

Changing the experiences of Masters level learning through improving assessment;

OUTLINE

Assimilate was UK National Teaching Fellowship project based at Leeds Metropolitan University, designed to explore UK and international approaches to Masters-level assessment, a little-researched area of HE pedagogy. There is a growing interest globally in improving the experiences of students at postgraduate level in a highly competitive global environment, with assessment seen as a key aspect of the Masters-level student experience. At the same time, universities concerned about caps on undergraduate student numbers are increasingly seeking to build up their Masters level programmes, which are seen as a potential growth area. Authentic, fit-for-purpose assessment practices are likely to enhance the attractiveness of these programmes.

In this research, the project team sought to offer the sector greater awareness of diverse practices in M-level assessment, and to provide a catalyst for future development of assessment in this area. The project rationale was based on the assumption that fit-for-purpose assessment will lead to enhanced student learning experiences, i.e. assessment *for*, not just *of*, learning (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). The team's professional experience and the relatively limited available literature in the field suggested that most assessment in current use relies principally on traditional methods e.g. unseen time-constrained exams, essays, theses and other written assessments. At the outset, the team expected to find a narrower range of assessment practice compared to undergraduate level, but were nevertheless hoping to find examples of good practice to share, and both expectations have been confirmed.

Using face-to-face and phone interviews, the team have assembled 34 UK and international case studies of Masters level assessment among which are some very valuable examples of innovation as well as overviews, from different nations, of diverse approaches to Masters level assessment.. These are presented on the project website.

Using case studies of innovation and applying a blend of Activity Theory and Q-methodology, the project team have modeled educator practices and perspectives on many aspects of M-level assessment, and the outcomes have interesting, with implications for improving practice. A 'Q-sort' involves participants modeling their viewpoint on an issue by rank ordering a set of items, usually statements, relating to the topic. These individual rankings by the research participants are then subjected to correlational and factor analysis to interpret diverse and shared perspectives on the issue. The researchers involved have interpreted five distinct factors, or viewpoints, relating to Masters level assessment, which have implications concerning staff and

student training for assessment, the assurance of standards, skills development , stakeholder consultation and the strategic implementation of assessment innovations.

One feature of the research has been to query what comprises Masters level compared to undergraduate level assessment, and this has become central to our qualitative approach, exploring shared conceptual constructs within the sector. The paper focuses on sharing the key scholarly and practical outcomes of the project and proposes some changes to assessment practice derived from the research.

References

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