux.

At the moment, the Bologna Declaration appears to have had relatively little impact on UK higher education, but it is something that will increase in significance as the decade unfolds (and the deadline for the implementation of the Declaration approaches).

Grading technicalities

There are a number of technical issues that are salient for institutional practice in assessment. These have been studied by the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group [SACWG] since its inception in 1994. SACWG's findings include the following.

- The use of a grading scale of some 16-20 points tends, at module level, to produce wider spreads of grades for predominantly discursive subjects such as English and Sociology than does a percentage scale. However, this difference seems to disappear at the level of the honours degree classification.

- The degree award algorithm chosen has an effect on honours degree classifications. Discussion of these issues can be found in Appendix 1.

The problem appears that rarely is there a clear rationale for the grading scale(s) and algorithm(s) that have been chosen. Some institutions have different grading scales in different subject areas. The sector in general knows relatively little about what honours degree algorithms are privileging, and why. Much practice in the area of grading appears to be based on tradition, with whatever thinking that originally underpinned this having become lost in the mists of time.

Higher education in the present day has to be more sensitive than it used to be regarding issues such as equity in the treatment of students. For instance, what is it about Law that produces proportionately far fewer first class honours degrees than Engineering? It seems highly doubtful that the variation can be pinned to variables such as the standards of the entrants, and/or to the quality of the teaching. One has to look at what is happening as regards assessment. In a modular scheme, equity in assessment comes to the fore in a way that it used not to do in the days of self-contained single-subject degrees (though it was always there, usually unacknowledged).



It seems likely that the application of leadership in questioning current assessment practice would unearth some tough challenges. Yet higher education cannot ignore a growing consumerist pressure (supported by government policy) to be able to justify its practices. It will probably be insufficient to rely on the argument from tradition or that from comparable institutions ('this is accepted practice'): peer review might have a homeostatic effect, in that the peers themselves may not appreciate all the complexities inherent in assessment. Leadership, therefore, has to prompt relevant parties into analysis, reflection and the construction of systems and practices on a foundation that is sufficiently sound for them to be justified convincingly.

No one should believe that assessment issues such as those noted above will be easy to resolve: they need effort, energy and no little skill. This is an area in which there is a clear need for further research and development on behalf of the sector.

However good the policies and ideas regarding assessment, the systems to make them work have to work themselves. This is where the management issues tend to be found. Key issues are being clear about who is responsible for what and about seeing that the assessment system is properly 'joined up'. This is the intention behind the QAA Code of Practice.

Staff development

Precept 13 of the QAA Code of Practice states as follows:

Institutions should ensure that all staff involved in the assessment of students are competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.

Institutions are adjured to consider how staff development can promote academics' expertise regarding assessment, and how administrators can be supported in their roles.

There is nothing contentious in the QAA's expectations. Any organisation worth its salt will ensure that its staff have the necessary understanding and skills to undertake their roles. The process of validation of programmes is a good vehicle for inducting new academics into what will be expected of them, and for refreshing the curricular expertise of the more experienced as new demands are made of higher education. Issues relating to the practice of teaching are sidestepped here (though there is much that can be said, as higher education evolves) since the focus of this paper is on assessment.

The problem with assessment is that everyone has been through it and has picked up approaches to it, often by osmosis. Everyone can thus claim 'to know about assessment', much as any member of the public can claim to know about education. Most academics have acquired approaches by observing what colleagues do – such as constructing explicit marking schemes for pieces of work or applying broader criteria where no preciseness of

expectation would be appropriate. Few, though, have a firm grounding in the theory and methodology of assessment, perhaps because expertise of this kind is thinly spread throughout higher education, with the exception of those colleagues who apply their expertise to the school arena. The Precept quoted above points to the need for institutions to consider whether the level of expertise regarding assessment is sufficient to meet the Precept's expectations.

There would appear to be plenty of scope for leadership. At a level below that of PVC, a course leader (in managerial mode) could organise an audit of assessment practice in his or her course in order to identify

- whether the assessments in practice do in fact marry with the intentions of the academic programme (of course they *should* do so if the programme has gone through a process of validation, but in the real world – as opposed to the ideal of programme documentation – things have a habit of slipping²²)
- how the assessments are being undertaken
- what needs to be done in order to secure that an assessment truly represents the student's own work (without a knee-jerk reaction back to formal examination practices)
- identifying what developmental activity might be needed in the light of the outcomes of the auditing.

The leadership aspect is to the fore when the course leader seeks to get colleagues to work on matters that are perhaps not uppermost in their list of priorities. The departmental head can

ask of course leaders a similar set of questions, with leadership again being particularly apparent when he or she seeks to instigate appropriate action. Where the PVC has managerial responsibility for staff development, the canvas is larger still – as is the scope for leadership. Where – as is typically the case – the PVC with responsibility for academic matters holds the staff development brief as well, the coherence of policy and practice regarding development in assessment should be high. Where the duties are divided, attention has to be given to ensuring that actions take place 'in sync'.

The same point applies to coherence between the academic and administrative dimensions of assessment, where responsibilities for development are likely to be divided. Whilst much of the two groups' work can be treated separately, there is a need to ensure that each understands what the other is seeking to achieve, the constraints that may apply, and what each will need from the other if the assessment process is to run well. It is at this interface that the potential for misalignment of expectations is likely to manifest itself. There must be clarity about 'who is responsible for what' in order to avoid shambolic happenings, such as the failure of an examinations office and an academic department to agree on which was responsible for arranging for a gymnasium to be laid out as an examinations hall. The result was that neither did. The students had to be sent away for a couple of hours whilst the room was readied for the examination²³.

²² For example, students can make strategic choices for or against particular kinds of assessment, and hence unbalance the collection of learning outcomes that they are expected to have attained. The world beyond the institution may not find out till too late. Higher education itself is not immune: one institution found out that its appointee to a lectureship in Business Studies had no expertise whatever in quantitative methods (which s/he had 'strategically' avoided through the exercise of choice).

²³ This (true) example is from Yorke (1998, p.112).

There is always a potential for disaster where an examinations office run as part of 'the administration' has to organise examinations with reference to the complexity of a modular scheme co-ordinated by a central academic facility. The examinations office needs to know the academic parameters, and the academic co-ordinators need to know what the constraints on the examinations office are, in order to eliminate the possibility of students being required to be in two different examinations at the same time, or of more students being needed to be accommodated than the examination hall can hold.

Staff development is vital – and, where the institution is working in partnership with other institutions (whose assessment traditions are quite likely to be very different), it is of critical importance if standards are to be sustained. The PVC (Academic) or equivalent often holds the staff development brief (at least, as far as academic staff are concerned), together with managerial responsibility for a staff development unit of some sort (although in a number of research-led universities this particular responsibility is lodged with the Registrar). The implication of the institutional learning and teaching strategies required by the funding councils is that staff development will have greater prominence than perhaps it had in the past. Yet staff development will not 'take off' unless it has the active encouragement of those with leadership roles within the institution. It is easy for, say, a PVC to pass everything across to a staff development unit and to tell it to 'get on with it' as far as assessment (and other

matters) are concerned – but that is not leadership. Issues which the QAA Code of Practice points towards, and where the PVC can exercise leadership (by working with other colleagues at PVC level as necessary, and with the head of the staff development unit²⁴) include

- developing the general level of understanding in the institution (and any partner institutions) about assessment
- developing technical expertise in assessment
- sharing good practice within the institution
- researching existing assessment practices
- exploring the implications for assessment of changes in expectations being laid on higher education
- examining the institutional assessment system in order to see whether any improvements may be needed (this point covers academic and administrative matters and those that bridge the academic and the administrative).

One important caveat. The arguments for the development – in various ways – of assessment capacity are, at root, about the development of a substantial component of quality in higher education. Quality is 'a slow-growing crop', and its succouring implies a longer-term view than the typical cycles of institutional activity tend to prompt. The need is for a sustained commitment to the developments seen to be necessary. Whilst some changes can be implemented quickly, those that are challenging to (sub-) institutional cultures are almost bound to take longer than one initially envisages.

²⁴ And, as appropriate, other postholders (academic and/or administrative) who have responsibilities for staff development.

Concluding comment

As a manager responsible for assessment matters, one will not go far wrong if one ensures that the institution follows the QAA Code of Practice, incorporates subject benchmark statements, complies with the requirements of professional and statutory regulatory bodies, makes sure that institutional systems function effectively, and so on. Things will be being done right.

The greater challenge is that of leadership. Assessment is a subject about which surprisingly little is understood, which adds to the difficulty. This paper has pointed to a number of issues that are of significance to today's higher education system. None admit of simple solutions. However, there is often intra-institutional expertise that can be drawn upon in dealing with the challenges. The capable leader

will have the confidence to make use of such expertise without feeling the need to become even more knowledgeable than those who already have it. After all, the conductor of an orchestra is not expected to be able to play all the instruments (though it helps if he or she is a good performer on at least one). The capable leader sees the bigger picture, and thinks about the possibility of doing things better, and even differently²⁵. He or she does not fall into the trap of dealing with one challenging issue in isolation: sorting out one problem can create other problems as a consequence (unitisation of assessments has had the effect of harming formative assessment, for instance). Doing the right thing requires not only doing the expedient and routine but also – as devotees of Star Trek might put it – a preparedness to boldly go into the institutional unknown.



²⁵ Doing things better matches Argyris's (1999) 'single-loop learning', whereas doing things differently maps on to 'double-loop learning' in which the initial 'givens' are subjected to challenge rather than passively accepted.

Appendix 1:

Some technical considerations

Institutions vary in the grading scales they use. The majority appear to use the percentage scale for marking, but a substantial minority use a grading scale which typically has between 16 and 20 points²⁶. Some institutions operate a 'mixed economy' as regards grading, with some academic units using percentages and others using grading – a practice that has attracted criticism in subject reviews. In a small number of instances, the grading scale is accompanied by grade descriptors which act as criteria for assessment. The rationale for the choice of scale often appears to be unclear, though the University of Derby is explicit in its intention that the grade descriptors it uses should assist assessors in the task of judging the standard of work.

Both the percentage and the grading scale approaches have problems that are not always appreciated. The percentage scale invites the question 'percentage of what?', and the astute student awarded, say, 67% can discomfit the assessor by asking 'what do I have to do to get the remaining 33%?'. If there is no precise mark scheme (which itself implies a sampling from the universe of possible responses to the assessment task), then the assessor could be struggling to provide a satisfactory answer (and the appeals process begins to edge nearer). The percentage scale is widely assumed to have the statistical properties of an interval scale – that is, one in which the intervals between neighbouring points are the same throughout the length of the scale. Reflection on the point reveals that the scale is probably closer to an ordinal scale (in which

performances are ranked, rather than measured against a ruler-like scale). In other words, the percentage scale does not have the mathematical properties to do everything the user might casually expect it to do – though this is often overlooked²⁷.

A similar argument applies to grading scales²⁸, but these at least seem not to suffer as much from the implicit presumptions of precision which underlie the percentage scale²⁹. The more obvious problem is that combining graded scores (as one might do with components of a module, for example) is difficult – especially when the scale is not of nominally equal intervals³⁰.

The percentage scale is used in different ways in different subject areas. At the level of the final award, and at the level of the grade given to the piece of work, there is evidence to show that the science-based subjects tend to use a wider range when awarding marks than do arts, humanities and social sciences (Yorke et al, 1996; 2000). At a time when courses were largely self-contained, the variation between subjects probably attracted little comment. Now that many programmes are modular, the discrepancies raise questions about equity – in a joint honours or a combined programme, for example, a subject with a wide spread of marks exerts more 'leverage' on a final assessment than does one with a narrow spread. Grading scales may mitigate these effects. SACWG has some limited evidence of a tendency for assessors in the arts, humanities and social sciences to use the more extreme

²⁶ For examples, see Bridges et al (1999).

²⁷ On this issue, see for example Dalziel (1998).

²⁸ A percentage scale is a special case of a grading scale, but is differentiated by additional – usually implicit – assumptions.

²⁹ It is quite likely that many assessors grade in terms of percentages before converting the percentage to the grading scale. This has the effect of blurring the distinction between the two approaches.

³⁰ The University of Derby's grading scheme uses smaller intervals in the middle of the scale and larger intervals at the ends.

grading categories to a greater extent than they would use percentages lower than roughly 30 or higher than about 75. One might expect this, since at the top end of the scale there is probably less reticence at awarding a mark close to 100% (perfection?) than at awarding an A+.

When one looks at Precept 2 in Section 6 of the QAA Code of Practice (and in particular the third bullet point³¹), it is apparent that there is scope for leadership in respect of the way that the chosen grading scale is used across an institution.

In work as yet unpublished, it appears that the differences in mark-spreads when grades are used rather than percentages does not extend to honours degree classifications. This directs attention towards the honours degree award algorithm – the set of rules whose application determines the award and (where relevant) its classification.

In early work SACWG ran specimen sets of module marks through a number of new university's award algorithms and found that up to 15 per cent of classifications might be different, depending on the algorithm³² (Woolf and Turner, 1997). Subsequently, the Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer [NUCCAT] showed that there was a considerable variation in the requirements that institutions had for determining the classification of an honours degree – for instance, the number of credits that a student could 'drop' from the algorithm varied between 0 and 80 out of a maximum of 360 (i.e. between 0 and 22 per cent of the total diet)³³.

The picture is further clouded by the tendency for institutions to back up an algorithm based on marks (typically a calculation of the mean percentage) with a second algorithm which is implemented for candidates near to the borderline between two honours degree classifications. This is usually a 'profile' algorithm in which, to be raised to the higher level, the borderline candidate has to have reached at least the higher of the two levels in X modules out of Y.

³¹ '... institutions will wish to consider [...] how to ensure that assessment is operated fairly within programmes, and that the principles for assessment are applied consistently across the institution ...'

³² This could not be done without being Procrustean with the mark data, since different institutions required different numbers of modules to count towards the award.

³³ See Armstrong et al (1998). The data are derived from p.15 and p.45, and refer to those cases in which a clear minimum expectation is provided. In addition, differing practices regarding condonement and compensation were found, which is a further complication. At least one institution has, in the light of the NUCCAT findings, reduced a high percentage of 'droppable' credit when classifying honours degrees.

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Note

Most websites mentioned in the text were accessed on 18 June 2001, the exceptions being the ILT and LTSN websites which were accessed on 25 July 2001.

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Mantz Yorke, 25 July 2001



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