



# **Position Statement for Higher Education Academy Panel: Student input to assessment design & strategy**

## **Can we involve students as key change agents to enhance assessment?**

By

**Professor Brenda Smith**  
Assistant Director  
The Higher Education Academy

Students of course are different these days. They are more concerned with socialising than they are to learn for their degree. They do not read and they come to lectures and tutorials ill prepared. Also with the diversity of students they are far more difficult to teach and need more support - they just want spoon feeding!

Many would agree with those comments but equally others would disagree. I would like to suggest that if we are to influence our colleagues to enhance what they do, then students can be our most powerful allies acting as key change agents for enhancing the student experience. But what leads me to believe this is the case?

I would like to go back to the days of the 'Enterprise in Higher Education' programme in 1987. This externally funded initiative was designed to encourage the development of qualities of enterprise. I was responsible at the time for running events across a university to encourage discussion and dissemination of effective practices. At these events I was keen to involve students to talk about their experiences. At that time presentations by students were starting to be integrated into a number of courses.

At one of these events we were trying to encourage a greater take up of developing presentation skills in our students. We were not far into the seminar when a member of staff said "I think this is a ridiculous idea to ask students to do presentations in the first year. They will be scared and they just do not have those skills". I was just about to reply when a student stood up and said in no uncertain terms that she disagreed with him. "How can we develop those skills if we are not allowed to practice then in the first year and develop them in other courses throughout our programme". Clearly the member of staff was taken aback. It led to a great deal of very valuable discussion. For me it opened my eyes to the value of involving students to help to influence staff.

Now some 20 years later I have proved time and time again the value of involving students. Let me give you a few examples. About four or five years ago what was the then Generic Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) ran a project called MESA - Managing Effective Student Assessment. This was jointly run by the Generic Centre and the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE). The project arose out of a concern to enhance the assessment process with large groups of students in the Health Faculty. We designed the project to involve a number of diverse institutions that we knew were interested in enhancing the assessment experience for both staff and students. Each institution included a senior manager, a staff/educational developer and at least one student. We explored our understandings and perceptions of assessment over two years meeting in different institutions around England. The culmination was a pack of resources based on a series of case studies that were jointly written by the staff and students and were based on the experiences of the student group. The most significant outcome for me



was when one students said .... "I never realised that assessment was for learning". What a sobering comment and one that has remained with me.

The Academy has run a number of 24 hour events that has involved both staff and students. The idea is that staff and students work in mixed groups and experience a range of resources relating to assessment and feedback. These include drawing a rich picture of their experiences of assessment and feedback, playing a card sort and watching a series of video clips of real students from different courses and universities taking about what their experiences of feedback that have been both positive and negative. These clips are available for downloading from the Academy web site. (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/2835.htm>)

During these events I can really see the impact that the students are having on staff thinking through the issues. For example, during the card sort each team member picks up one card at a time and reads out the statement. The team then have to decide which header card it goes under. These header cards range from strongly disagree through to strongly agree. I have seen a member of staff put it under one heading when the students says "Oh no, you might think that, but our experience is ....". Again a healthy discussion ensues.

Students can also influence other students. In another example 34 students and 6 staff from one programme in a local university spent two days at the Academy in York exploring perceptions of assessment and feedback with a view to revising the curriculum. At times the staff and students worked in different group while at other times they worked in their year groups. One activity was for each year group to produce an essay plan based on the same essay title. Each year group then presented their work to the other two years and received feedback from all groups. It was a fascinating experience as the groups supported each other and the staff watched in amazement at the excellent exchange that took place between the groups.

A further example was when we use an 'Egg Game' to illustrate the importance of students setting criteria, marking against those criteria and then giving feedback to their peers. The idea of the activity is to design a container (using only the resources supplied) to hold a fresh egg that when dropped from a height the egg does not break. Each group has to design their own criteria for how they would like the other groups to assess them and they in turn assess and give feedback to the other groups. This activity as well as being a lot of fun, raises a debate about involving students in the process. Carless, Joughin and Mok (2006) talk about 'Learning-orientated assessment: principles and practice, where they viewed three components as being essential to represent the purposes pertaining to learning.

"First, assessment tasks which promote the kind of leaning needed for the workplace of the twenty-first century.....  
Second, assessment processes should involve students actively so as to promote the kind of dispositions they need to be lifelong learners.....  
Third, we viewed 'feedback as feedforward' as being a crucial component of learning-orientated assessment. By this we mean that tutor comments should carry clear implications for future tasks or the current task when time is available, rather than merely reviewing and/or justifying the grade for the completed assessment"

We therefore need to work with our students to give then experiences of setting criteria, marking and giving feedback just as they will be expected to do in future work situations. A frequent comment I hear from the students is that they never realised that assessment can be so difficult and time consuming for staff!

The whole area of students giving each other feedback I believe should be started from very early in the course. I would suggest that students start with giving peer feedback and move through to giving other students marks. The giving of marks is more difficult and needs careful handling. A simple example of encouraging students to give peer feedback is



where even in a large lecture they could swap notes and give one piece of positive feedback and one suggestion for enhancing those notes.

So I would like to propose that we think of ways in which we can use our students in a positive way to influence the process of assessment and feedback. We can benefit from listening to what students have to say as they come up with some creative ideas that benefit both ourselves as staff and the students themselves.

Brenda Smith

Carless, D Joughin, G and M.C. Mok, M (2006) Learning-orientated assessment: principles and practice in *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* Vol 31 No 4 August 2006 p 396

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