

Assessment *in* Practice

Leading Enhancement in Assessment and Feedback at the University of Edinburgh: Using TESTA Methodology to Gain Programmatic Oversight of Assessment and Feedback Practices

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For the last two years, the University of Edinburgh has been engaged in the Leading Enhancement in Assessment and Feedback (LEAF) project using Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) methodology to help us to improve oversight of the assessment and feedback activities provided on our degree programmes, with a view to enhancing our practices. TESTA methodology was initially developed at the University of Winchester and through their [website](#) they provide an excellent, comprehensive tool kit to support practitioners in running a TESTA audit in their own institutions. This paper will reflect on our experiences of using the TESTA methodology, the amendments we have made to tailor the methodology to our institution, and the benefits we have found of using TESTA.

The University of Edinburgh first began working on the project alongside the University of Glasgow, the University of Nottingham and the University of Birmingham. We were particularly interested in being involved in the project with a group of research-intensive universities to reflect on our respective performance levels in key metrics from the National Student Survey (a UK national survey of final year undergraduates used as a measure of student satisfaction). Scores from this survey indicate that, as with many UK research-intensive universities, there is room for us to enhance our students' experience specifically in assessment and feedback. We are currently conducting a number of projects across the University to help us understand the details of our learning and teaching practices, enrich our student experience data, and enhance our current practices.

Through using the TESTA toolkit, and discussion with members of Winchester's TESTA team, we realised that although very useful, the methodology needed amendments to fit with the wide range

of choice offered through the University of Edinburgh's degree programmes. We, like many other Scottish 'Ancient' universities, offer elective choice and flexibility in many of our degree pathways, meaning that our programmes are often constructed to engage and align with the interests of an individual student.

In the Humanities and Social Sciences degree programmes, in particular, it is common-place in our pre-honours years (the first and second year of the programme) to only require students to study a third of their yearly total of credits in their 'home' school (the school which hosts their programme). All other credits can be selected from across the University, known as 'outside courses'. It is also quite normal that although students will study the majority of their credits within their home school they still have significant amounts of choice offered to them within that school, allowing them to follow their own specialist interests in the honours years of their programme.

STRAND 1: ASSESSMENT MAPPING

Following the '[Ten Steps to Audit a Programme](#)' guide, the TESTA team advised us to collect and record information about programmes' assessment and feedback regimes from the Programme Director. However, due to our very flexible programme structure it was improbable that a Programme Director would be able to provide us with the detailed level of information required. It is worth noting that realising this was itself a very useful learning experience. A key learning point from this project was understanding the challenge of programme coherence while offering high-levels of elective choice within programmes. Although we still maintain that flexibility and choice are very important features of our degree programmes, we are now working to strengthen oversight of the holistic programme-level student experience.

At the beginning of the project, we had two options: (1) we could audit only those courses (modules) that were delivered by the home school; or (2) we could take a broader approach and map assessment and feedback practices on all of the most popular courses and pathways taken by students enrolled in a given degree programme regardless of whether or not they were owned and managed by the home school. We selected the latter option. As choice, flexibility and the provision of elective 'outside courses' is something that Edinburgh prides itself on, the experiences that students have whilst studying these courses are fundamental to the students' overall experience of university. Not only this, but there is no distinction made in the National Student Survey about where students are having particular experiences, and it is important for us to understand if and where negative experiences are occurring and the reasons why.

The University records the courses that students from each programme enroll in, so it was easy to identify the most popular 120 credits of courses per year (around 6-10 courses) for each programme enabling us to construct a 'popular pathway through the programme' (for more information see the University of Edinburgh's [Institute for Academic Development](#)). The researcher working on the project then completed 'desk-based research', using course documentation and virtual learning environments (VLEs) for each course selected, to map out assessment and feedback events and practices. These were subsequently verified, and

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amended through short interviews with the Course Organiser for each of the individual courses identified on the 'popular pathway through the programme'; an alternative to the Programme Director route. This also gave Course Organisers an opportunity to add any additional details of feedback and assessment activities that were not recorded in the documentation and to ask any questions they had about the project, to strengthen staff engagement, ownership and 'buy-in' to the aims of the LEAF project.

STRAND 2: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

We used an amended version of the TESTA 'Assessment Experience Questionnaire' to survey students. We were keen that the survey should build upon data obtained from other student experience research undertaken by the University. We were also keen that it would allow students to distinguish between the consistency of their experiences and any anomalous experiences they had on specific courses, and that it would give students the opportunities to voice their more nuanced views. As a result, we added additional questions including a short set of 'free text' open-ended questions which asked if there was any assessment and feedback practice that students had found particularly helpful, and if there was anything that they would like to change.

Once the survey had been completed and results analysed, they were then contextualised by looking at other survey data gathered by the University such as the National Student Survey (NSS) data, and our own **Edinburgh Student Experience Survey (ESES)**. Across the three data sets we looked for repeated themes, and points where clarification was needed. A particular theme of interest for our students related to the 'timeliness of feedback' therefore when conducting the focus group stage of the research we took the opportunity to ask students what they understood and regarded to be 'timely feedback'; one of the many examples of how the focus groups were adjusted to facilitate a deeper and more granular understanding of the student experience within particular contexts. These questions were added to the standard TESTA focus group **questions**.

STRAND 3: PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once completed, the data are compiled into a single report. We try to keep the report at quite a high level, providing headline findings. We provide visual maps of assessment 'hand-in' points and include details of issues arising and highlight innovative and effective assessment and feedback practices. The aim of the report is to give back an overview of **assessment and feedback** practices used by the degree programme, and to map the student experiences to these practices allowing Programme Teams to understand both the range of practices being used and what the student experiences of these practices are.

The benefits of this are:

- Visual maps of assessment allow Programme Teams to view any deadline 'bottle-necks', where multiple submission deadlines fall on the same, or similar, dates that might be stressful for students.
- Assessment maps allow Programme Teams to see linkages between

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different types of assessment. A number of our degree programmes identify that students will develop abilities in team work, verbal presentation skills, and project work over the course of the degree programme. A visual map shows whether or not students are experiencing opportunities to develop these skills over the course of their programmes, and not just at a single point in time. This scaffolding of learning is particularly important for students, and they should be fully aware of where they are explicitly developing particular skills and attributes not merely exhibiting these unknowingly.

- The process allowed us to identify and share effective practices. All degree programmes that have participated in the project have had individual courses with truly excellent and innovative assessment and feedback practices.
- Granular level data is developed which subsequently enables Programme Teams to focus on programme enhancement that is evidence-based and underpinned by research.
- The audits provide a platform to develop a dialogue around feedback and assessment, and gives students and staff 'permission' to have conversations about the creative, innovative and effective practices that are being used in teaching; as well as the challenges still being faced.
- It helps us to more fully understand one of the key metrics that impacts the student experience.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

We at Edinburgh are more than happy to discuss our experiences of using TESTA with other institutions. For more information please feel free to email: hazel.marzetti@ed.ac.uk.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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