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SOME NOTES ON THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION WITH RESPECT TO PLACEMENT LEARNING AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LEVELS OF STUDY

This paper sets out some of the precepts and principles that are seen to underpin the assessment of students in general and placement learning in particular within UK higher education. Author also identifies the differences seen to exist in UK higher education between «Masters» and «Honours» levels of study.

Within the UK an institution's course development procedures have to take note of a number of sets of documentation and provisions amongst the most important of these are:

- the National Framework for Education Qualifications for England Wales and Northern Ireland (NFHEQ) [1];
- the series of subject benchmark statements [40+ in total] that cover the disciplines and fields of study taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels [2];
- the suggestions published by QAA on the format of programme specifications [3];
- the Code of Practice for Higher Education [4];
- occupational Standards set down various professional groups. For example in Social Work by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) [5] or in Youth and Community Work by the National Youth Agency (NYA) [6].

Within the UK system it is the responsibility of an individual institution to interpret these documents and in particular the Code of Practice and National Framework in terms of its own teaching provision and curriculum both at undergraduate and post graduate levels. As a consequence the detail of the provision for assessment will vary between institutions as they each develop their own policies and responses. It is also the case that where the professional endorsement of a course is provided in addition to academic qualification, as for example in the case of Social work, or Youth and Community Work, the general provisions of those bodies charged with maintaining the relevant occupational standards will additionally have to be successfully incorporated into the design of a programme before it will be permitted to run.

This paper sets out some of the precepts and principles that are seen to underpin the assessment of students in general and placement learning in particular within UK Higher Education. Additionally it

seeks to identify the differences seen to exist in UK Higher Education between «Masters» and «Honours» levels of study. It draws heavily on the sections 6 and 9 of the United Kingdom National Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's Code of Practice for Higher Education and The National Framework for Higher education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in doing this.

Aims and types of assessment

In higher education, 'assessment' describes any processes that appraise an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills and there are many different forms of assessment, serving a variety of purposes.

Generally these can be seen to include:

- promoting student learning by providing the student with feedback, normally to help improve his/her performance;
- evaluating student knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills;
- providing a mark or grade that enables a student's performance to be established and the mark or grade may also be used to make progress decisions;
- enabling the public (including employers), and higher education providers, to know that an individual has attained an appropriate level of achievement that reflects the academic standards set by the awarding institution and agreed UK norms, including the frameworks for higher education qualifications. This may include demonstrating fitness to practise or meeting other professional requirements.

The way in which students are assessed fundamentally affects their learning. Good assessment practice is designed to ensure that, in order to pass the module or programme, students have to demon-

strate they have achieved the intended learning outcomes.

In order to test the wide range of intended learning outcomes that may be incorporated in a programme, diversity of assessment practice between and within different subjects is to be expected and welcomed. Within professionally endorsed courses students may be required to successfully demonstrate their capabilities, skills and achievements within each module of a programme.

Institutions are required to ensure students are aware of the purposes and implications of different assessment tasks, especially the opportunities provided for them to show the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme. Assessment is usually seen as being a mixture of the following:

1. **Diagnostic assessment** is used to show a student's preparedness for a module or programme and identifies, for the student and the teacher, any strengths and potential gaps in knowledge, understanding and skills expected at the start of the programme, or other possible problems. This might for example be conducted before a student embarks on a course or module and could form part of the interviewing and entry process.
2. **Formative assessment** has a developmental purpose and is designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and on how it can be improved and/or maintained. Reflective practice by students sometimes contributes to formative assessment. This typically takes place as the module or course is delivered.
3. **Summative/Synoptic assessment** is used to indicate the extent of a learner's success in meeting the assessment criteria used to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme. Synoptic assessment is used to encourage students to combine elements of their learning from different parts of a programme and to show their accumulated knowledge and understanding of a topic or subject area. A synoptic assessment normally enables students to show their ability to integrate and apply their skills, knowledge and understanding with breadth and depth in the subject. It can help to test a student's capability of applying the knowledge and understanding gained in one part of a programme to increase their understanding in other parts of the programme, or across the programme as a whole. This type of assessment typically takes place at the end of a course or module.

In practice it can be the case that an assessment may be designed to be both diagnostic and provide formative feedback.

Placement learning

Significant numbers of courses within UK Higher Education now provide opportunities for students to gain experience. Prior to graduating, of their intended work place or profession. Consequently «placement learning» has had an increased significance in terms of the student's experience of their course. A further consequence of this is that a section of the National Code of Practice in Higher Education has been devoted to specifying what is seen as «good practice» in terms of placement learning. Courses that incorporate placement based learning are expected to respond in terms of their own curriculum, policies and procedures and incorporate their own interpretation of what constitutes «good practice» into their programmes.

Within the Code of Practice for UK Higher Education an effective placement learning opportunity is seen as one in which

1. The aims and intended learning outcomes are clearly defined and understood by all parties.
2. The responsibilities of the higher education institution, placement provider and student are made explicit to all parties, [the responsibility for ensuring that a placement within a course provides adequate opportunities for the intended learning outcomes to be achieved typically rests with the higher education institution].

Placements can serve a variety of purposes. The intended learning outcomes from a placement may be highly specific, for example the development of practical skills and competencies that will be required for practice in professional or other employment; or they may be more general, for example the development of an understanding of the cultural or employment context of an organisation.

Practices between institutions as to how they discharge their responsibilities to ensure that placements provide appropriate learning opportunities will vary according to the nature of the placements. However it is generally accepted that in all cases these procedures should be clear and well documented. For example, in the case of student-negotiated placements, this is often done by providing a standard document that the placement provider and student could use to confirm that appropriate opportunities would be available to the student in the course of their placement.

The general approach advocated is that where the placement provides professional work experience, an emphasis should be placed on the partnership between the institution and the placement provider. The partnership should be one of mutual benefit that enables an institution and its students to have access to practical learning opportunities and enables a provider to be confident that access to competent and work-ready recruits will continue.

General principles

The Code of Practice identifies the characteristics that placement learning should include and effectively identifies what is considered to be good practice.

Where placement learning is an intended part of a programme of study, institutions should ensure that:

1. Their responsibilities for placement learning are clearly defined as well as those of the placement agency.
2. The intended learning outcomes of a placement contribute to the overall aims of the programme.
3. Any assessment of placement learning is part of a coherent assessment strategy when viewed in the context of the course as a whole.
4. Irrespective of what form placement learning takes, institutions need to consider the contribution that placement learning makes to the overall aims of the programme and the specific programme outcomes when they: a) design, approve, monitor and review the programme; b) design and implement the assessment strategy for the programme.

These considerations should be reflected in the information supplied to students, placement agencies and staff specifically in: the programme specification; the assessment guidelines; as well as the information and guidance for applicants, students and placement providers.

All Institutions have to consider and resolve issues around such questions as:

- How the assessment of placement learning will be covered by their arrangements for internal moderation and external examining?
- Whether the standards which are applied to any assessment of placement learning are consistent with available subject benchmarks and other relevant reference points, comparable institutions and, where appropriate, fulfil professional or regulatory body requirements?

Institutional policies and procedures

Institutions should have in place policies and procedures to ensure that their responsibilities for placement learning are met and that learning opportunities during a placement are appropriate.

In their policies and procedures on placement institutions should seek to ensure that they:

- define their procedures for securing, approving and allocating placements, including information on the consequences for students of a failure to secure or complete a placement;
- define their procedures and criteria for the approval of individual placement opportunities;

- consider and respond to any health and safety requirements;
- consider the requirements of relevant statutory regulatory, professional or funding bodies; and
- ensure there is clear information available about the allocation of placements where these involve collaborative agreements between institutions, employers and placement providers or students from more than one higher education institution (for example regional consortia).

The criteria to be used when approving placements should address placement providers' ability to:

- provide learning opportunities that enable the intended learning outcomes to be achieved;
- support students on placement;
- fulfil their responsibilities under health and safety legislation in the workplace, having regard to the level of skill and experience of placement students.

Institutions should be able to assure themselves that placement providers know what their responsibilities are during the period of placement learning.

Placement providers should be aware of their responsibilities for: the provision of learning opportunities; their role, where appropriate, in the assessment of students; the health and safety of students.

Institutions are required to ensure that their staff who are involved in placement learning are competent to fulfil their role. In meeting this precept institutions should consider the extent to which: institutional placement staff are competent to identify and develop placement opportunities; and the development needs of institutional placement staff are met.

Student responsibilities and rights

Prior to placements, institutions should ensure that students are made aware of their responsibilities and rights. Students should be aware of their responsibilities:

- as representatives of the institution; towards the placement provider and its customers, clients, patients, and employees;
- for managing their learning and professional relationships;
- for recording their progress and achievements; and for alerting the placement provider and institution to problems with the placement that might prevent the progress or satisfactory completion of the placement.

Students should also be made aware of their rights for example: to a safe placement environment or to be treated in accordance with applicable legislation.

Institutions are required to ensure that students are provided with appropriate guidance and support

in preparation for, during, and after their placements. They should consider providing guidance to students, developed whenever possible in consultation with placement providers, on:

- the support they provide to students and where the responsibility for securing a placement rests;
- appropriate induction to the placement environment, including health and safety information;
- any occupational health considerations or requirements;
- any legal or ethical considerations (for example client or patient confidentiality);
- the means of recording the achievement of specific learning outcomes and progress;
- organisational orientation and work expectations;
- the institutional support services that will remain available to students during placements;
- appropriate debriefing and reorientation upon a students' return to their institution from the field.

Monitoring and evaluation of placement learning opportunities

Institutions should monitor and review the effectiveness of their policies and procedures in securing effective placement learning opportunities. In implementing this, institutions should consider:

- encouraging placement supervisors and students to provide feedback on progress and communicate any concerns in a timely way to the institution;
- periodically reviewing the progress of students;
- using feedback from institutional placement staff, placement supervisors/mentors, external examiners and students;
- establishing procedures within which feedback on the quality and standards of the placement can be received and appropriate action taken where necessary;
- establishing formal and informal means of gathering feedback from placement providers about the placement arrangement.

Honours and Masters level descriptors

These are defined in the «National Framework for Higher Education Qualification» (NFHEQ) [1]. They consist of distinct descriptors which are seen to apply to all Honours and Masters programmes respectively and which reflect the capacities expected of graduates at particular levels.

It is the responsibility of an individual institution to devise programme aims and learning outcomes which reflect and operationalised these descriptors in the context of their particular curriculum. The success of the institution's interpretation of these

descriptors is tested through the validation of the programme and by periodic review by the National Quality Agency for HE and professional endorsing bodies.

As well as the Honours Degree and Masters Degree descriptors, descriptors have also been written within the NFHEQ for the first year of an undergraduate programme, Certificate in Higher education Level, two years study at undergraduate level (Diploma in Higher Education) and Doctoral level.

Honours degrees form the largest group of higher education qualifications. Typical courses last for three years (if taken full-time) and lead to a Bachelors degree with Honours, having a title such as Bachelor of Arts (BA(Hons)) or Bachelor of Science (BSc(Hons)).

The NFHEQ defines Honours level graduate as having developed «...an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the graduate will have also have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The graduate will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively. An Honours graduate should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances» [1].

Therefore in order for a student to be awarded an honours degree they will have to have demonstrated through their assessment:

- a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study or discipline(s), including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at or informed by the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline;
- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;
- conceptual understanding that enables the student to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems and use ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline;
- the ability too describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;
- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (e.g. refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline);
- an ability to apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, ex-

tend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;

- they can critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;
- they can communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

In addition with respect to employment students at Honours level are expected to show qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:

- the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts; and
- the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

Masters degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research, or a mixture of both.

Longer, research-based programmes often lead to the degree of MPhil. Most Masters courses last at least one year (if taken full-time), and are taken by persons with Honours degrees (or equivalent achievement). Professionally endorsed Masters courses tend to last longer. Also at this level are advanced short courses, often forming parts of Continuing Professional Development programmes, leading to Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas. (*Note: the MAs granted by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are not academic qualifications.*)

Within the context of the NFHEQ successful graduates from Masters programme will be seen to have undertaken study that «...will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems. They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative, in complex and unpredictable professional environments» [1].

Masters degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated through their assessment:

- a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice;

- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;
- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline;
- a conceptual understanding that enables the student to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline;
- shown an ability to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses;
- they can deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- they can demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level;
- they can continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.

In addition with respect to employment they will be seen to have the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:

- the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations;
- the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

Conclusion

Within UK higher education a significant amount of discretion lies with the institution and therefore with a programme as to how it will interpret the Code of Practice and NFHEQ in the context of its own curriculum and other relevant documentation. The general trend is, particularly where bodies concerned with protecting occupational standards are endorsing courses, for an increasing degree of communality to emerge in terms of for example the balance between placement based learning and institutionally based learning and also in the types of skills and learning outcomes students are expected to demonstrate in particular professions.

However given the relative autonomy of many institutions there still remains considerable variations nationally between institutions in the way the regulatory frameworks are interpreted at course level and so consequently the student experience of learning and of their course also varies significantly between institutions.

1. National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, January 2001 // Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. - Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI/default.asp>.
2. Subject benchmark statements // Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. - Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>.
3. Programme specifications // Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. - Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/default.asp>.
4. Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education // Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. - Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>.
5. Social Care Standards // General Social Care Council. - Available from: <http://www.gscc.org.uk/For+course+providers>.
6. The NYA Quality Mark // National Youth Agency. - Available from: <http://www.nya.org.uk>.

Морган Джон

**ДЕЯКІ МІРКУВАННЯ ЩОДО ОЦІНЮВАННЯ СТУДЕНТІВ
У БРИТАНСЬКІЙ ВИЩІЙ ШКОЛІ З ОГЛЯДУ НА ПРОХОДЖЕННЯ
ПРАКТИКИ ТА ВІДМІННОСТІ МІЖ РІВНЯМИ НАВЧАННЯ**

У цій статті визначено деякі ключові моменти та принципи, що обумовлюють оцінювання студентів під час навчання, зокрема проходження практики у британській вищій школі. Автором також розглядаються відмінності між різними рівнями навчання у британській системі вищої освіти.