Transforming assessment and feedback case study
Students as partners and pioneers in assessment and feedback enhancement
University of Winchester and Bath Spa University

Summary

In 2011, with funding from our Assessment and Feedback Programme, teams of academics at the universities of Bath Spa and Winchester embarked on FASTECH, an ambitious project aiming to engage students as partners in embedding technology-enhanced assessment-for-learning practices across all programmes of learning. Four years on, both universities are experiencing more agile responses to their assessment and feedback concerns.

A pioneering student fellow scheme has played a key part in the FASTECH story. Working alongside tutors as researchers, evaluators and technology champions, the role of a student fellow involves researching and proposing ways of enhancing the student experience of assessment and feedback, gathering evidence of the transformative potential of technology, evaluating project outcomes and acting as advocates for the use of technology-supported approaches whenever these offer proven learning gains. This ground-breaking collaboration has not only advanced understanding of assessment for learning at both universities but also shown the potential of engaging students as active partners in curriculum enhancement.

“What I have come to recognise is how much students have to offer to those of us who have been working in learning and teaching all our lives.”

Professor Joy Carter, vice-chancellor, University of Winchester
Case study

Challenge

There are a number of reasons why scaling up transformative approaches to assessment and feedback in higher education is proving challenging.

Firstly, our 2012 report on the assessment and feedback landscape indicates that few institutions have overarching strategies for assessment and feedback. Rather than driven from the top, responsibility for assessment and feedback design in UK higher education is by and large devolved to faculties, schools and departments and from there to individual module teams. Although individual examples of effective practice exist in many quarters, these can have only limited traction in the absence of a clear, strategic drive for assessment and feedback enhancement.

A further problem lies in the prevailing discourse around assessment. The same baseline research showed that institutions focus more on procedural matters than educational concerns when reviewing their assessment practices. Then there is a question of time. Academics bound by the demands of their disciplines have little opportunity to engage with the educational ideas that underpin effective assessment practice so are often unable to make properly informed choices, particularly about technology (Nicol & Draper, 2009). And, although students in many institutions have a representative voice in curriculum matters, their full potential as experts in the learning experience has not been realised despite the well-publicised impact of the National Student Survey. At every level, therefore, the building blocks needed to support wide-scale changes in practice towards assessment for rather than of learning can be missing.

"The challenge now is to see assessment as something we do with students, not for or to them."

Bath Spa University

Innovative approach

The two universities, having previously worked together on the HEA-funded TESTA project, took a two-pronged approach to engineering wide-scale change.

Taking from TESTA the value of educational principles as a common language and evaluative touchstone, the team selected the same set of principles – Gibbs and Simpson's conditions to improve student learning – to provide an underpinning framework for dialogue with programme teams.
But to fully understand how students experience assessment and feedback a still more radical approach was called for. With our funding, FASTECH pioneered a scheme of students working as equal partners with academic staff in research and evaluation projects and as champions, facilitators and advocates for technology-supported enhancement of assessment and feedback.

Making it happen

Initially, 17 student fellows were appointed on 15 programmes across the two universities. However, success has led to significant growth.

Post project, Winchester has 60 student fellows based on the FASTECH model but with a wider educational development remit, each receiving an honorarium for their work funded jointly by the institution and the Student Union. Posts are advertised and applicants submit ideas before being formally interviewed. Once appointed, student fellows undergo training in assessment literacies and are brought up to speed with the skills of their trade – in techniques, for example, of evidence gathering, data evaluation, academic publishing and project management.

“We wanted to shift the game and involve students in a powerful way as innovators and partners.”

University of Winchester

Technology is embedded in many of the projects submitted by student fellows. Examples include evaluating methods of data capture, supporting academics in implementing mobile device schemes and setting up social learning platforms to enable students to develop a sense of belonging on programmes with below-average rates of retention.

Assessment provides the catalyst for such enhancements but the effect can be felt more widely as the technical “know-how” of student fellows gets passed on to their academic partners. So too are the educational principles that underpin every aspect of the FASTECH approach, providing the benchmarks by which the intervention and the technology that supports it are implemented. The principles are used again to evaluate the learning gains from each project before the outcomes are disseminated and used in a continuing cycle of evidence-based capacity building and enhancement.

“Our work highlights the importance of educational principles as a cornerstone of any change initiative in assessment and feedback.”

Bath Spa University
The FASTECH model

The project summarised the key stages in the FASTECH process in the following diagram:

Impact

Changing practice

The gains from the student fellow scheme have been far greater than previous student voice initiatives. Firstly, as experts in the experience of learning student fellows offer penetrating insights into how educational goals such as "distributing student effort" and "increasing time on task" can be achieved. Then as trained researchers, they help develop the robust evidence base needed to build the critical mass in favour of assessment-for-learning practice that in turn influences the direction taken by whole programmes of learning.

Finally, in both universities, the student fellows have had a key role in establishing the principle-led discourse that is reinstating pedagogy at the heart of assessment and feedback practice. Gibbs and Simpson’s conditions to improve student learning, for example, provide the benchmarks for evaluating student fellow proposals at Winchester while at Bath Spa University, a timetable for timely receipt of feedback now accompanies every assignment. Academic staff are also more exposed to and better supported in understanding these educational goals. At both universities, an educationally driven discourse is challenging programme teams at course review over their use of technology in assessment and feedback activities. As a result, there is greater incidence of
effective technology use and a wider range of assessment tasks in evidence, from online exemplar marking and online peer review to video self-assessment.

Developing a strategic vision

Institutional strategies for assessment and feedback are now under development at the University of Winchester. Bath Spa University is also developing a specific policy and regulatory framework for assessment and feedback. Both undertakings can draw on the research and development work of the student fellows and the cultural shift made possible by this innovative student-staff collaboration on assessment and feedback.

Most significantly, student fellows have brought to the table an enthusiasm and expertise in technology that has revolutionised practices related to assessment and feedback, justifying the resources allocated to the scheme.

Lessons learned

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

- Recognise that academic workloads can present a barrier to staff adoption of technology-enabled practices. A student fellow assigned to each programme may provide a way forward for busy academic staff.

- Convince uncommitted staff with robust evidence of the link between technology and improved learning outcomes. Evidence-gathering techniques such as the FASTECH Think Aloud sessions recorded on Camtasia show how well students can respond to technology-based interventions.

- However, avoid using technology purely to replace or substitute for paper-based processes. Technology use which augments learning by doing something distinctive and different has more resonance with staff and students.

- Consider not adopting particular technologies wholesale across a programme. A mix of approaches provides variety and increases engagement.

- Finally, ensure your student fellow scheme is backed up by a sound recruitment process and effective skills development. Newly appointed student fellows need expert guidance on assessment literacies, research methodologies and ethics, project management and publishing techniques.

Ensuring sustainability

Expansion of the student fellow scheme to one per programme, wherever possible, is building on the work of the FASTECH project at the University of Winchester. At Bath Spa, five full-time learning technologists, one per faculty, have been appointed to support innovations in a faculty-led approach.
We are also continuing to support partnership working with students on technology-enhanced learning and teaching through our Change Agent Network. This peer-to-peer community supports staff and students working in partnership on curriculum innovation projects, disseminates good practice and prompts further innovative work by running workshops and events.

**Find out more**

Jisc Design Studio: [FASTECH project](#)

Jisc FASTECH project: [Toolkit and blog](#)

Jisc: [Change Agents Network](#)

Jisc: [Guide on changing assessment and feedback practice](#)

Jisc YouTube: [Transforming the assessment and feedback landscape – Students as partners](#)