Summary

Bridging the skills gap between higher education and the workplace has become a matter of concern for institutions as more and more students select university courses on the basis of their employment prospects.

Recognising that standard course assessments can also incorporate employability skills, our Collaborate project at the University of Exeter developed a toolkit to enable academic staff assess the employability potential of their assessment designs then exploit modern technologies when making adjustments. Accessible, fun and thought-provoking, the Collaborate resources have generated considerable interest at Exeter and elsewhere as universities strive to give their students the edge in a highly competitive job market.

“We need to know how to use assessment to develop skills and competences alongside academic knowledge.”

University of Exeter
Case study

Challenge

In a 2011 CBI/NUS survey, 70% of students stated that improving their employability potential was the most important reason for going to university. However, the 2014 NCUB survey, conducted with over 4000 students from 20 UK institutions, reveals wide variation between the disciplines when it comes to gaining access to work experience, despite students rating links between their courses and business as vital to their future prospects.

After work experience, assessment arguably offers the best vehicle for developing the skills sets needed in the workplace. Opportunities in standard module assessments to acquire and demonstrate work-related competencies – such as audience awareness, collaboration, peer and self-review – would surely enhance the employment prospects of any graduate.

Nonetheless, time-honoured modes of assessment such as essays and examinations still predominate on most courses, and the concept of “authentic assessment” – often seen as bridging the gap between academia and the workplace – is neither clearly understood nor free from controversy.

Innovative approach

With funding from our Assessment and Feedback Programme, the Collaborate project team addressed this challenge by developing a series of tools to enable disciplinary and work-related skills to be combined in the same assessment design, while also making use of contemporary, off-the-shelf technologies wherever appropriate to achieve a desired outcome. The term “work-integrated assessment” was devised to reflect the dual nature of the design.

From research with a range of stakeholders, including employers, the team identified six dimensions that characterise authentic workplace assessment. These form the six-point structure of the first element of the toolkit – the assessment designer.

What are the six dimensions?

1. **Problem/data** (As well as being thought provoking, assessments that make use of real-world data mirror problem solving in the workplace)

2. **Time** (Assessments occurring more frequently and in a less structured way involving an element of surprise prepare students better for real-world challenges)

3. **Collaboration** (Teamwork is often valued more than individual performances in the workplace)
4. **Peer feedback and review** (Giving as well as receiving feedback prepares students for working constructively with colleagues and clients)

5. **Structure** (Assessments in which students have to order tasks and set priorities for themselves reflect the nature of real-world problem solving)

6. **Audience** (Writing for different audiences not only recreates an authentic workplace activity but also engages students more deeply and effectively with course content)

Joining up the points formed by the six dimensions creates a “radar chart”, as is evident in the model below. In this the tool has been used three times, making the difference between the original assessment, the redesign and eventual outcomes strikingly clear. The assessment designer can thus help academic teams to:

- **Analyse** how far a design currently maps to the employability dimensions
- **Redesign** the assessment to achieve a desired employability profile
- **Evaluate** how far the redesign has achieved its aims

A completed work-integrated assessment chart © University of Exeter

To try out the assessment designer, see the animated version on our [Design Studio](#) or the University of Exeter's Academic services [webpage](#).
Tech trump cards

“Define first what you want to achieve then look for technologies that align with your aims.”

The second element of the toolkit, the “Tech trump” cards, invites academic teams to choose technologies to support the redesigned assessment, using a star rating system and outline descriptions of the affordances of the technologies to arrive at a decision. However, the Tech trump cards only come into play after the assessment has been analysed for its employability potential with the help of the assessment designer i.e. it is only when an academic team decides to address a weakness identified on a radar chart – for example, a lack of opportunities to develop collaborative skills – that they seek out the technologies aligned with that dimension.

iTest and skill cards

The two final components of the toolkit are an iTest quiz, which prompts staff and students to assess their digital literacy skills, and a set of skill cards, evaluation placemats and scoring sheets to evaluate a work-integrated assessment in detail.

Making it happen

The Collaborate team engaged iteratively with a wide range of stakeholders to perfect the design of the toolkit. Their participatory approach meant working with over 150 individuals within and outside the university, including:

» Staff and students from multiple disciplines
» Students’ guild
» Employment and graduate development unit
Feedback mediated by modern technologies drove every stage of development. To obtain employer input, for example, the project team turned to the professional and business social network tool, LinkedIn, while blogs and video blogs, such as Collaborate Voices, kept the wider community informed. Providing guidance on needs, preferences and best practice, stakeholders played a key role throughout production.

**Impact**

The Collaborate resources have proved highly effective. One reason for their success is that they allow users to develop their own framework for action. Deliberately, no guidelines are provided for the use of the assessment designer, an approach which has proved particularly beneficial in a research-intensive university.

> “Users construct their own meaning from the model which serves only as a scaffold for their thinking.”

University of Exeter

Another advantage of the Collaborate toolkit is that it is not discipline-specific. Academic disciplines at the University Exeter that have worked with the Collaborate project to remodel their assessment designs range from English literature to biosciences, from psychology to modern foreign languages.

**Benefits for staff**

While some staff have benefited simply from knowing more about employability skills and contemporary, off-the-shelf technologies, for others the journey has been quite transformative, resulting in assessments that have made a substantial difference to student employability and engagement. Examples include setting up and publicising a fictitious company entirely in a modern foreign language (Spanish), synthesising information into a leaflet for a real-world client (psychology) and creating videos with mobile phones and free editing software (biosciences). Such redesigns have generated a greater degree of student engagement and achievement, but unexpectedly, there have also been time and cost efficiencies. Marking time was saved, for example, when the assessment of a module on a BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) course moved from a written essay and examination to the production of a patient information leaflet for a newly set up Wellbeing Centre combined with a group presentation.
“It saved time for me personally and in terms of college resources. Because this was an assignment that was set up, it took some preparation but we marked it as a team in real time.”

Psychology tutor, University of Exeter

Other disciplines have also found time-efficiency benefits as a result of remodelling their assessments in ways that better reflect workplace practices.

“A lot of assessments [in my subject] are 2000–3000-word essays, but I now ask students to use artefacts as references rather than writing so much prose.”

English literature tutor, University of Exeter

Benefits for students

Perhaps the most telling evidence of enhanced relevance and employability comes from the students themselves. In a module evaluation survey, in response to the question “What has been the most important thing you have learnt in this module?” students independently provided answers that aligned with the intended learning outcomes of the BSc Applied Psychology module, as shown below:

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In addition, students have been making use of the Tech trump cards to identify digital tools to assist them in their studies, showing the flexibility of this element of the toolkit. Students also take visible pride in having acquired real-world skills as a result of their courses.

“I can say I have given a business presentation in another language. Every student has written an essay. Why would I mention that in an interview?”

Student, University of Exeter

Lessons learned

The key learning points project has to share are these:

» Involve students at an early stage in assessment redesigns to ensure they have a stake in how they are assessed

» Draft, test, evaluate and be prepared to go back to the drawing board to perfect your assessment design. The dimensions model accommodates an iterative design approach

» Put employability at the heart of the activity, leaving the choice of technology until you have defined your aims

» Don’t overlook the digital literacies that underpin effective learning and teaching in a digital age. The iTest quiz offers an engaging way of highlighting the skills students and staff need. Competence in digital literacies also impresses employers looking for staff with additional skills

Ensuring sustainability

The flexibility of the Collaborate toolkit means elements can be used in different contexts resulting in wide penetration and uses for the tools are continuing to expand. At Exeter, staff development sessions on digital literacy skills benefit as much from the Collaborate tools as do staff induction programmes and postgraduate certificate courses in education.

Post project, the resources are evolving in response to user feedback and the new opportunities afforded by emerging technologies. In 2014, the Tech trump cards, for example, are being reformatted for mobile phones as part of iExeter, a free app providing Exeter students with personalised information and services. Work is also ongoing to maintain the contemporary nature of the technologies featured on the Tech trump cards and to ensure that an employability focus is embedded into the university’s assessment policy and practice.
Find out more

Jisc Design Studio: Collaborate project

Jisc: Guide on enhancing student employability through technology-supported assessment and feedback

Jisc YouTube: Transforming the assessment and feedback landscape – Embedding employability skills

University of Exeter Academic Services: Work-Integrated Assessment – The Collaborate Project