

Discipline/Course/Subject Area:

Business Research Methods

Institution:

Glasgow Caledonian University

Start date:

2005-06

Impact:

The practice was introduced:

☒ across a level 3 core module

☒ across level 3 of a degree programme

☒ across CBS / two or more subject groups

☐ across the institution as a whole

The practice was adopted by:

☐ the department, other departments in the institution and in other institutions

No. of students affected:

c770

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Others involved:

Title of Practice – Using a Portfolio Approach in Business Research Methods (Business Research Methods)

Abstract

This is an introductory course in business research methods, which looks at the philosophies of research and their application to the business and management disciplines. It also gives an exploration of the research process identifying the need for focus and achievable aims, time management and presentation. Emphasis is given to the research output and its uses.

In order to provide more timely and effective feedback to the large number of students, the assessment for the module was changed from two end-loaded assessments (coursework submitted towards the end of the module and a final exam) to the development of a portfolio of evidence which was gradually built up over the course of the module. Changes were made to the timing to allow for at least 2 feedback opportunities before the final assessment was submitted.

Description of Implementation

In what context did the new assessment practice happen?

This is a core level 3 module for all programmes in the Caledonian Business School Framework (20 programmes) and the BA Accounting Suite of programmes. It is also an option for two other programmes and is delivered to students studying Business Law in another School. In session 2005-06 it was also delivered in Singapore by local tutors. Over 800 CBS students studied this module in semester B 2005-06.

Due to the wide range of courses taking this module, part of the delivery is tailored to individual course requirements with a change in emphasis to offer a detailed examination of an option of qualitative, quantitative or mixed research methods. The lecture programme is delivered to all students by a core team of staff, while the seminars are customised by staff from the different programmes, using examples and practices from their own discipline or sector area. Central to the course is the development of a Research proposal which is instigated through seminar work in the core section of the module and then taken forward throughout the seminar programme.

What was the rationale for introducing the practice?

The module previously had assessment points in weeks 10 (coursework) and 12 (examination) after which there was no opportunity for feedback which the students could make use of.

Problems with this were:

- The timing of the submission meant that classes were finished and there were few opportunities for students to receive feedback on the coursework or on the exam.
- Students completed work on SPSS in labs which was not directly linked to any of the assessments.
- The coursework is meant to underpin the dissertation in the following year and many students did not come to see tutors before leaving for their summer holidays. That meant that if there were problems with their proposed dissertation area, they did not find this out until they began the next level.

How was the practice implemented?

The module is self-contained but provides the underpinning theory in preparation for the dissertation at level 4 for those students who continue into level 4. Similarly, although not part of the module, early facilitation of dissertation supervision is also provided. The teaching/learning strategy for this module is based on a constructivist philosophy of learning, utilising Mayes' learning cycle of 'conceptualisation, construction and dialogue' (Mayes, 1997). All students follow the core lectures but participate in tailored seminar programmes relating to students' main areas of interest. This brings together the learning from the first two levels as well as the learning at level 3.

In CBS the seminars are delivered by 8 teams comprising staff from each of the 8 subject areas in CBS with each team covering a number of programmes.

The total complement of staff for the module is: 14 senior lecturers, 12 lecturers, 5 teaching assistants. In addition, in sessions supporting lab work, there are 2 senior lecturers, 1 lecturer and 4 teaching assistants. In 2005/06 there were 44 seminar groups and 31 lab groups

Before REAP:

There were two pieces of summative assessment each worth 50%, namely:

- 1 **Coursework** – A Research Proposal – submitted in week 10
- 2 **Examination** – 2 hours – in the examination period at end of module

Although the module stands alone in level 3, there is an expectation that the skills developed in this module underpin the level 4 dissertation. Feedback from tutors on level 4 indicated that students sometimes had unrealistic expectation of their ability to take the "proposed" topic forward into a dissertation. One of the major drivers for change was the need to make feedback opportunities available to students at an earlier stage in the first place and to ensure that they could make use of this in the proposal.

Changes made:

Assessment for the module was changed from the above to the development of a portfolio of evidence comprising three main pieces of course work

1. a **critique of articles**
2. a **case study** including data analysis using SPSS
3. the **research proposal**

Since this module is delivered to so many different students, there were opportunities to carry out different smaller pilots of change. The approach taken was to use a number of small pilots to enable change in a two stage process from coursework and exam to a portfolio. The intention is to adopt an electronic portfolio in session 2006-07.

What resources were needed?

- Time of module leader and members of the team to develop new assessment materials and also to give feedback to students.
- Increased administrative support was required to handle the assessment submissions.

Perceived Benefits

For students...

- Opportunity for timely feedback which can be used to inform their next piece of work in the module
- Potential impact on progression rates
- Better quality research proposals

For teaching/support staff...

- Earlier indicators of student performance.

Issues/Challenges

For students...

- Earlier submission dates meant that students had to engage in the whole assessment process sooner

For teaching/support staff...

- Changes in workload patterns in the short-term since we moved marking from the end to throughout the module.
- Senior management were not particularly aware of the effect on their staff of these changes. There is a need to clarify workload demands in the future.

Enablers that Help/helped the Practice to Work

- Motivation and contribution of staff delivering the module
- Willingness of administration staff to deal with increasing numbers of assessment items

Points of Advice

- Although on paper the changes to the timing of the assessment were welcomed and did not appear to be problematic, a small number of the tutors were unhappy about the perceived increase in workload from the changes. The changes were in timing rather than quantity but this can be a substantial issue for staff.
- There is a need to examine the way work is monitored as some staff are concerned about the possibility of an increase in plagiarism, although tools such as Plato and Turnitin can help address these concerns.
- There is a need for more staff development for tutors in giving effective feedback
- Making sure that all staff (including part-time) are fully briefed on what is happening with the changes and why – a little time spent making sure they can see the benefits is felt will be well worth the effort.

Possible Improvements/Enhancements (suggested by the case study provider)

We are aware now that there is still too much assessment on this module, so we need to focus on reducing the number of assessments whilst increasing relevance (in students' view at least). There is also a need to examine the way some work is monitored, particularly in relation to issues of plagiarism

Interim results and future plans:

Interim evaluation suggests that there appear to be many more students engaging in the research process and the process of assessment at an earlier stage. Evidence of this comes from the small number of students who had to resubmit the first two elements of the coursework in August 2006. The changes to the assessment mean that:

- Students begin by writing a critique of articles which then allows them to use these developed skills when writing their research proposal. This also feeds forward into dissertation planning in year 4.
- Feedback for students has influenced changes to the delivery mechanism even in the pilot stage. There is a necessity to contextualise the teaching material for many different programmes in this module. The teaching in lectures and seminars is focused on ensuring that the materials are relevant to each student group and this is informed by the developing proposal titles. Time is built into the programme for tutors to deal with requirements for specific methods or issues for individuals or group of students directly relating to their research proposals.

Evaluation shows that both students and staff welcomed opportunities for earlier feedback while students also welcomed the move away from the end of module examination. The amount of work however, (namely marking) still appears to be an issue for staff. This is particularly evident in a module like Business Research Methods with a very large numbers of students. For example, moderating a 10% sample of course work across the different subject areas means around 70 pieces of work x 3 assessments. Although this is more than before it is difficult to convince staff that the quality of work outweighs this. There is a need for more support for staff in giving effective feedback. Senior management were not particularly aware of the effect on their staff of these changes to the assessment strategy – and although initially supportive, did not seem to appreciate the changes in workload timing. The module leader acknowledges the need to clarify workload demands in the future.

Further Reading

Relevant publications by those doing case-study:

Relevant/influential/related publications in the research literature suggested by the case study provider:

Nicol, D.J. & Milligan, C. (2006), Rethinking technology-supported assessment in terms of the seven principles of good feedback practice. In C.Bryan and K.Clegg (Eds), *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*, Taylor & Francis Group Ltd, London