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Values for best practice in assessment

We begin this book by identifying some values as a starting point on our mission to optimise assessment in terms of validity, reliability, authenticity and transparency. For a start, let's try to define or explain these terms in straightforward English, and add some further values to work towards in our assessment. We have continued to address the agenda in this section throughout the book, so please regard this initial exposition as just a summary of the overall picture.

- 1 **Assessment should be valid.** It should assess what it is that you really want to measure. For example, when you are attempting to assess problem-solving skills, the assessment should be dependent not on the quality and style of the production of written reports on problem-solving, but on the quality of the solutions devised.
- 2 **Assessment should be reliable.** If we can get the task briefings, assessment criteria and marking schemes right, there should be good inter-assessor reliability (when more than one assessor marks the work), as well as good intra-assessor reliability (assessors should come up with the same results when marking the same work on different occasions). All assignments in a batch should be marked to the same standard. (This isn't the same as the strange notion of benchmarking, which implies that assignments should hit the same standards in every comparable course in existence – an interesting but quite unachievable idea.)
- 3 **Assessment should be transparent.** There should be no hidden agendas. There should be no nasty surprises for students. Students should not be playing the game 'guess what's in our assessors' minds'. Assessment should be in line with the intended learning outcomes as published in student handbooks and syllabus documentation, and the links between these outcomes and the assessment criteria we use should be plain to see (not just by external scrutineers such as QAA reviewers, but by students themselves).

- 4 **Assessment should be authentic.** There are at least two dimensions to this. First, we need to be striving to measure each student's achievement, in ways that enable us to be certain that the achievement belongs to the student and not to anyone else. Second, we need to be measuring students' achievement of the intended outcomes in contexts that are as close as possible to the intentions lying behind the outcomes in the first place – for example, performance skills should be measured in performances, not just where students are writing about performance in exam rooms.
- 5 **Assessment should motivate students to learn.** Assessment should help them to structure their learning continuously during their studies, not just in a few critical weeks before particular assessment climaxes. Assessment should allow students to self-assess and monitor their progress throughout a course, and help them to make informed choices about what to learn, how to learn it, and how best to evidence the achievement of their learning.
- 6 **Assessment should promote deep learning.** Students should not be driven towards surface or 'reproductive' learning because of the ways their learning is to be assessed. They should not find themselves 'clearing their minds of the last subject in order to make room for the next subject'.
- 7 **Assessment should be fair.** Students should have equivalence of opportunities to succeed even if their experiences are not identical. This is particularly important when we are assessing work based in individual learning contracts. It is also important that all assessment instruments and processes should be *seen to be fair* by all students.
- 8 **Assessment should be equitable.** While assessment overall may be designed to discriminate between students on the basis of the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes, assessment *practices* should not discriminate between students, and should set out not to disadvantage any individual or group. Obviously, students may prefer and do better at different kinds of assessment (some love exams and do well in them, while others are better at giving presentations, for example), so a balanced diet of different means of assessment within a course will set out to ensure that no particular group is favoured over any other group.
- 9 **Assessment should be formative – even when it is primarily intended to be summative.** Assessment is a time-consuming process for all concerned, so it seems like a wasted opportunity if it is not used as a means of letting students know how they are doing, and how they can improve. Assessment that is mainly summative in its function (for example, when only a number or grade is given) gives students very little information, other than frequently confirming their own prejudices about themselves.

- 10 **Formative assessment should start as early as possible in a course or module.** There is a great deal of research evidence that students benefit greatly by having some early feedback on how they are doing, and adjust their efforts accordingly. Conversely, if we leave assessment till too late, students who fail are frequently so discouraged that they drop out, or lose motivation.
- 11 **Assessment should be timely.** Assessment that occurs only at the end of a learning programme is not much use in providing feedback, and also leads to the 'sudden death' syndrome, meaning that students have no chance to practise before they pass or fail. Even where there is only end-point formal assessment, earlier opportunities should be provided for rehearsal and feedback.
- 12 **Assessment should be incremental.** Ideally, feedback to students should be continuous. There is sense therefore in enabling small units of assessment to build up into a final mark or grade. This avoids surprises, and can be much less stressful than systems in which the whole programme rests on performance during a single time-constrained occasion.
- 13 **Assessment should be redeemable.** Most universities insist that all assessment systems contain within them opportunities for the redemption of failure when things go wrong. This not only is just, but avoids high attrition rates.
- 14 **Assessment should be demanding.** Passing an assessment or test should not be automatic, and the assurance of quality is impossible when students are not stretched by assessment methods. That is not to say that systems should only permit a fixed proportion of students to achieve each grade; a good assessment system should permit all students considered capable of undertaking a course of study to have a chance of succeeding in the assessment, provided they learn effectively and work hard.
- 15 **Assessment should enable the demonstration of excellence.** The very best students should be able to be challenged to achieve at the highest standards.
- 16 **Assessment should be efficient and manageable.** It is possible to design brilliant systems of assessment that are nevertheless completely unmanageable because they make ineffective use of staff time and resources. The burden on staff should not be excessive, nor should be the demands on students undertaking the assessment tasks.