UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge Centre for
Teaching and Learning

Assessment and Feedback Project

Executive summary

This project forms part of the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning's (CCTL) work plan to identify, facilitate and enhance teaching, learning and assessment practices across Colleges and the University. The Assessment and Feedback Project was developed in response to the University's Examinations Review (September 2017) which recommended the development by Faculties and Departments of a wider range of creative or innovative modes and methods of summative assessment as alternatives to traditional examinations. It was integrated into the activities of the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) which reports to the General Board through the Education Committee.

The Assessment and Feedback Project intersects with two other CCTL projects: the *Inclusive Teaching & Learning Project* and the *Student Skills Project*. The projects' action plan involves six key areas of activity, including: to enable shared understandings of assessment theory and practices with a good practice guidelines; to align assessment to learning outcomes and teaching methods; to support Faculties/Departments in the development of creative, innovative and discipline-specific modes of summative assessment as alternatives to traditional examinations; to support strategies for more inclusive assessment practices; to strengthen strategies for effective feedback; and to support the integration of online or technology-enhanced assessment and feedback tools.
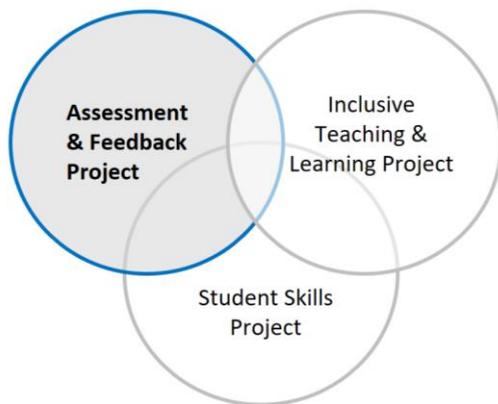
Introduction

The Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL) was tasked with developing an Assessment and Feedback Project in late 2018. This project's plan was designed to dovetail with the inclusive teaching and learning recommendations and initiatives outlined in the University's review of examination and assessment practices, which was completed in 2017.[1] Following this review, the Board of Examinations was replaced by the Examinations and Assessment Committee in Michaelmas Term 2018, at the same time that CCTL commenced the development of this project. In May 2019, the project plan was reviewed and endorsed by Examination and Assessment Committee, with agreement for the dovetailing of work initially focusing on the encouragement and support of diversified assessment practices.

The Assessment and Feedback Project's focus on assessment was expanded to also include feedback practices, understanding that these themes are interlinked. It recognises that assessment is a fundamental aspect of the student learning experience, and that there should be a purposeful alignment between assessment, teaching strategies and intended learning outcomes. Through its strand of work on 'inclusive assessment' the project purposefully intersects with *CCTL's Inclusive Teaching and Learning Project*. It also intersects with CCTL's *Student Skills Project*, as it recognises that students should be given opportunities to develop skills through learning activities that are designed to enable them to achieve their courses' desired learning outcomes, as well as to develop the assessment literacies needed to regulate their own learning and performance.

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[1] University of Cambridge (2017) Examination Review Final Report:
https://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/examreview_final_report_19sept17.pdf

Figure 1:
The relationship of the Assessment and Feedback Project to CCTL's parallel projects

Working with the educators from across the University and Colleges, CCTL started the Assessment and Feedback Project by developing the expertise to interrogate national and international research on assessment and to evaluate the implementation of initiatives designed to enhance assessment and feedback practice at Cambridge. A Senior Teaching Associate was recruited in September 2018 and a Project Associate in October 2019, with components of their work plan dedicated to this project. Their work has been progressed in collaboration with cognate units, including the Educational Quality and Policy Office, Student Operations, the Business Information Team and the Cambridge University Student Union.

The project plan: six areas of activity

Figure 2:
Overview: Assessment and Feedback components

The six key objectives of the Assessment and Feedback Project are:

1. To develop guides and share examples of good practices relating to assessment and feedback (Examination Review 2017, rec 63)
2. To assist Faculties and Departments in the review of their current assessment methods and learning objectives (PVCE letter to Chairs of Faculty Boards, Heads of Schools & Departments, May 2018)

3. To encourage, advise and support Faculties and Departments in the development of creative, innovative and subject/discipline-specific modes of summative assessment as alternatives to traditional examinations (Examination Review 2017, rec 52)
4. To support strategies for more inclusive approaches to assessment design and ensure provision of alternative arrangements (UK QAA 2018)
5. To assist Colleges, Faculties and Departments in the review, development and provision of information about feedback strategies, marking methods, refinement of assessment criteria (Examination Review 2017, recs 54-60, 67 and 75)
6. To support the Electronic Assessment Project Board in the identification of appropriate digital approaches to assessment and feedback design and delivery

1. Shared understandings and guiding principles

The first area of activity involves the clarification of terminology relating to assessment practices at Cambridge as well as the development of guides and the sharing examples of good practice relating to assessment and feedback:

- *Principles and glossary*: Co-developed with the staff and students in a number of CCTL forums, including the annual meeting of the Directors of Teaching and Senior Tutors (September 2019), these principles for assessment clarify commonly used terms for assessment by the Quality Assurance Agency's advice and guidance for assessment in U.K. higher education,[2] and in light of the Cambridge context. The glossary of assessment terms will help to inform the development of a coordinated and coherent set of practical resources and activities while clarifying expectations for students and staff.
- *Evidence-base and case studies:* Examples of good practice in the design and delivery of assessment and feedback have been identified through initiatives like the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund (TLIF) and showcased at a variety of CCTL events, for example the annual Cambridge Teaching Forum.[3]
- *Online toolkit of resources*: CCTL has developed a series of resources that feed into the Assessment and Feedback Toolkit: http://www.assessment.cctl.cam.ac.uk. These include the A-Z glossary, guides on a variety of assessment-related topics and case studies from across the collegiate university. To further disseminate these resources, CCTL actively seeks to publish feature articles and case studies on assessment practices in the new Cambridge Teaching and Learning Newsletter, to which all staff are encouraged to subscribe.[4]

2. Assessment design

The second area of activity involves a focus on the design of assessment to align with subject and discipline specific learning outcomes and teaching and learning activities. This alignment enables both reliable and authentic learning experiences:

- *Guide to constructive alignment with learning outcomes*: The Educational Quality and Policy Office (EQPO) has well developed curricula and assessment guidelines for clear learning aims and outcomes,[5] the project's guides are being developed to support and expand these guidelines with tips and examples of practice in different subject and disciplinary contexts..
- *Analysis of assessment methods:* CCTL is working with the data provided by Student Operations to review the patterns of assessment in Cambridge across different disciplines,

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[2] QAA (2018) Assessment Advice and Guidance, UK Quality Code for Higher Education, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/assessment
[3] Cambridge Teaching Forum: https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/teaching-forum
[4] Cambridge Teaching and Learning Newsletter: https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/newsletter
[5] Educational Quality and Policy Office: Learning aims and outcomes:
https://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/curricula-and-assessment/learning-aims-and-outcomes

that was reported in the Examination Review Final Report (2017) and is archived in their database. From this analysis, it is possible to identify existing varieties in assessment practice, and to undertake granular paper-level as well as programme-level mapping of assessment practices.

- *Academic integrity and assessment:* This work strand of the project seeks to ensure that policies and procedures are supported by educational opportunities for students to develop their understanding of ethical research and writing practices. It encourages the understanding that while assessment should be be designed to minimise opportunities for students to commit academic misconduct, assessment conservatism can be avoided. CCTL has collaborated with the University Library in initiating a programme of staff development seminars on academic integrity (December 2019) and with some Departments to pilot discipline-specific academic integrity education to students (Sociology and African Studies, October 2019).

3.   Diversified assessment

This third strand of work is focused on encouraging, advising and supporting academic staff in Faculties and Departments in the development of creative, innovative and subject/discipline-specific modes of summative assessment as alternatives to traditional examinations:

- *Guide to different assessment modes and methods:* The interest in diversifying assessment practices, and what 'creative and innovative' assessment might look like disciplinary contexts, has led to the development of a rubric of the different types of assessment currently undertaken at Cambridge, and the types of learning outcomes that they support. Attention is paid to modes, methods and conditions of assessment, as well as the skills that students should be supported to develop.
- *Showcasing assessment practices:* The 2020 Diversifying Assessment Symposium[6] was coordinated in collaboration with CCTL and the Chair of the Examination and Assessment Committee, Professor Chris Young. It was the first in a planned sequence of fora to discuss the rationale for diversifying assessment along with examples of practice from difference disciplines, such as Law, Engineering and Classics. The forum was livestreamed and recorded with over 100 participants.
- *Assessment design module*: CCTL is developing a module on assessment design that will include examples of 'authentic' discipline and subject-specific assessments that are aligned to learning outcomes and teaching practices and skill development (to be launched in 2020).

4.   Inclusive assessment

This fourth strand of work supports University-wide and local Departmental strategies for more inclusive approaches to assessment design and ensure provision of alternative arrangements for disabled students:

- *Student perspectives and partnerships:* CCTL has worked closely with student partners in understanding their assessment needs. Student representatives from the Disabled Students Campaign are particularly proactive in recommending accessible and inclusive assessment design, providing advice for the enhancement of reasonable adjustment processes and offering advice on 'lessons learned' from Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMAs available only disabled students) for the diversifying assessment initiatives.
- *Attainment gaps and assessment:* the Access and Participation Participatory Action Research Plan (see the APP PAR Report) included a student-led project on diversifying assessment that was presented to senior staff of the University and showcased at the Diversifying Assessment Forum. CCTL has designed this project to involve two future

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[6] Diversifying Assessment Forum, March 16 2019: https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/events/diversifying-assessment-symposium

iterations of the participatory action research cycle, which will involve students as co-researchers in a range of attainment gap and assessment-related topics.

- *Faculty and Department consultation:* Following the work on the APP, an attainment gap task force was initiated in March 2019 to more effectively coordinate the Faculty and Department consultancy or liaison work around assessment practices and attainment gaps. This group includes representatives from CCTL, the Equality and Diversity Unit, the Educational Quality and Policy Office and the Business Information Team, who have developed Cambridge's Exam Results Analytics database. This group has committed to the development of an 'Attainment Gap Starter Kit' that will support staff in analysing assessment result data, identifying any students impacted by attainment gaps, and considering educational interventions.

5. Feedback and marking practices

This strand of work focuses on reviewing and then supporting the provision of information about effective feedback and marking strategies.

- *Review of feedback practices*: Following consultation with students and staff undertaken in early 2019, CCTL contributed to the review of the CamCors platform, where supervisors provide feedback for undergraduate students. A paper with two recommendations was submitted and considered by the Senior Tutors Committee and the General Board of Education in late 2019, focusing on strengthening staff and student understanding of this platform as an effective longitudinal feedback tool, that will allow richer evaluative judgement of a students' progress in College-based assessment practices.

- *Guides for feedback and marking:* These guides are being developed by CCTL to support staff in developing effective strategies for feedback (or 'feedforward'), that builds on dialogue and opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. These guides will be integrated into CCTL's Effective Undergraduate Supervision module and staff development programmes.

- *Effective feedback module:* A new Moodle module is in development that will model effective feedback strategies for teaching staff, building on the advice and case studies collated for the Guides, and informed by the theories and practices shared by Dr Naomi Winstone, a visiting scholar with an international expertise in feedback practices, at the 2019 Cambridge Teaching Forum.

6. Technology-enhanced assessment

This sixth strand of work collaboratively with other groups across Cambridge interested in identifying and supporting appropriate digital approaches to assessment and feedback design and delivery.

- *Guides for online assessment*: Remote teaching, learning and assessment guides were rapidly produced in response to the temporary pivot to remote teaching and learning in March-May 2020, expanding the guides and resources under development by the University Information Services team, the Disabilities Resource Team and CCTL. While these were short term guides, they drew on lessons learned in existing well-designed and developed online assessment practices, and will feed into medium and long term strategies for future partial online assessment practices.

- *Evidence base and case studies:* Case studies of assessment practice, research into Cambridge digital assessment practice (e.g. Helen Duncan's PhD analysis of electronic vs handwritten exam scripts), and summaries of the scholarship about the affordances of online assessment practices are being rapidly developed in response the shift to remote assessment, and will be disseminated in the Cambridge Teaching and Learning Newsletter.

Project review and evaluation

CCTL has developed a framework for regular self-assessment and evaluation of its programmes and projects, following the guidance from Office for Students and the Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), and in alignment with the Cambridge Admissions Office evaluation strategies. The project self-assessment adopts the Theories of Change model to describe the aims and context of each project; articulate the changes that the project hopes to bring about or contribute to; and scrutinise how the project aims to achieve these changes.

Additionally, the Assessment and Feedback Project coordinator reports regularly to the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) and the CCTL Steering Committee, which in turn report to the General Board of Education. These committees provide an opportunity for the project team to adjust work plans in response to contextual factors and priorities, for instance the shift in focus in late 2019 to activity related to investigating attainment gaps.

Next steps

Covid-19 and the emergency shift to Remote Teaching, Learning and Assessment has foregrounded the value in diversifying Cambridge's assessment practices away from high-stakes handwritten and timed examinations, as well as the need for technological-enhancement of traditional examination design and delivery. The University's planning documents for the year 2020-2021 underscore the need the maintain standards and academic rigour in both teaching and assessment, even as we seek technological solutions for remote or online delivery of assessment.[7] Additionally, the University highlights the need for inclusive teaching and assessment practices, so that all students have equal opportunities to demonstrate their achievements through the assessment process, with no group or individual disadvantaged. The Assessment and Feedback Project has incorporated components of its work to address and support assessment practices in the immediate emergency situation.

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[7] University of Cambridge, draft briefing paper *Education Provision in the Academic Year 2020-21* (20.05.2020)