

Student Success: Assessment

Podcast transcript

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Key

- + **EP:** Edd Pitt (host)
- + **KQ:** Kathleen M Quinlan
- + **SN:** Stuart Norton (introduction)

Transcript

SN: We know that assessment and feedback practices are among the most powerful levers educators have for improving student learning. Amidst current uncertainty within HE through a variety of different disruptors and with the shift in pedagogic landscape in global higher education right now, there's a need to think seriously about how we put the significant resources devoted to assessment to better use to support students' learning, as well as academic staff development and to improve assessments fitness for purpose more generally.

My name is Stuart Norton, I'm Senior Advisor in Learning and Teaching at Advance HE and I'm leading the update to the Advance HE student success framework series. I'm delighted to introduce these podcasts that are part of a range of activity linked to the forthcoming Advance HE literature review authored by Dr Edd Pitt and Professor Kathleen Quinlan, both from the University of Kent.

Within their review, the authors advocate broad conceptions of assessment and feedback, centre student learning, and prompt a rethink of traditional views on assessment and feedback. The review, this podcast, forthcoming webinars and all associated activity provides a wealth of resources to help institutions and practitioners at all levels recognise the need for and the means to bring about evidence-informed transformational change.

The review itself complements the wealth of research available. And their recommendations have been synthesized and drawn from a range of demonstrable outputs designed to help higher education institutions, policymakers and researchers alike to identify aspects to prioritise, consider or review in relation to current policy and practice of assessment and feedback, with a view to rethinking and repositioning assessment strategy, processes and practices. That being said at least me to hand over to the authors who will now introduce themselves for this advanced HE connect benefit series podcast

EP: Welcome to this Advance HE student success connect benefit series discussion today a podcast between myself, Dr Edd Pitt, Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Study of Higher

Education at the University Of Kent and today i'm joined by my co-author on this literature review on assessment and feedback, Professor Kathleen Quinlan, welcome Kathleen.

KQ: Thank you Ed.

EP: It's been great working with you on this extensive literature review. As we mentioned in the blog, it was a large undertaking and a really short timeframe that certainly presented challenges along the way for both of us. You took the lead on the assessment section of the review and I thought we could start this podcast by explaining to our listeners, what do we mean by assessment?

KQ: Yes, thank you Edd. I think it's important that we establish that right from the beginning as we do in the review. We've expanded the definition a little bit beyond what has previously been described in relation to the Advance HE framework. So Sam Elkington defined assessment as 'means by which we assure and express academic standards' but you and I of course are very heavily influenced by a focus on assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. That is assessment should be about promoting students' learning. And that of course links very closely to feedback which is the other half of our review which you took the lead on and we talk about in the other podcast in this series related to this literature review. Assessment links to feedback in that way because a lot of the learning occurs through the feedback process but it's also focusing here on the way in which assessment itself can promote learning. So Black and William have written seven key principles for assessment for learning. And in the process of that work they also defined educational assessment and we've borrowed from that definition, so that assessment is something that we define as learners engaging in tasks which generate data. So they're doing something and that provides an observable output upon which inferences or claims can be made about learning.

EP: So are we talking about something that will always be submitted and marked then?

KQ: No, the act of students doing something - if we want to put it that broadly - students doing something that's then observed in order to make a conclusion can occur any place in the instructional cycle. It could be written. It can be verbal. It can be individual. It can be group based. Can have a very small audience, just a teacher or can even be a public display like an art exhibit that's open to an entire community. So it can be as small as answering a question in a seminar or as big as a year-long research project. It might count toward a student's mark or it might not. So using that definition assessment is pretty inclusive and as with the example of a contribution to a seminar discussion, it's actually quite hard to separate assessment from good instruction itself. So for example, whenever you practice active learning in your classes you're obviously engaging students in doing things rather than just being a spectator to your teaching. And student participation in any learning activities become assessment for learning when the student, their peers or a teacher observes those actions, that participation and makes that inference about students

learning. And those inferences might be in the form of marks that are handed out or it could be just as simple as a student who's made a contribution to a seminar discussion and said 'my fellow students don't seem to have understood what I just said, I wonder why. Maybe I need to communicate my point more clearly'. So even that is a moment of self-assessment that's occurring in relation to that participation, that single remark perhaps in the middle of a discussion with peers.

EP: Yeah I completely agree and I think what you're saying here really relates well to the things we've recently been saying about how feedback should be viewed in this way too, and it sounds like we're helping students to see assessment and feedback a little differently to the commonplace interpretation of say producing work and it being marked and getting feedback on it.

KQ: Exactly. And so there is that really nice connection between the assessment piece and the feedback piece which although we did write them as two separate sections in the literature review, we brought those together in the recommendations and this set of assumptions, especially the assumption around both assessment and feedback being ultimately about promoting student learning, brings that unifying principle.

EP: Yeah, and in the review this thing is really interesting. We sort of argue that effective assessment practices should integrate as many, what we're calling here, powerful learning principles as possible. So I wonder if you could explain why this is the case and how we might go about achieving this?

KQ: So given the complexity and the wide range of assessment activities that I've just described as potentially falling under the umbrella of assessment for learning, it made sense to try to organise the review in terms of some underlying learning principles. And that's why we start the review with this section of the review with what we called high impact practices. High impact practices are instructional practices that include a number of key principles or elements. Those elements typically include high expectations of learners, sustained student effort, meaningful academic and peer interaction working with diverse others, timely and constructive feedback, real-world application, public demonstration of competence and reflection on it, and integration of learning. And so by definition a high impact practice integrally involves assessment, quite specifically a public demonstration of competence. So in that case, the student work is seen by and assessed by someone other than the teacher; a community member maybe, or a client or a service user, maybe a beneficiary of the student's action. And so given that emphasis on public demonstration of competence, it felt important to reference the high impact practices, and that set of broad principles I've just outlined are kind of central to that portion of the review.

EP: Yeah, and I wondered then if you could give us a sort of an example of a high impact practice that we might see in the review.

KQ: Yeah, they're typically complex and extended activities so internships, community service learning, capstone courses, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research projects, and sometimes richly designed e-portfolios are all examples of what have been considered high impact practices. Drawing on that literature on high impact practices that's come out of the work in the US based on surveys of student engagement, the national survey of student engagement in particular.

EP: And you mentioned at the start of your answer there internships, and of course these are very powerful learning experiences but at most universities only a small percentage of students are able to take advantage of them as a formal part of their curriculum.

KQ: Yeah, and that is in fact one of the major drawbacks and limits the inclusivity of those kinds of experiences when you have just a small proportion of students doing them. But what is interesting is that there are some exciting ways that we can bring work-integrated learning into the classroom which can give those high impact experiences to all students.

EP: And have you got a specific example of that?

KQ: Yeah, we have a little section on live case studies and I say live case studies, they go by various names. Sometimes they're called client initiated or client sponsored projects, live study, live case studies, collaborative industry led projects, or in more design-oriented fields they're sometimes called live briefs. And basically in this situation, clients are lined up with real problems that they need advice or assistance on and then students are formed into groups to research this problem, to analyse possible solutions and to present those to the client at the end of the module. So in the process of solving that problem for the client the students might visit the organisation or business, they might interview members of the business or the clients or product users. They might gather examples from elsewhere in the sector or industry, and these live case studies integrate those eight elements of high impact practice that I just outlined but they offer those rich learning experiences to a whole cohort, even with large class sizes. So when they're structured as group projects, they also are more efficient to mark and because students are more interested in the work. They see how it connects to the real world and it allows them to build skills that they'll need in their own careers, tend to be intrinsically motivated throughout the module to do high quality work and to learn which is what we're ultimately trying to promote.

EP: Yeah, absolutely and I was struck by some of the research in the review on these live cases where I think it was one of the studies that you'd highlighted showed that a live case was more effective in terms of student satisfaction, outcomes, engagement and performance than a fictional case study.

KQ: Yeah, and that was a fascinating study Valenzuela in Chile did that study and it was really fascinating and prompts a question that we kind of need to focus on more is sort of

how real does an assessment need to be? In the case of the Valenzuela study the public demonstration of students actually presenting to real clients with real current problems who can potentially use the students recommendations to make real changes seem to be crucial ingredients in that effectiveness. So in the previous year to the study year the teachers had used a fictionalised or non-live case study which captures of course some of the elements of high impact practices. It might set high expectations. It might involve sustained effort meaningful interactions with others. It may involve feedback and reflection on learning. But the actual real world application - that is not just making a theoretical connection or fictional connection - but actually having a public demonstration of competence in the form of presentations to the client. And that idea of it being real and in real time seemed to be important and distinguished the fictional from the live cases.

EP: Yeah, and I wonder if we're moving into authentic assessment here too then because you know this has got real currency at the moment as we respond to various demands that are put upon the sector by government policy, regulatory bodies and arguably wider industry expectations. And I know this is something we've discussed frequently in our exchanges as we carried out the review and we also highlighted it in our recent special issue that we did together for the Assessment in Education Principles, Policy and Practice Journal. So with this in mind then, how is the field now conceiving of authentic assessment and crucially how are we promoting meaningful student learning and growth, and student engagement and student satisfaction?

KQ: Yes, high impact practices - I'm now thinking of them as a subset of authentic assessments. So they include the elements of authentic assessment plus additional elements. So because public demonstrations of competence are not always possible as I was just describing with the live case study, it is useful to look at this wider category of authentic assessments. So authentic assessments first of all involve realism, which we were just talking about and emphasises the relevance of problems to everyday or professional life and its practical value that could come in the form of a live case as I was just talking about or even in a fictional case would still count as an authentic assessment.

EP: And that sounds like something that would really help students become better graduates.

KQ: Yes, authentic assessment is tightly tied to the employability agenda. That's right and it's interesting that it was mentioned in the literature review on Employability that was conducted as part of this Advance HE Student Success series of literature reviews. But I think we can review authentic assessment a bit more broadly than just being about employability. First we can broaden it beyond the work sphere, so that it might be authentic to a discipline rather than just to the world of work. And that's what you are referring to Edd of course when you referred to the paper we had done for assessment in education last summer when we introduced the concept of signature assessments. So assessments can be authentic to intellectual, social and material practices of the discipline

itself and those we called signature assessments. So I would prefer - and we saw signature assessments as a type of authentic assessment – so I would prefer to say that authentic assessments are realistic to either the professional employment or the discipline itself.

EP: Yeah, and I would agree. And I think as you were starting your answer there about these parts it sounded like there might be other elements that are within this authentic assessment.

KQ: Yes, so ethics assessments are usually described as offering cognitive challenge so focusing on higher order thinking application, problem solving and maybe even decision making.

EP: Right, yes thinking is at heart of higher education...so that that definitely makes sense.

KQ: Yeah, and I would take just a little bit of issue with that. Not that I would dispute that it should be cognitively challenging. It should be and most definitions of authentic assessment tend to privilege this cognition, basically privileging the thinking process. But I think that we can be more holistic in our approach to student learning and incorporate both emotional and moral dimensions so that we can view authentic assessment as being defined also in terms of emotional and ethical challenges that are realistically faced, perhaps by graduates in the real world beyond the classroom. And by widening it to consider ethical challenges it also allows us to emphasise not just employment as a reference point or even the discipline as a reference point, but the state of the world more generally. So dealing with big issues of social concern such as social justice and climate change which might not of course be front and centre to many careers but which I would argue universities, disciplines and university graduates should be addressing.

EP: Okay, so I hear you saying it needs to be realistic and challenging as well as ethically and emotionally perhaps as well as cognitively...

KQ: Yes, so the challenge I'm suggesting here is that it should be cognitively challenging, ethically challenging and emotionally challenging and that all of those contribute to that authenticity.

EP: And then are there any other key defining elements of authentic assessment?

KQ: Yes, so authentic assessments are also usually defined as developing what's called students' evaluative judgment - you'll know about that from the feedback literature of course - for example, through transparency of criteria and opportunities for feedback. So evaluative judgment basically means that students understand what constitutes good performance so they can self-regulate/monitor their own performance toward

improvement. The high impact practice literature calls this reflection on an integration of learning. And so it goes by different names but often it's referred to in this literature as evaluative judgment.

EP: Yeah, and I would agree and obviously evaluative judgment is very familiar to me. And in that feedback session we discuss, for example, students working with exemplars and their engagement in peer feedback and peer assessment which are key ways that students can build this evaluative judgment.

And I think this is another example of synergy between the two literature sections that we've got within this this bigger review that are often strangely dealt with separately in the field. So I wondered if you align to these sort of constructs within authentic assessment if you could give us a sort of worked example of making a traditional assessment more authentic.

KQ: Yeah, there are lots of small ways that we can make even what are basically traditional assessments more authentic. So it could be introduced just by contextualising knowledge. So for example, instead of asking students to write an essay where they explain a concept or explain a theory you could give them a case scenario and ask them to apply that theory to that case scenario. How does it fit with or explain what's happening in that case scenario? So that's a pretty simple example of how we can just increase the authenticity of a fairly traditional assignment.

EP: Is there anything else in that?

KQ: Yeah, in another example that came up in the literature review. There was a course on diversity in the US and the teachers introduced an oral exam in place of a written exam and this was in part to ensure authentic assessment of students' ability to explain concepts. So understandably to prepare students to enter a more diverse workforce, it may be important for them to be able to verbally explain certain key concepts related to diversity, equality and inclusivity. So by putting in place an oral exam instead of a written exam they could test that particular skill that would be real to what students and citizens and graduates and professionals might face. And at the same time, it also promoted academic integrity, so made it harder to cheat.

EP: I'm really glad that you brought up exams because it would probably be remiss of us not to mention exams within an assessment podcast. I think you know the last two years have been really disruptive for higher education assessment and given we've had to adjust and modify and think differently about assessment and really it's fitness for purpose. How has the research field responded to this? And associated to this, what implications might this have for practitioners moving forward into this what we're now calling post-pandemic world, where the established norms have been questioned and we think differently about how we assess?

KQ: If only. Yeah, you're right exams - and we mean exams are traditional, timed, proctored, closed book, often decontextualised tests of knowledge were still a dominant feature of the landscape in the UK pre-pandemic and in many other places in the world. So then when we went into lockdown in the UK in 2020 - I'm aware that lockdowns happened at different times in different parts of the world - we in the UK were suddenly confronted with really serious academic integrity issues. When you try to shift an old style exam which were originally intended to reduce cheating because you literally were looking over the shoulders of people who were taking the exams, and then try to shift that into an online setting and this seems to have prompted some rethinking of exams. And of course Edd you remember on our own survey of UK practitioners in Autumn 2020 which we published you remember in that separate Advance HE collection on pandemic assessment. Our survey suggested that many academics were paying attention to authenticity of assessments and to shifting from exams to more coursework type assignments as a result of this shift to online learning and online assessments in particular. So it did seem to be prompting the kind of rethink that we would want to be seeing in the sector. It's a little too early to see how that is coming through in the literature because our literature review cut off in October 2021, so more to come on that in the future.

EP: So do you have any thoughts about the way the sector might go or what you would hope the sector sort of thinks about doing?

KQ: Well I certainly hope that we see the sector continue to embrace opportunities for more authentic assessments instead of just end of module, decontextualized, knowledge-based exams. Multiple choice exams may indeed capture some of the key knowledge that students might need in a field but they often don't capture very well the skills or the attitudes that are needed to work effectively and be effective citizens after university. So we really do need to encourage staff to create more authentic assessments, particularly those that provide opportunities for students to work in stages with feedback and opportunities to draft and redraft, so that they can incorporate feedback throughout a term toward larger more meaningful outcomes.

EP: Yeah, and again I think that ties in really with the sort of things that we were talking about on the feedback side of the review, and certainly we're going to touch on those within the second podcast of course. And as we draw towards the end of this podcast, I wanted to ask you about the area of inclusivity within assessment and whether you could tell us a little bit more about this somewhat emerging area of literature.

KQ: Yes, thanks, we specifically recommend to researchers that they attend more to the equity and inclusivity in assessment and feedback design. We know we have substantial attainment gaps in the UK between say Black, Asian, minority ethnic students and white students. We also know that the Office for Students in England is requiring that we close those attainment gaps before 2030. And we know that while we here in England are under

a mandate, we also know that other countries also have documented achievement gaps that are problematic. So it's really important that we think about assessments and how they might be contributing to those attainment gaps or how they might be a given design affects different groups of students differently. Because assessments are the most proximal aspect of curricula to student outcomes so if we have disparities in outcomes we need to be looking at assessments to say how might they be adding to or reducing those attainment gaps.

EP: Yeah, have you got a sort of an example of maybe an assessment that we might be able to do that with?

KQ: Well there's some research from the US on undergraduate research projects that suggests that they tend to level the playing field. So underrepresented minority students, which is more the term that's used in the US, those students tend to benefit from engaging in undergraduate research projects. The attainment gap then is smaller on those assessments than they might be on other kinds of traditional exams or assessments. And I think we need to be looking more broadly to say are there any other kinds of assessment or ways of writing or designing assessments that might have these differential effects on different groups of students. And it's remarkable, there's actually surprisingly little on those questions. I only found a handful of articles that considered that question. So it's a little bit early to say what works in terms of assessments for closing attainment gaps but there is some reference to it. Where we have such evidence in the review we make note of it. I think it's worth pulling that together and also worth researchers in assessment and feedback prioritising that part of the research agenda and posing that as research questions. So not just attending to satisfaction, engagement and performance of all students but to disaggregate findings to see what demonstrable impacts are on different subgroups of students of particular designs.

EP: Yeah, and I think that's a nice way to sort of end and as we pose a challenge to the field and our listeners. It's been great chatting to you about this side of our literature review. So thank you very much for all your answers and I really look forward to our discussions on feedback on the other podcast as part of this pair. And listeners can also check out the full review in the assessment and feedback section of the Student Success Connect Benefit Series on the Advance HE website and the webinar which will be taking place on June 9 at two different times of the day for our listeners across the globe. So thanks Kathleen.

KQ: Thanks Ed.

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