

National Conference on Assessment

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Summary

This was a conference which brought together representatives of Subject Centres and other interested parties for the purpose of discussing assessment in general terms, as well as to launch a series of guides produced by the LTSN Generic Centre.

Plenary Addresses

The conference commenced and closed with keynote sessions.

Graham Gibbs

The first keynote presentation, by Graham Gibbs (Centre for Higher Education Practice Open University, and NCT) was on 'What lessons can we learn about assessment?'. Gibbs took an irreverent view of our traditional methods of quality assurance in UK higher education, noting the general conservatism of the system and propounding a general thesis that the institutional methods by which we seek to 'influence' assessment are the product of 'anxieties'. These anxieties are concern with authentication of the work of named students, and concern for the need to be seen to be maintaining a mythical 'gold-standard' of assessment. These anxieties chiefly led to tinkering with the balance of coursework and assessment, either requiring or ruling-out certain methods on chiefly negative criteria rather than positive benefit for student or system. Assessment is amongst the most expensive elements of degree provision and the expenditure on external examiners, staff-time in double-marking and etc. are driven by the concern to be seen to be doing the right thing, rather than any deep thought with regard to what outcomes are actually being assessed.

Perhaps this presentation was overly-dismissive of systems (e.g. double-marking, external examining) which are currently in use, but there were some telling comments on the use of these systems in assisting students in measuring their own progress. Comments made by examiners on work by students over an entire year are often able to fitted on one A4 sheet. Peer-reviewing of work in certain subjects and at certain stages of degree study is more helpful as a learning process for student and reviewer alike, as well as being cost-effective in terms of staff time.

George Gordon

The closing keynote session, by George Gordon (The Centre for Academic Practice, University of Strathclyde) was on 'How can we work with our subject communities to effect and manage change?'. This took a fairly personal view of subject management across the speaker's career. He noted that 'early adopters' are not the main target: there is a need to bring the rank and file of academia and management to recognise the criteria for change. He was critical of

current quality assurance methods, inasmuch as they placed emphasis only on levelling of student quality, rather than driving standards forward. Change has been gradual across the last few decades and initiatives take time to be adopted.

Sectional Sessions

The parallel sessions which followed the keynote presentation were divided on the basis of the nine Assessment Guides which were launched at the conference.

- Assessment: A Guide for Senior Managers
- Assessment: A Guide for Lecturers
- Assessment: A Guide for Students
- Assessment: A Guide for Heads of Department
- Assessment Series: A Briefing on Portfolios and Key Concepts
- Assessment Series: A Briefing on Large Groups & Peer, Group and Self-Assessment
- Assessment Series: A Briefing on Key Skills and Work Based Learning
- Assessment Series: A Briefing on Plagiarism
- Assessment Series: A Briefing on Students with Disabilities

The sessions themselves were mostly focus-group driven and threw up various ideas. The general focus was on implementation of the guides as subject-centre level and the desire that they be rewritten to suit the requirements of individual subjects. The specific purpose of each session - even the basis of the dissection - was not clear until one had read the Assessment Series Guide which corresponded to it.

The 'Plagiarism' session, which I attended, provided some evidence of how different the requirements of some subjects could be - as well as evidence that different academic staff have widely-differing views on what assessment is about. Concerns expressed ranged over the legal implications of punishment of plagiarism; the effects of 'lenient' treatment of plagiarism on student morale; the workload implications of having to constantly vary assessment tasks to help prevent plagiarism; and the question of whether plagiarism should be defined as a moral failing, or an educational failing. There was a detailed presentation on computer-aided detection systems, though not presented as necessarily the only solution to detection of plagiarism.

Comments

This was a very stimulating conference. The level of audience participation in all sessions was helpful, though there was perhaps an overuse of soporific PowerPoint displays. The individual sessions were also a little too inclined to rush into the focus group format - where the discussions which involved the entire group were often more inclined to encourage debate. The tone of debate was very open, in a non-coercive forum in which participants were able to air criticisms without the feeling that policy was likely to directly result from the discussion.

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