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Institute of Teaching and Learning

SALLY HICKSON STAFF ASSESSMENT LITERACY

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2020/21 PROJECT REPORT

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ITL Fellow 2020/21

SALLY HICKSON

Sally has worked in the School of Health Sciences since 1999, and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA). Sally works with colleagues from many programmes on their curriculum design projects and professional accreditation. Since studying her Masters and further PGCert she has developed a keen interest in curriculum design with a particular focus on assessment and contributes to the New Academics Programme and the PGCert in Higher Education. Sally chairs or belongs to many working groups focussed on curriculum and assessment design both within the Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health and across the University.

Fellowship Student Partner Interns

MOHAMMED ELKOSSI

MAPENZIE TAUZIE

STAFF ASSESSMENT LITERACY

ITL Fellowship project

This project explored the academic literacy of staff, identifying gaps in knowledge, exploring innovative practice and encouraging transformation of assessment strategies, working collaboratively to support positive change.

Context

This project aimed to improve the assessment literacy of academic staff at the University of Manchester, including innovative assessment design, both formative and summative, and maximising feedback on assessed work.

Shortly after the project began it evolved in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with an enhanced focus on delivering timely guidance and resources for staff and for students to support the immediate adjustments made to assessment.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

1. Explore and identify best and innovative practice within the University and at other HEIs
2. Identify extent of knowledge gap and examples of imaginative use of a variety of assessment modes, both formative and summative
3. Bust myths and misconceptions of the University's regulations and assessment norms/expectations
4. Establish new expectations for innovative and diverse, more authentic assessments through changes to the University's strategy and guidance documents
5. Encourage and promote different types of feedback on assessed work, through using innovative and various methods by involving students as peers and other partners in teaching and learning

Project activities

Literature review

The Fellowship afforded time and focus to explore the literature relating to staff assessment literacy and assessment design more generally. There is very little in the literature relating to the former, as much of 'assessment literacy' in the literature focusses on student assessment literacy. Seeking out books, articles, blogs and other university resources has enabled a detailed knowledge of assessment design, supported by the key drivers, future direction and innovations in the subject area. This extensive reading has contributed to all the activities and outputs of this fellowship. But there is more to learn!

Student focus groups (UG and PG representation across all Faculties)

These were co-ordinated and facilitated by the project's two Student Partner Interns (Mohammad and Mapenzie) in July and October 2020, exploring student understanding and perceptions of academic staff assessment literacy. Mohammad and Mapenzie each produced a summary report of the very informative student responses, which highlighted a perceived lack of staff assessment literacy and the impact of this on students – among other key points, students expressed that:

- in some cases that their lecturers did not make clear the type of assessment that will be used
- where lecturers explain the mode assessment they did not provide justification for the choice and use of the assessment
- in some cases assessments were rarely linked to the ILOs, while others felt they were clearly linked
- assessments sometimes were not clearly integrated in the whole picture of the course
- non-traditional assessment gave them a new range of skills that were also relevant to real life situations

Review of existing University of Manchester guidance and documentation around assessment and feedback

- **Teaching, Learning and Student Development (TLSD) Policy and Framework review:** A review of the documents and supporting guidance for assessment and curriculum design was conducted and areas for improved guidance for staff highlighted. TLSD colleagues and I discussed how we can evolve the existing guidance to give more support to staff in designing assessments, integrating the key findings of this project as appropriate to ensure that the relevant webpages and guidance documents for curriculum design are as supportive as possible for academic colleagues working on curriculum design / programme amendment, including assessment design. This will enable staff to find guidance, principles and good practice example to enable them to design curricula and associated assessments with the best input.
- **Faculty assessment framework/guidance review:** Detailed guidance for curriculum planning and assessment design from Hums and FSE was reviewed.
- **New Academics Programme (NAP) Assessment & Feedback - content review and input:** The NAP is one route by which academics can receive training/ preparation in curriculum and assessment design. I reviewed materials relating to assessment and feedback to ascertain the nature of the content, currency and key messages. I also attended the University NAP curriculum development group to discuss some findings and shared the '7 principles of good assessment design' for inclusion in all NAP programmes. These 7 principles were distilled from extensive review of literature, subject experts and other worldwide HEI resources. I have developed asynchronous resources for the NAP that Faculty teams are integrating into their programmes as appropriate.

Assessment-focused groups

- **FBMH Assessment Oversight Group – Chair:** This group was formed in order to discuss, troubleshoot and develop solutions for immediate adjustments to online assessment as a result of the shift to online, blended learning (OBL). I was pleased to chair this Faculty-wide group to contribute to finding solutions and developing advice and guidance for colleagues incorporating my knowledge developed from the Fellowship. I led on the development of several guidance documents in this group that were subsequently adopted by the University OBL group – listed in Outputs below.
- **University Online Blended Learning Assessment Group:** As Chair of the Faculty group above, I was invited to join this University-wide group to represent FBMH and draw upon my knowledge and expertise of assessment design. This dovetailed nicely with the focus of the Fellowship as the urgent need for materials to advance staff assessment literacy was suddenly paramount. The work I was doing for the Fellowship meant I was able to contribute significantly to the discussion and to the outputs of the group.

Other consultation and engagement

- **Staff survey:** In order to better understand staff perceptions of their own assessment literacy, a survey was developed. Although a limited response, two key points of interest arose from the responses: a clear indication of a variety of levels of staff assessment literacy, and limited training/preparation in the area of curriculum and assessment design.

- **Conferences:** I attended several online webinars/workshops with other HEIs and collaborations to gain an understanding of what the current international thinking was about assessment, and two online conferences with the Higher Education Academy:
 - Teaching and Learning Conference 2020 (Teaching in the spotlight: Creative thinking to enhance the student experience).
 - Degree Standards Conference 2021: Improving assessment literacy and maintaining academic standards.

Both of these HEA conferences and the other events I attended highlighted the open door to re-thinking assessment in creative ways, whilst highlighting challenges and opportunities of assessment diversification.

Challenges faced

Covid! Whilst this was a challenge, it also accelerated many aspects of the Fellowship, in that the original scope had to widen to accommodate the urgent need for assessment adaptation and support for academics across the University. In some ways this meant a re-focus from the original aims of the Fellowship, but more importantly it provided opportunity to contribute to institution-wide resources and solutions which were urgently needed.

Student partnership

With this being a project focused on improving staff assessment literacy, the best potential role and the scope for involvement and impact of Student Partner Interns (SPI) didn't feel immediately clear at the initial project planning stage. However, after some reflection and exploration of the contribution that SPIs could make to this topic, it was realised that students' perception of staff assessment literacy and how staff engaged with students about assessment would be crucial insight. The SPIs were enthusiastic and quick off the mark, and presented the results of their focus groups quickly and succinctly. They also provided valuable perspectives on students' perception of gaps or good practice from their lecturers on assessment design, marking and feedback, and how this can evolve with greater engagement in questions around assessment literacy.

Collaborative work

Much of my collaboration was largely driven by the impact of Covid, which necessitated the rapid production of support and guidance for colleagues in relation to assessment design, delivery, marking and feedback. These groups afforded the opportunities to work with academic colleagues across the University - including eLearning, Disability Advisory and Support Service (DASS), central administration and professional services - to troubleshoot issues as they arose and to work together to produce resources to support academics in the shift to online/blended assessment. I also met with other colleagues such as the Head of Widening Participation and Outreach, and key concerns around WP and addressing the attainment gap were then fed into some of the resources developed for the OBLA group and others, with inclusivity and accessibility at their core. Colleagues at the Institute for Teaching and Learning have been instrumental in contributing to many of the outputs below, and transforming them into a fantastic web resource.

Outputs

Developed and co-developed as part of this project:

- 7 principles for good assessment design - ITL and NAP resource (cross-faculty)
- SPI student focus group report
- NAP programme (FBMH): co-delivered the Assessment and Feedback, and Curriculum Design sessions
- PgCert Higher Education: co-delivered taught component of the Assessment and Feedback course unit
- Staff guide to developing open book exams
- Student guide for online open book exams
- Student guide for online MCQ exams
- Student guide to avoiding academic malpractice
- Matrix for alternative online assessments (2020/21)
- Recommendations for increasing confidence and integrity in assessment to OBLA group and others (ongoing)

Impact

The immediate impact of my project has mostly benefited the endeavour to change assessment practices and support requirements necessitated by the Covid pandemic. By focussing literature searching and scanning the global HE sector for resources for alternative assessments, I led the development of a package of materials to support colleagues in the shift to online assessment. These were adopted across the University in the race to replace traditional examinations or other assessment that normally required face to face/on campus presence. The impact of these resources can be seen in the diversity of assessment methods applied during 2020 and into 2021.

Being involved in developing the content for and delivering two key NAP sessions in FMBH will impact on the next generation of academics by providing them with foundation principles in relation to assessment for them to build their academic practices on. Using the extensive literature and online sources in relation to assessment design, gathered during my Fellowship, to inform the content of the sessions should ensure that new academics will have a better, more current grounding in curriculum design, assessment and feedback. This is also true about my co-delivery of the assessment and feedback unit in the University's PGCert HE.

The Fellowship has opened the doors to involvement in other projects and working groups in my Faculty and at a University level. This affords me the opportunity to use the extensive knowledge I've compiled to influence discussions and support colleagues in transforming their assessment practices in their programmes. I hope that this will enable me to continue to make an impact with increasing staff assessment literacy across the University. Membership of key University working groups will provide a platform to steer the development of assessment and curriculum design related strategies – something I'm very excited to be part of.

Reflection

The outputs listed in this report are valuable, helpful resources and I'm pleased with the ways in which I have managed to make an impact through the NAP/PGCert teaching and contributions to Focus/Working Groups. I have gained a lot of knowledge through being afforded the time to read and explore assessment practices across the HEI sector – being able to use this knowledge to contribute to discussions and solutions is rewarding personally, but also benefiting colleagues and the University.

On the flip side, the impact of Covid meant that the focus became more narrow in order to meet urgent need for assessment solutions and address the gap in staff assessment literacy regarding online/alternative assessments. Whilst this isn't a bad thing, I do feel that I have not been able to achieve my original objectives fully – and my mission to improve staff assessment literacy is no small feat! I feel I've scratched the surface and learned an enormous amount - there is still a lot of work to do and I'm looking forward to being part of this.

Next steps

In order to see a sustained improvement in staff assessment literacy, resulting in modernised, inclusive and more fit-for-purpose assessments and feedback in all programmes, there is a lot we can do!

A more widespread roll-out of training, development materials, sessions and information for academic staff, as well as a commitment from the University to drive changes in assessment through its corporate messaging and documentation to support curriculum and assessment design, will all have a significant impact on enhancing assessment literacy. The Institute of Teaching and Learning will be key in housing resources and promoting staff development in this area, working in partnership with other teams in TLSO to embed the shift towards modern assessment and feedback paradigms in the

documentation surrounding programme development, programme amendments and the assessment framework, as well as introducing flexibility into the degree regulations to accommodate more diverse assessments.

The following 'transformative ideas' have emerged throughout my fellowship as key areas that could make a significant impact:

- Programme Level Assessment
- Focus on formative feedback
- Remove/minimise traditional exams
- Establish Communities of Practice (that include staff, students, employers and other stakeholders)

For my next steps, I am currently developing further resources that can be both integrated into the NAP and made available University-wide via the ITL website, in order that colleagues can embed and use these as appropriate. With the work underway as part of the Flexible Learning Programme, within the ITL and in other University-wide strategic work on assessment, there is the potential to make an institution-wide cultural shift in improving assessment and feedback, and I am keen to be at the forefront of that.

Sally Hickson
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