

SRHE conference proposal

Assessment Careers: towards a vision of post-modularisation

Abstract

Assessment is resource intensive and assessment practices that help learners to become more self-reliant over time promote both efficiency and sustained learning. However, taking the necessary longitudinal approach to assessment is difficult when programmes are modularised and fragmented. This paper proposes that formative assessment could be used to link modules through providing learners with an assessment career. In an assessment career, learners are enabled to transfer learning from feedback from one module to the next and appreciate their longer-term progress. A variety of assessment career interventions were piloted in 5 programmes and the impact on learner identities was explored. Some early results will be presented as part of a vision of post-modularisation.

1000 words paper

One of the major challenges for learning and teaching in contemporary higher education is sustainability of assessment. Assessment consumes huge resources and attempts to streamline assessment by limiting feedback or automating assessment risk having a negative impact on learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Barnett (2007) and Carless et al. (2011) have argued that it is possible to encourage learners to become self-reliant and self-regulating over-time with decreasing dependency on assessors for feedback. Thus the resourcing issue can be addressed while maintaining the role of assessment in promoting learning.

However, higher education is fragmented. Modularisation of many courses in higher education means that assessment is often viewed as a series of one-off events. Modules or units are taught, assessed and then closed as the learner moves on to the next one. Meanwhile the learner body is shifting – towards more part-time students, distance students, mature and international students who do not conform to the traditional view of a student as on campus and focussed on study. Enabling this variety of learners to become more autonomous is difficult to achieve when there is such a piecemeal approach to assessment and it is further hindered by an overemphasis on grading (Hughes, 2011).

Many practices of modularisation might be here to stay – and there are benefits particularly to enable learners to customise their programmes- but this paper will suggest that modules can be partially re-integrated through longitudinal assessment practice offering us a glimpse of post-modularisation in higher education.

The paper will draw on a three year JISC funded project “Assessment Careers: enhancing learning pathways through assessment” at the Institute of Education which promotes a longitudinal view of assessment by building on a learner’s past experiences of assessment as well as current trajectories. Like a working career, an assessment career develops through a series of related events that join up to give a coherent and progressive pathway that is self-directed. When learners embark on an assessment career they will undertake a

personal journey building on assessment feedback to monitor progress and meet personal goals across programmes and beyond.

The first phase of the project was to capture the current assessment practice of the institution to provide a baseline for identifying change and to develop examples of the assessment careers approach. Opportunities were identified for both enhancing feedback practice and making previous assessments and feedback readily accessible electronically so that progress across modules can be made visible to both learners and assessors.

The second phase is to pilot new formative assessment practices which support the Assessment Careers approach in 5 different programmes. The aim of each pilot is to change the way feedback is written and presented to students so that it links modules across the programme while at the same time promoting learner self-reliance. This is achieved using a range of tools such as self-assessment, dialogic feedback pro-formas, peer feedback and student reflections on progress between modules. A common methodology was designed to evaluate each intervention. The final phase will be to scale up the innovations, but will not be discussed in this paper.

This paper will present some early findings to include:

- a) Feedback profiles before and after the intervention

Feedback is difficult to analyse because it is open to varied interpretations and precise feedback classification systems such as that of Orsmond & Merry (2011) proved difficult to implement. Their classification was adapted and tested resulting in a feedback profiling tool that could identify how far feedback linked current performance with both previous and future work. Profiles of written feedback on selected modules were taken before the change in feedback practice was implemented and then afterwards. The paper will present results from these profiles and discuss evidence for improved connections between modules in a programme.

- b) Learner reflections on assessment careers

A small cohort of students was asked to identify experiences that had shaped their attitudes towards assessment – one they considered to be good; one bad; and also what forms of feedback they had found effective. They were then given the opportunity to practice giving and receiving peer feedback as part of an online module. At the end of the module, an online focus group was conducted to elicit more about these experiences. These data were analysed in terms of questions about qualities of feedback, learner autonomy and so on. Case studies from this process will be reported.

Modular assessments require coherence if learners are to develop autonomy over time. Integrating the curriculum is one solution, such as in programme focussed assessment, but poses all sorts of difficulties when students are on different pathways where disciplinary practices and norms might vary. Narrowing the curriculum and restricting choice is another option, but may not be desirable. The paper will conclude with a vision of how the Assessment Careers approach might break down the compartmentalising practices arising from modularisation and begin a process of modular re-integration which is both sustainable and flexible.

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Orsmond, P. & Merry, S. 2011. Feedback alignment: effective and ineffective links between tutors' and students' understanding of coursework feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 36(2): 125-126.