Types of Assessment

Introduction

The type of assessment selected should be carefully chosen to relate to the learning outcomes at module and programme level and should take into account the principles of validity and clarity of purpose.

Students each have an individual learning style and react differently to forms of assessment. It is therefore important to ensure an appropriate degree of variety in assessment so that the level of disadvantage which may result from a narrow range of assessment is minimised.

The following types of assessment can be considered. The paragraphs that follow indicate a range of potential types of assessment and suggest situations in which they could most usefully be utilised. This list is not intended to be either comprehensive or exclusive.

- Essay
- Oral Presentations
- Dissertations and Projects
- Performances
- Laboratory Work
- Assessing Practical Skills
- Group Work
- Vivas/Oral Presentations
- Examinations
- Other Types of Assessment

Essay

The objective of an assessed essay is to test the student's ability to discuss, evaluate, analyse, summarise and criticise. The problem is that students too often think in terms of content not structure: they think an essay is a list of what they know about a topic. They do not conceive of an essay as an argument in support of a thesis. They need explicit guidance to move them towards thinking of essays as a structure of concepts such as introduction, problem, statement, context, definition of key terms, review of argument, internal summaries, integrative cross references. They need to understand that a wide-ranging reading of conflicting sources is required. Equally they need to reconceptualise the meaning of critical: too often they think it means negative rather than an informed opinion based on evidence so that they demonstrate a thorough understanding.

The danger with essays as a method is that they are easy to plagiarise and undue weight can be given to criteria such as style, handwriting and grammar.

Staff need to be clear about their criteria for marking essays and offer guidance about good practice in writing.

Oral Presentations

An assessed presentation is one of the best ways of assessing verbal key skills. It may also assess interaction skills. The following issues may help to get the best out of such activities:

- Involve students in negotiating the criteria for assessment;
- Make the criteria for assessment of presentations clear at the beginning;
- Work out with students the weightings of the aspects within the criteria;
- Let students have an unassessed rehearsal;
- Involve students in peer assessment of one another's presentations;
- Keep the length and scope time limited to prevent boredom or unnecessary escalation of effort;

- Choose a venue that isn't too intimidating: videotaping presentations can be useful feedback and allow external examiners to monitor performance;
- Check what other presentations students may be doing: avoid overkill.

It is important to recognise the possible limits or disadvantages for students presenting in a language that is not their first language, and the communication difficulties that may result from some disabilities.

Dissertations and Projects
Most programmes involve a substantial piece of writing following an investigation or piece of research. The following suggestions may be helpful in planning this type of work:

- Are the assessment criteria clear, explicit and made known to students?
- Give students access to past examples of work for guidance and information;
- Are there opportunities for students to receive formative feedback on their progress at appropriate times?
- Decide on whether a Faculty needs a policy on guidance and support to students: how much contact time are they entitled to? Do Faculties offer generic teaching or run workshops with students exchanging experience and helping one another?
- It is important that both students and staff are fully aware of their responsibilities in relation to the conduct of the work, the time management of the work, and the degree of support and guidance to be offered. In this way, there should be consistency of practice in the supervision of projects.
- Do students have equal opportunities in selecting their dissertation themes? What mechanisms are employed to ensure equity of projects available to students, and that a wide range of projects are available?
- Do all students have equal access to the data, equipment and other materials needed to undertake the work?
- Students should complete a risk assessment before embarking on a dissertation or project.

Performances
Where an element of performance is an integral part of the assessment, establishing criteria for assessment is extremely challenging but the following ideas may be helpful:

- Criteria need to assess the essence of the performance and not focus narrowly on the measurable elements;
- Work alongside colleagues and learn from how they evaluate;
- Ensure that the evidence of the elements of performance is recorded for moderation;
- Build in an incremental approach over time;
- Get students to record a log of how they prepare for performance so they can reflect back;
- Build in peer assessment and use audiences to contribute to assessment;
- Minimise competition and be alive to the stress on candidates.

Laboratory Work
- Give students clear guidance about the format of reports with generic section headings;
- Get students to assess a range of good, bad, average past reports;
- Publish and enforce clear deadlines for reports so that students don't accumulate a backlog;
- Prepare a standard assessment/feedback grid and complete this on a regular basis;
- Include some pre-laboratory preparation in the form of short answer questions so students know what they're doing;
- Include in examinations some questions linked to laboratory work.

Assessing Practical Skills
- Where and when are the best situations to measure practical skills?
- Is it necessary to establish a minimum standard?
- How much do practical skills count for?

- Can students self-assess or peer assess as a means of diminishing observation load on staff and building students' confidence?

Group Work

Given that the ability to work as an effective team member is a key skill required in most areas, the use of group work can encourage development of this skill. Issues to consider in the use of group work include:

- How will the groups be formed? Will students form their own groups (though often students may self-select by ability)? Should the tutor allocate students randomly to provide fairness?
- What is to be assessed? Is it the product or outcome of the group work or is it the process of teamwork that is being assessed?
- How are students to be introduced to group work? Students need to understand the benefits of group work and thus it is important to set the scene and be clear on exactly what is being assessed. A few exercises may be set early on to help students reflect on group skills before the actual group work commences.
- How will the assessment criteria for the group work be developed? It is suggested that assessment criteria should be introduced slowly and that students should have the opportunity to add criteria of their own with the agreement of the tutor. Allocation of marks to each criterion should be discussed with the students.

Vivas/Oral Examinations

Vivas can be very useful learning experiences and the most can be gained where it is clear what the viva is for and when there is a debrief following the viva. However, it is University policy not to use vivas for resolving borderline cases. Issues to consider:

- What is the viva for? Is it to confirm submitted work is the candidate's own or is it to further explore their understanding of a subject and be sure it has reached the required level?
- Provide time for preparation for the viva – students should be informed what the viva is for and what they will normally be expected to do;
- What are the general arrangements for the viva? – think about room layout, waiting rooms etc;
- Try to ensure open-questions are asked to enable students to give full and articulate answers and let students do most of the talking;
- Consider asking students to write reflections on the viva afterwards – this should be no more than one page – so that they consider what they feel went well and where things went less well. This will assist the feedback process;
- Ask students for their opinions about the viva process as they may well raise issues about certain aspects of the process worthy of consideration for the future.

Examinations

Examinations set out to test what has been learned rather than what has been taught. They may take a number of forms but the common factor is that they are relatively short, timed and observed to ensure it is the students' own work. 'Unseen' examinations are very common because the assumption is that students will revise the whole syllabus. However, 'unseen' examinations are criticised for producing superficial responses and may encourage rote learning. Some of the following points may help to avoid these problems:

- Avoid testing basic information recall: set questions that require students to make use of their knowledge and re-interpret it intelligently;
- Ensure the questions are clear and the rubric is unambiguous;
- Prepare your marking brief at the same time as you set the question so that you have a clear view of what constitutes an effective answer;
- Consider making the mark scheme explicit so that students understand which parts of the examination carry most marks and don't waste time on less important areas;
- Don't expect students to write too much and remember that most if not all of them are accustomed to using a word processor rather than writing.

Variants on the traditional unseen examination are:

'Seen': questions are given out at a pre-specified date beforehand. The advantage is that students focus on preparation for the answer rather than second-guessing what questions will be set. Anxiety is reduced and standards are likely to rise because students can use it as a learning experience. However, plagiarism can be a real issue.

'Open-book': students have access to specified texts and/or own notes. The emphasis on memorising great chunks of material is lessened, anxiety is lessened and more demanding questions can test what has been learned.

'Case-study' or problem centred exams: allow students to apply a wider range of knowledge and use their skills in problem-solving. There is less reliance on memorising and a more realistic test of ability is facilitated.

'Multi-choice questions': easy to mark using a computer and can ensure that students revise the whole syllabus. It is, however, more difficult to assess higher-order skills. Structuring good questions is very difficult.

'Take-away' papers: a mechanism for setting time-constrained assignment tasks – whereby essay titles or problems are set at the start of a week and students have to submit their paper by the end of the week.

Other types of assessment
There are many other modes of assessment that can be used to assess a range of learning outcomes:
- portfolio of work produced over a period of time;
- computer-aided assessment;
- reflective journals, logs or blogs;
- wikis;
- preparation of an article as if for submission to an academic journal;
- production of a video or film;
- critical review of an academic article;
- preparation of a committee briefing paper or committee of enquiry report;
- poster presentation;
- preparation of a business plan for a new venture;

Resources

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/UnderstandingAssessment.pdf

http://www.swap.ac.uk/docs/Differentformsassessment.pdf

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/assessment/A_Marked_Improvement.pdf.

http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/publications/guide-no-3---blending-assignments-and-assessments-for-high-quality-learning.pdf?sfvrsn=14.