

<p><b>Institution: University of Cumbria</b></p>
<p><b>Unit of Assessment: 25 – Education</b></p>
<p><b>Title of case study: Enhancing University assessment through evaluating student and lecturer understanding of academic standards</b></p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The research undertaken by Professor Sue Bloxham and colleagues has had a significant impact on the approach to assessment in Higher Education. It has influenced practitioners, universities and advisory/regulatory bodies, providing advice for University tutors on communicating assessment expectations and contributing to national body and university guidance to encourage student learning and consistent marking. The research has helped tutors understand their individual 'standards framework' involving tacit, norm-referenced knowledge, holistic judgement and local negotiation of shared standards as well as the importance of dialogic, formative assessment opportunities for communicating their standards to students. This has led to improvements in assessment policies, practice and national guidelines in the UK.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>One reason university students are dissatisfied with assessment is because they think guidance, marking and feedback can be inconsistent or hard to understand. The research was designed to address these problems in grasping tutors' sense of quality as reflected in their marking standards through assessment guidance and feedback. It also investigated standards in response to students' claims that standards were idiosyncratic, inconsistent or hard to understand.</p> <p>Professor Bloxham's research builds on and links several current aspects of international inquiry, including work on the individualised, tacit, interpretive nature of academic standards; professional learning of academics; the transparency agenda in Higher Education assessment and supporting and retaining students from under-represented groups. Within that context, the research has specifically developed insights on assessment practice, based on the mismatch between how standards are communicated to students and the reality of those standards in use, including potential solutions to this problem.</p> <p>Two practitioner research studies were undertaken; evaluating interventions designed to increase tutor dialogue with students about assessment criteria, grading and feedback. This was investigated by studying university tutors grading student coursework. The project used 'think aloud' by tutors as they graded student assignments and wrote feedback, followed by a semi-structured interview, in order to explore academic judgement. Analysis of results and interviews with students showed that students consider tutors to be inconsistent in their assessment standards and therefore they seek dialogue with them in order to achieve a sense of transparency regarding expectations (Bloxham &amp; West 2007). The research indicates that student dissatisfaction may lie in the mismatch between the explicit presentation of assessment expectations to students as analytical and criterion-referenced and the actuality of tacit, holistic, and norm-referenced tutor judgement. The research developed a novel sociocultural perspective on assessment, providing a new metaphor to capture the nature of the professional learning that tutors engage in when developing their individual standards frameworks.</p> <p>The research provided the following insights into grading coursework and provision of feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighted and facilitated resolution of the conflicting purposes of assessment in Higher Education, recognising that there is a concentration of quality assurance effort on assessment systems rather than on the quality and communication of tutor judgements;</li> <li>• The essential need for tutor – student dialogue to go beyond previous conceptions of 'transparency' and support shared understanding of standards frameworks within and between teaching teams and student cohorts;</li> <li>• That tutors generally make holistic judgements based on embedded tacit standards frameworks, with judgements influenced by norm-referencing;</li> <li>• That teams of tutors develop shared but contested 'standards frameworks' through an 'interplay' between the vertical domain of public knowledge (of subject discipline and of pedagogy) and the horizontal domain of tutors' practical wisdom (including social and situated ways of working);</li> <li>• That at the heart of that interplay artefacts, including assessment criteria and concepts such as</li> </ul>

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'critical analysis', mediate tutor judgements. Within the interplay, power, based on academic status, influences the development of shared but contested local standards frameworks in programme teams and subject discipline departments.

The research began in 2004 and continues, and has involved several researchers: Professor Sue Bloxham (Director of Educational Research Jan 2011- present, formerly Head of Educational Development 2003-11); Dr Pete Boyd (Reader, Education Faculty, 2010–present, formerly Senior Lecturer in Educational Development, 2004-10), Dr Amanda West (Senior Lecturer in Sport 2004-2010; Principal Lecturer Sport & Exercise Science, University of Sunderland, 2010-present), Amanda Chapman (Senior Lecturer in Economics 2004-present), Liz Campbell (Senior Lecturer in Outdoor Studies, retired 2010), Mary Ashworth (Research Assistant 2006-13) as well as Professor Susan Orr (York St John, 2004-12; Assistant Dean Sheffield Hallam 2012-13; Dean of Learning & Teaching at the University of the Arts, London, 2013).

### 3. References to the research

The quality of the research outputs listed below is reflected in their wide citation in international journals published in the UK and elsewhere. A further indication of quality and impact is reflected in how practitioner publications have been developed from the research and in invitations for consultancy that have resulted from the publications.

- Bloxham, S & West, A (2004) Understanding the rules of the game: marking peer assessment as a medium for developing students' conceptions of assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 29 (6) 721-733. DOI: 10.1080/0260293042000227254 (cited by 114)
- Bloxham, S (2009) Marking and moderation in the UK: false assumptions and wasted resources, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 34 (2) 209-220 (cited by 44)
- Bloxham, S & West A. (2007) Learning to write in higher education: students' perceptions of an intervention in developing understanding of assessment criteria. *Teaching in Higher Education* 12 (1) 77-89
- Bloxham, S, Boyd, P & Orr, S (2011) Mark my words: the role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices. *Studies in Higher Education* 36 (6):655-670 (cited by 12)
- Bloxham, S & Boyd, P (2011) Accountability in grading student work: securing academic standards in a twenty-first century quality assurance context. *British Education Research Journal* i-first DOI: 10.1080/01411926.2011.569007 (cited by 6)
- Boyd, P & Bloxham, S (2013) A Situative Metaphor for Teacher Learning: the case of university teachers learning to grade student coursework *British Educational Research Journal* iFirst 9 April 2013, DOI: 10.1002/berj.3082

### 4. Details of the impact

#### 4.1 Stimulating practitioner and stakeholder debate and challenging conventional wisdom

The research has stimulated practitioner debate on the purpose, methodology and practice of assessment and its effect on student satisfaction through a range of processes:

- Contribution of the research findings to the *Feedback: Agenda for Change* created by 23 researchers and writers with specialist expertise, under the auspices of Oxford Brookes University *Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange Centre for Excellence*. The research influenced the emphasis on feedback as a dialogical process and on students creating their own feedback as a process of understanding standards.
- Invited as expert contributor to Guardian Professional Development on-line debate on authentic assessment (2012), particularly debating the impact of a mismatch between perceptions of guidance and marking on student dissatisfaction.
- Conference keynotes: University of Central Lancashire (2010), National Assessment in Higher Education Conference (2008), SOLSTICE Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, at Edge Hill University 2008)
- Reference 2 used as a stimulus for a professional development debate at Kings College London Assessment and feedback CPD event on marking, moderating and sharing practice.
- A workshop for the Northern Universities Consortium, particularly related to the influence of this body of research on external examiners' understanding and use of academic standards.

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- Commissioning by the Higher Education Academy to provide a national seminar on the topic: Really Useful Information! Aligning feedback with tutors' professional judgement (June 2011).

The research evidence and theoretical conclusions have underpinned significant discussion in these events (and in CPD as in 4.2 below) on rarely discussed topics such as tutor differences in marking, influences on individual judgements and the problems associated with communicating tutor standards to students. It has provided the evidence of a need for further guidance on academic standards for external examiners and therefore the Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education Academy (HEA) have commissioned further research on External Examiners' use and understanding of academic standards to guide future training.

#### 4.2. Influence on training and staff guidance

The value to Higher Education of the insights has been demonstrated by invitations from over 20 UK and international universities and organisations for Professor Bloxham and the research team to contribute to staff development. Training events and consultancies have focused on:

- Increasing dialogue between staff regarding assessment standards;
- Designing assessment and assessment guidance to provide dialogical and other opportunities for students to grasp tutor's diverse standards;
- Assisting students to recognise the tacit, holistic and variable nature of professional judgement and the limited power of explicit information to make tacit knowledge explicit.

This practical application of the research has been valuable to staff involved, receiving highly positive staff evaluations and reporting of influence on practice, for example:

"I used some of your thinking in shaping some of my own work to support the continuing professional development of colleagues in their own understanding of assessment." (UK, Russell Group University)

This work to disseminate the application of the research has also specifically influenced Certificate programmes for new academic staff, including at Aston University (2010 -2011), Northumbria University (2011), New University of Ireland (2011-13), University of Central Lancashire (2011), Writtle College (2011).

The research has informed institutional and national change programmes: Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (2009), Manchester Metropolitan (2009), University of the Highlands and Islands (2010), University of Sunderland (2009) and the Norwegian Higher Education Learning Outcomes Project. The research is cited in London Metropolitan University's Institutional *University Assessment Framework* in terms of encouraging staff to develop students' understanding of quality and to negotiate and share standards.

*A marked Improvement* (see 4.2) is being used to lever transformative change in university assessment practices through the *Transforming Assessment in Higher Education Pilot scheme*. To date, 14 UK universities have used this publication to review their assessment practices and eight have been selected to be part of the HEA pilot scheme. This research, amongst others, underpins universities' plans to develop methods to help students grasp tutors' concepts of quality which mirror the ways in which tutors learn about academic quality/ standards; predominantly through inductive methods such as being marked, marking, using exemplars, discussion with colleagues and peer feedback on draft work.

The research is also cited in guidance for staff, for example, University of Edinburgh on engaging with criteria and standards and Queen Mary University of London on reliability in marking. Through training and guidance at a wide range of institutions, the insights of the research have had a far-reaching influence on professional practice.

#### 4.3 Development of Resources to enhance professional practice

The research has directly fed into the Higher Education Academy publication designed to improve assessment, *A Marked Improvement: Transforming Assessment in Higher Education* (HEA 2012), through Professor Bloxham's contribution as an author (as evidenced on the HEA's website).

The HEA publication specifically cites the practitioner book Bloxham S. & Boyd, P (2007) *Developing Assessment in Higher Education: a practical guide* Open University Press, as a

“comprehensive” resource for educational developers and practitioners. This book was written to disseminate the early outcomes of this research to practitioners. It is recommended in many lecturer training programmes nationally and internationally (e.g. New University of Ireland, London Metropolitan University, University of Westminster, Queen’s University Belfast, University of Bradford, Bristol University, University of Portsmouth, University of Sussex and University of York) or used to provide advice for tutors (e.g. Griffith University, Edith Cowan University, Australia, Imperial College, University of Huddersfield, Montclair State University, USA). It is also used in policy documents, for example the *Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes* project of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council in 2011-2012, and London Metropolitan ‘University Assessment Framework’. Sales of 1700 books indicate the value placed on the work.

#### 4.4 Use of research findings by professional bodies to define best practice and formulate policy

Professor Bloxham is a member of the advisory group revising the assessment section of the Quality Code for Higher Education (2013) chapter on assessment of students, ensuring that the research underpins national guidance to staff on good practice in assessment. The research has contributed to a broad perception that guidance needs to be improved, has influenced the revision of these guidelines and led to the invitation to join the group. The revised guidance, out for consultation between May and August 2013, notes the interpretive nature of academic judgement; the importance of building shared understanding between staff and students of the basis on which academic judgements are made; and the importance of building students’ assessment literacy given the complex nature of professional judgement: these are all insights derived directly from this research.

Whilst activities for students such as peer assessment, feedback on drafts and engagement with exemplars have a history of use in Higher Education, the research here is significant in taking the use of these participative methods into a different realm. It challenges taken for granted assumptions about shared standards, which are made explicit in written documentation such as learning outcomes, assessment criteria and statements of standards. To date, the impact has been on teachers’ practices, mediated through training and both institutional and national level guidelines. It is expected that this translation into practice will create a positive impact on student learning, achievement and satisfaction: evaluating this represents the next stage of the research.

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (cross referenced to numbers in section 4)

To corroborate 4.1:

- A Director of NUCCAT, to corroborate impact through the Northern Universities Consortium workshop.
- Guardian Professional Development Network <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/oct/24/authentic-assessment-university-teaching-learning>.
- Director of the ASKe Pedagogy Research Centre, Oxford Brookes University to corroborate impact of the research on the *Feedback Agenda for Change*.
- Kings College, London, Assessment and Feedback, Schools Event Discussion themes. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/assess/discussthemes.pdf>

To corroborate 4.2:

- To corroborate impact through the tool, *A Marked Improvement* <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/assessment/a-marked-improvement>
- To corroborate impact on assessment policy at the University of Edinburgh: <http://www.enhancingfeedback.ed.ac.uk/staff/resources/interacting.html>

To corroborate 4.3:

- Academic Lead (Assessment and Feedback), Higher Education Academy to corroborate impact on *A Marked Improvement: Transforming Assessment in Higher Education*.
- To corroborate impact on the Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes project, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council in 2011-2012, final report. <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/projects/aaglo/>

To corroborate 4.4:

- Assistant Director in the Research, Development and Partnerships Group, QAA, to corroborate impact on the assessment section of the QAA Quality Code.