Renewing Policy and Practice: Frameworks for Institutional, Faculty and Department Action

The purpose of this section is to suggest practical ways in which assessment policy and practice can be reviewed and renewed. The key steps in making and managing change that follow are based on observations from case studies of educational innovations, including examples from the Assessing Learning project. Regardless of what level the change is targeted at — university, faculty, or department — the primary objective is to produce sustained effects that survive well beyond the enthusiasm of individual change agents. It is not simply about redrafting policy statements and regulations. The values underlying approaches to assessment are so deeply embedded in academic practices developed over many years that it is often extremely difficult to change them without challenging fundamental and often competing assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning across the institution.

Change at the institutional level requires a planned approach that is fully in tune with the core values of the institution, usually articulated in the mission and goals of the university as they relate to teaching and learning. However, the diversity of assessment practices across fields of study means that the specifics of change need to be implemented and managed at the level of faculty and department. Getting consensus is not easy and any significant rethinking and change can take a number of years to implement successfully.

In ‘Immersing a Faculty in Assessment’, Jennifer Radbourne and Duncan Nulty provide a case study of a planned approach to faculty change from Queensland University of Technology. They describe the way in which the faculty approach to assessment was successfully transformed over a sustained period. The key elements targeted in this process were: the academic programs; the staff who deliver the programs; and the organisational policies. The four principal phases involved: a review of the policies and practices; the development of an accountability model; the deployment of an in-house consultant to facilitate change; and the integration of assessment changes into curriculum redesign.

A planned approach towards policy change

1. Identify the need for change

Obvious as it sounds, unless a genuine need to improve assessment can be identified then any efforts to produce change will produce a cynical response from the key stakeholders. However, the need for change in assessment practices is not necessarily recognised or widely supported by those engaged in teaching and learning. It can be useful to commission independent local research to identify precise aspects of assessment practices that require rethinking. This does not mean defining problems into existence: there has to be an overall acceptance that change in assessment will actually improve the quality of learning outcomes.
The local research could include analysis of data from existing student feedback surveys as well as purpose-designed surveys and focus groups of student perceptions of assessment practices. A critical aspect to look out for is the ways in which student learning behaviour is driven by current assessment requirements. Surveys and focus group interviews with staff can reveal patterns of shared concerns that would not otherwise be known in a setting where habit and tradition are the primary rationale for current practice.

Throughout the project for change it is essential to demonstrate the tangible benefits that flow from the renewal of approaches to assessment. The most crucial of these is the impact on improved learning outcomes. It is therefore vital that in the initial stage of the project that a systematic evaluation of student approaches to learning is undertaken, including their perceptions of the role of assessment, and that some measures of learning outcomes are provided for comparative purposes.

Finding, reviewing and disseminating examples of best practice from universities and departments in similar contexts is useful in the early stages of a program of renewal. Staff need to be convinced that change is not only desirable but possible. They also need to believe that what they are planning to do is in some respects unique and innovative.

2. Recognise the everyday reality of obstacles to change

Most obstacles to changing assessment practices can be overcome with a planned approach that involves genuine consensus building. Opposition or resistance to change from academics is most likely where it poses a potential threat to their autonomy and integrity, and where changes simply do not make sense or appear unnecessary. Proposals to regulate assessment in isolation from other aspects of teaching and learning, or ignoring the disciplinary context are destined to fail. Even so, there will be a natural tendency to downplay the significance of assessment and so the case for change has to be argued and the evidence of need provided.

Ensuring that the nature and origins of existing policy is clearly understood is a critical step to removing obstacles to change. In case studies for the Assessing Student Learning project some staff made a series of erroneous assumptions about the comprehensiveness of university policy for assessment. For example, staff assumed that they were ‘not allowed’ to give ungraded passes, which was simply not the case. Likewise, it was asserted that staff were compelled by university policy to distribute grades according to a particular formula: there was in fact no such policy, this was simply a matter of long-standing practice at the faculty and department level. The perception that the wheel is being reinvented is also a common source of irritation and resistance. In one university an internal review was held on the issue of special consideration and only on completion of the review was it discovered that an almost identical policy had been accepted only a few years prior.
3. Raise awareness of the issues and generate discussion

Getting consensus on the need for improving approaches to assessment is best achieved by the use of open forums that involve all academics, and especially, the senior executive and administrators. Gaining the political support of university and faculty leadership across all staff and from the outset will ensure the involvement. This in turn will promote the credibility of the change project.

A widely supported forum should have the effect of starting and stimulating conversations about assessment. An example from a University of Tasmania assessment symposium in 2002 illustrates the pattern of activities and outcomes that might be expected from effort to renew institutional assessment policy and practice. The open forum raised general questions from academics, support staff and administrators such as:

- How do we provide an appropriate range of assessment methods and maintain fairness across large classes, with diverse student groups?
- How can we more clearly and meaningfully link assessment to outcomes?
- How should we deal with the need to provide special consideration for students with disabilities – what are the parameters?

However, these forums too often lead to too little lasting change. A planned approach will ensure that there is immediate follow-up involving the dissemination of the findings, the preparation of a second stage plan of action at the institutional level, and direct input into the major policy making bodies.

4. Promote change on multiple fronts

The University of Tasmania example cited above illustrates how, having raised the issues, actions might be proposed for attention at the institutional level. These included diverse activities such as:

- Conducting workshops and facilitating regular conversations on assessment;
- Developing a manual of good practice;
- Showcasing exemplars of good practice from within the university;
- Collecting information on assessment practice and standards and developing resources;
- Promoting the value and importance of good assessment practice and rewarding it.

Making these multiple activities take place in a co-ordinated fashion is a major challenge. While formal committees of the university or faculty clearly have responsibility for initiating and implementing change, ad hoc working groups are often the most effective means of responding to new and emerging issues. The credibility of an assessment policy review working party will rest on the extent to which it involves connections to all levels of decision making concerned with the quality of teaching and learning. It is therefore important in a planned approach to review leadership roles of individuals and groups responsible for assessment policy.

The notion of ‘idea champions’ has been widely-used in higher education innovations and involves identifying and supporting academics at the faculty and department level who take responsibility for local initiatives. This is particularly effective when some funding is available to provide time release.
5. Provide expertise and support

Staff development is the most common form of support to assist the implementation of change. It needs to be needs-based and to have a strong element of ownership by the participants in both its design and delivery. The Queensland University of Technology case study illustrates the level of commitment required to produce long-term, sustained changes in practice with skills development and related auditing arrangements. That project also included the deployment of an internal expert consultant to assist the implementation process.

6. Connect to accountability and reward systems

None of the suggestions outlined above will be effective unless there is some impact on the accountability and reward systems of the university, faculty and department. In a time-deprived environment academics like everyone will make rational decisions as to how they distribute their energies. Making the responsibilities of all stakeholders clear and transparent and connecting the outcomes to the reward processes of the university is essential. At all levels of administration and teaching, those with a part to play in improving assessment practices need to feel that their efforts are properly recognised.

References
