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Towards Inclusive Assessments in Higher Education

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Background

Funded by HEFCE as part of the *Improving Provision for Disabled Students* programme, the SPACE Project focused upon a Student-Staff Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation. Co-ordinated by the University of Plymouth and conceived by colleagues at the Disability ASSIST Service, the project conjoined the expertise of disability officers, academic staff and educational developers from eight higher education institutions (HEIs) in the south west region of the UK. During its three year programme, the project surveyed the opinions of approximately 800 disabled and non-disabled students through an annual questionnaire, student focus groups, face-to-face interviews and specially conducted case studies of alternative and inclusive assessments involving 480 students (Waterfield & West, 2007). The purpose underlying this intervention in the field of assessment practice was the desire to explore the views of disabled students regarding 'special arrangements' for examinations, identify preferred methods of assessment for both disabled and non-disabled students, and to evaluate, by students and staff, a number of case studies of alternative and inclusive assessment practice, i.e. forms of assessment that do not necessitate the provision of 'special arrangements' for disabled students.

The following two case studies, adapted from Waterfield & West (2007), have been chosen for their demonstration of an inclusive approach to assessment design. In Case Study A, we explore a pilot scheme in the arts, where a design report is used to assess disabled and non-disabled students and thereby offer more accessibility than the traditional modes. In Case Study B, we review a complex pilot scheme in a school of engineering, a model of inclusivity for disabled and non-disabled students, offering the ultimate option: multiple choices of assessment mode.

Case Study A: design report

Context

Courses: BA (Hons) in 3-D Design for Sustainability and BA (Hons) in Spatial Design.

Numbers of students participating:
50 (including 8 disabled students).

Standard assessment method:
essay.

Purpose of assessment method:
summative.

Research method(s): staff and
student questionnaire and interview.

Participation: this case study was
developed with the Design Centre at
Falmouth College of Art and Design.

Description

This pilot evaluation of a design
report, with a combination of
graphics and text, was implemented
on two courses to explore
assessment methods in relation
to working in art and design. The
teaching and learning framework
for the design report was delivered
through a series of lectures,
seminars and tutorials. It is
representative of recent changes in
art and design-based degrees, where
practice-based activities are being
pursued in an attempt to conjoin
studio practices and academic
writing. The design report required
students to critically evaluate the
design process, taken from concept
through to design development, and
present their report in the form of a
client presentation. As an approach,
it was designed to be congruent
with the learning styles of the high
numbers of students with dyslexia
studying the arts. The design report
resulted in an overall increase in
marks by 30%. As an assessment
tool, it has been embedded into

course development and review. It
is being considered for development
as an aspect of a new master's level
course in design.

Resources required for the design report

Specialist software to develop the
online design report template.

Advantages of the design report for staff

- The inclusive format of the design
  report supports a combination of
  delivery methods (graphics and
  text) rather than relying solely on
  text.

- The design report is transferable
  to the workplace: it is used in
  industry by designers to reflect
  upon their professional practice.

Advantages of the design report for students

- Students are encouraged to write
  in a more critical, self-reflective
  way.

- Students are given the
  opportunity to create their
  own design report proforma,
  encouraging an independent
  and constructivist approach to
  learning.

Issues arising for staff regarding the design report

- The learning outcomes needed
  revision to link more directly to
  the assessment criteria, making
  marking clearer and more
  focused.

- The assessment method took longer to deliver because it was new to staff and students. Once in place, the implications on time should be minimal.

Issues arising for students regarding the design report

- Students really enjoyed writing the report and felt that that it had direct relevance to their development as designers. It was an example of learning located in practice.

- The original design report template was inadequate for manipulating text and image within a single document. It has now been modified. The HEI is considering further professional publishing software to improve the experience of completing the report and developing the professional skills of students.

Case Study B: an end of module test or coursework or portfolio as assessment choice

Context

Courses: BSc in Building Surveying and Environment, BA in Architecture and BSc in Construction Management.

Module: Behaviour of Structures.

Numbers of students participating: 146 (including 14 disabled students).

Standard assessment method: end of module test.

Purpose of assessment method: formative.

Research method(s): staff interviews, student interviews, student questionnaires and focus groups, with data analysis.

Participation: The full case study summarised here was originally authored by Easterbrook *et al.* (2005) and is available at: <www.plymouth.ac.uk/disability>. It was developed in conjunction with the School of Engineering and the University of Plymouth, and was joint-funded by the Higher Education Academy Engineering Subject Centre.

Description

This approach to assessment, based on student choice from the three modes listed above, derives from an earlier SPACE pilot of a single choice of assessment, which recorded high levels of student and staff satisfaction and saw an increase in grades achieved. Maximising flexibility of choice was responsive to the breadth of the student cohort: traditional, mature, disabled, non-disabled and international students. The innovation of the three choices was explained to students during the first lecture and reiterated in the information accompanying the student survey questionnaire. Further clarification could be obtained from staff. Latterly, students were offered a week in which to choose their preferred method of assessment and a five week buffer during which they could replace their initial choice. Only six chose to do so.

Offering students a choice of assessment method was a challenging point of departure, presaging difficulties in development and delivery. From the point of view of trying to balance validity with reliability, establishing equity between assessment methods was a critical concern, facilitated through an evaluation conducted by an industry representative, an academic adviser for the HEA Subject Centre for Engineering and the School of Engineering. An increase in staff time dedicated to supporting student choice and marking was recorded. Student grades improved, specifically at the upper and lower ranges, and with a 99% satisfaction rating to students, the choice of assessment mode has been embedded into the module. The resource of 'special arrangements' for disabled students was cut completely and as a pilot it has raised a high level of interest at all SPACE Project dissemination events.

The tripartite choice has been expanded, through direct student feedback, to accommodate a fourth choice; a weekly summative test to provide an ongoing measure of achievement through feedback, rather than the submission of extensive coursework or the summary pressure of an end-of-module test or portfolio presentation. (The self-reflection questionnaire for students is downloadable at <www.plymouth.ac.uk/disability> for use and modification by colleagues considering developing assessment choice.) Some students chose to abandon this option after a few weeks and reverted to coursework,

indicating that the student experience of assessment choice had helped inform the choices made. Further developments are under consideration including providing the weekly summative test in an online version, and the School of Engineering is evaluating assessment choice for other modules on their programmes.

Resources required for the three assessment choices

- Additional staffing time to support student choice.

- Additional time for marking assessments unsupported by model answers.

- Drop in demand for 'special arrangements' for disabled students equals less resource from the examination office, disability services, etc.

- Fewer departmental resources required for 'special arrangements' for in-class tests for disabled students.

Advantages of the three assessment choices for staff

- The diverse student group was better served by assessment choice.

- Levels of student satisfaction were increased.

- Providing equality of opportunity at school level for disabled students created a proactive engagement between staff and students.

Advantages of the three assessment choices for the student

- A marked reduction in the number of students obtaining the lowest grades.

- A marked increase in the number of students obtaining grades of 60%+.

- Choice of assessment encouraged synergy between assessment mode and students' learning styles and circumstances.

- 'Special arrangements' were not requested by disabled students.

Issues arising for staff regarding the three assessment choices

- The individuality of student submissions required additional staff time for appraisal and marking.

- A framework for staged submissions of students' assessments had to be devised and administered, to help structure student study time and reduce the volume of end-of-module submissions.

Issues arising for students regarding the three assessment choices

- Taking personal responsibility for choices made was empowering for students.

- Student choice would have been better informed if a range of examples had been available to act as an *aide-mémoire* to each assessment mode.

Conclusion

The two case studies cited here show above all that with careful planning, assessment practices can be designed and developed to be inclusive. In so doing, levels of student satisfaction are likely to increase, grades awarded for assessed work are likely to improve and demands on HEIs to make 'special arrangements' for disabled students are likely to diminish dramatically. From this we can conclude there will be cuts in demand for the resources required to make 'special arrangements', but that what diminishes is likely to be demanded elsewhere in a reallocation of resources. To make assessments inclusive requires careful planning, additional staff time for marking and evaluation, the delivery of well targeted feedback to students and the resources to embed changes at the course review and development stage. This redeployment of resources, which one mustn't underplay in its complexity or potential to spark resistance, is a vital element in the staging of the infrastructure necessary to make assessments inclusive in an age of equality.

References

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About the authors

Judith Waterfield has worked for over 20 years to support learning across the educational continuum as a teacher, educational therapist, dyslexia specialist and senior lecturer. For the past 15 years she has led disability provision at the University of Plymouth. She has directed national and European projects, helping to shape progressive thinking about inclusive higher education through systemic and practice change. In 2004, she was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in recognition of her lifetime work contributing to the development of equitable learning and teaching for diverse students.

Bob West is a part-time senior lecturer at the University of Plymouth, specialising in researching and writing on disabled students in higher education. He has 28 years' experience in the field and lives in the South of France where he divides his time between painting, stone walling and academic work.