



## Case study 1: Putting assessment at the heart of learning

### University of Glamorgan

#### What this case study covers

- **Subject, mode and level:** Cross-disciplinary with a focus on humanities and social sciences and the creative and cultural industries
- **Assessment topic:** Implementing a strategic vision for assessment
- **Technologies used:** Blackboard®; Facebook®; QuestionMark™ Perception™ assessment authoring and management system; Microsoft® Access®; Turnitin® assessment-management and plagiarism-checking tool

#### Background

During 2008–2009, two faculties at the University of Glamorgan – Humanities and Social Sciences and the Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries – took part in a one-year Change Academy project jointly sponsored and supported by the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation. The project, Putting Assessment at the Heart of Learning, aimed to embed assessment and feedback practice that was in line with the university's overall vision for learning, teaching and assessment.

Under the leadership of the university's Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), the project has been extended during the academic year 2009–2010 to three additional faculties – Business, Advanced Technology, and Health, Sports and Science – and to the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. Enhancing assessment and feedback throughout the university and its partner institutions is the long-term goal.

The Change Academy project has been informed by a university-wide commitment to blended learning. Blended learning is not viewed as a peripheral activity at the University of Glamorgan, rather as a springboard for enhancing curriculum design. The CELT team, which has responsibility for supporting the adoption of blended learning, has been able to draw on its wide experience of technology enhancement when helping academic staff to make changes in their approach to assessment and feedback.

#### Rationale

The University of Glamorgan's vision for assessment derives from its 2007–2012 strategy for learning, teaching and assessment, which identifies improved assessment as key to achieving more effective learning. The guiding principle is that assessment is as much a means of supporting learning as it is a measure of attainment: students who are engaged and inspired by their assignments are more likely to overcome challenges; students who receive prompt, meaningful feedback are more likely to improve. 'Assessment FOR learning' is how the university terms its vision for assessment, an approach which is now embedded in all university strategies, policies and projects that involve learning and teaching. Technology is recognised as having a key part to play in achieving the aims of the strategy.

The assessment FOR learning policy is also evident in the three objectives of the Change Academy project which addressed the efficiency as well as the effectiveness of assessment and feedback. The objectives were to:

- Improve the quality of the student experience, so that assessment helps to advance student learning
- Develop and implement a revised approach to curriculum design, placing assessment at the heart of learning
- Reduce assessment workload for tutors and students

In 2006–2007, before work commenced on the Change Academy project, research conducted by the CELT team into the structure of 4000 modules revealed a number of concerns about assessment and feedback. Analysis of the assessment load in 15 first-year courses, for example, showed striking differences from module to module – the number of assignments per module ranged between six and 29 assignments. Although the differences were explained in part by disciplinary requirements, the timing and design of assignments did not take into account either student or tutor workload. Students taking four or five different modules simultaneously could find that assignments came in ‘bunches’ – a light workload, or even no assignments at all, during the first semester was often followed by a heavy workload after Christmas.

Assessment formats also tended to be traditional; essays, closed book exams and lab reports predominated. Furthermore, students were unclear about how the assignments related to course outcomes and, because of timing issues, found it difficult to use feedback from previous assignments to improve their grades.

### **Transforming assessment practice**

Use of technology was not a predetermined outcome for the Change Academy project. However, a number of technologies have played a key role in the drive towards greater innovation, effectiveness and efficiency in assessment practice.

Although student representation on decision-making committees had been established for some time at the University of Glamorgan, technology enabled the wider student voice to be heard in the research leading up to the Change Academy project. Working closely with the Student Union’s Education Officer, the CELT team set up online surveys in QuestionMark Perception and a page on Facebook as well as holding face-to-face focus groups to gather information about students’ experience and expectations of assessment and feedback. These strategies enabled the students’ perspective on assessment to be more accurately represented, sometimes with surprising results. The university rule that assignments should be returned within 20 days, for example, was discovered to be less important to students than knowing *when* they would receive feedback – from the student point of view, an assignment needed to be returned promptly on the date specified, and before the start of the next assignment. Only then could they use feedback to improve their performance:

*‘What students want to know is when it [the assignment] is coming back and that it will be possible to use the feedback in their subsequent work. This is especially important to first-year students in their first term. Yet very often students’ assessment deadlines are bunched after the Christmas holidays. Both students and tutors then have a heavy workload and students are less likely to be able to use the feedback they receive to improve their performance in the next assignment.’ Alice Lau, Research Fellow in Assessment, CELT*

The research conducted by CELT for the Change Academy project opened up a debate, conducted online and in face-to-face sessions, about procedure as well as policy – for example, should a tutor give more detailed comments on weaker assignments or give equal time to all levels of achievement?

How much feedback should a student expect and what should the tutor focus on? Students stressed the importance of *meaningful* feedback and all students, including those at the top end of the mark range, wanted to know how they could improve further:

*'When you get it back and got a 2:1, say, all the feedback is positive, but if it's that good, why didn't I get 100%? I find that a real struggle. I've had that with a few [assignments]... it would be nice to know what I need to do to get a first.'* Student, University of Glamorgan

*'The comments I got did not validate the mark. I had 45%, and to get a mark that low, nearly a fail, I expected much more feedback than a few lines at the end of my essay!'* Student, University of Glamorgan

To embed changes indicated by the Change Academy project baseline research, CELT adopted a number of strategies. These included disseminating examples of good practice via the VLE, Blackboard, rather than focusing on weaknesses; providing tutors with small incentives for innovation; appointing faculty champions; and recognising even the smallest steps towards change. The strategies successfully nurtured the assessment FOR learning policy within the two faculties involved in the first stage of the Change Academy project, and effects were quickly felt elsewhere in the university. The project report highlights the following as particular achievements:

- Revitalised discussions on assessment and feedback throughout the university
- Capture of students' views of assessment
- Production of a handbook of good practice in assessment
- Changes to assessment strategies that have improved the student experience as confirmed by student surveys
- Increased capacity of management to implement change

As a result of student feedback, technology has been integrated into assessment redesigns to engage students' interest and align assessments more closely with the university's blended approach to curriculum delivery. Examples of technology-enhanced assignments include the creation of sharable digital resources in preparation for teaching practice (a credit-bearing assignment undertaken by students in the first term of an early-years education degree course) and digital story-telling involving online self-assessment and peer review (an assignment on an e-learning module taken by computing students).

But perhaps the most far-reaching innovation to come from the Change Academy project has been the assessment diary. In response to students' requests for more efficient assessment management, module leaders in psychology entered all scheduled assignments into an Access database to plot the peaks and troughs in workload that might be experienced with different combinations of modules. It became immediately clear when 'bunching' was likely to occur and assignments were rescheduled or redesigned to create a more regular and even workflow.

A database of information on assignments has clear advantages for any faculty delivering a modular programme and the assessment diary has since been adopted by all faculties at the University of Glamorgan. With a web-based front end developed in house, the diary is accessible from Blackboard and can be personalised by selecting modules from a drop-down menu, giving students and tutors clear, easily accessible information about when assignments are to be submitted and returned. While of value to all students, the assessment diary offers particular benefits to students who experience difficulties with personal organisation or memory.

## Lessons learnt

The Change Academy project has provided valuable insights into how assessment can become a driver of more effective learning. Research into the student perspective has revealed that assessment and feedback practice should include:

- Clear, specific and consistent communications about assessment criteria and submission dates
- A more evenly spread workload, enabling students to reflect on what has been learnt from previous assignments
- Flexibility and choice in assessment formats
- Provision of marked assignments as benchmarks
- Timely, detailed and clear feedback about how to improve, even when a 'good' grade is awarded
- One-to-one feedback from tutors. If this is not possible, timetabled feedback sessions and opportunities for peer feedback are valued. This provision could be offered online
- Seamless access from an online learning environment, such as a VLE, to all assessment-related information and tools, including the plagiarism detection software, Turnitin, assignment guidelines, a calendar of submission and return dates plus clear information about how to submit assignments

From a change management perspective, experience from the Change Academy project suggests that allowances should be made for emergent as well as anticipated change. As the most appropriate assessment strategies often emerge at the grass roots level, it is desirable that faculties, and even individual practitioners, should be able to determine what is best for their context. The approach of working faculty by faculty has been beneficial in this respect. This finding has particular relevance to the adoption of technologies which may have greater benefits in one subject discipline than another.

## Advantages gained

Although the Change Academy project started in a small way in two faculties, a tried and tested model for implementing change has emerged to inform subsequent stages of the project; the development of the assessment diary has helped the assessment burden to be more evenly distributed throughout the academic year, and a handbook of best practice capturing the most salient outcomes of the project is now available on the VLE, enabling innovative ideas and sharable approaches to be disseminated institution-wide. The CELT team has found that this method of identifying and sharing examples of best practice has raised the profile of enhanced assessment across the university:

*'It is important to acknowledge that even where there are problems, there is often good practice as well. But it's not always easy to recognise good practice in your own department. "It's just what we do," is often what people say, but this can limit understanding of what good practice is – and therefore the spread of the best ideas. The Change Academy project has set out to improve the way we share our best work.'* Norah Jones, Head of CELT, 2006-2009 and Change Academy Team Leader, 2008-2009

Creating a framework for change supported by robust channels of communication has been a further benefit from the Change Academy project. The management group structure for both the first and second stages of the project brings together the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic Development and Quality), Deans of Faculty and the Head of Staff Development, as well as the Head of CELT and student representatives. This model ensures that innovative practice can be owned at all levels before it is taken forward.

One of the most far-reaching gains, however, has been the status accorded to the 'student voice': the database of evidence on the student experience of assessment and feedback collected by the CELT team continues to challenge embedded practices and promote discussion institution-wide about how students' experience of assessment and feedback can be improved.

### Key points for effective practice

- **A top-down strategic vision for assessment needs to be combined with faculty-based approaches to change**
- **Learners' views on assessment and feedback provide a valuable evidence base from which to implement change**

### Learner perspective

*'It would be better if... there were different ways of assessing, rather than just all coursework and exams at the end... You do get quite enthusiastic about the first one or two, but when it gets to the fourth one, it does become so mundane and so dull. You just feel you're going through the motions of turning them out.'* Student, University of Glamorgan

*'Sometimes you just get comments such as "You write well". I want to know, "How do I write well?" Tell me. If I write well, why don't I write excellently? What don't I do right? We never get that feedback.'* Student, University of Glamorgan

### Tutor perspective

*'Only recently has it been made explicit in higher education what has long been established in the school sector, that assessment is a key part of the learning process. Assessment that merely counts rather than enhances performance is not worthy of the name.'* Haydn Blackey, Head of CELT, University of Glamorgan

### Further reading

JISC (2009) [Effective Assessment in a Digital Age](#), Voices on assessment and feedback p.21: Dr Phil Davies

Jones, N. (2009) [Putting assessment at the heart of learning](#), University of Glamorgan Change Academy Report

The Higher Education Change Academy, [Academy Connect – Issue 3 – Assessment and feedback](#)

### Key words

Assessment for learning, feedback, change management, Change Academy

### Links

[The Higher Education Academy](#)

[University of Glamorgan Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching \(CELT\)](#)

### Reflect and discuss

How might you use technology to involve students in decision making about assessment policy and practice in your context? Could technology support greater flexibility over the timing, format or design of assessments?

See also: Effective Assessment in a Digital Age video case studies, University of Bedfordshire, [Enhancing graduate attributes](#)