INNOVATION IN ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK: ENHANCING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: This study utilised TESTA (Transforming the experience of students through assessment) to examine assessment and feedback processes and practices within nursing and midwifery under graduate programmes of study at Edinburgh Napier University (UK). TESTA is a tried and tested process that uses validated tools and has been widely accepted by Higher Education Institutes worldwide. Three triangulated methodologies are used to gather data related to current assessment and feedback practice through an audit and the student voice is heard by means of a questionnaire and focus groups. The results of our TESTA approach demonstrated that students experienced mainly summative assessments and a wide range of assessment type yet failed to see the value of some forms of assessment. The findings also demonstrated that students were unclear about goals and standards expected of them and were dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of feedback they received. The study initiated a dialogue amongst staff and served as a catalyst for appropriate changes in assessment and feedback practice within the current programmes. Groups of staff worked on specific priorities within the data and the outcomes of this informed the design and development of a new curriculum.

Key Words: assessment, feedback, student experience, enhancement , innovation

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is central to student learning and known to be a powerful driver in determining what approach students will take to their study (Ball, Bew & Boxham et al, 2012), what they will do and how (Beaumont , O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011). Modules have become the building blocks of curricula and tend to be regarded as isolated units to be completed in turn, making it difficult for students to see the programme as a whole. The adoption of a great programme focus to assessment has been suggested as a possible way forward (Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet 2009; McDowell, 2012). Projects such as the PASS (Programme Assessment Strategies) project sought to focus assessment on programme level outcomes and aim for a more coherent design of assessment across different parts of a programme (Hartley & Whitfield, 2011).

Feedback is also a known concern with Higher Education (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon 2011) receiving persistently low satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey (UK) despite increasing efforts by lecturers to respond to this. The modular system has brought with it an increase in summative assessments and feedback is often received post submission and accompanied by a mark. Students tend to associate this with the completed module particularly if it is if focused on content and difficult to translate to future study.

Improving approaches to assessment and feedback is clearly a priority within Higher Education and a recent publication by the Higher Education Academy (UK) calls for a "radical reshaping "of assessment (Ball et al 2012, page 9). Within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Care at Edinburgh Napier University a project was undertaken to uncover what students were seeking in terms of assessment and feedback, and evaluate the assessment and feedback strategies within the Under Graduate programmes. To enable this, the TESTA (Transforming the Expedience of Students Through Assessment) methodology, developed at the University of Winchester, was employed as a pilot study to gauge practice across the programmes within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Care.

METHODS

Three under graduate nursing and midwifery programmes were included: Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Midwifery & Bachelor (Hons) of Veterinary Nursing. The TESTA methodology is based on three triangulated research methods including an audit of number, type, variety and timing of assessments. Quantity of feedback and proportion of exams is also calculated. The second method involves an Assessment Experience validated Questionnaire (AEQ) which uses a Likert scale and statements that relate to quality and distribution of effort, coverage of the syllabus, quality and quantity of feedback, use of feedback, appropriate of assessment, clear goals and standards, approach to assessment (deep and surface) and learning from exams, opportunities for assessment and feedback within clinical practice. 476 second and third year students participated. The third method used focus group interviews (n=7, sample = 36 students). A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used to allow for consistency of core questions (Jessop, El-Hakim & Gibbs, 2011). Focus groups with the students explored themes such as variety of assessment, understanding goals and standards and quality and quality of feedback. The discussions were recorded using digital equipment and professionally transcribed (Jessop, El-Hakim & Gibbs, 2011).
The project was subjected to ethical scrutiny by the Universities Ethics and Governance Committee

Analysis

Data from the programme audit and the AEQ were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences v 20. The researchers conducted descriptive tests including means, ranges and standard deviations for each variable, both split by programme and for the full data-set. Percentages were also calculated.
Appropriate statistical test were used to examine the relationships between different scales and the relationships between audit information (number of formative assessments, number of summative assessments, and variety of assessments) and AEQ.
Analysis was guided by Braun & Clerk's stages of thematic analysis (2006).An iterative approach was taken in which data and categories were systematically reviewed until the most commonly cited concepts were identified, and a logical and a clear pattern emerged. Categories and themes were validated by a second researcher.

Results and Findings

Demographic data
Age and gender
93% of participants were female. 43.1% were aged of 22-30 years, 28.4% were aged 17-21 and 31% were 31 years or older.

Audit results

TESTA defines formative assessment as assessment that is not marked but where feedback is given and is required by all students. Students experienced up to 28 mainly summative assessments over the 3 year programme which included a range of up to 17 different types of assessment. Nursing and midwifery students are also assessed in practice and the numbers of competencies varied across the programmes and field of practice. (See Table1).

Table 1 Assessment Practice

Programme	Assessment within University						Assessment in Practice	
	Number of Assessments			Variety of Assessments	Exam %	Academic writing %	Competencies to be achieved	Written tasks
	Total	Summative	Formative					
BN Nursing (4 different fields of practice-FoP) Mean number of assessments	25	25	0	13	17%	56%	800	56

Range of number of assessments across FoP	20-28	19-28	0-1	11-16	11-35	52-64	513-997	15-153
Vet Nursing Programme	33	33	0	15	24%	60%	N/A	N/A
Midwifery Programme	23	23	0	11	35%	52%	1415	0
TESTA 8 Universities Mean	**43**	N/A	N/A	**13**	**15%**	N/A	N/A	N/A
Range	**32-63**			**7-17**	**0-79%**			

The audit results demonstrated that students are over assessed, that assessments are mainly summative and that the quantity of written feedback varied significantly (between 20 and 503 words per assignment). This in turn raised questions around the quality and appropriateness of feedback on the basis that feedback should be a meaningful and helpful tool for students.

Questionnaire data is displayed in table 2

Table 2 Quantitative Data Gathered Through EAQ

Questions related to	Percentages
Quantity of effort	79.8% students reported that it was necessary to work consistently hard to meet the assessment requirements
Clarity of goals and standards	50.5% reported that it was easy to know the standard of work expected.
Quantity & quality of feedback received	54% students agreed/strongly agreed that they received sufficient feedback on their work 46.8% students agreed/strongly agreed that they understood feedback on their work 55.1% students agreed/strongly agreed that feedback on their work was timely
Use of feedback students received	The majority of students (84.7%) used the feedback they received to go back over what they had done in their work
Appropriateness of assessment	62% students reported that staff seemed to be more interested in testing what they had understood than what they memorised
Coverage of syllabus	58.8% students reported they had to study the entire syllabus to do well in assessment
Learning from the examinations	84.5% students learnt new things while preparing for the exams
Taking a deep approach to learning	87.5% students reported that they usually set out to understand thoroughly the meaning of what they were asked to read
Taking a surface approach to learning	44.5% students often found they had to study things without having a chance to really understand them
Opportunities to demonstrate the competence in clinical placement	45.5% reported that they has sufficient opportunities to demonstrate the required competencies
Quality of feedback within clinical practice	32.8% students reported that they received sufficient feedback on their work in clinical placement
Overall course satisfaction	78.9% felt satisfied with the quality of the course

The questionnaire data provided valuable insight into student's views and perceptions about assessment and feedback, including clarity of goals and standards, whether they use the feedback they receive, and perceived quantity of effort required to succeed in their assessments. The data also demonstrated that the clearer that students are in terms of the goals and standards expected of them, the more likely that are to engage in deep learning the more productively they used their feedback and the more satisfied they were with their programme of study.

The focus group themes and subthemes were as follows:
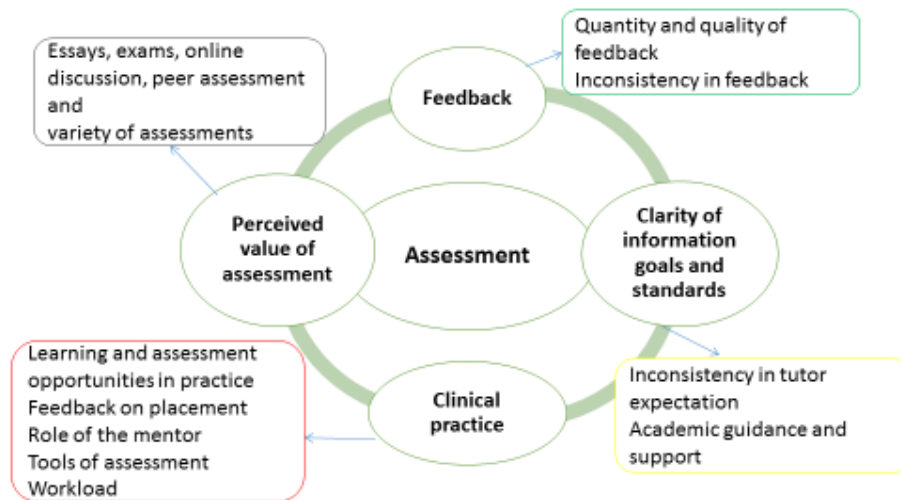
Diagram 1 Focus Groups Themes

The findings showed that students often struggled to understand what value specific types of assessment had in preparing them for professional practice

"I don't know if the essays really prepare you to be a nurse" Student

Students indicated that they were dissatisfied with the quality and quality of feedback they received and found that it could be contradictory and therefore confusing in terms of what is expected of them.

"I got 40 per cent and my feedback was minimal. And I'm thinking how can my mark be so low without a decent amount of feedback? " Student

"you're kind of like pulled and pushed. .. you're getting told one thing from like the module leader and then you go to the academic supervisor and they say no, no, ….." Student

The students also emphasised the importance of feedback within clinical practice, the key role that the mentor played in this, and anxiety arising from opportunities to demonstrate clinical competence.

"They're (mentors) are just trying to get their job done and sometimes forget that you want to have a learning opportunity" Student

"When I get feedback from my mentor. It kind of builds your confidence" Student

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research approach was to have a deeper understanding of the *actual* approach to and detail of assessment and feedback currently in the 3 curricula explored, and to gain an insight into the student experience in relation to assessment and feedback. Together the research data uncovered some key elements of the pedagogical design and student experience in relation to this.

It was evident from the data that use of summative assessment was excessive – as identified in Table 1. The audit clearly identified a lack of formative assessment which is known to be a key to deeper learning and to enhance understanding of goals and standards expected (Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet 2009). This lack of clarity was evident within the data (See student quote).

An over focus on a modular as opposed to a programme student experience was also evident in the data gathered. A consequence of this was that each module was seen in isolation and feedback received at the end of a module considered to be too late to be of value and irrelevant to subsequent modules. A finding shared by others (Jessop, El-Hakim & Gibbs 2014a).

Furthermore, the significant variation in volume of feedback from a student perspective was seen to be disappointing, potentially confusing and difficult to synthesise. (See student quote).

The collective data generated from the student survey and the focus groups, identified key areas for change. These included ensuring quality and quantity of feedback, clarifying expectations of learners and demonstrating the authenticity and purpose of assessment tasks within the learning process.

The data gathered initiated and facilitated a dialogue amongst academic staff with a view to working collaboratively to make significant and appropriate changes to the assessment strategies. The aim was to facilitate learning from the assessment process and to encourage an approach to feedback that enabled a deeper

understanding and effective learning process. In addition, the data provided a level of detail, particularly from students, with regards to manage their expectations in an academic environment.

One of the key advantages to this study, not identified in the TESTA process, was the opportunity taken to gather additional information about assessment from a clinical practice perspective. Within all the programmes reviewed, students spend a significant percentage of their time outwith the university in clinical practice, supported by mentors and with a requirement to be assessed in practice. Within our study, specific data was gathered in relation to this element of the student experience and again demonstrated a significant variation in expectations, learning opportunities and feedback within clinical practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the TESTA methodology uncovered vital information and insights about assessment and feedback practice, started a dialogue amongst staff (Jessop, El-Hakim &Gibbs, 2014 b), and has served as a catalyst for change within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Care at Edinburgh Napier University. Changes in practice are underway within module and programme teams to reduce the number of summative assessments, increase formative assignments and overall programme focus of assessment and work towards greater consistency in feedback for students. Groups of staff and students are working on priorities for change including, clarity of goals and standards, authenticity and communicating value of assessment and quality and quality of feedback. This work will be evaluated and learning used to inform the development of a new curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Universities' should work towards a greater programme focus for assessment and feedback.
- Strategies should be put in place to increase consistency in practice in terms of marking, guidance and feedback on students work.
- Assessment type should be stream lined to enable students to build on their learning and assessment skills, and more formative assessment introduced.
- Feedback should be intensified in year one and lessoned in subsequent years to facilitate increasingly independent and autonomous learning.

The process, challenges and outcomes of this project will be shared during the conference presentation

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