

# Improving Student Engagement and Development through Assessment

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Theory and practice in higher education

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## Contents

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<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	viii
<i>Foreword</i>	xiv
Introduction LYNN CLOUDER AND CHRISTINA HUGHES	1
1 Student views on assessment ALEX BOLS	4
2 Trained for the high jump; asked to do the long jump: does first year assessment promote retention? ANTHONY COOK	19
3 Exploring new students' conceptions of engagement and feedback ED FOSTER, JANE MCNEIL AND SARAH LAWTHER	32
4 Helping them succeed: the staff–student relationship CHRISTINE BROUGHAN AND DAVID GRANTHAM	45
5 Evaluating assessment practices: the academic staff perspective FRANCES DEEPWELL AND GREG BENFIELD	59
6 Assessment for learning LIZ MCDOWELL	73
7 Finding their voice: podcasts for teaching, learning and assessment GRAHAM STEVENTON	86
8 Student peer mentoring for engagement and retention: challenges in community building and assessment HEATHER CONBOY AND RICHARD HALL	99

9	The impact of assessment and feedback processes on student engagement in a research methods module STEVE JEWELL	113
10	Digital storytelling as an alternative assessment MARTIN JENKINS AND PHIL GRAVESTOCK	126
11	Interdisciplinary assessment CLINTON GOLDING AND CHI BAIK	138
12	Assessing employability skills: understanding employer needs and how to engage with students MARIE HARDIE AND NORMAN DAY	152
13	Getting the context right for good assessment practice LYNNE HUNT, SARA HAMMER AND MICHAEL SANKEY	166
14	Technology-supported assessment for retention ORMOND SIMPSON	181
15	Issues and strategies for student engagement through assessment in transnational higher education GLENDA CROSLING	196
	Conclusion CHRISTINE BROUGHAN AND STEVE JEWELL	210
	<i>Index</i>	212

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## List of illustrations

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### Figures

1.1	Student views on assessment and the learning process	7
1.2	Percentage of students identifying with the consumer/co-producer dichotomy	14
9.1	Plot of student's estimated marks against tutor's marks	120
13.1	The student learning journey	169
13.2	Key features of quality assessment practice	171
13.3	The Course and Programme Mapping System (CPMS)	175
13.4	Getting the context right for assessment	176
14.1	A 'rivergram' of the percentage of active students on a Science Foundation course at the UK Open University	182
14.2	Graduation rates of higher education institutions in the UK	183
14.3	The probability of suffering various effects among different groups according to educational experience	184
14.4	A 'rivergram' of the percentage of active students on a rewritten Science Foundation course with a formative assignment at the UK Open University	187

### Tables

2.1	Comparison between universities at the extremes of the <i>Guardian</i> league tables in terms of aspects of assessment in Biology drawn from the National Student Survey	26
9.1	Module questionnaire for the assessment and feedback responses	122

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## Foreword

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Assessment of students in higher education is crucial for the integrity, validation and quality not only of programmes of study, but also for individual institutions and the system overall. In more recent times, the centrality of assessment in student learning has been resoundingly endorsed in the pedagogical literature, emphasizing its role in encouraging students to take what should be effective approaches to their study so that they can achieve success with the learning outcomes that are embedded in assessment processes. Significantly, assessment is also a means of reinforcing higher order thinking, which is the hallmark of higher education.

Another important theme, particularly in these times of student diversity, is that of student engagement in their learning. Perceived as integral to academic success, engaged students are more likely to be motivated to study for meaning and understanding, rather than merely doing what is required to pass an exam or assignment. In combination, these two pivotal themes of assessment and student engagement as essential components in successful academic outcomes result in a strong approach to enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. This book provides an important opportunity to explore the synergy of these themes; it seeks to investigate from a range of perspectives the ways in which student engagement can be enhanced through assessment, and the ways that assessment also can be enhanced by assisting students to engage in their learning. Furthermore, the interaction of these themes not only represents best practice, but also advances the boundaries of practice more generally into yet unexplored domains, opening the field for further progress. For the benefit of students in our diverse higher education systems, curriculum developers, teachers, quality assurance practitioners and policy-makers, this book's exploration should be a valuable and useful resource. I commend it to such staff regardless of their particular role or setting.

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# Introduction

*Lynn Clouder and Christina Hughes*

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This book is set in the context of current challenges in higher education: massification, student diversity, an escalating demand for personalized learning driven by developments in information technology and pressure on marking turnaround times, to name but a few. The advent of student fees is promoting a consumer culture in which students are becoming 'customers' with an increasingly powerful voice in shaping curricula to their own requirements. Likewise employers are exerting pressure on higher education institutions to turn out students with workplace skills. In this context, assessment is key; student retention, completion and employability are hard outcomes linked to assessment targets in a target-driven world and used as indicators of success.

Yet assessment is challenging for academics as well as students. Mention assessment and feedback in any higher education institution in the UK and the spectre of the National Student Survey (NSS) springs to mind. Whether one sees the NSS as a robust research tool or not, it does reveal that assessment and feedback are consistently the aspect of their course with which students are least content. In response, this book acknowledges the need to 'do better' in terms of student satisfaction.

There are also inevitable dangers in an over-zealous approach in making assessment central to the resolution of these political, reputational and financial imperatives facing educators and managers. The contemporary drive toward assessment-led curricula can produce excessive, and overly complex, approaches that impede rather than support students' learning (Heywood 2000) – assessment on, rather than with and for, students. It can create an emotional climate for the student that is anxious, nervous, or simply, but damagingly, disinterested. In jeopardy is the joy of learning (Quinn 2010) and at risk a focus on assessment as primarily a tool of enablement. Quinn critiques the dominance of regulatory ideas and practices in higher education, which lead to reductionist and fragmented approaches and overly technological solutions that constitute a pedagogic loss rather than gain. Along with others (see Clayton *et al.* 2009; Tamboukou 2010; Hughes 2011) she recognizes the spirit of pleasure that is necessary in capturing imaginations and fostering creative and engaged responses to learning. What is too easily forgotten is that many students entering higher education not

only expect, but look forward to, some independence and a different kind of learning and approach to assessment, than that experienced at school. Student aspirations may be directed ultimately toward employment and the class of degree now necessary for securing this, but they still aspire to develop their love of subject matter and to experience the disruptive rapture when understandings shift in significant ways.

Acknowledging the truism that assessment drives learning, well-conceived and implemented assessment can play an important part in making learning enjoyable and meaningful and therefore more engaging. Notwithstanding institutional measures of success, the contributors to this book focus specifically on assessment and its potential to enable students to engage with peers and tutors, to gain personal insight, to feel valued and supported, and above all feel they 'fit in' as part of a learning community, and, as such, can succeed in higher education. Perhaps the book's most important message is that neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies work effectively in isolation. Grass-roots interventions can have a positive impact on student engagement, but without a strategy that targets the whole institution, improvements will be piecemeal.

### **The structure of the book**

The chapters in this book are arranged to form three key themes: (1) setting the broader context of assessment from the perspectives of students, staff and institutions; (2) outlining specific assessment interventions; and (3) a focus on strategic change at an institutional level. Critical friend commentaries following each chapter provide an external reference point allowing readers unfamiliar with the terrain to gain a sense of how the ideas fit into wider debates.

This collection provides a well-researched evidence base of current thinking and developments in assessment practices in higher education, drawing on both applied and theoretical research. A particular strength of the book is its interdisciplinary nature, which enables similarities and differences between disciplinary demands and needs to be accommodated. It gathers together a wealth of expertise from academics, academic developers, pedagogical researchers, National Teaching Fellows and Centres for Excellence in Higher Education, from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and the UK. Recognizing that a particular pedagogic strategy that is well embedded and taken for granted in one context might be completely novel in another (King *et al.* 2007), the aim is to inspire academics and managers not only to critique their own practice, but also to be brave and imaginative in creating new or different assessment possibilities.

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