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Developing academics' assessment practices in open, distance and e-learning: an institutional change agenda

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Special Issue: Assessment in open, distance and e-learning: lessons from practice

TITLE

Guest Editorial: Developing academics' assessment practices in open, distance and e-learning: an institutional change agenda

Jessica Evans, Sally Jordan, and Freda Wolfenden

ABSTRACT

Universities across the globe are attempting to change assessment practice to address challenges in student engagement and achievement. Integral to this objective are strategies to develop academics' assessment practice. These frequently focus on attendance at formal Continuous Professional Development (CPD) events and/or implementation of institutional blueprints. This editorial article uses a case study from the Open University (UK) to explore an alternative 'communities of practice' approach to the improvement of assessment arguing that academics' professional expertise is best deepened through participation in authentic activities of teaching and scholarship. The discussion identifies what is involved in such an approach including the role of an enabling principles-based framework, the constraints on implementation and the implications for HE leaders.

KEYWORDS

Assessment change, assessment principles, institutional change, professional staff development, communities of practice, HE leadership.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) across the globe is in a state of flux, rapidly shifting from the prerogative of an elite few to mass participation, by way of multiple modalities and diverse providers; equal access to affordable and quality university education for all women and men is a global goal for 2030 (UN, 2015). In a very short period the UK higher education sector has been subject to a plethora of changes: introduction of loans and the withdrawal of the teaching grant; rapid expansion including increased competition and private providers; a fast developing hybrid teaching and learning model as many universities move into technology mediated learning; development of intense audit and public scrutiny of what Universities deliver; diversification of the products and markets of universities into phenomena such as MOOCs and OER; and increasing pressures to widen participation in HE. All this has led to an

increasingly diverse and fragmented sector in which different conceptions of the very purpose of universities – and therefore assessment – coexist, making it incumbent on higher educational institutions to take a more critical stance on the function, design and the short and long term effects of assessment.

The UK government's plan to institute a metrics framework for teaching (the 'teaching excellence framework') will, whatever else it does, put assessment at the fore of measurable outcomes for teaching (Strickland, 2015). This can only mean that the quality of assessment will become visible and subject to audit as never before, and will be seen as a key factor when analysing data on retention and progression, reshaping career trajectories and reward systems for academic staff, and defining success in employer engagement.

With this emerging landscape in mind, this special issue explores the challenges of a more reflective and analytical approach to assessment through a lens on practice; the purpose of the issue as a whole is to enhance understanding of how assessment in open, distance and e-learning in higher education can be developed within wider pedagogic strategies to improve students' learning experience and their academic achievements. Hence, writing as academic teaching practitioners, authors present case studies that evaluate and review their interventions, setting out the context for, and reflecting on, educational problematics in their own teaching. In this editorial article we focus less on the substantive aspects of assessment innovations themselves, and more on the institutional mechanisms that can be used to support changes in assessment practice. We do so by presenting a 'case study' of our own experience of instigating institution-wide change in assessment practices at the UK Open University (OU) the aim of which was to achieve a coherent assessment diet oriented to assessment for learning (AfL). We draw out themes of academic professionalism and emerging communities of practice, related to our project's aim to raise the standard of assessment by promoting it as 'craft'.

In our article we seek to account for a particular *kind* of change process, often neglected in research on academic teaching practices. Too often, the early, sometimes faltering steps that are the building blocks for sustainable and systematic change are not reflected in the literature on academic teaching practices and academic development. We argue that nurturing and installing a meaningful and sustainable enhancement culture in assessment requires more than merely providing staff development opportunities to enhance individual teacher's practice. Such CPD interventions are often delivered by specialist units outwith Faculties and can be conceptualised as a 'set of commodities to be consumed' (Boud & Brew, 2013, p. 20; Boud & Hager, 2012). Taking account of the wider context within which an individual's teaching takes place is critical to the success of University projects aiming to improve the quality of student learning; collective effort across all institutional levels is essential for sustained movement in academic practice through

deepening academics' understanding of their assessment activity as professional work (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Boud & Brew, 2013). Our case study is therefore cognisant of the institutional opportunities, blockages and paradoxes typical of many Universities – for example: the lack of a clear, focused and intellectually rigorous teaching and learning strategy or an articulation of what constitutes high quality assessment; a weak culture of sharing professional learning and 'good practice' as well as little structured mentoring support for academic staffs' teaching (Fung & Gordon, 2016). Complicating factors can include the lack of systematic reward for academic staff engaged in teaching improvement work despite institutional exhortation of the need to 'put the student at the heart of everything we do' and concomitantly a historically embedded recognition system that values academics' research achievements more highly than their teaching-related activities (Cashmore, Cane, & Cane, 2013). Within the fault-lines of these phenomena, we – as a small group of experienced academics acting as 'institutional entrepreneurs' (DiMaggio, as cited in Hardy & Maguire, 2008 p.14) outwith the formal management structure – sought to bring about a new community of assessment practice.

Assessment in HE

The practice of assessment is a core component of the teaching and learning process and exerts a powerful influence on what and how students learn. Assessment also plays a critical role in helping students to become self-regulated, reflexive, independent learners with the capability to exercise high-level evaluation on their own and others' work that allows life-long learning (Boud, 2000). From the educator's point of view, assessment makes the difference to student motivation, informs future study choices, provides a means of measuring the effectiveness of module content and teaching methods, and provides information to facilitate quality assurance and enhancement (Biggs, 2001). However, the impact of assessment on learning is not neutral. It can become 'the tail that wags the dog' (Dysthe, 2008, p. 17), defining a 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder, 1971) and leading students to become demotivated or over-dependent on their tutors (Yorke, 2003). Furthermore, as Boud (1995) points out, whilst students may be able to escape the effects of poor teaching, they are unlikely to be able to escape the effects of poor assessment. It is therefore the most vital thing to get right.

In higher education the practice of assessment is an integral part of the teaching role of academics and central to quality assurance mechanisms. But historically assessment practice has rarely been the explicit subject of staff professional development or an institutional priority for improvement (Ferrell, 2012). Whilst there are a growing number of cases of studies of professional development for teachers in universities, some including consideration of assessment, we have found little recent literature concentrated on professional learning in distance learning institutions (Hughes et al., 2016). Discourse around assessment in universities is

often limited to technical or procedural issues and the selection of tasks and their associated mark schemes, with little consideration of how assessment relates to pedagogic design (Holroyd, 2000). Moreover, not only have many assessment tasks remained unchanged in design and operation over a long period, but where there have been developments and innovations, these have usually taken place in individual modules, resulting in a fragmented experience for students through their qualification study due to the nature of the modular curriculum (McDowell, 2012). This can be particularly true for distance learning students whose study as part-timers extends over a longer time period, often 6 years or more.

The Case study

The OU has recently been engaged in a major institutional change initiative (The Study Experience Programme 2011-15), focussed on core aspects of the student learning journey with the aim of improving student progression and achievement. The programme strand that comprises our case, the New Models of Assessment and Tuition (NMAT) project, concentrated on the quality of academic assessment practices across the institution; its initial remit was to explore innovative and flexible assessment practices and propose ways of embedding such practices, recognising that the university curriculum was moving from a modular to a qualification focus. From 2012 to be eligible for Student Loan Company (SLC) fee-loans, part-time students had to *enrol* for qualifications rather than only collect credit towards qualifications by registering in individual modules as was previously the case. It therefore became necessary to devise assessment strategies that were coherent and properly developmental over the whole of a qualification's study levels.

The goal of NMAT was to *unlock thinking* around assessment through ownership and innovation of assessment by academic teams, supporting them to enhance their competencies and expertise in the practice of assessment as part of the institutional endeavour to better support the development of independent, self-regulated learners across the wide range of discipline-based and vocational qualifications. It struck us that the key aspects of professionalism we wished to support staff to develop were similar to the graduate outcomes we wanted for our students: to become more objective in evaluating their own practice in relation to peers and to the benchmarks of the sector, to search for good practice within a demarcated community of fellow practitioners, to proactively learn from mistakes whilst under guidance from experienced peers and to make systematic improvements in order to bring about a fully professional attitude with respect to assessment (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). Sustainable system change requires relational change in both students and teachers. Therefore if students are expected to become more sophisticated learners their teachers should also participate on an equivalent learning journey to become more sophisticated educators.

The NMAT project team comprised a small number of experienced academics from different faculties with project support. We began by investigating aspects of assessment practice at different levels across the university:

Modules and qualifications: assessment design; student experiences; module team (academics) and tutor experiences.

Programme level: staff development and scholarship; quality enhancement; peer review.

Institutional context: principles, policies and regulations; recognition and reward; resourcing.

These were collaborative investigations aimed to generate a rich picture of assessment practice across the university including at key points in the cycle of module assessment practices (Figure 1). Activities included workshops with ‘critical friends’ from different units; interviews with key stakeholders including groups of students, tutors and academics working on large cohort introductory undergraduate modules; examination of assessment schemes from these modules; analysis of student survey and achievement data, interrogation of relevant sector wide research literature, and consultation with external experts.

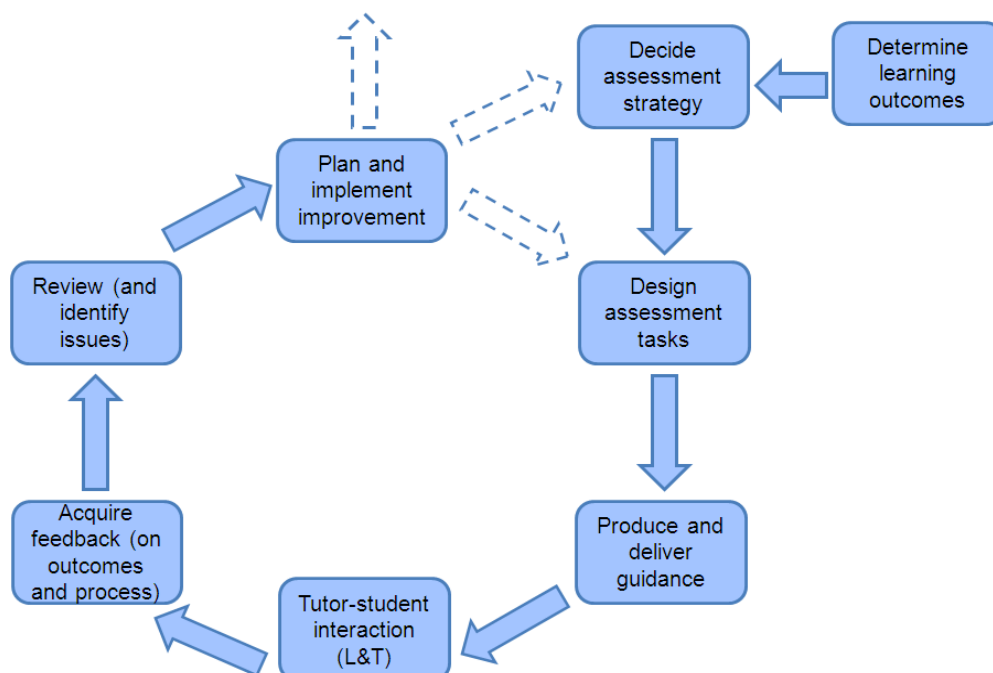


Figure 1: Assessment practices in a module

These investigations of roles and practices revealed that assessment suffered from considerable inconsistency particularly in the student experience, low levels of expertise, isolation within module or programme teams and a lack of clear expectations based on current practice. There were examples of exciting innovative and effective practice but too frequently these were little known in the wider institution. There was an absence of a transparent, shared guiding framework for assessment practice across the institution. This led to project activity to create such a framework in the form of a pan-university set of guiding 'Principles for Assessment Practices' relevant to the assessment cycle.

Principles for Assessment Practice

The purpose of the principles is greater consistency and transparency in the design and use of assessment, and more effective and engaging assessment tasks in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study. The seven principles aim to stimulate conversations and changes in practice such that assessment more fully achieves the aims of *assessment as a developmental process to support learning*. An example of one of the principles is given here:

Students should be given opportunities to engage in and develop their skills in peer review and self-assessment. All qualifications should offer students opportunities to develop the skills of peer review and self-assessment under guidance from Associate Lecturers [tutors] as part of the assessment strategy. Producing and receiving feedback reviews are different learning processes with different benefits and students should have opportunities to undertake both. In both peer review and self-assessment students should have opportunities to provide written and oral commentary and should justify their evaluative decisions. To achieve this, early teaching of review and evaluative skills should be introduced in all qualifications and planned across the stages of a qualification where possible.

In drawing up the principles we attempted to reflect the diversity of priorities, values and knowledge from different communities rather than impose uniformity from the centre (Mutch, 2002). This ensured the principles had relevance and support from across the university and facilitated their approval through the university governance process. The principles recognise that academic staff's understanding of the purpose and pedagogical philosophies underlying assessment differs across types of qualification, study level and discipline (Cleaver, Lintern, & McLinden, 2014) and that it is allegiance to discipline or subject that primarily motivates academic staff (Gibbs, 2013; Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). The principles allow for a wide variety of assessment tools and design across the curriculum including those which are tied to disciplinary and professional requirements.

There was an important curriculum context for our principles – the OU’s relatively flexible, modular curriculum. Indeed a distinctive feature of the OU is its Open Programme studied by over 40% of graduates who may combine modules from subjects across the whole curriculum. Accordingly, the principles had to be constructed at a level of abstraction that could be workable and meaningful across these subject boundaries but could also create a coherent assessment experience for students, whatever their qualification intention. Moreover, the *kinds* of principles created were in large part governed by the need to ‘re-set’ the very purpose of assessment in a ‘mass’ educational institution whose open-ness (no prior qualifications are needed to enter the OU’s degree level programmes) not only means that a substantial number of students compared to the rest of the sector enter with less than ‘A’ level qualifications, but also that its market comprises unpredictable, changing demographics. Here too there are major differences compared to the rest of the sector. For example, increasingly since 2012, a larger proportion of new recruits are from groups historically found to be less confident and prepared for distance mode HE study (see Prescott in this issue).

Consequently, staff designing assessment must be aware that many students upon entering the institution have little tacit knowledge and understanding of assessment literacies, and also that their previous experience of assessment may be starkly different to that within the OU (see Fenton O’Creavy et al. in this issue). Accordingly, the principles reflected the need for the first year of study to focus explicitly on ‘learning to learn’, balancing this with a strong foothold in the discipline foundational to the qualification. In recognition of contemporary theories of learning (Nicol, 2010; Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999) the principles were also a long term commitment to embed social learning, such as peer review, into teaching and learning episodes. Furthermore, the principles reflected the growing emphasis in the sector on producing graduates with defined employability capabilities, such as cognitive and key skills related to life-long and independent learning. The principles thus had the concept of a self-evaluating, self-regulated learner at their heart and could, in this sense, be said to be ‘discipline blind’.

Finally, we were quite explicit that these principles for assessment practice were not designed to offer ‘blueprints’ for assessment approaches or rules for assignments. We recognised that implementation would need to be owned at a local level (Faculty, programme, department, subject or module team), mediated through the lens of the particular subject (Knight & Trowler, 2000). Rather the principles were an enabling framework for movement in practice.

Embedding the Principles

Movement within practice is complex, particularly in such a large, distributed institution as the Open University where various tasks and processes to support the design, tuition, monitoring, quality assurance, and award of assessment are parcelled up and allocated to different roles and units. In the absence of an overarching framework and especially given the open, modular nature of the curriculum, there are frequently dissonances between the teaching practices of different units, resulting in a fragmented, incoherent and inconsistent student experience.

Our model of transformational change in the practice and discourse of assessment across the university had a number of components operable at different levels of the organisation. The creation and approval of the guiding principles of assessment practice provided a framing policy innovation. We previously described the range of activity pursued to develop the principles; this led to our nurturing a group of academics from different disciplines interested in improving assessment practice. This group provided the nucleus of an emerging community to guide and sustain the implementation of the principles. As project leaders, we consciously rejected a managerialist approach with its discourse of deficit, positivist assumptions about change through tightly controlled rational procedures, monitoring efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances (Deem, 1998). Such techniques can lead to an endless cycle of refinements to performance management systems and process improvements including many small piecemeal technical 'innovations' that, not only risk cancelling each other out, but can also easily become increasingly detached from the wider pedagogical strategies of the organisation (Nicol & Draper, 2009).

Instead, the project enacted an approximate 'distributed' leadership model, perhaps best characterised as a collaborative framework for academic staff and leaders in HE, that properly integrates vertical decision making (formal approval for the University's new principles for assessment practice) and horizontal academic leadership and ownership of change (engagement with staff at all levels to construct and implement the principles). Distributed leadership takes account of contexts and contingencies that frame that leadership; it focuses on the 'leadership' development of individuals at all levels of the organisation whether they are in positions of formal authority or informal influence. Quinlan (2014) argues that self-reflexivity is a key aspect of this more 'authentic' leadership style. To take staff with you, to care not just about process but a meaningful and sustainable outcome, requires leaders to create and participate in spaces that allow forms of open dialogue with the aim of developing the practice of collegial problem solving; solid connections can then be made between top level or institutional policy (in our case the approved set of principles) and the details of 'how to do it' on the ground. We deliberately acted as fellow explorers of the pedagogic discourse in a collegiate setting, working with academics from across the university (our emerging community) to develop the

mechanisms for implementation of the principles. Collectively we initiated a number of different innovative activities across the system, learning through reflection and feedback on these activities (Checkland & Scholes, 1990). The overarching priority was the *process of participation towards improvement* rather than meeting financial targets or even targets for student performance.

The key features and interrelationships of the change process our project exemplified can be illustrated using the ‘Transformational Change in Assessment Practices’ model drawing on Nicol (2012), as shown in Figure 2.

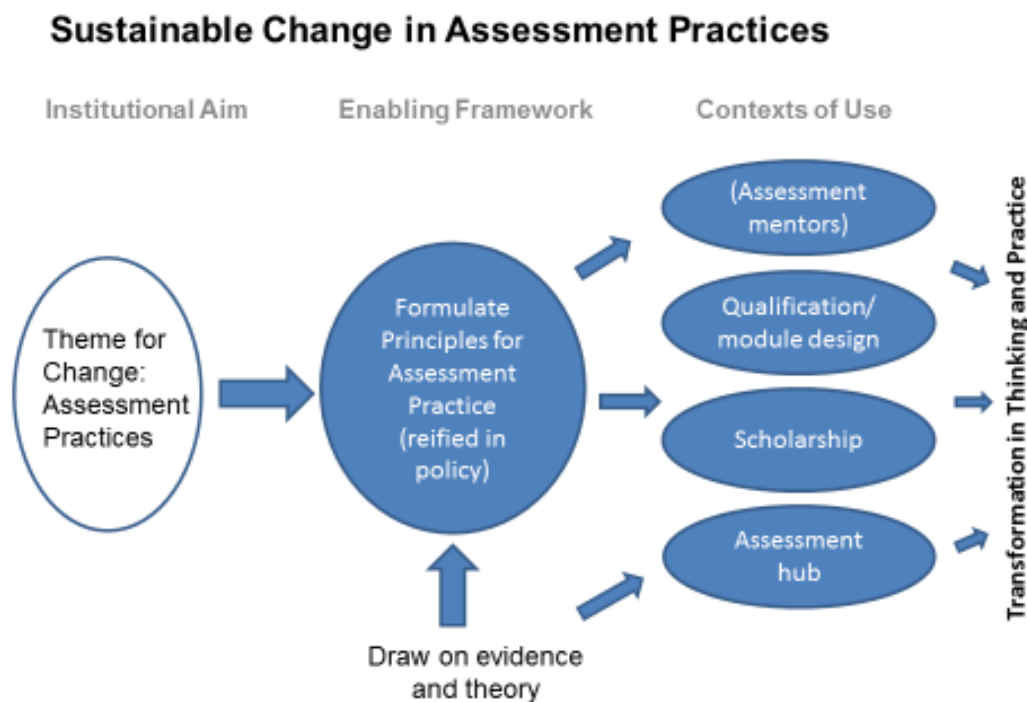


Figure 2: Transformational Change in Assessment Practices Model (after Nicol, 2012)

The principles for assessment practice were presented as a high level ‘conceptual resource’ defining the constituent educational practices within the assessment theme and underpinned by a clear pedagogic position drawing on what we knew about effective learning. Enactment of the principles is (since implementation continues) supported by closely related innovations and activities. One such innovation is the Assessment Hub, an institutional online space led by academics in a network across all faculties for sharing guidance, scholarship, good practice and experiences of assessment. The Assessment Hub includes a searchable assessment ‘bank’ where module teams upload short evaluations of their own assessment work to share with others. The other innovation is the appointment of ‘assessment mentors’ in different discipline areas within all the Faculties, to support academic colleagues in the design

of assessment and the interpretation of student and tutor experiences of assessment. These 'mentors' support the development of the assessment hub as well as forming a group for cross-discipline and inter-Faculty discussions on assessment, acting as a consultative forum for further assessment policy development, and supporting scholarship initiatives at both university and Faculty level. In designing this role we were clear that it should be separate from both quality assurance and staff performance management mechanisms. Lastly the project initiated, mentored and resourced a number of scholarship enquiries engaged with assessment practice.

Reflections

Underpinning the project's model of change was a belief that it is not the instantiation of explicit criteria in rules which brings about change, but a deepening understanding of the purposes and processes of assessment shared across academic staff. Our approach was that the prime site for learning about assessment is within departments, module and programme teams; thus learning about assessment is located firmly in the processes of co-participation in the social practice of assessment (Lave & Wenger, 1990). Academics develop expert competence to undertake the tasks associated with the design and delivery of assessment through engaging in authentic practice-based activities situated in their particular context, characterised by their discipline (Loads & Campbell, 2015), specific qualifications, and within the precepts of distance learning.

These situated opportunities for guided and peer supported development of new knowledge and knowing (Cook & Brown, 1999) ideally arise in the course of the work itself and address aspects of the work, recognising the dialectic relationship of productive activity and understanding (Lave & Wenger, 1990). New knowledge and organisational innovation is generated through this interplay of forms of knowledge and knowing as part of action (Cook & Brown, 1999). But simply doing the work is not sufficient for professional development. Academics need to be provided with opportunities for, and prompted to, reflect on issues which 'mutually confront them' (Boud & Brew, 2013, p. 216). In this process guidance emerges from the dialogue between an academic expert in assessment working in a mentoring-style role who has skills in directing attention to issues and areas that might otherwise be disregarded and can disrupt habitual thinking and assumptions. They – the assessment mentors – are required to play different roles in various sites of assessment participation and to improvise (Lave & Wenger, 1990). As Boud and Brew observe, this emphasis on practice 'focuses attention on the nature of the associations connecting people and artefacts in dynamic, interactive and provisional ways that give rise to understandings of a relational theory of action' (2013, p. 213). This is not to suggest that all other forms of professional learning i.e. those outside the routines of practice, are redundant but rather that their purpose and form needs

to more clearly link to the situated practice of academic within their curriculum or subject setting.

Our experience at the OU, echoed in research findings (for example Ferman, 2002), suggests that this model of professional learning is consistent with the preferences and needs of academics. In the project, we undertook a survey of academics. Respondents were asked to identify types of professional development which they would be likely to use to meet their professional development needs relating to assessment. By far the most popular options, with only minimal variation by faculty or by length of time in post, were 'Examples of good practice to look at' (selected by 75% of respondents) and 'The opportunity to talk to someone who has done something similar' (selected by 58% of respondents) (OU, 2014). Very many respondents mentioned 'learning on the job' and spoke of the power of both learning from others and learning through mentoring and monitoring.

However in the Open University, as in many distance learning institutions, academic engagement with assessment can be problematic, for the distributed nature of the design and delivery of teaching makes it difficult to create an integrated or bounded site of practice. At the OU, the 'TMA' (tutor marked assessment) is regarded as a peak conduit for student learning to take place. But, assessment designed by module teams is usually mediated by local tutors who support students and offer feedback on their assignments. How these local staff interpret and facilitate the enactment of assessment tasks is central to developing an understanding of students' assessment experiences, a point addressed explicitly by Brunton and colleagues in this special issue. Individuals, including academics, construct their understanding of teaching within their context. But for academics in distance institutions, mediation of assessment by tutors – who have the role of closely observing student work and interacting with the student – can inhibit the development of their expertise: it limits their direct experience of student dialogue on assessment tasks. Therefore module teams lose the texture of the experience of practice as a holistic entity.

Furthermore, for many academics in distance institutions, engagement with the entire assessment cycle is sporadic rather than annual and it may also be piecemeal in so far as there is a division of labour between different assessment elements. For example, different people within a module team may attend exam boards, set assignments, undertake dialogue with tutors or monitor samples of tutor marking and feedback. This can limit their opportunities for learning and the practices of assessment in distance learning may only slowly become integrated with their own personal practice. In addition the scale of the institution and its complicated procedures and structures, can limit the capacity of module teams for action following reflection on practice. This is somewhat mitigated by the collective model of academic working within the OU, centred on the role of the module team, which offers structured opportunities for academics to talk about teaching, to make sense

of the 'messiness of academic practice' (Jones, 2011) and become engaged in social negotiation of what constitutes competence in assessment. Designing and delivering teaching in distance learning institutions is much less a private act than in campus institutions.

Nevertheless over recent years certain economic and ideological factors have acted to undermine this model of collective working. Following Stephen Ball's formulation, we have all become reformed as neo-liberal subjects (2012, p.2) in which a business imperative has penetrated all aspects of higher education, reshaping the social relations that govern our everyday working practices. Ball follows closely on the heels of influential HE commentators such as Stefan Collini (2011) but his own elucidation is that professionals must now operate as calculative selves in the service of new policies of performance. Academics spend increasing amounts of time reporting on what they do, fulfilling their University's management mandate that what is most important is that the measurement of results and comparisons of outputs are seen to be done (see Power, 1999.) It is not only that the academic acquires new skills such as the arts of self-presentation and inflation, it is that there is a profound 'loss of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do' (Ball, 2012, p.20). In the context of teaching and learning work, performativity means a re-orientation of pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes. Consequently attention is deflected away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate measurable performative value (Ball, 2012). Clearly this militates against the development of scholarship-oriented, thoughtful and reflective teaching and assessment communities.

At the OU, these shifts are manifested in how the core teaching task is carried out. For example, as a consequence of a policy of 'efficiency', module teams are smaller; resources are limited and tight timescales all preclude possibilities for significant teaching and learning conversations and investigations into effective practice. Academic teaching practice is becoming more individualised, led by the 'contract' an academic has made with their performance objectives; and mentoring in teaching activities has less time allocated to it. Finally, academics relatively new to the sector are being required to assume leadership roles prematurely – a practice that can be characterised following Margaret Radin's 'indicia' of commodification (in Ball, 2012, p.25) as 'fungibility', where people are regarded as fully interchangeable with no effect on their value to the role holder. Thus there are less opportunities for their beliefs about the purpose and form of assessment to be challenged and disturbed in the formative years of learning their craft. Overall, then, this is a picture of assessment practice which at best has pockets of disconnected 'innovations' and at worst is vulnerable to stasis with little learning at the heart of its endeavour.

This dilution of the collective model of module team working makes it more imperative to pay attention to the development of alternative communities of practice

for academics and other staff across the institution and in particular around assessment – relational networks of interactions which sustain and reproduce particular practices (Wenger, 1998). In a large distance learning institution such as the OU, defining an assessment knowledge and practice community is complex and contestable. Is there a bounded ‘site of practice’ for academics in distance education given its spatial, temporal, professional and social dimensions (Boud & Brew, 2013)? Who are the experts or ‘masters’ and how do members of the community progress from ‘apprentice’ practitioners to become experts? Do all educators make this journey and what is regarded as adequate? Or for some practitioners do their career long trajectories merely involve passing through the assessment community? (Lave & Wenger, 1990). Similar questions are pressing for the sector as a whole, with the increasing use of postgraduate ‘teaching assistants’ and the casualization of part time sessional teaching. Given that most academic staff are not researchers of pedagogy in higher education, to what extent should intellectual engagement with assessment move into scholarliness? And how might this become recognised as prestigious work within an institution if not through established forms of recognition accrued to research-related metrics?

Whilst the cases presented later in this special issue do not address these questions directly, we suggest that the practice of the scholarship of assessment is part of an academic toolkit for change; through enquiry into their practice, academics can develop expertise to teach more knowledgeably and the community of practice around assessment can reinvent and transform itself, with ongoing innovation. Such activities encourage engagement with pedagogic theories, whilst making visible the cases of enquiry for others to learn from and criticise; both of these features are essential for deeper understanding of assessment practice (Roxa & Martensson, 2009). Participation in scholarship allows academics to develop a more expansive interrogation of pedagogical practices, controverting the hegemony of the ‘audit society’ (Power, 1999) – the processes of quality review and the deficit model of much formal academic development.

We should be clear that this agenda cannot be about turning all academics into scholars or researchers of assessment pedagogy. Most of the academics we worked with are typical of many HE staff; they undertook scholarship projects investigating their own teaching practice, but they were already researchers in their own subject disciplines. Their identities as researchers and professional academics do not depend on demonstrating their knowledge of the scholarly literature of pedagogy either generally or within their own discipline. Moreover, the diversity of epistemological positions associated with different disciplines can make it harder for non-social sciences academics to participate in the scholarship of teaching and learning as this is mainly focused in the social sciences and informed by particular theoretical understandings (Cleaver et al., 2014). Furthermore, as Gibbs (2013, p.12) points out, academics in any case under-utilise the scholarly literature and are more

likely to deploy and contribute to more pragmatic forms of knowledge exchange, such as the toolkit-like 'how to do X' guides rather than in deeply discursive literature-search based educational research. Reprising our question above, to what extent do institutions – and perhaps more importantly their students – want and expect a deepening of professionalism in teaching (as we defined it earlier) from their academic staff?

Drawing on our experience of leading pedagogic change in a large, complex and distributed institution, we end with some concluding thoughts and lessons learned. Our overall preoccupation is what makes for sustainable improvements to assessment practice. The sponsored scholarship activity has been highly productive, involving practitioners from each faculty; the potential value of the assessment hub has been recognised in a recent OU QAA inspection (QAA, 2015) and is being developed further. It is too early for evaluation of specific NMAT project outcomes, but initial signs are mixed.

Realising sustainable change is difficult and our experience has led us to believe that the kinds of questioning and interrogation of one's own practice as an academic teacher is risky for individual academics, and requires not only courage but explicit support from university leaders and managers at all levels (Quinlan, 2014.) It is risky not least because morale dissipates if staff are persuaded to invest energy into change projects that are then neither recognised nor rewarded, or where they do not continue to receive support throughout the full process of implementation, which might take a matter of years. At the centre of all internal activity, space needs to be made for a sustained academic conversation about teaching and learning if we are to develop a more robust and inclusive culture of pedagogic debate and innovation. But this space needs to be decoupled from formal quality assurance processes and governance; research and practice informed development will depend on keeping different voices in dynamic tension with each other, not driving through rubrics and blueprints. To date we have experienced only limited success in persuading key stakeholders to invest in the role of 'assessment mentor' as conceptualised here, to support the development of academic practice in assessment. The role has become deeply embroiled with quality assurance procedures, in securing support for new pieces of assessment regulations, and increasingly associated with the 'gatekeeping' of assessment particularly around cost control. This worries us: focussing the activities of 'assessment mentors' at the policy and governance level risks a loss of identity and capability for mentors as assessment experts – how do they continue to develop their knowledge and knowing without deep engagement in a collective conversation that acknowledges the ambiguities and messiness of assessment practice? It also signals a reluctance to enable thoughtful engagement with pedagogy as a dynamic concept underpinned by theory and values, and rather reduces it to a set of methods and processes to be applied to student interactions (Waring & Evans, 2015).

Scholarship enquiries have achieved greater traction to date, but disincentives need to be removed from staff who commit to deep engagement with their teaching and learning, importantly by creating explicit links to markers of esteem such as career development opportunities and promotion (Fung & Gordon, 2016). As we have argued, institutional change – in this case in assessment practice – can only properly and sustainably happen where practice communities are actively created rather than simply assumed to exist, somehow pre-formed, as if ready and able to simply ‘implement’ policies. Paying attention to the means – the tools of change – in a University means that academics as teachers must be given space to play their part in the ownership of the intellectual agenda (Evans, Muijs, & Tomlinson, 2015). Our project’s overarching organizational approach aimed to empower academics through the development of collective assessment expertise and of professional identities. In creating an intellectual space for academics across the institution to focus on a crucial aspect of pedagogy, staff could – for the first time in many cases – reflect on their own experience and enter into a dialogue with others, and then use this as a springboard to develop scholarship projects more formally investigating and evaluating their own practice.

Based on the experience described in this case study, we contest that the best way to empower academics’ assessment practices and to create impetus for assessment innovation is to collectively develop expertise. This should be based in the mainstream practice of module and programme teams, supported by spaces (such as our Assessment Hub and forum) to facilitate cross-institutional dialogue and sharing, as well as interrogation and iterative development of such practice. As a consequence the development of individual professional identity is enhanced. However, no one should underestimate the challenge of planning a meaningful approach to professional staff development if it is to actually create systematic and sustainable improvements to assessment. As we have shown, there persist a range of institutional challenges related to the professional identity of staff who are not by and large pedagogic scholars and their motivations and investments in teaching.

The Special Issue

This special issue comprises a number of case studies highlighting the work of practitioners from several higher education institutions. Some of the cases describe scholarship project outputs from the Open University's New Model of Assessment and Tuition project; however what all the practitioners have in common is an engagement in the practice of scholarship of assessment, and for some this is their first step. Their scholarship is a means of deepening their ability to reflect on the purpose and effects of assessment; and in so doing they have widened their perspective on their academic practice, as they look for and deal with new challenges and initiatives.

A number of recent initiatives are challenging current assessment practices in higher education. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and badged open courses (BOCs) are accelerating demand for technology-mediated assessment of various sorts. MOOCs and BOCs are also renewing pedagogic debates around online learning for a highly diverse student body largely unknown to the academics charged with designing such offerings and their associated assessment. Diversity may comprise both those intending to study for degrees and those with no intention to progress to accredited higher education, and still others who fall into the category of 'widening participation', with low levels of prior education. Moreover, there are expectations that MOOCs can 'disrupt' traditional concepts and methods of assessment in accredited programmes of higher education.

The cases from Hills and Hughes and from Yenn and Rofe consider instances of these highly contemporary university offerings. Yenn and Rofe discuss the challenges in preserving a participatory pedagogic approach within a MOOC with a large global cohort and where the technical functionality of the MOOC platform can act to limit assessment to predominately multiple choice tasks. However, by conceptualising peer assessment as participation in the 'real-life' practices of research – through multiple community conversations in which sources of authority are distributed across students and tutors – the MOOC assessment activities serve to help students experience how expertise in research is co-created and emergent. Hills and Hughes too explore the challenges of designing assessment in a non-accredited but certificated learning experience – the BOC. Hughes and Hills write in the context of a course designed to widen participation in higher education to those from non-traditional backgrounds. In this context future studies might give attention to the ways in which assessment acts differentially with different groups of learners and the cultural tools, language and artefacts comprising the social practice of assessment.

Such differentiated interactions are the focus of Fenton O'Creevy and Van Mourik's study of Japanese students' experiences of assessment tasks on the Open University's (UK) MBA programme. They draw on ideas of student trajectories across a landscape of communities of practice, to describe the continued 'boundary crossing' made by students who remain physically located within their home culture, whilst studying online in a different culture. The challenge for course designers and tutors is how assessment design can mediate this to enable the boundaries to become a 'site of learning' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) rather than a site of failure. Fenton O'Creevy and Van Mourik offer an example of how one academic team undertook to investigate and evaluate their own provision, making changes in response to their findings. They remind us that in distance education much teaching is socially and organisationally constructed and, as the article illustrates, identification of the problem of practice, investigation and change to improve student learning were only possible by working collectively (Trowler,

Fanghanel & Wareham, 2005); through the process of participation, collective expertise was enhanced to be subsequently applied more widely.

Several of the case studies in this issue investigate assessment practices within the setting of degree level study within the UK Open University. The term 'Open' has a range of definitions across the sector, but the UK Open University has no entry qualifications for its undergraduate qualifications. Accordingly, assessment often has 'unintended consequences' especially on novice learners who often struggle to 'decode' the academic assumptions of the language of assessment. Messenger, Murphy and Siemenski conducted interviews with novice students in the unusual category that their grades in their first assignments were borderline, but rather than continuing to struggle academically their grades were seen to improve in later assignments. The novice students were all sponsored by their employers, and Messenger et al. recognise that this factor was probably of some significance in keeping the students on track, if not explaining their improving performance. The initial assumption was that the feedback provided by tutors was of critical importance; however the students strongly identified interaction and support from their peers as being of critical importance at a time of emotional vulnerability. If social forms of learning beyond the formal learning opportunities made available to students (online forums etc.), are critical to keeping students engaged and motivated then there are perhaps implications for novice students on all distance learning modules.

Prescott's case study considers the effectiveness of peer learning for initiating first year students new to HE into good academic habits. There are many reasons for plagiarism in student work and there are already many 'deterrents' and sanctions in place at the OU. But the changing demographic composition of OU students, as discussed earlier in our editorial article, behoves Prescott to create assessment explicitly as an exercise in academic integrity, seeking to develop students' understanding of the first principles of honest scholarship via collaboration over source-referencing through a wiki. She finds that not only does dialogue in a group lead to higher levels of self-monitoring when working individually, it also alleviates the high levels of anxiety associated with referencing – less often acknowledged by HE as in itself a barrier to preventing plagiarism – that afflicts many students when they work on their own. Prescott deploys the idea of moving from novice to apprentice, considering how, through this peer approach, students begin to see themselves as joining a scholarly community that expects them to develop a voice of their own.

Sinclair's case study, a description of the introduction of a short digitally recorded oral presentation as an assessment in a religious studies module, touches on a number of the practical challenges and opportunities for assessment in the 21st century. The oral presentation was designed to add variety to the assessment diet of students and to assess a component which explicitly develops employability skills.

However, the evaluation found some reluctance to engage with the digital recording, which may have been linked to the age profile of students on this module and also as a result of this type of assessment being introduced for the first time for students approaching the end of their studies. For the longer term development of this assessment method, Sinclair suggests it is vital to take a qualification-focused perspective on assessment practice.

Brunton, Brown, Costello and Walsh, from University College Dublin's Open Education Unit, address the construction of a programme strategy for assessment in the context of a distance online learning modular curriculum in the Humanities. In developing a programme protocol in the form of an assessment 'matrix' they ensured students could achieve all qualification outcomes and avoid over-assessment of some outcomes over others as well as the overuse of particular assessment types. Brunton and colleagues too arrive at the idea of the proactive development of teaching communities – in this case the Assessment Writers – as a critical part of implementation of suites of assessment across modules in a qualification. They recommend a multi-faceted approach to this – the creation of an online course, workshops and provision of assessment guides and resources. This formation of assessment writing communities within subject areas created a space for new dialogue and ideas about assessment and feedback to be voiced as well as for intellectual challenges to be aired. In their case, their reflections demonstrate a very structured, intense approach to implementing a formalised policy. Nonetheless they echo our argument that the institutional implementation of assessment policies and strategies must, if they are to change teaching and learning systemically and sustainably, pivot on actively created practice communities devoted to the deepening of professional expertise.

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