



Commentary: Head of Department's Experience of Managing and Interrogating Programme-Level Assessment – Asking Questions

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Key insight:

The key task for a head of department is to ask questions about assessment - questions about student effort and learning and questions about staff effort and workload.

Working with students, programmes teams and lecturers as Head of Department meant supporting them in terms of assessment. I had a duty of care to students to ensure that their assessment was fair, consistent and worthwhile and a duty of care to staff to ensure that their workload was appropriate.

In doing so, it became evident that I needed an overview of the assessment of a programme. Students tend not to grasp their assessment workload. They aren't always sure how many assessment tasks they have at any one time. They aren't confident about the assignments they have submitted and can be confused about when they get results and/or feedback or both. Lecturers don't always see the assessment load that students have. Having a programme assessment strategy enabled me to develop an understanding of the student assessment experience.

Developing a programme assessment strategy (QQI, 2013) requires that programme teams ask and answer questions about assessment.

Some of the questions are:

- How many assignments do students have over the year?
- How long is needed between submission of student work and the issue of provisional results and feedback?
- What assessment methods assess the programme and module learning outcomes?
- What assessment methods do students experience over the whole programme?
- Over the course of a full programme, do students have enough/too many essays/projects/tests? How many essays (or other assessment methods) do students do in Year 1 (2, 3, as appropriate)?
- Is there over- or under-assessment? Are all the assignments/tests/projects/exams needed?
- How do the assessment methods link within and across modules?
- How does the assessment planned for a module meet the module learning outcomes? What does it contribute to the assessment of the programme learning outcomes?
- Where do students develop the academic referencing and writing skills needed for the programme? How are these assessed?
- How do assessments fit with the student effort hours per module? Have students time to read, to practice skills or to just think?
- Do students have time to prepare for exams?



A coherent team approach leads to practices that have a positive impact on students. Lecturers are aware of assignments, projects and other assessments across the programme. It can help manage assessment fashions – do students need four different reflective journals at any one time?

With a programme assessment strategy, programme teams work together to see how their assessments link from one module to the other over the duration of a programme. Lecturers do not make individual agreements with classes, they make decisions through consultation with both students and colleagues. When programme team members change, the programme team can support new team members with the programme assessment strategy and, hopefully, previous assessments.

Programme teams can be resistant to developing a programme assessment strategy, yet programme approaches to assessment support lecturers in developing their assessment.

As a head of department, questions that I asked were:

- Does the assessment assess the module learning outcomes?
How does it contribute to the assessment of the programme learning outcomes?
- Will the assignment give you reasonably accurate information?
How will you use the information?
How will students use the information?
- Is the assessment/assignment of value to the students?
Is it worthwhile?
Does it engage the students and/or you?
- Is it worth your time to mark/assess/grade it?
How long will it take you to assess?
Will you get it returned to students in the agreed time for the programme?
- When do you assess student work?
When you receive assignments from students, how do you manage your work?
Can you spend the working day on the assessment?

I think the key task for a head of department is asking questions about assessment. Questions about student effort and learning and questions about staff effort and workload challenge but they provide a means of interrogating assessment at a programme level; they help lecturers and programme teams make professional decisions about assessment and improve the quality of programme assessment and student learning.

References

QQI. (2013). *Assessment and standards*, revised 2013. Dublin: QQI. Retrieved from: https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Assessment_and_Standards%20Revised%202013.pdf