

Enabling Policies to Support Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning in Irish Higher Education

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The National Forum's 2016-18 Enhancement Theme focused on Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning in Irish higher education (see National Forum, 2017a). In addition, a recent National Forum project focused on Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning (National Forum, 2018a). This *Forum Insight* draws on the findings from these two National Forum projects, to inform and encourage discussion around assessment policies in Irish higher education.

Considering assessment from a policy perspective in higher education

Most policies focused on assessment and feedback, also termed Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning, include issues related to reliability (such as consistency and accuracy) and validity (such as constructive alignment). In addition to these core concepts, through the National Forum's Assessment Enhancement Theme, the following principles of assessment were articulated which point to aspects of assessment that need a particular focus in national and institutional policies:

Assessment and feedback should empower students to become self-regulated learners.

Assessment and feedback should be clear and understandable by staff and students.

Decisions on assessment and feedback should be guided by a programme-level approach.

Assessment and feedback approaches should foster partnership between staff and students.

Students should experience a diverse range of assessment methods, including, where relevant, authentic and work-based assessments.

Assessment and feedback should be manageable for staff and students.

Assessment and feedback should be enhanced through staff engaging in related professional development, including engagement in scholarship in this area.

Assessment and feedback should be supported by enabling policies.

There has been a range of international and national policies that support some of these assessment principles (see National Forum, 2016). For example:

- The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) emphasise that institutions should ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students in an active role (European Commission, 2015).
- The HEA working group report, in particular, maintains that students as partners is key in moving beyond legal compliance to embed a culture of engagement throughout the institution (HEA, 2016). It also notes that institutions should embrace innovative learning techniques which incorporate the student as creator of their own learning.
- Whereas many policies highlight the importance of timely feedback to students (European Commission, 2015; QQI, 2016), there is also a recognition that students have a part to play in developing their own judgements to encourage a sense of autonomy in the learner (QQI, 2016) and to empower students in the learning process, e.g. the principles of universal design for learning (HEA, 2015).
- The Irish National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) highlights the expectation of learning at different levels and across different sectors, supporting more valid assessment approaches (QQI, 2017).
- The 2016 Irish Student Survey of Engagement report (ISSE) highlighted that students gain most when they invest time and energy in their learning and institutions and staff have key roles to play in providing an environment that both encourages and facilitates that engagement (ISSE, 2016).

Developing enabling policies for assessment in higher education

The National Forum's Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning project explored the idea of developing policies that are 'enabling' (National Forum, 2018a). A definition of what constitutes an enabling policy was constructed, as part of this project, through interviews with experts and staff across the sector. The agreed definition is as follows:

Enabling policies are those which are implementable, situated in practice and reflective of the higher education institution's priorities.

Accordingly, the ten criteria outlined for determining whether a policy is enabling are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 Criteria for determining if a policy is enabling (National Forum, 2018a)

In order for a policy to be deemed implementable it needs to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> clearly define the HEI's commitment to the policy area have an implementation plan be accompanied by policy instruments such as procedures, and clearly defined areas of responsibility
In order for a policy to be deemed situated in practice it needs to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be based on consultation have been tested at operational level facilitate innovation be routinely monitored and reviewed for effectiveness
In order for a policy to be deemed reflective of the HEI's priorities it needs to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be guided by the HEI's vision be in line with the HEI's strategic objectives allow the HEI to meet its legal obligations

Of the 101 policies reviewed during the enabling policies project, 25 policies focused on the term 'assessment' and/or the related areas of 'standards/plagiarism'. Overall, such policies met just under one third of the available enabling criteria (27%) and met a higher proportion of implementable criteria than criteria associated with being reflective of HEI priorities or situated in practice (see Figure 1).

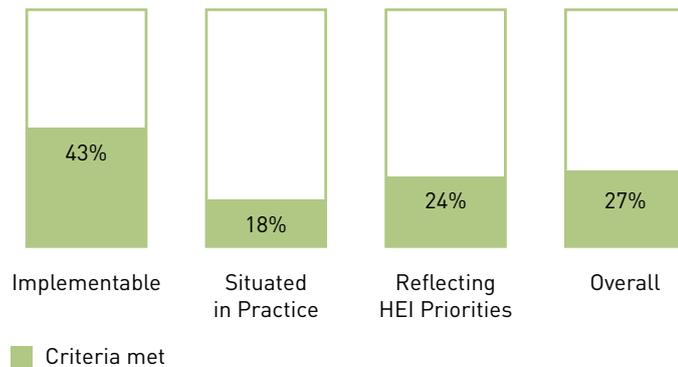


Figure 1 Proportion of types of enabling criteria met in assessment/standards/plagiarism policies (n = 25 policies)

Participants in the enabling policies project highlighted a number of concerns regarding technology-enabled assessment (TEA) that could be addressed through an enabling policy infrastructure. These included:

- Verifying the identity of students when a TEA is conducted at a distance
- Ensuring that distance and on-campus students experience similar appeals processes
- Having to rely on third-party vendors to retrieve assessments and information about assessments during time-critical periods
- Ensuring the overall security of information on third-party platforms
- Informal approaches to sharing of grading and feedback on students' assessments or other confidential assessment-related content
- Dealing with some lack of consistency in the use of platforms and applications

- A perceived lack of guidance and/or support for students, among some staff, especially in the area of e-portfolios
- A perception among some students of poor technical knowledge on the part of some teaching staff overseeing TEAs
- A perception among some students of a lack of IT infrastructure to support proposed TEAs
- An overestimation, reported by some staff, of the technical capabilities of students in some instances
- The desire of some students to use their own devices for assessment purposes

In response to the review of existing policies, and discussions with sectoral representatives, the National Forum has published an eight-step guide to developing enabling policies for digital teaching and learning (National Forum, 2018b). The eight steps are as follows:

Step 1: Reviewing current policy and practice within your institution

Step 2: Identifying gaps in current provision

Step 3: Stakeholder consultation

Step 4: Drafting an enabling policy

Step 5: (Re-)Evaluating – (Re-)Drafting Policy

Step 6: Policy approval

Step 7: Implementing policy

Step 8: Monitoring and reviewing for effectiveness

The National Forum enabling policy guide provides examples of questions suggested by the sector to be asked when developing enabling policies in specific topic areas, including technology-enabled assessment. Examples of how existing policies have responded to such questions are also provided.

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