



# Innovative Assessment in Higher Education

Edited by CORDELIA BRYAN  
and KAREN CLEGG

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# **Innovative Assessment in Higher Education**

**Edited by  
Cordelia Bryan and Karen Clegg**

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# Innovative Assessment in Higher Education

Throughout higher education, assessment is changing, driven by increased class size, changing curricula, and the need to support students better. At the same time assessment regulations and external quality assurance demands are constraining assessment options, driven by worries about standards, reliability and plagiarism. This book is about the difficult process of changing assessment in sometimes unhelpful contexts. More than a 'how to do it' manual, *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* offers a unique mix of useful pragmatism and scholarship.

Key features include:

- exploration of the rationales behind different kinds of innovation in assessment
- discussion of the complex assessment contexts in which teachers attempt to innovate
- contextualisation of innovation in assessment within a range of academic settings
- theoretical and empirical support for innovations within higher education
- case studies illustrating the problems encountered with traditional assessment methods

*Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* is an enquiry into how and why we innovate in assessment and what practices 'work' in different contexts and cultures. A vital resource for higher education teachers and their educational advisors, it provides a fundamental analysis of the role and purpose of assessment and how change can realistically be managed without compromising standards.

**Cordelia Bryan** is a freelance higher education consultant. She has led four successful UK higher education projects, is a registered practitioner of the Higher Education Academy and is an external evaluator for several projects. She also co-edited *Speaking Your Mind* in Longman's *Speak-Write* series and has lectured and published widely on educational development within higher education.

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# Foreword

Assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education. It occupies a great deal of time that might otherwise be devoted to teaching and learning, and it is the subject of considerable debate about whether it is fair, effective and worth spending so much effort on. Assessment is a topic about which people have strong opinions, though whether those opinions are backed up by a good understanding of what it is and how it works is less certain.

There is no doubt that many students and teachers would prefer assessment to be different to what they currently experience. However, in what ways should it be different? What should it take into account? Which directions should it pursue? And how can changes be implemented? Assessment seems such a fixed and given part of the educational scene that it might appear to be less susceptible to change than most other features of higher education.

But while this might once have been true, it is not the case now. We are probably seeing more substantial shifts in assessment policy and practice than have ever occurred before. These are being driven not just by the desires of participants for change in assessment – such desires have been present for many years without it making much difference – but by the external influences on higher education institutions for accountability, for responsiveness to changing employment conditions and by the increasing power of consumers. Governments are requiring universities to justify their practices as never before, employers and professional groups are placing expectations on institutions to deliver graduates who can more effectively cope with the world of work and students are starting to realise that they can have considerable influence when they are contributing a greater proportion of university budgets.

These pressures are being played out in complex ways and it will be some time before we can clearly discern what their overall effect will be. What is clear, however, is that they are leading to many innovations in higher education courses in general and in assessment in particular. These innovations are moving in a number of different directions. First, they are generating alternatives to traditional assessment practices that were once dominated by the unseen examination and the standard essay. These practices have proved unable to capture the range and nature of the diverse learning outcomes now sought from courses. Second, they are

involving students more actively not only in teaching and learning activities, but in assessment itself. Society today demands more than passive graduates who have complied with a fixed assessment regime. It wants people who can plan and monitor their own learning and do so without continuous prompting from others. Third, they are generating new forms of portrayal of outcomes. A standard honours classification or a set of grades communicates little to employers or to those admitting students to further study. How can students present what they know and do so in ways that others will understand and which are validly recorded? Fourth, they are recognising that assessment itself has a powerful influence on learning and that changes to assessment may have a greater influence on students' learning than other changes to the curriculum. Assessment innovations are therefore needed to improve the quality of learning outcomes.

The contributors to this book are some of the leaders of change in assessment in higher education in the UK and elsewhere. They are pioneering new ways of thinking about assessment and new forms of assessment. They are responding to the changing environment and developing specific innovations to meet a variety of the needs identified above. They are doing so within a system that is not well funded and with colleagues that may not fully appreciate the need for many of these changes.

This collection points to new directions in assessment and provides illustrations of important initiatives. The entire area of assessment is in a state of flux and it is not clear how it will settle down from the current flurry of activity. The contributors to this volume show how they have been thinking about these issues and illustrate what they have put into practice. They also offer suggestions to stimulate further innovation in assessment practice. They do not provide recipes to follow, but new perspectives on problems. By engaging with them we can gain greater understanding of the issues we ourselves face.

Cordelia Bryan and Karen Clegg have done an excellent job in bringing together a stimulating range of chapters in an accessible form. A major strength of the collection is the work of Graham Gibbs and the accounts from various projects that have been stimulated by him and his colleagues in the Assessment Project Network. It is through the collaborative work of this network that the conceptual underpinning for the book evolved. In his two early chapters Gibbs takes a characteristically pragmatic and thoughtful approach to setting the scene and articulating how assessment frames learning. He regards the experience of students as central to what we should be doing in education and examines how assessment can aid learning and shape students' experience in positive ways. He places particular emphasis on the role of feedback and the need to improve the quality of information that students get about their work.

The editors and contributors share my own view that assessment advocates have ignored the consequences for student learning for too long. Assessment has been seen almost exclusively as an act of measurement that occurs after learning has been completed, not as a fundamental part of teaching and learning itself. In the past, by isolating assessment we failed to realise that it can have a very negative effect on student learning and can encourage students to do things that are



counterproductive to their long-term interests. It also led to courses that did not utilise the positive influences that assessment can have on focusing students' attention on the most important concepts and practices they are studying. Righting the presently very skewed balance between assessment for measurement and certification and assessment for learning is an important and strong theme throughout this book.

In practice, innovating in assessment does not mean inventing assessment activities that no one has ever used before. Rather, activities need to be innovative in the context of the course and the experience of students so that students respond to the task in hand and not to their preconceptions of what a particular assessment method does. That is why books like this are important. They enable us to extend our repertoire of approaches and stimulate us to consider ways of designing assessment that addresses needs for which our present approaches are inadequate.

Finally, there is one important observation to make about how a reader should approach a set of new ideas in this area. In assessment practice the devil is always in the detail. Most innovative approaches fail not because they do not represent good ideas but because their implementation has been inadequately thought through. At the end of the day what makes a difference is exactly what a student does and how they experience what they do; it is not the intention of the teacher that counts. Students have been trained by many years of schooling to read tasks carefully and take them literally if they are to do well. This applies as much to innovative approaches as it does to the conventional essay question. If there are ambiguities in what is required by a task, if the boundaries are unclear, if the nature of what is to be produced is obscure, then the assessment activity is not likely to be effective. The implication of this is that when using approaches to assessment that students are likely to find unfamiliar, as is the case with many examples in this book, it is often worthwhile to err on the side of explicitness. The challenge in this is to construct an assessment task that is clear without trivialising a complex activity by turning it into a behavioural checklist.

Another level of detail should also be considered. It is common for a new approach to assessment initially to be less effective than anticipated. This is because it often requires several iterations before a new idea or new approach can work in one's own context. There are many factors to be taken into account and it is only through adjustment over time that really effective practices can be developed. It is in marrying the high-level concepts of assessment for learning with the micro-details of implementation that the art of good assessment practice lies.

In the end, a focus on assessment of all kinds is important because, as I have suggested elsewhere, students may well escape from poor teaching through their own endeavours, but they are trapped by the consequences of poor assessment as it is something they are required to endure if they want to graduate. The more we can engage students in assessment activities meaningful to them and which contribute to their learning, the more satisfying will be their experience of higher education.

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