



Case study 3: Supporting the transition to degree-level study

Loughborough College

What this case study covers

- **Subject, mode and level:** Sports science at Foundation and Honours degree level
- **Assessment topic:** Inducting learners into the practices associated with learning and assessment of learning in higher education
- **Technologies:** Hot Potatoes™ quiz generation software; Mahara e-portfolio system; Moodle™; Quia Web quiz generation software; Turnitin® assessment management and plagiarism checking tool

Background

Loughborough College's sports courses range from BTEC introductory certificates and first diplomas to Foundation degrees and a Higher National Diploma (HND). A one-year top-up programme to BSc Honours level is available to students who have been successful in either of the two-year options – the HND or one of the Foundation degrees.

Many sports students combine a higher education course with professional training, work or family commitments, so flexible and part-time options are increasingly valued. Mature students who are already employed in the sports and leisure industry, for example, may be unable to commit to full-time study, while high-performing athletes who are attracted to the college for its training expertise and sports facilities need to fit study around their training programmes. Consequently, the college offers distance or blended learning options on some sports courses.

The Sports, Exercise and Fitness team at Loughborough College make full use of e-learning tools and technologies to lay the foundation for independent learning. All students have personal log-ins to LearnZone (the college's customised version of Moodle), which gives seamless access to learning resources and module guides and formative assessments. Students can also submit completed assignments through the assessment management and plagiarism checking tool, Turnitin, via a link embedded in LearnZone.

Rationale

Assessment drives learning in a number of ways: as well as measuring achievement in relation to learning objectives, assessment reinforces what learners need to know and/or be skilled in. Many learners who start out on a degree course, for example, have limited experience of the values and protocols of academic study. Assessment highlights for them the importance of new skills such as:

- Reflection (on own and others' performance)
- Research and information management
- Academic writing and referencing
- Management of collaborative group work

However, assessment must also capture learners' interest and motivate them to spend time and effort on challenging academic tasks. The National Union of Students' Principles of Effective Assessment

highlight how important it is for learners that credit-bearing assignments ‘have the capacity to inspire and motivate’ – for example, through the use of digital technologies.

With the support of the college’s ILT (information and learning technologies) team, the Sports, Exercise and Fitness team at Loughborough College has fully exploited the affordances of technology to encourage learners to engage with both the theoretical aspects of the discipline and the value systems associated with study in higher education.

Transforming assessment practice

Technology now plays a key part in establishing a culture of effective formative learning. During induction, students are introduced to the text-matching tool, Turnitin, and receive guidance on referencing skills and academic writing. The importance of academic integrity is then reinforced via the tutorial system in which the potential consequences of plagiarism and poor referencing practice are made clear. In addition, in the early stages of the Foundation degree courses, a 20-credit module, Personal, Professional and Academic Development, establishes the protocols associated with academic study.

Modules on the sports science degrees typically provide 10–12 weeks of lectures and seminars; however, not all of these take place face to face and, when a seminar is delivered remotely, interactive Hot Potatoes and Quia quizzes and peer-reviewed assignments provide assessed evidence of students’ independent learning. Sport specialists understand how important motivation is to success, so non-assessed online formative tests and games developed in Hot Potatoes and Quia are also offered to motivate students to monitor their own learning; the interactive, anytime anywhere nature of online formative assessments imparts a sense of control over the pace and timing of learning and helps build self-esteem. Peer assessment activities have also been introduced on the Foundation Degree in Sports Coaching to further develop students’ capacity for active, self-regulated learning.

All students on the degree courses submit their assignments online via the link to Turnitin embedded in LearnZone, and both marking and moderation take place in GradeBook in Turnitin. It is not general policy, however, that students see the reports generated by Turnitin following the submission of their assignments; students in the early stages of a degree course may find it difficult to interpret Turnitin reports accurately and personal tutors are considered the best judge of whether guidance, warning or disciplinary action is needed. Instead, tutors review their tutees’ Turnitin reports to check how well the principles of good academic practice that have been taught at induction and reinforced via the tutorial system are being applied. If necessary, tutors ask to see tutees on a one-to-one basis to require a higher standard of work. Turnitin has also proved highly competent in picking up similarities between individual pieces of work; copying from other students’ work is treated in the same way as any other form of academic misconduct.

A culture of sound academic practice has been well established on the sports science courses as a result of this ‘belt and braces’ approach to preparing students for study in higher education. External verifiers have confirmed that academic referencing on Loughborough College sports courses is of a high standard.

Technology-mediated approaches are also adding new dimensions to the design of assessments. One of the first assignments on the one-year Honours degree top-up programme requires students to reflect on experiences arising from an 80-hour work placement which can take place in the summer vacation before or during the final year of study. Students, who may be working as sports coaches or teachers, employees or managers in a sports centre or retail outlet, use the blogging tool in the Mahara e-portfolio system to explore links between their theoretical knowledge and the experience of work in the industry. The assignment is credit-bearing to communicate to students the importance of making these connections:

'We suggest to students that they use the summer months as a bridging period between the Foundation degree and the BSc top-up year. This is a time when even full-time students can get employment in the industry and they need to use that experience as a study opportunity. So we set an assignment of eight reflective blogs in Mahara on experiences in the workplace that are related to the content of their degree course. Students can upload evidence such as photos, video and audio files, but this assignment is chiefly designed to develop their theoretical and reflective skills, using real-world experiences as the springboard.' Lyndsey Welch, Lecturer and ILT Section Leader, Loughborough College

Tutors also exploit the potential in an e-portfolio system to create an online community which can perform several functions. Students are encouraged to use the blogging tool in Mahara to support one another when researching for the dissertation which forms a major part of the assessment structure of the Honours degree course. Emphasis is placed on active rather than passive uses of the tool to encourage an ethos of independent learning: students set up their own blog, invite others to join, and upload images and other digital resources to support one another in research activities. In a digital age, information-gathering is likely to involve resources such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, YouTube clips, online journals, newspaper articles and websites, and an electronic medium is essential for this purpose. However, the learning community supported by the e-portfolio system performs another vital role, that of helping students to integrate socially – especially important for those students who live off campus or who combine study with work, family or sports training commitments.

While there was some resistance initially to adopting an additional platform for learning (students who are already using the VLE to support their learning queried why they should use another tool with a different interface for some aspects of their learning), the use of the e-portfolio system is gaining ground.

Lessons learnt

Reliance on digital tools for teaching, learning and assessment creates the need for support and training for tutors and students. The IT skills of students still vary, and a cohort of students can include some highly competent learners and others who experience difficulties in using a range of new technologies. As there is no formal IT training for students or tutors, academic staff with ILT responsibility have absorbed requests for support in the use of tools such as Mahara and Turnitin. While this has added to their workload, a supportive, collegiate approach to disseminating IT skills has proved beneficial in a context in which student numbers range from around 150 on the three Foundation degree courses to approximately 80 on the one-year top-up BSc Honours in Applied Sports Science.

Advantages gained

Students on the sports courses at Loughborough College now have access to a range of tools and technologies to support learning and the assessment of learning, and the variety of approaches being deployed provides a challenging but motivational learning environment. Students have particularly appreciated the flexibility and privacy of online submission: whereas previously, a student might have been able to see the grades awarded to peers when collecting assignments from the departmental office, now marks recorded in Turnitin are only visible to the individual student and his or her tutor. Students are also more likely to return to the feedback they have been given: grades and feedback remain stored in the system and are not lost by the time of the next assignment.

For their part, once accustomed to marking assignments online, tutors have found the paperless system facilitated by Turnitin has markedly improved efficiency and security. The three chief benefits of the Turnitin system for tutors are: the instant availability of evidence of submission or non-submission; a record of the time of submission; and greater convenience and security – for example, when assignments are passed between markers during moderation and external verification. An additional unexpected gain has been that feedback given by one marker is visible to a second marker,

which has helped to standardise the amount and detail of feedback given to students by different tutors. The electronic storage of grades and feedback has also enabled course leaders to monitor student achievement levels, the timeliness of marking and the quality of feedback given to students.

Key points for effective practice

- **Technology has a key role to play in establishing a culture of self-regulated learning**
- **Technology-enabled approaches to assessment engage learners and encourage time to be spent on challenging tasks**

Learner perspective

'I like seeing my feedback online as it keeps it private and allows me to store it for future use without worrying about losing it.' Foundation degree student, Loughborough College

'Turnitin enables feedback to be accessed quickly and more easily, allowing me to see strengths and areas to work on readily, so I can make the changes needed to improve my next piece of work.' Foundation degree student, Loughborough College

Tutor perspective

'Turnitin has been of great support for me in my role as course leader of the HND in Sport and Exercise Science at Loughborough College. It allows student work to be stored centrally, making it easier for me to monitor student progress and eradicating the chances of work being lost or mislaid. Second marking can also be done online, so again we can have a central record of this which minimises paperwork. As all work, feedback and second marking is stored electronically, external verifiers can access it online which eradicates the need for reams of paperwork being stored in folders.' Hannah Dingley, HND Course Leader, Loughborough College

Further reading

JISC (2009) [Responding to Learners Pack](#)

National Union of Students (2009), Briefing: [Assessment Purposes and Practices](#)

QAA (2009) [Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience](#)

Richardson, D. (2003) [The transition to degree level study](#), The Higher Education Academy

Key words

Assessment for learning, academic integrity, plagiarism, learner engagement

Links

Loughborough College [Sport, Exercise and Fitness programmes](#)

Reflect and discuss

To what extent in your context do assessment-related practices help clarify course goals and standards for students?

See also: JISC research study [Learning Literacies for a Digital Age](#) (LLiDA)