Assessment and feedback higher education landscape review: survey outcomes
Context

Digital transformation has occurred across all aspects of education over the last two years during the pandemic. Whether as an acceleration of a planned strategy or an emergency response, changing assessment practice has been a priority.

We have learned lessons about equity, about learning design and about interoperability. We have seen success stories and consistently high levels of student attainment. A move away from traditional unseen exams to other forms of assessment has seen many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, perform better.

Assessment is central to the educational process. Done well, it drives improvement, shapes student behaviour and provides accountability to employers and others. It can also be a source of dissatisfaction, frustration and anxiety. Does it assess the right things? Does it take place at the right points in the learning journey? Is it susceptible to cheating? Existing and emerging technologies are starting to play a role in changing assessment practice and could help address these issues.

We have learned many lessons and towards the end of 2021, it seemed appropriate to take stock of where we are as a sector and think about what good assessment and feedback practice will look like in future.

Through consultation with universities, a survey and a review of current literature, we have gained a picture of the UK assessment and feedback landscape in higher education.
About the survey

Jisc launched a survey of the assessment landscape in UK higher education on 4 October 2021. The survey closed on 10 December 2021.

The survey asked about the use of digital tools to support assessment and feedback practice and the challenges. Respondents could enter free text to fully reflect their own views. Where a range of options were offered, these were derived from analysis of the topics raised most frequently in interviews.

A total of 63 responses were received. These came from 46 unique higher education institutions.

The respondents categorised their job roles as:

- academic practitioner (28.6%)
- learning technologist/technology enhanced learning (TEL) manager (28.6%)
- senior manager (20.6%)
- staff developer (19%)
- other (2%)

Jisc has previously undertaken a survey about electronic management of assessment (EMA) in 2014. That survey generated 90 responses from 76 separate higher education providers.

The question sets differed between the surveys so the 2021 survey does not represent any kind of longitudinal study following on from the previous work. There is, however, sufficient overlap between questions for the most significant differences to be interesting.
Standardised or variable?

There was roughly a three-way split between organisations that described their management of assessment and feedback as highly standardised in terms of its policies and procedures (28.5%); those that allowed a limited amount of local variation (33.3%) and those that recognised a lot of localised variation (36.5%).

Two thirds of respondents having a reasonable degree of standardisation is only a slight increase on the previous figure.

Although we have anecdotal evidence that the emphasis on improving the student experience has led universities to look at policy and procedure and try to iron out some of the inconsistencies, which can impact on both individual student experience and perceptions of fairness and equity, it doesn't seem as if this is leading to very top-down approaches to policy.
Use of digital tools

The range of assessment practices being supported by the use of digital tools does offer a useful comparison with the 2014 work.

Management tools

Most universities have now implemented online submission of student work. It is not surprising to see that this is the most frequent use case. In 2014 just under 30% had already made online submission mandatory university wide and that figure now stands at 54% with a further 44% saying it is widely used.

The biggest change is the widespread adoption of online marking. In 2014 only 12% of respondents mandated this approach institution wide and a further 32% had mandated it in certain subject areas. This sums up to approximately 44% significant use.

In 2021 32% of respondents said online marking is institutionally mandated and a further 54% said it is widely used. The figure for widespread usage is thus 86%: almost double what it was seven years ago. This seems to represent a significant change in attitude.

In 2014 not only was online marking relatively little used, it was also one of the biggest areas of resistance to the introduction of digital technology to support assessment and feedback processes.

Formative tools

Increased use of digital tools to support feedback is also a welcome development given that our previous research found effective engagement with feedback to be key to enhancing learning. Previously, 58% of respondents were making fairly widespread use of technology to support this process. That has leapt up to 91% in 2021.

What is equally evident, is that many approaches that have been known for some time to be pedagogically effective e.g. peer review and group work, remain among the least well supported by digital tools in UK higher education. That is not particularly surprising as our past research found many of these approaches were not well supported by core tools and innovative developments proved difficult to scale up.

As a result of these findings, we looked internationally to find some examples of pedagogically sound approaches being delivered at scale. These are featured in the new Principles of good assessment and feedback guide as case studies of putting our principles into practice aided by digital technology.
Pedagogic challenges

Our 2014 survey did not ask respondents to separately identify pedagogic challenges. We did however ask staff to identify the most significant ‘pain points’ and one of those elements shows a stark contrast with the 2021 results.

In 2014 just over 6% of respondents identified accessibility/inclusivity as a significant issue. In 2021 this has risen to 51%. It is assumed this difference relates to the fact that people are much more aware of the issues rather than a situation where we are almost 10 times worse at resolving them.

Our new principles emphasise the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in the design of assessment and feedback practice.

It appears as though staff are very conscious of the need to rethink practice but not necessarily confident in their ability to do so.

A possible area to follow up is the significant concerns around how to stop students cheating in a digital environment. There seems to be a fairly widespread assumption that it is easier to cheat in the digital world without necessarily stopping to address the fundamental questions around why students cheat in the first place. We addressed this in an exercise with the Jisc student experience experts group that fed into the new guide, Principles of good assessment and feedback.

Underlying issues include over assessment and assessment bunching causing students to panic; not paying sufficient regard to students’ personal circumstances and the stresses they face and students not really understanding the principles of academic integrity and how they relate to ethical practice in the world of work. Tackling these areas, coupled with designing assessments that don’t readily lend themselves to tailor-made answers, will go a long way to addressing the issue. We cover all of these topics in our principles guide.

The challenges identified in the survey prompts were those that came up in interviews in the early part of the research. It is notable that feedback practice did not feature as a pedagogic challenge in those conversations despite our understanding of the central role it plays. We therefore included attitudes to feedback in the section on cultural challenges.
We did however offer a free text field for staff to express in their own words what they saw as the main challenges and the topic that came up most frequently (25% of free text responses) was issues relating to feedback. Some other responses mentioning workload, large cohorts and scalability of practice are related to the difficulty of effective feedback practice in the circumstances.

Our new guide does feature feedback prominently in discussion of the principles and supporting case studies.

**What can Jisc do about these challenges?**

The most common responses to the question about how Jisc might help with these challenges (given by 50% of respondents) involved mention of sharing of good practice through facilitating communities of practice, case studies and workshops or other events.

A reasonable number (17%) went further and wanted Jisc to take more of a leading role in providing advice and guidance.

Despite the concern around accessibility/inclusivity, only one of the comments specifically mentioned this topic.
Technical challenges

Interoperability stands out as the main technical challenge. Some 83% of respondents recognise issues in this area with 43% rating the challenge as significant.

Staff seem to be more concerned about how to get the digital tools to work together than they are about the functionality of the individual tools. Given that most universities are using commercial products that need to link to a limited number of core systems, this issue appears to be much more significant than it ought to be. Jisc guidance should therefore include greater emphasis on requiring suppliers to certify against recognised open standards.

A few of the free text comments about challenges did talk about the software market:

“Very limited choice in the market. Vendors not keeping up with the rapid changes in assessment and feedback and pedagogy.”

Senior manager.

“Electronic marking tools generally still aren’t as intuitive as marking on paper. Assessment modes are more varied than online platforms readily allow for.”

TEL manager.
What can Jisc do about these challenges?

In terms of responses about what Jisc might do to support the sector, 43% of those who responded wanted to see Jisc lobbying and putting pressure on suppliers on behalf of the sector. These comments were some of the most specific requests for support. Comments include:

“Put sectoral pressure on suppliers to create interoperability.”

TEL manager.

“Reviewing APIs and similar between major HE systems.”

Senior manager.

“Bring together systems providers to identify how integration can be designed into systems as they are developed.”

Staff developer.

This was not the only comment asking for suppliers to be included in events.

One comment seems to be asking for an update of sector requirements work previously carried out by Jisc:

“Profile UK HE sector requirements for an assessment system and make those requirements available to system developers.”

TEL manager.

Another talked about working with suppliers to help them understand UK requirements.

“Encouraging a broader market for assessment and feedback platforms. Assisting in frameworks or campus license deals for the sector.”

Senior manager.
Cultural challenges

Staff resistance to change remains the most persistent cultural challenge. The number who see it as a significant issue has dropped only 1% since the previous survey and 88% feel the issue is problematic (as opposed to 93% in 2014).

These figures may not be quite so concerning as they first appear. In our 2014 survey, many respondents felt that staff resistance was only just beginning to surface and attitudes were likely to harden as use of digital tools scaled up. If the situation has not noticeably improved, at least it hasn’t worsened with increased use.

What can Jisc do about these challenges?

Unsurprisingly, respondents did not specifically request that Jisc help with culture change but the calls for facilitating communities of practice and sharing of experience obviously relate to this topic.

One comment did, however, address this:

“Identify models of change and case studies of where innovation or change has worked at an institutional level.”

Staff developer.
Rethinking assessment

The pandemic may have focused minds on digital transformation but there are other reasons why now is the ideal time to review assessment and feedback practice.

We have a sound body of evidence of good pedagogic practice. Some of this is not new but recent research has advanced our thinking on why some of the known good practice works.

We now have tools that can work seamlessly together and support good pedagogic practice at scale.

Students and teachers have been exposed to different ways of doing things and are better able to contribute to dialogue about what works and what doesn’t.

The assessment landscape survey together with a literature review and consultation events, informed the development of a refreshed set of principles for assessment and feedback which offer an actionable way to improve learning, teaching and assessment and can be applied to any aspect of learning design underpinned by the effective application of technology.

In our new guide, Principles for good assessment and feedback we discuss how the principles can be applied to assessment and feedback illustrated with examples of digital practice from across higher education.
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Let’s work together to transform your assessment and feedback practice
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