ASSESSMENT STRATEGY – DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING ASSESSMENTS FOR ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Introduction

Assessment has the potential to be a driving pedagogically instrument in third level education. The function of assessment should not merely be to measure learning, it should be an occasion for students to engage with and develop their learning. Successfully engaging in the assessment process is an opportunity for students to achieve and demonstrate key knowledge, skills and competencies.

In 2012, a project with the aim of improving the quality of assessment writing in an online Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Humanities Programme began with the development of a guide for designing and writing assessments for online distance education students. In 2013, an audit of the programme's learning outcomes and their inherent assessment types was conducted, with some deficiencies being identified. The appropriate assessment types required to provide students with reasonable opportunities to achieve the programme's learning outcomes, as well as each module's learning outcomes, were identified. This resulted in the creation of an assessment matrix, which involved a structured and transparent programme-level plan for the assessments across all modules within this flexible modular programme, where students may take a number of different progression routes. Prior to the introduction of the assessment matrix, while some variety in assessment type was evident, the choice of assessment depended on decisions made by individual assessment writers, and often tended to rely on the essay-style assessments and the end-of-year examination. A need for training of assessment writers was identified and in 2014 an online assessment writing course was developed and associated training workshops delivered.

This poster will present the process involved in: the creation of the guide for writing assessments; identification of the appropriate assessment types for the achievement of learning outcomes; the development of the assessment matrix and; the on-going development of an online assessment writing course and training workshops. The paper also details the lessons learned from the project thus far and outlines our plans for the project.

Background of the Open Education Unit

The Open Education Unit (formerly Oscail), the main provider of online, 'off-campus' programmes in Dublin City University (DCU), was established in 1982 as the National Distance Education Centre (NDEC). This Unit has seen many changes since its establishment in 1982, including a full transformation from being a separate organization, working in conjunction with a number of Irish universities, to being the main provider of online distance education programmes for DCU. The Open Education Unit is now located within DCU's National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL).

By providing online, 'off-campus' programmes, the Open Education Unit has as its core mission the provision of programmes in order to provide students with the opportunity to attain their educational goals without being required to attend campus-based lectures/tutorials on a regularly basis.

A number of undergraduate programmes in a range of subjects from the Humanities and programmes in Information Technology are offered by the Open Education Unit. There are also postgraduate programmes, which are targeted specifically at students wishing to obtain management qualifications mainly in the areas of Clean Technologies, Operational Management, Internet Enterprise Systems, Information Systems Strategy and Management for Sustainable Development.

Structure of the Humanities Programme

One of the challenges of this project was to ensure appropriate opportunities for students to achieve the stated programme learning outcomes while retaining the flexibility of its structure. The humanities programme is based on a modular structure with students being required to successfully complete twelve modules in order to graduate with a degree qualification.

The current offering of undergraduate humanities programmes includes the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities (Hons), the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities (Psychology Major) and the Bachelor of Arts in English and History. The focus of this poster is the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities (Hons) programme which consists of a suite of thirty (15 ECTS) modules from five subject areas: Psychology; Literature; History; Sociology and Philosophy.

While some restrictions are in place, the flexibility of module selection is a defining element of this programme and students are not required to follow a strict pathway through the programme. One of the underpinning principles of the degree is to enable students to select modules from a range of different disciplines. Therefore the pathway through the programme is deliberately designed to provide the maximum level of flexibility and choice for students.

Open Distance Education Staffing Model

The Online Distance Education Teaching and Learning/Staffing Model, utilised by the Open Education Unit, is well-defined in its delineation of staff roles. The staffing model consists of a small number of full-time campus-based staff working with a range of externally-based academic staff from a variety of academic and industry backgrounds. While the full-time staff members execute a diverse range of functions and roles, all other members of the team have very specific and distinct tasks and duties. This peripheral network of people consists of academics contracted to complete certain tasks which typically involve part-time hourly-based work conducted over a period of time ranging from a number of weeks to a number of months (up to a full academic year). The roles undertaken by these part-time employees include ODE tutors, learning materials writers, assessment writers, learning materials editors, senior academics advisors, assignment monitors, internal examiners, external examiners and programme board members.

The staffing role which is central to this poster is that of the Assessment Writer. Appointments to this role are mainly awarded to academic staff from a variety of higher education institutions from the Republic of Ireland. An Assessment Writer is contracted to produce a set number of assignments including marking guidelines, feedback grids, end-of-year examination papers and marking guidelines for a particular module.

Programme Learning Outcomes and Learning Opportunities

While online distance education programmes may differ in many aspects from the more traditional on-campus programmes, within the higher education system, both modes of delivery compare in their reliance on the Irish NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications) / learning outcomes system. The humanities programme is listed as level 8 (honours undergraduate degree-level) based on the NFQ categorisation of qualifications. Therefore, the language and level of the learning outcomes are aligned to that of a level 8 standard. The humanities modules are designed to have a progression from foundation to intermediate to advanced level modules and this progression is reflected in the related module learning outcomes. It is the learning outcomes that shape and guide the instruction and assessment of the humanities programmes. The constructive alignment of programme learning outcomes with assessment type was a critical first step in the design of the assessment strategy.

Development of the Assessment Matrix

The assessment matrix was designed to ensure the appropriate usage and varieties of assessment types across the humanities programme, in order to ensure that students had reasonable opportunities to achieve the required knowledge, skills, and competencies as determined by the programme learning outcomes. This programmatic-level view has the

added advantage of safeguarding against the over-assessment of any particular programme learning outcome, and against the over-use of any particular assessment type.

Typically, the design and development of assessment will lie within the remit of a single module coordinator. However, here, the introduction of the assessment matrix saw a shift in the development of the assessment strategy from the individual lecturer to the programme team. In order to incorporate the appropriate assessment type, with the purpose of providing appropriate opportunities for students to achieve the programme learning outcomes, the programme team were required to prescribe particular assessment types in particular modules. This offset any over reliance on a particular assessment type and prevented a situation where a student could avoid engaging with the required learning opportunities. In addition, careful consideration was given to the alignment of module learning outcomes with the appropriate level and pitch of the module assessment.

The assessment matrix contains information pertaining to the type of assessment, the number of assessments, the weightings, the marking rubrics and the feedback format for all modules.

The "Creating Assessment for Online Distance Education Students" Document

Prior to the development of the assessment matrix, a guide was created for writers of distance education assessment called "Creating Assessment for Online Distance Education Students". This guide discussed constructive alignment, writing examination papers, different assessment types, writing marking guidelines and designing marking rubrics, scaffolding assessments, using open educational resources, sample assignment documentation and templates, assessment grading schemes, and examples of best practice. In 2014, this guide was converted into an online course and will be further expanded in 2015.

Introduction of Different Assessment Types

The creation of the assessment matrix highlighted some deficiencies in the learning opportunities available to students in relation to a small number of programme learning outcomes. In 2013, the majority of these gaps were addressed through the introduction of a variety of different assessment types. The introduction of these assessment types exposed the need for training and support, for assessment writers, in the design and development of assessment documentation.

The appropriate design and development of assessment instructions, for students, is paramount to the positive experience of students with that assessment. Similarly, badly designed assessments can have a negative effect on the student experience. The design of digital assessment must be well structured, clearly written, comprehensive and unambiguous. Assessment instructions should provide students with an indication of what the assignment task is, how they should go about completing the task(s), and what criteria will be used to evaluate their work. This is especially beneficial to students who may have been out of

academia for a number of years or for those who are new to third level study. Appropriate and well-constructed evaluation criteria are important for students in order to inform their study and form the basis of the feedback which is provided by the lecturer. Providing students with the evaluation criteria, prior to assignment submission, can enhance the relevance of feedback.

In order to support writers, the existing assessment writing guide was converted into an online course within a virtual learning environment. With the introduction of a number of assessment types to the assessment strategy, the main development work undertaken was in the expansion of the resources relating to online assessment tools. These resources detail the benefits and pitfalls of each assessment types; outline the structure of assignment instructions documentation for students (sources to be use, aims and objectives, which programme learning outcome is being assessed, detailed guidelines, assessment weightings, evaluation criteria, format for submission, specific instructions relating to any digital technologies used); provide guidance on how to create assignment marking guidelines for lecturers; and supply sample assessment grading scheme/marking scheme/feedback grids. In 2013, the assessment instruction documentation was expanded to include information for students on how and what to upload for marking (including the number files, file format and naming convention for files); this section is referred to as "Deliverables". Following a review of the 2013 assessment documentation, additional sections were added to the 2014 assessment documentation, namely, an "Evaluation Criteria" section, a "Plagiarism" section and a "Referencing" section. The evaluation criteria of each piece of assessment, is directly linked to the criteria on which the feedback is framed.

Future Plans

In 2015, a number of the existing digital resources will be further developed. These resources will be specifically designed for assessment designers, in the development of assessment documentation, for assignments using collaborative digital tools such as wikis and blogs. In addition, further developments will be in the area of the design of marking rubrics and additional support for students through the feedback mechanism.