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Title Developing portfolios to become meaningful, external-facing assessments

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This paper is linked to a roundtable session on external-facing assessments, proposed by Nicholas Grindle and Vincent Tong.

Introduction:

Within the current climate of an increasingly globalised and marketised Higher Education students and stakeholders directly and indirectly become driving forces for educational developments and change (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2013). With increased expectations to reap benefits of several years' worth of paid education and training, Higher Education institutes and staff are under more pressure to provide skills that go beyond the knowledge acquisition and deepening that Universities have been known for traditionally (Marginson, 2011; Tilak, 2008). One consequence of these wider changes is the need to provide transferrable skills, to offer practical experience and to develop employability amongst students. The major challenge is to balance these needs with institutional requirements and to simultaneously satisfy expectations of maintaining academic rigour (Haggis, 2006). External-facing assessments could provide one solution.

Assessments, in general, are complex aspects of higher education. Learning objectives are implemented to provide an overview of the course, but also offer quality assurance opportunities. However, learning objectives are not always easily accessible for students (Hussey and Smith, 2002). This combined with increased focus on transferrable skill, education and consequently assessments need to be reconsidered and redefined. Since the introduction of the Bologna process, assessment procedures have changed (Pereira et al., 2016). And it has been acknowledged that different kinds of assessment lead to the development of wider skills than merely the achievement of intended learning objectives (Lam, 2014). Assessments are no longer a simple end product, but work in progress, with several layers of objectives (Dochy et al., 2007).

In the following, I present a cross-institutional staff-student project in relation to the introduction and practical implementation of external-facing assessments.

Project background and context:

Within teacher education portfolios, reflective journals and learning logs are regularly used to assess teachers' abilities and skills in relation to teaching standards teachers have to meet in order to qualify. Often, however, trainees develop these portfolios and journals for the purpose of assessments only. As a lecturer working on an international teacher education programme, I have personally experienced the frustration of trainees and teacher educators regarding the limited use and benefit of teaching portfolios. If used appropriately and consistently, reflective portfolios could be very powerful for teachers' continuous professional development. In their forming years, trainee teachers are provided with the tools of recording reflections and creating relevant action plans, thus are taught reflection in action and reflection on action. Once trainees have graduated and are working as teachers in steady employment, they could continue to use these tools. In practice, the way the portfolios are laid out in such a way that trainee teachers do not necessarily realise this transferability. In relation to employability, trainee teachers also do not realise that the portfolio could potentially help them build a professional image and could therefore be used in situations such as job interviews or parent conferences, where the public, professional image would be particularly relevant.

Working in an institutional context where connected education (Fung, 2017) and formation in the sense of the German concept of Bildung (Schneider, 2012) are highly valued and staff-student collaborations are actively promoted and encouraged, I initiated the project that seeks to develop portfolios as external-facing assessments. The aim is to create tasks with the dual functions of being applicable as assessments, but also to be meaningful for external agencies. Staff and students from four different departments across UCL are now collaborating on this project: UCL Greek and Latin, Information Studies, UCL Institute of Education and Chemical Engineering.

In particular, the project aims...

- to recognise students' needs and challenges in relation to creating and exploring portfolios.
- to explore the necessary dimensions of skills, learning and understanding that need to be captured in a portfolio.
- to develop a portfolio with a dual purpose: for assessment and for demonstrating the manifestation of skills and learning.
- to allow students to create specific assessment tasks and criteria to reflect their own experiences with portfolio work.

Process:

In an initial meeting, we shared our experiences to date in order to gain insights into the different academic contexts and assessment requirements across the departments involved. Subsequently, staff and students in each department collaborated to share experiences and difficulties with existing frameworks with a view to develop a shared understanding of expectations, needs and requirements for new assessment tasks and activities. Currently, staff and students in each department collaboratively explore specificities of their study areas. For example, within the teacher education programme and within information studies, students are currently exploring web site development tools and online software to build portfolios to show case specific areas of learning. Within classical studies, however, staff and student explore the use of objects from museums and archives to create an app that can be used by subsequent cohorts but also within secondary education to support classical language learning.

First steps and ways forward:

In this first stage of the staff-student collaboration across UCL schools a variety of perspectives on external-facing assessments and portfolios have already emerged. Firstly, external-facing assessments must be incorporated within existing curricula in such a way that students are not faced with additional, unnecessary pressures. Therefore, secondly, the assessments must be appropriately supported as far as the use of technology is concerned. Thirdly, students should not be required all of their assessment tasks with the public or external bodies. Portfolios and external-facing assessments therefore would require additional editing or selection processes, so that showcasing work is meaningful for future employments without the students potentially incriminating themselves. Fourthly and following on from the previous point, the assessments need to still allow for personal reflections, which may not be suitable for sharing as external-facing assessments. And finally, ethical, moral and legal concerns need to be considered regarding the materials used for the external-facing assessments. Our next steps are to develop specific sets of tasks and recommendations for future cohorts of students.

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