PLENARY LECTURE

Professor Sue Bloxham, Emeritus Professor of Academic Practice at the University of Cumbria, 'Improving assessment in a comprehensive and sustainable way: infrastructure, strategy and professional learning'

Abstract:

We now have a wealth of knowledge about more effective, engaging and fair assessment in higher education but much practice remains profoundly resistant to change. Despite significant national funding and local initiatives, the potential power of assessment to foster student learning, improve engagement and reduce non-completion rates is often wasted – and student satisfaction remains low.

Most change initiatives have been at the level of individual academics in specific modules rather than at the more sustainable and influential level of the programme, department or institution. This talk will consider a framework for assessment change which recognises that many assessment interventions raise problematic and complex ideas made more difficult by the large and loosely-coupled nature of many Universities. It will use the themes of institutional infrastructure, assessment strategy and approaches to the professional learning of those involved with teaching and assessment to posit a range of practical interventions which, I hope, will stimulate conversation and ideas throughout the rest of the conference and beyond.

Biography:

Sue Bloxham is Emeritus Professor of Academic Practice at the University of Cumbria. She has published widely in the field including the best-selling Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education (Open University Press) with Pete Boyd and was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2007. She has also researched and published on matters such as student skills development, group assessment, feedback, course design, marking, moderation and external examining. In recent years, her research has focused on communicating assessment expectations to students, the use of standards by academics and driving assessment change at the institutional level. She was principal investigator for the Higher Education Academy’s influential 2015 Review of External Examining Arrangements and is now playing a key role in the HEA’s Degree Standards Project developing external examiners and comparability of standards in higher education. Sue is regularly invited to speak on the topic of assessment at Universities and conferences in the UK and abroad.
‘Rethinking assessment and feedback: creating opportunities to exercise judgement’

Professor David Horne, Professor of Micropalaeontology, School of Geography
Kelly Peake, Head of Learning Development, Academic Development

Abstract:

In this workshop we propose that the processes of crafting, submitting and reflecting on a response to a question or situation are at the heart of good learning. Crafting a response may rely on actively bringing to bear what you already know (preparedness) or may include seeking, acquiring and assimilating new information (research); in either case the timescales can range from almost instantaneous as in a conversation, to hours, days, weeks or longer as in asking students to prepare answers to questions in advance of a seminar. Submission can be oral or written. Reflection on your response and the reactions it elicits may alter your way of thinking or your preparedness for subsequent questions, and may lead to the generation of new questions of your own. Every stage of this process is an opportunity to exercise judgement – in self-assessment of your knowledge, selection of relevant material for your response and self-evaluation of your response and its effects. Similarly, opportunities are created for a teacher to exercise judgement of a student’s submission, whether oral or written, and provide a response. This submission–response pattern is probably most commonly recognised in “assessment and feedback” but actually occurs much more widely in teaching and learning. We suggest that if we consider assessment and feedback as two moments in a larger series of opportunities to exercise judgement, it offers possibilities for incorporating more dialogue, more reflection and ultimately improving education.

This workshop will share approaches where curricula and/or assessments are designed to maximise opportunities for students and staff to exercise judgement, including designing an entire module, supporting assessed coursework assignments and devising problem-based learning activities; it will incorporate participatory experience of an example. These approaches facilitate the development of both students - in learning what will be appropriate and score marks in a disciplinary context - and staff - in assessing their students’ levels of learning and how to best interact and design responsive teaching to improve these. We will ask participants to consider possible applications and limitations of these approaches in their own teaching contexts, as well as to offer critical feedback and instances of their own approaches that, together with our School of Geography examples, can be shared more widely after the workshop. We also hope to include students from Geography as facilitators and interlocutors.

‘Enabling teaching teams to assess student coursework’
Dr Antonios Kaniadakis, Lecturer, School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science
Dr Tassos Tombros, Lecturer, School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science

Abstract:

QMUL is currently promoting a strategy that will see Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Demonstrators move from a “precarious” status, to use a term popularized by the so-called “gig-economy”, into more stable, professional roles. With this comes the hope that the quality of teaching in QMUL Schools and the overall student experience should improve. However, people’s ability to work on a module is usually taken for granted: TAs and Demonstrators are hired for their subject knowledge so issues around teaching and assessment practices are often overlooked.

With the QMUL strategy, a new opportunity arises to build TAs’ and Demonstrators’ expertise in teaching and assessment. This workshop will examine the challenges of enabling teaching teams to assess students’ coursework in large and smaller modules. Through hands-on activities, open discussion, testimonies from TAs, Demonstrators and lecturers, the workshop will problematize but also present ways in which module organisers may enable their teaching teams to deliver good quality assessment. Issues to be touched upon include but are not limited to: consistency of assessment across a teaching team; aligning training with timetabling; providing timely feedback; organisational issues and School support. The workshop will explore the view that training should not be a series of one-off sessions but rather a continuous process of communicating with TAs and Demonstrators that is embedded in department practices.

‘Attainment through a non-deficiency lens: assessment, feedback and student belonging’

Dr Daniel Hartley, Researcher, Engagement, Retention and Success
Dushant Bhavna Patel, Student Project Manager, Engagement, Retention and Success
Grace Broome, Graduate Project Administrator, Engagement, Retention and Success

Abstract:

How are gaps in the attainment of different student groups linked to their experiences of assessment and feedback practice? How might differences in student belonging impact student experiences of assessment and feedback? To begin answering these questions, this workshop encourages QMUL staff to reflect upon whether ideas of student ‘deficiency’ are embedded within assessment and feedback practice. The workshop comprises two components which foster awareness of the implications of student diversity and heighten staff reflexivity around developing
inclusive practice. In the first component of the workshop, attendees will, in small
groups, discuss ‘real – life’ dilemmas (listed below) and consider a range of
viewpoints to explain them. In component two, attendees will discuss potential
individual and institutional responses to component one, before feeding back to the
rest of the group. Through the workshop, staff will in turn better appreciate ways of
constructively addressing important differences in student expectation and
preparation, but, crucially, also understand how their own expectations of different
student groups can help reproduce gaps. This workshop is co-lead with student
researchers.

PARALLEL SESSIONS B

‘Improving assessment and feedback culture: a whole school approach’
Dr Reuben Loffman, Deputy Director Taught Programmes, School of History
Dr Dan Todman, Director of Taught Programmes, School of History
Dr Jen Wallis, Director of Teaching Associates, School of History
Dr Chloe Ward, Writing Tutor Coordinator, School of History

Abstract:
Like other Schools at QMUL, History is currently re-examining its assessment and
feedback practices in an effort to enhance student learning and increase student and
staff satisfaction. In his 2009 paper on ‘Transforming Assessment and Feedback:
Enhancing Integration and Empowerment in the First Year’, David Nicol emphasises
the importance of taking a whole institutional approach to such changes – in other
words, that what is required to create empowered learners is a holistic re-evaluation
of teaching aims and expectations and curriculum design as well as specific
feedback practices. If this gives an intellectual coherence to teaching development
and encourages strategic thinking about how cultural change can take place, it might
also risk setting the initial bar quite high – in the midst of so much change from so
many different directions, can a School sustain another cycle of collective effort?

In this round table, we’d like to take the opportunity to reflect on our efforts to
achieve this sort of wide-ranging change – with the aim of stimulating a broader
conversation about how this can be achieved within the specific environment of a
QM School. We will do this from a range of perspectives and problems, including
management, leadership and training of permanent and temporary staff, consultation
and involvement of students, and the emplacement of writing as a key element within
the undergraduate degree. Our reflections will include comments on the unexpected
and uneven ways that change can come about, the means of fostering and
celebrating existing good practice, and the implications of involving students more
fully in improving the School. Rather than presenting ourselves as either a finished product or even as instances of particularly good practice, we seek commentary and advice from others. Four five minute position papers will be followed by specific questions put to the audience for consideration and feedback, then a free discussion led by questions from the audience.

‘Gender and intersectionality in assessment’

Professor Maralyn Druce, Professor of Endocrine Medicine and SMD Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team Co-Chair and, William Harvey Research Institute

Dr Nimesh Patel, Senior Lecturer and Head of Assessment, MBBS, Institute of Health Sciences Education

Dr Helen Bintley, Clinical Skills Lecturer and SMD Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team Member, Institute of Health Sciences Education

Abstract:

In 2015 the Athena SWAN charter was expanded from STEMM subjects to also recognise work undertaken in arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL) and recognises work undertaken to address gender equality more broadly. QMUL is a signatory to the Charter and was awarded a Silver award in 2017, with many schools holding awards at bronze and silver or working towards these.

There is an extensive literature on effects of gender (and other protected characteristics such as ethnicity) in assessment in higher education and the impacts on this – from course type to gender balance of the cohort being assessed to the nature of the assessment itself and even the way in which assessment is presented. Data collected by Self-assessment teams in different schools reviews gender differences in attainment in QMUL undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and it would be instructive to consider these in the context of the available literature and also by comparing outcomes in different schools and programmes and assessment types.

Using a presentation of some of the areas from the literature (Maralyn Druce) as well as sharing data from the School of Medicine about the role of gender in specific subtypes of assessment (Nimesh Patel) we will also invite presentations on student assessment and attainment from other schools in order to consider a range of assessment types. In addition we will consider how to ensure inclusivity extends to LGBTQ+ students and how curriculum change could drive assessment development (Helen Bintley).

We will consider the following questions:

- Are we taking appropriate account of the impact of gender and other protected characteristics when we set our assessments and what frameworks and supports should be put in place if differential attainment is noted?
Can we and should we amend our assessment strategies to account for impacts of diversity and in order to improve inclusivity of assessment?

How can we ensure inclusivity extends to LGBTQ+ students and how can we use curriculum change to drive assessment development?

‘The challenges of growth, size and diversity in the School of Business and Management in feedback and assessment methods’

Dr Martha Prevezer, Reader in Governance and Strategy, Deputy Director of Teaching, School of Business and Management

Professor Gerry Hanlon, Professor of Organizational Sociology, School of Business and Management

Dr Panos Panagiotopoulos, Senior Lecturer in Information Management, School of Business and Management

Dr Steve Brant, Digital Learning Officer, School of Business and Management

Dr Amit Rai, Senior Lecturer in New Media and Communication, School of Business and Management

Dr Fadi Safieddine, Accreditation Manager, Senior Lecturer, School of Business and Management

Abstract:

SBM presents a number of challenges: in terms of numbers of students, diversity of students in capabilities and backgrounds, and diversity of disciplines that we are both coming from and teaching across. We have put together a workshop team to bring together some of these issues. Research presented to a teaching group in SBM – including Amit Rai, Gerry Hanlon and Martha Prevezer by ERS and Sadhvi Dar looking at data on BME degree results and employability indices shows a lower proportion of BME students achieve ‘good honours’ degrees, and BME students have worse outcomes seen through employability data.

Prof. Hanlon has introduced diaries into his large core first year Business and Society module as a form of assessment. This arose out of perception of need for greater inclusivity and engaging those groups having difficulties with reading difficult texts and writing about them. Intended outcomes include a cumulative recognition and ability to reflect on their note-taking in diaries and allowing peer assessment of diaries. In the workshop he will reflect on his experiences with the diaries and whether they are achieving the desired results.

Our other stream of work on assessment and feedback is on Going digital – how can digital technologies contribute to more engaging, effective and efficient practices. Steve Brant and Panos Panagiotopoulos are working on rolling out online marking and Fadi Safieddine is highlighting pressures towards standardising assessments and feedback for accreditation purposes. We have transitioned in SBM within a year
to paperless marking. This came with challenges in terms of moderating, diverse assignments and feedback practices, many markers, reduced turnaround times, new equipment. This team will comment on thoughts about effective ways of presenting online feedback and ways in which we can use online resources to create greater standardization of assessment processes.

Brining these two streams together, this workshop will reflect on how we can accommodate these pressures which pull in different directions: towards more personalized feedback and assessment that is tailored to individuals’ needs and aptitudes, and making use of online resources and the push to standardize in order to cope with large numbers and to make marking and assessment more consistent across modules and programmes.

DRAPERS’ LECTURE

Professor Chris Husbands, Chair of the Teaching Excellence Framework and Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, ‘What lessons are there from the Teaching Excellence Framework?’

Professor Chris Husbands has been Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University since January 2016. Sheffield Hallam is one of the UK’s largest and most diverse institutions, which plays a vital role in the city of Sheffield, the county of Yorkshire and the nation.

Chris Husbands is an educationist, university leader and public servant. Before working at Sheffield Hallam he undertook senior roles in universities for over fifteen years, and was Director of the Institute of Education and as Vice-Provost at University College London.

His academic interests are in education policy and practice; his research has explored the reasons for difference in performance between education systems and his work has been published in fifteen books and over four hundred papers and presentations. He has worked with local and national governments in the UK and internationally, across four continents.

Professor Husbands was appointed in 2016 by the Government as the inaugural Chair of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which assesses teaching excellence across UK higher education. He is Chair of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Board, Chair of the Doncaster Opportunity Area Board and a member of the board of The Sheffield College. He has been a board member at two examination boards – at Edexcel and at the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA).