In 2011 with our funding, the e-AFFECT project run by the Centre for Educational Development at Queen’s University Belfast initiated an institution-wide programme of assessment and feedback enhancement extending into 2014 and beyond.

Taking an appreciative inquiry approach to change management, the centre encourages academic schools to identify what they do well in assessment and feedback using a set of educational principles as benchmarks. This process not only surfaces existing good practice but also enables academic teams to identify for themselves what needs to change. Centre staff then provide ongoing support as participating schools implement the technology-supported solutions that best meet their needs.

One of the first to take part was the School of English, a humanities discipline which piloted then adopted computer-assisted assessment (CAA) in a phonetics module plus electronic submission, marking and feedback (EMA) as standard practice in all modules.

“The term electronic management of assessment (EMA) is increasingly being used to describe the way in which technology is used across the assessment lifecycle from the electronic submission of assignments to marking and feedback.”

Jisc
Case study

Challenge

Mention assessment and feedback and university staff immediately think of one of their most complex challenges. Increased participation in higher education can mean an all but unmanageable workload at peak times for academic and administrative staff. At the same time, bunched assignment scheduling, late feedback and inconvenient, outdated submission processes cause frustration and anxiety for students. It is not surprising that interest is growing in electronic alternatives.

Nonetheless, making the transition from paper-based to electronic practices is far from easy, especially if the culture and practices surrounding assessment have been established over decades. Academic staff naturally seek a strong rationale for replacing familiar ways of working with digital technologies; they may even incorrectly assume that traditional approaches are mandatory.

Innovative approach

To overcome barriers, the Centre for Educational Development uses a multi-stage approach: an appreciative inquiry workshop is followed by a technology “market place” then action planning, implementation, review and evaluation. The aim is to drive forward an institution-wide programme of enhancement using technology where appropriate and in line with the project’s principle-led model for assessment and feedback.

Educational principles for assessment and feedback

© Queen’s University Belfast model of educational principles for assessment and feedback
Building on the Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) principles of good assessment and feedback, the model establishes the important part assessment and feedback play in successful learning and provides a framework against which to map enhancement initiatives. Thus new approaches are first piloted to ensure alignment with the model. In the case of the School of English, the introduction of CAA and EMA were piloted using the following technologies:

- Queen’s Online (QOL), the university’s Sharepoint®-based virtual learning environment (VLE) which supports online submission, marking and return of assignments with feedback. Although designed primarily to support e-submission rather than e-marking, QOL has the advantage of supporting the large file sizes essential in some disciplines

- TurnitinUK with GradeMark® introduced in 2014. Academic staff using GradeMark can mark and moderate students’ work in a single online environment enabling grades and feedback to be visible to second markers, external examiners and tutors as well as students

- QuestionMark® Perception®, accessed either via the VLE or independently to produce formative tests with immediate, automated feedback. It is also used as a tool for summative assessment where appropriate

Making it happen

Recognising the considerable learning curve that technology represents for many academic staff, the centre introduced a phased programme of support, engaging with schools in tranches and supporting each tranche over a three-year span to ensure their action plans become a reality. Outcomes, both negative and positive, are shared with schools subsequently joining the programme to build a critical mass of understanding and expertise.

As summarised above, the first step in the process is an appreciative inquiry workshop. In this, senior curriculum managers, academic and support staff come together in a collaborative workshop environment to interview one another about the high points in their experience of assessment and feedback – an activity that establishes from the outset that assessment can be a heartening, even inspiring experience and not just a problem that “needs fixing”.

“Discovering what worked well in the past reminds us that we can bring about positive assessment and feedback experiences for ourselves and our students.”

An appreciative inquiry script helps shape the direction of each interview. From there, group discussions take place around what is meant by good practice, prompted by a set of principle cards constructed around the REAP
assessment and feedback principles. These include ways of implementing the principle in question alongside a list of technologies that might assist the process.

In the second phase, participants attend market-place demonstrations of institutionally supported technologies before exploring the affordances of these and other potential solutions using a set of technology cards. The process of reflection, experimentation and dialogue supported by sets of cards can extend over some time but leads, the centre believes, to more effective decision making. When required, centre staff offer bespoke technology demonstrations to support schools in the next stage of their appreciative inquiry cycle – action planning – which leads finally into pilot schemes and a review and evaluation of the outcomes.
Summing up the e-AFFECT appreciative inquiry approach to change

» Encourage academic teams to discover what they do well
» Share that with others
» Dream of what their practice could be like in two-three years
» Get down to action planning, design and delivery

Impact

As a result of undertaking this cycle of activities during the academic year 2011–2012, the School of English came to recognise the need to improve its submission, marking and feedback processes. In the second semester of 2012, the school piloted the online submission tool in QOL before fully adopting it in September 2012, implementing both e-marking and e-feedback as standard practice on all modules. The impact has been to produce more efficient workflows for staff plus an improved assessment and feedback experience for students.

“The move to electronic marking, about which I was initially uncertain, has been like moving from night into day.”

Director of Education, School of English, Queen’s University Belfast

Efficiency gains

While it is too early to assess the impact of GradeMark, both systems enable students to submit their work up to the deadline from their own work station. Students either receive immediate confirmation of receipt by email (GradeMark) or can view the file that they have uploaded online (QOL). Both systems thus enable students to manage their work more efficiently and remove the anxiety and inconvenience associated with physical submission. Students can also download their grades and feedback remotely – a matter of importance for those who live some distance from the campus.

e-Submission has also resulted in significant workflow efficiencies for the school. The equivalent of 20 working days over the academic year has been saved from administrative budgets by no longer copying, coding and anonymising assignments prior to marking. In addition, markers and external examiners have access to students’ work at any time without the transfer (and potential loss) of hard copies.

Additional efficiency gains include generic feedback for all students via the feedback tool within the QOL system and, as a side-product of exploring new technologies, the potential for some modules to make use of computer-
assisted assessment. Both students and staff emphasise that formative tests with immediate feedback really can save time and effort in some disciplines.

“Fast feedback’s really important in phonetics. You need to establish good habits from the start.” “It’s the way to go...definitely.”

Student, Queen’s University Belfast

**Effectiveness gains**

Benefitting from workflow efficiencies, academic staff in the School of English can now devote more time to pedagogy. While finding it unfamiliar to start with, most have adjusted to onscreen marking once the potential for time savings and flexible working became apparent.

“Reading essays on screen rather than on paper took some getting used to, but the convenience...easily outweighed any initial hurdles.”

English tutor, Queen’s University Belfast

Evidence of the beneficial impact on the student experience is visible in improved student evaluation scores for timeliness and quality of feedback between 2012 and 2014. In the 2012 first-year experience student survey, 74% of students in the School of English said they had received detailed comments on their work. In the 2014 National Students Survey this figure rose to 84%. These results support anecdotal evidence from academic staff in the [project video] that CAA and EMA can improve feedback quality by freeing up time previously absorbed by marking and administrative processes.

“We can now devote more time to the provision of feedback...That obviously helps to improve the quality of the feedback.”

English tutor, Queen’s University Belfast

**Institutional impact**
An exact cause and effect link between the successful EMA pilot in the School of English and improved quality measures is still hard to establish but what cannot be denied is the sharp increase in the last two years in e-submission rates across a diverse range of disciplines at Queen’s.

In the School of Creative Arts, for example, uploads via Turnitin increased from 565 in 2012–2013 to 1349 in 2013–2014 and submission via QOL from 773 in 2012–2013 to 1520 in 2013–2014 (this last figure includes both assignment files and associated feedback files uploaded by staff). Overall, the data indicates that uptake of EMA has more than doubled in two years in this school which has close links with the School of English. The introduction of GradeMark may encourage still further use, yielding greater consistency in marking and feedback practice.

But perhaps the most valuable outcome for the university is emerging evidence of improved student satisfaction and a growing sense of assessment and feedback practice having moved into a new era.

Lessons learned

The key learning points the project has to share are these:

- Engage the active support of decision-makers and senior managers when implementing technology-based interventions programme-wide
- Take a collaborative approach to change management, enabling schools and departments to arrive at their own action plan for change.
- Support the process by providing a safe environment in which to try out new approaches. Bespoke, subject-based workshops for exploring new tools and technologies, for example, help academics arrive at decisions that are sustainable and appropriate for their needs
- A “critical friends” initiative can offer further encouragement, but the most powerful influence comes from the positive experience of colleagues

Ensuring sustainability

The cycle of appreciative inquiry with its focus on positive celebration of good practice, action planning, implementing and evaluating outcomes is proving a sustainable approach to assessment and feedback enhancement in this large, research-led institution. Work continues post project to engage still further schools.

“We are continuing to roll out the programme across the university so that it’ll have a very wide impact.”

Queen’s University Belfast
The e-AFFECT project toolkit provides additional support for academic teams starting to engage with the process. This contains all necessary resources for an appreciative inquiry, principle-led approach to change management in assessment and feedback and is free for use across the sector.

Find out more

Jisc Design Studio: e-AFFECT project

Jisc Design Studio: e-AFFECT toolkit

Jisc: Guide on changing assessment and feedback practice

Jisc: Guide on electronic management of assessment

Jisc YouTube: Transforming the assessment and feedback landscape – Enhancing the student experience