

## Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast **A Deans View on Assessment**

Hello and welcome to Episode 17 of the Learning and Teaching, a Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host for this week. In this episode, Graham Redshaw Boxwood from LTDS speaks to Sarah Graham,

Dean of education in our Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, also known as HaSS.

Dr. Ruth Valentine, Dean of taught Programs for our Faculty of Medical Science.

Also known as FMS and Dr. Sara Marsham our Dean of Education for Science, Agriculture and Engineering.

Also known as Sage. Now Graham, Sarah, Ruth and Sara.

All have a conversation about assessment. As we're in the midst of our assessment period.

We thought we'd get the dean's view. So, over to Graham. Okay, so let's start where in relation to assessment and feedback and what do we do?

Well, at Newcastle, I think one of the things we do really well within within the faculty of Medical Sciences on giving feedback is

something that we developed a few years ago in medicine giving automatic feedback using a personalised website.

So this is something that we deliver through our virtual learning environment where each of our students, when when they do an online assessment,

whether they do a written assessment or whether they do a summative examination,

when they get their marks back, they get them back and they're colour coded.

So they get green if they're doing really well and their top of their cohort.

Amber if they're passing, but that kind of mean, that borderline pass or red, you know,

just highlighting to the students that they're below that and that pass mark and they need to up their game.

But they also get personalised feedback alongside that. And this all happens on the virtual learning environment.

And as I say, we brought in a few years ago, the students really appreciated being able to see that.

They can also see where they marks sits in comparison to the cohort.

So even though they're passing and they think they're doing well, they can see that they're,

you know, maybe not top of the class, but they're not bottom of the class.

They're somewhere in the middle. And we also break it down to give them feedback, say if

it's on exam questions, feedback on whether they're doing well in a particular area in the exam.

So, again, for medicine you know, your physiology questions, you did really well on your biochemistry questions.

Maybe you didn't do quite so well. So they can see where they're doing well and why they're not doing well.

And that's worked really well in medicine. And we're kind of bringing that out and using it in dentistry as well.

So that's one thing I think where doing well on. And I think from feedback from the students that they really appreciate.

Sarah or Sara? From Humanities and Social Sciences, so

I've just had the privilege of reviewing all of our external examiner reports and

of course their focus is very much on assessment and feedback in the programs,

not just for assuring standards and for quality purposes,

but also there's a lot of detail in those reports about the assessments themselves and how our program teams respond to

assessment so they rather than me kind of brought out a number of practices in HaSS that seemed to be working really well.

There was a lot of discussion and description and the students also feedback on this as well around the innovation and assessment,

particularly in the last couple of years. So despite, you know, an accredited program where you've got very mandated formats,

the teams were still able to innovate and really switch out that assessment design.

So design is something I think that our external examiners in HaSS think that we do well in terms of the focus or the context of the assessment.

There's a lot of good practice and good commentary, not just in our external examiner reports, but in our AMRs.

And in my observations, too, that there's a global outlook to a lot of the assessments that are designed so that they are there.

They are the hinging on that real world, authentic called they're heading in that direction, which is really interesting.

And external examiners comment on how prepared that enables our students to be for graduate ness and for work.

There's a lot of great stuff around our feedback, too, particularly with the introduction of canvas.

I think it's been a real success in terms of trying and supporting the innovation of practice and iterative

design so I can see feedback rubrics being used really successfully and feedback like Ruth says,

you know, against particular marking bands,

which is super helpful to be able to, a student to position themselves because it's all about them understanding where

they are and what they can do with that feedback and then working on it for the next assessment for learning.

So yes, some great examples of good assessment, practice and innovation in HaSS,

and also some great examples of using canvas and digital platforms to enable effective feedback.

Still lots of work to do as well though. And I might come back to talking a little bit about some of the work that we've done

with them at the company Nous in relation to our feedback later in the podcast.

And Sara. Yeah, just sticking up in the Faculty of Science, agricultural engineering. I think like Sarah.

We have a whole range of assessment which is really welcoming to see the, you know, across.

We've just been doing some work around authentic assessment, which is something we might pick upon again in a little while.

But actually, it is really reassuring to see that a lot of colleagues were already implementing this within their modules.

And in relation to that, they'd received a lot of really good feedback from students in relation to the assessment and different practices.

I think just take that a step further.

One things that we see a lot of comments, some from our some examiners is our very thorough and transparent moderation procedures.

You know, this might not always be something students fully understand,

but there is a lot of practice in the faculty where colleagues are trying to engage students and explaining how moderation and scaling processes work,

sharing the policies with them, and sort of engaging students in the use of our marking criteria and our rubrics,

especially when we have those assessments that are quite novel and quite innovative.

Often students may be a bit concerned about how they're going to be marked and how they're going to be assessed on them,

because it isn't a traditional essay or traditional exam. And I think our colleagues have taken a lot of time to create very assessment

specific criteria that allows multiple markers to ensure that they're being fair and consistent.

But it also allows students to see where they're achieving marks, but also where they need to be improving on for the next time.

And it's about having that dialogue with them, about using that feedback to to go forward.

But then our external examiner has recognised in the processes that we go through as a

team going through moderation module moderation boards and taking that through into our boards of examiners.

Great thanks. I think with my roll I'm really delighted to hear the good news about canvas.

And I think that's been a real success. I think for listeners of the podcast,

there is a case studies database that there is lots and lots of good examples and a

lot of us that's been added since the pandemic started about about practices in

assessment and feedback and many other issues as well. So please have a look at that.

OK. So our assessment practices changed dramatically during the pandemic.

What lessons can be learned from this? What has worked?

Should we keep doing? What should we change? I can pick up on that.

I think just picking up on something Sarah said was around the accrediting bodies and I think previously we've always been a little

uncertain about doing quite different pieces of assessment because we've always thought that the accreditation bodies,

you know, wouldn't necessarily like that. They wouldn't recognise what we were doing.

I think one of the real successes of the pandemic is the support that we've received from our accrediting bodies to do different things.

I think it's allowed our colleagues to recognise that the restrictions in place that we often perceive aren't necessarily there.

And I think as long as we have those clear lines of communication with our accrediting bodies,

that actually they're really supportive of us changing and doing those assessments.

I think from a SaGE perspective, so generally it's got a lot of colleagues thinking more broadly about assessment.

You know, we have a lot of good practice across the faculty and know a lot of colleagues are really keen to keep their assessment updated.

But I think there have been you know, this has allowed us to use it as a real springboard to actually think about more cohesive assessment,

thinking about assessment, not in a standalone way, but also multiple assessments within a module,

how they fit together, but then also across them across a program.

And actually getting people thinking about how assessments in my module relate to assessments in another module

and having that pathway of assessment progression clearer not only for colleagues but also for students.

And I think, you know the technology as well as, again, complementing canvas,

that's really allowed us to do lots of different things and really enhance the diversity of assessment that's available to our students.

I think if I come in there as well, just to echo what Sarah's just said there,

I think within within FMS we've had feedback from our external examiners on

actually how innovative some of our room assessments have been over the last academic year,

how we've been able to develop. Critical thinking in the way that we've carried out our assessments, which which was that before.

But maybe, you know, because we've had to think about the way we've assessed our students differently.

Actually, the way our students have tackled the examinations, they've done it differently.

And that's come out and the extent that examiners have seen that. The other thing I did want to point out, really, I think has worked really well.

over the pandemic with us changing to different forms of assessment is how we've

worked with with the TEL team the TEL team in FMS and the TEL team within LTDS.

I think, you know, being able to have access to canvas and all the things that canvas will do to it to us,

allow us to be more innovative, but also the support we've had to be able to do those developments and work with our program teams.

I think that's worked really well, you know, in in FMS. We've got some real good examples where students actually start online examinations

for some of our accredited programs where we have to carry out online examinations.

And they went really well where our students were fully supported throughout the actual assessment.

They were you know, they actually could speak to an academic if they needed to.

We had zoom rooms available for them, for students to to have chats if things went wrong whilst they were on their own, on their assessment.

And the way that we were able to deliver questions, the questions were coming in,

different orders for different students, and even the actual answers were given in different orders.

So, reducing that risk of students colluded.

And I think that has worked really well. And I think people, I think we were very worried before we did the online assessments.

We thought that maybe there was a big risk here. And the students, I think, were worried as well.

But I think actually the way we handled it worked out really well.

And I think some of our programs will we'll be continuing to use those online assessments.

So it shows that it wasn't just a one off thing that we did during the pandemic, actually, it's something that we can take forward.

So I think we've learned a lot. I think we've also learned a lot of what doesn't work well, which is also a good thing.

And that we know maybe there were some things that we did as a knee jerk reactions that later on,

if we'd had that time to think a little bit more, we wouldn't have done in such a way.

But, you know, it's all a learning curve.

And I think our students and staff appreciate that.. I as actually just wondering about this student feedback that you've received about their support.

For example, I know that the FMS TEL team worked really hard on the zoom support calls.

Yeah. I mean, we were we were lucky in in one way that actually not many students needed that support.

Actually, when you when it went down to the assessments pretty much went smoothly but the students that did need that support.

Got it immediately and got to speak to someone. And I think that it was invaluable.

And so the feedback we've had from students has been really, really positive.

Great, Sarah. Yeah. I'm Echoing what Sara and Ruth have both said and offered so much detail,



I think I'll just shift the perspective slightly because one of the things that I think the last couple of years in our kind

of understanding of alternative assessment and delivering that has really surfaced for us is that inclusivity or exclusivity.

So we've had so many benefits of shifting online and being able to pivot,

not least the agility of our academic colleagues to rethink their assessments and redesign them,

our students exposed and experiencing different forms of assessment and working and practicing in different ways,

but also what that means for our students who have support plans in place.

And for some, it's been a very, very heartening and positive experience of being able to to be at home and be able to work online,

which for Newcastle University has not been a traditional way of working.

But for the students, it's been incredibly isolating and really change their thinking.

And for some of our students will probably acknowledge this,

that actually they haven't had access to the equipment and the technical kind of tools that they have needed.

And that's whether, you know,

whether that be from there where they live in terms of geographically where they live or in terms of the equipment, computers, for example.

And that's really, you know, held or shone a light on some of those real differences and diversity in our

student body and something that we need to be really mindful of moving forward,

that this gives us the opportunity to to actually develop and deliver more innovative, inclusive assessment practices for learning and as learning.

But we can't leave anyone behind. And I think that's an important message for us certainly as deans.

But I think as a university as well.

Can I just pick up something Ruth said around that support that we've received from our colleagues in the TEL community, which has been.

You know, really outstanding but also colleagues within disciplines and across disciplines.

I think where we have held areas of expertise within the faculty colleagues who have done different types of assessment or are trying something new,

you know, they've been really keen to share their practices with colleagues.

And so we have created these practices of community that have allowed us to think

about our approaches and help each other out in terms of flexible delivery,

but also flexible assessments. And that's been really rewarding to see the colleagues who wouldn't necessarily

come in contact with each other and talk about assessment have been doing so.

So that's been a real bonus of a change in our assessment practice.

Great.

We know this stuff, invest a lot of time in the feedback we provide to students, but students don't always feel satisfied with their feedback.

Why is there this disconnect and what can we do to improve this? I'm not talking from a HaSS perspective just for this this question,

but actually from a university wide perspective, because I had the privilege of leading a small sprint,

which is a bit of an investigation into a topic or an issue that we feel is important or pertinent to us at the moment.

So feedback practice was was the topic that we felt was worth this investigation.

And so a small team spent a couple of weeks talking to students and gathering, garnering feedback from students about their feedback.

What we learned from that was it was quite a number of things and we've also designed something too which I'll come back to.

One of the things that we learned is that feedback is one of the most important pieces of information that our students

get from university experience and their feedback that they receive here from through their eyes and their words.

It's different to the way that they have been experiencing feedback before they got to university.

And for them, that's a challenge. And it's not unknown to us. But how we bridge that knowledge,

that developmental gap in developing the use of feedback in university is a real challenge to us.

Students really, really want their feedback to be timely.

Now, that's really interesting because that doesn't necessarily mean in relation to our 20 day turnaround policy.

In fact, very few of our students talked about that when they when they were talking about feedback.

But what they talked about very much was coming time to absorb the feedback that they received

and learn and gain from it so that it could influence or inform their next assessment piece.

So for each student, that's going to be quite a different thing, that timeliness.

And the only other point I'll make at this moment is then it's the personalisation

and the interpersonal relationship that feedback has for our students.

And we often see it as something that we do in something that we give to students at the end of an assessment.

Most students see feedback at the end of an assessment given to them.

But what our students really value from the now Sprint findings is what they can do with that feedback,

how they can talk about it, how they can process it so that it's as valuable as it can be to inform their learning.

So as a result of that, we developed a bit of a it's not a module, it's something that you can drop into canvas.

A bit of a set of tools that our students can use to make the most of the feedback that they receive.

And that's a little bit of advice for our colleagues who are developing their feedback practices.

But mainly it's for students to make the most of their feedback. So I'm hoping that that will become more visible, as is this next gen moves forward.

It was designed by every one of the university or particular faculty or on discipline.

So I'm hoping it's fairly generic and really accessible and user-friendly.

Can I just check how people are accessing that Sarah? Is it available in

Canvas commons and they can just download into their canvas course? It is indeed.

It's still got a little bit of work to do yet. Graham and some of the members of your team and LTDS are still working on that.

But yes, it's Commons piece that can just be embedded into a module in canvas. Great, Ruth.

I mean, I don't think there's much more to it than what Sarah has just said,

because I think the key to getting feedback right is speaking with the students and finding

out what the students want or what their expectation is and I know as part of the sprint.

That's very much what Sarah and her team have had been doing.

But yeah, we we did our own within our own practice, within, you know, within within like within my practice.

What we found is when we speak to students, their expectation of what feedback is going to be compared to what our expectation is as

academics on what we think a good feedback is, is quite different.

And it's trying to bring those two closer together so that where we're educating ourselves, understanding what students want,

but we're also helping the students during induction and that transition to university on what they're

going to get from us and how they can use that to develop their practices as they move through university.

And hopefully some of this information that's coming in canvas commons will will help with that,

because I think that's the problem that we've got, it's what students think is feedback.

Or the feedback that they've had from that from their previous education experience and what we think

is feedback and what we're going to give the students and it's just bringing the team together.

So I think really the key to all of this is talking and listening to our students.

Do we think we need to help students with strategies on what to do with their feedback and how to use it?

Yeah, yeah, I definitely think we do.

I mean, one of the things we've kind of investigated in FMS as a kind of initial thing is that they need to pick up their thing.

So it used to be in the day where you used to have the pile of excited sat in the office.

Now, obviously,

because they get that electronic copy back we can actually monitor that as well through and through whether they've picked it up or not.

And it is interesting, there is a cohort of students that don't pick their feedback up.

So first of all, it's educating that, you know, there is some feedback.

Please pick it open and then speaking with your tutor and actually working through that feedback, that's going to that's going to help them.

And so yeah, definitely. As much as we can to kind of educate them on how they can use their feedback to feed forward

really to ensure that it does help with their next piece of assessment that they get in.

I think sometimes we can be a lot more explicit with that because I think as a as a teaching team,

we often understand that a piece of assessment in one module or even one unit or in one

area will go forward maybe to a different module or even a different stage of their degree.

But I'm not sure we always make that explicit enough to students.

And I think, you know, an overall arching map of assessment and how it all fits together not only helps students make that clear,

but I think it helps us as teaching teams to make those links between assessments.

You know, it may be linking to an assessment on a module that we don't personally contribute to or deliver to,

but we can direct students to when we're setting our assessments to say,

when you get your feedback from this piece of assessment,

you know please bear in mind because you'll be really useful to you when you go into to Stage 2 or when you go into this module.

And I think that allows the students to see that we have a more cohesive plan and we know that we have designed our programs in that way.

I think one of the things that we've been doing quite well in SaGE is involving students in exemplars and actually

timetabling running sessions with our modules where students know that they've had the assessment brief,

they've had the chance to look at the assessment criteria and then they come into a session.

They use the criteria to mark or to rank exemplars from previous submissions or are similar.

And students find that really valuable because not only does it give them a chance to actually see what's expected in relation to the criteria,

especially as well, if it's quite an novel piece of assessment,

quite an innovative piece of assessment, allows them a chance just to see what that assessment looks like,

because I think sometimes students are quite anxious about an innovative assessments.

They're not quite sure what we're looking for. And by giving them a chance to mark those exemplars and do it in groups and talk to each other,

then I think it reassures them that they know what the submission should look like,

but also that they know what they need to do to go up the grade boundaries and through each of the different assessment criteria.

In what ways can students be involved in assessment, design and processes moving forward?

Authentic assessment and engagement. Can I just keep that off?

I think. Sara has made a really good point around and thinking through engaging our students and in learning and understanding assessment criteria,

how it's processed and used by program teams still having examples to match

feedback and marks to and having a go at assessing or evaluating pieces of work from

the module or from modules that they study. I think is a really helpful thing to do.

But a lot of my practice in combined honours is gone quite a way further than that

in terms of enabling students to design their own assessments and to prioritise

their own criteria depending on what it is that they're actually producing and to enable

students to influence and actually to manipulate the format of assessments as well.

So choosing which format, it's best to submit their chosen piece of work.

Now, it's very specific because these modules are intended to bring together subjects and students in combined,

as you know, study two or three subjects.

And the idea behind these types of assessments are to view the students as the experts in their own learning across their

subjects and pulled those subjects together in relation to an interesting topic that actually is underpinned by all of the disciplines.

And then how they produce that and speak to it can be very personal.

And I think that authentic nature of that assessment deals with a lot of the sector worrying plagiarism, essay mill,

all of the things that are filtering around WONKE and in all of the platforms currently around our innovations and assessment,

but actually put the onus back on the students themselves to think through what assessment means for them.

So I think anything that develops their own practice and their own understanding is helpful

as assessment for and as learning for the future for them in work and in further study.

I think within it within faculty of medical sciences, where we've got programs that are much more regulated and we may be quite stringent

in the types of assessments or the types of questions we might be asking.

One of the things that we've been trying to do with it within FMS with some of our programs is



actually we brought students into to work on working groups where they looked at our marketing criteria,

they've looked at our rubrics and given us feedback on on what those means to them as the students.

So we're not changing the overall question. What actually does the marking criteria make sense to the student?

It makes sense to us. And actually, when we sat down with the students, some of the things they did, they weren't quite getting it.

We got them to help us rewrite the marketing criteria. So it was more student friendly and more understandable.

So, again, there are ways that you can actually get the students involved, even if you're very strict on.

We must be assessing this area in this way. The students can still interact.

And it was quite surprising. And looking at some things where I thought this is this is quite an obvious marking criteria, an obvious rubric.

And the students misinterpreted it. And it was really obvious.

And once they said it, I could see it. So and so. So, yes, working with the students in that way has helped us within FMS.

Yeah, we did the same in SaGE. I think those those sessions, whether timetabling had come along and use those exemplars that gives us,

as markers real insight into how students are understanding the criteria.

And I think it allows us to have that dialogue with students.

And, you know, if they're unclear as to what is the difference between a two two and two one and first,

then that allows us to reflect on them and revise them with their input.

I know in SaGE some colleagues as well. I've worked with colleagues, in LTDS to write those criteria and think about the language that's used.

So it is a lot more focussed on the student rather than more difficult to decipher academic language.

And I think that's been a real benefit. But I think, you know, all colleagues are keen to listen to the students and reflect them on the practices and revise as necessary and we do so as well in response to to colleagues.

Especially we have multiple markers assessing the same piece of assessment.

And sometimes you know as the person writing those assessment criteria, you think they're really clear.

But then a colleague will come and say, well, I don't understand. I find it very difficult to mark against that criterion.

And what does it mean? And again, that allows us to reflect and revise as necessary.

There's lots of work about improving the student assessment literacy,

but there's also this really interesting to hear that sort of wider learning that we're doing as well about the students perceptions as such.

it was really interested. Great. Okay. Can I just take the time just to thank all three of you for contributing to this discussion.

It's been really, really interesting. And hopefully the listeners of the podcast will find this also.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you to Graham for leading the conversation and to Sarah,

Ruth and Sara for their great input and great insight into assessment here at Newcastle University.

I hope you enjoy today's episode.

And if you want to learn any more, please visit our show notes and remember to like subscribe and tell your friends all about this podcast.

See you in two weeks time. bye.