

This is the accepted manuscript version of a chapter that was published by Routledge in the book 'Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education: Developing dialogue with students' in 2013

An Assessment Compact - changing the way an institution thinks about assessment and feedback

E-book synopsis

Offered as a case-study, this chapter considers the introduction by Oxford Brookes University of an Assessment Compact (defined as a non-legally enforceable agreement) between the university and its students. The aim of the Compact is to reconceptualise thinking about assessment and feedback in the institution to bring about significant change in both assessment practices, and attitudes to assessment and feedback among staff and students, rather than just consolidate current practice. The chapter will consider the difficulties and challenges that have been faced in the implementation of the Compact, and the degree to which it has so far been successful, and why.

Introduction

In September 2009, Oxford Brookes University introduced an Assessment Compact - defined as a non-legally enforceable agreement - (see Fig.1 p x) between the university and its students. The aim of the Compact is to bring about significant change in both assessment practices, and attitudes to assessment and feedback among staff and students, rather than just consolidate current practice. It is both values and evidence-based, and seeks to reconceptualise thinking about assessment and feedback in the institution whereby assessment and feedback are seen as a relational and integrated learning process involving on-going dialogue within an active learning community of staff and students.

This chapter explores the approach to institutional change and, in doing so, aims to help you, the reader, consider (a) whether the introduction of such a compact might be appropriate in your institution, and (b) if so, how you might improve the chances of successful introduction by judicious consideration of the Brookes' experience. It will offer this experience as a case-study, and consider which factors enabled the development of the Compact and identify issues arising in the translation of the Compact into practice. In particular, difficulties in understanding the ideas within the Compact and the capacity to envision radical change are discussed. There will also be consideration of the degree to which this strategy has succeeded so far in changing thinking about and practice of assessment in the institution.

Institution ready for change.

A number of factors combined to make the institution ready for significant change. By the autumn of 2008, the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe), a Higher Education Funding Council of England funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, had existed at Brookes for three years actively promoting changes to assessment practices and funding research projects into assessment across the university. Concern, interest and awareness of assessment issues had grown as a result. Despite this, as with the sector at large, the UK National Student Survey (NSS) scores for assessment and feedback for the university were not good. In addition, on the basis of those scores, a new student union vice president (academic affairs) (SU VP) had been elected on a platform of “doing something about assessment” and the university also had a new Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC). The final positive factor was that a mass course-redesign was about to happen as part of a rationalisation of all the undergraduate courses offered at Brookes, which offered an opportunity for changes in assessment strategy and practice to be made as part of this process.

The process of creating the Compact.

Origins

The original idea for a Compact came out of a discussion at the University’s Academic Enhancement and Standards Committee (AESC), which was considering the NSS scores. Some initial suggestions by committee members included rule changes, such as introducing a maximum length of time for assessment to be returned and feedback given, or a requirement to use standardised feedback templates etc.. These were similar to actions taken by many other institutions. But fortunately the newly appointed DVC wanted to draw in university based expertise in this area in ASKe and therefore the committee decision was to commission one of ASKe’s Directors to lead the project of developing the Compact.

Two other important decisions followed. It was agreed that the ASKe team would write a first draft of the Compact, informed by explicit principles and research-based evidence. A cross-university working group was then formed comprising sufficiently senior representatives from each academic school (deputy heads where possible) who had interest in learning and teaching issues, plus representatives from the student union including the SU VP.

Ideas in the Compact

ASKe drew on its extensive knowledge of research and current thinking about assessment practice from around the world. While having no illusions about the difficulties involved in bringing about significant cultural and institutional change,

there was a determination to produce a document that got to the heart of the assessment and feedback issues, rather than just tinkering with existing practices, or imposing simplistic standardised 'rules'. It needed to propose a new and holistic approach to assessment and feedback that reflected new understandings and practices for a modern Higher Education sector, and focussed on principles, not rules. It was recognised that the ideas contained in the Compact were complex and many staff and students had not previously been asked to think deeply about the assessment process. Engagement with, and commitment to, the Compact would inevitably mean some major changes to assessment attitudes and practices. The Compact had to have academic integrity and require the application of relevant principles but also recognise the need for contextual interpretation (e.g. for different disciplines, courses and so on).

The Compact was very much influenced by both the *Assessment Standards Manifesto* and the *Feedback Agenda for Change* which had each been the result of earlier ASKe initiatives. These initiatives, one on assessment standards (2007), one on feedback (2009), followed the same model bringing together a group of national and international experts in the field for two days of discussion and debate. The outcomes, in the form of the Manifesto and the Agenda for Change, both call for necessary changes in assessment and feedback policy and practice. The *Agenda for Change* is discussed in Chapter XXX of this book.

It is not our intention in this chapter to go into detail about the theoretical literature and research evidence and underlying debates that influenced the Compact's content. Much of this is significantly covered in Chapter XXX, and for full detail of the Manifesto and the background arguments behind it, see Price et al. (2008).

However, in summary, the Compact is informed by the following key principles:

- To be effective, assessment must be recognised as a joint responsibility between staff and students (Rust et al., 2005).
- Assessment and pedagogic literacy among staff and students are prerequisites for increased effectiveness of assessment and feedback (Price et al., 2010).
- Students need to actively work with assessment standards in order to gain a full understanding of them (Rust et al., 2003).
- Understanding and emphasising the relational and dialogic nature of feedback and its processes is crucial for effective student engagement and learning (Price et al., 2010).
- Interactions within a learning community (Astin, 1997; O'Donovan et al., 2008) are of primary importance in enhancing the student learning experience.

<Insert fig 1>

The wording of the Compact.

As a first step, to appeal to busy staff and students and increase the likelihood of it being read, it was decided that the document should not exceed one page of A4. However while being succinct it also needed to capture and communicate the complex ideas at its heart, without ambiguity. With this in mind very special attention was paid to the choice of words and the precise meaning of phrases and sentences. The consequence of this is that, in achieving the required brevity, it is not always clearly understood by staff and students, especially on first reading. It contains some language that has particular technical meaning and requires very careful reading. This in turn has led to a number of problems, with some staff dismissing some of the chosen terminology as overly complex jargon, and some reading other parts somewhat superficially, believing what is said to be simpler than the ideas the words are actually trying to convey. These problems are discussed further below.

Whole university involvement

A draft of the Compact was presented to and discussed by the working group. Given the robust interrogation to be expected from academics when confronted with proposed changes it was pleasantly surprising how few adverse comments were raised, with most representatives being very supportive. However, it should be acknowledged that these were academic staff with particular roles that reflected some interest in teaching and learning and, in that sense, were probably not truly representative of Brookes' academics as a whole. The SU VP was very supportive and had a particularly good understanding of the ideas behind the Compact which had been developed by working with ASKe and the DVC over a long period of time since her election.

After several meetings, and some minor redrafting and rewording, the final version had a relatively trouble-free ride through the university's committee structures to become policy.

Factors and issues regarding creating the Compact

- The ease of formal agreement of the Compact was undoubtedly largely due to the championing of it by the DVC, along with the SU VP, and the fact that so many senior staff had buy in through their involvement in the working group, as well as responsibility for improving assessment and feedback ratings in the NSS. The SU VP had even sent a copy to the National Union of Students and had had the response from the national executive that they saw it as "exemplary practice". However, another reason for its easy passage may also have been that not everyone understood all the ramifications of the commitments made in the Compact.

- The wording of the Compact was an issue raised by the working group and has proved to be an on-going issue. Words like 'relational' and 'dialogic' were seen to be especially difficult by staff, let alone students, and there have been repeated suggestions that the wording should be simplified. However, we have consistently resisted calls to simplify the wording on the grounds that this would inevitably change the meaning. The ideas *are* complex, and we believe that part of the argument for dialogue is that it will only be through dialogue that understanding of the concepts will be achieved. The Compact cannot, and should not, be seen as something which can just be handed out as a self-explanatory document.
- Another major issue has been the understanding and appreciation of the scale of the issues that the Compact is trying to address and differing abilities to envision the fundamentally new approach and reconceptualisation that it advocates. There was ready agreement to the Compact by many, both managers and academic teaching staff, because there was a belief that, to a large extent, "we are doing it all already." However there was, and is, little evidence in practice to corroborate that belief.

Translating the Compact into practice

It is fully recognised that successfully getting a policy accepted through the committee structure is not the same as getting a policy implemented. As has already been mentioned, it was fortunate to be able to link introduction of the Compact with a university-wide initiative to redesign all programmes. A staff development programme was launched to take place over the academic year 2009-2010, which ended up continuing into the following academic year. The programme focussed on development for whole programme teams (including student reps) coming together to consider how the theory-based principles and commitments of the Compact could be applied in the assessment and feedback processes in their new programmes. These were known as Assessment Design Intensive (ADIs) and were based on a successful formula of "Course Design Intensives" (see <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/CDIs/Home>) pioneered by the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD). They were jointly run by ASKe and the OCSLD and offered to each academic School. It was through these ADIs that it was hoped that 'grass-roots' buy-in to the Compact could be achieved. Take-up for the ADIs was mixed but by the end of the year, some staff from all Schools had taken part and well over 200 academic staff had attended some form of support training. Following the staff development interventions it was up to the programme teams to fully translate the Compact's tenets and obligations of the University into the plans for the new programmes.

Factors and Issues in translating the Compact into practice

- The backing of the senior management, as exemplified by the DVC sending instructions to all Schools that they should participate in ADIs.
- Many staff really welcomed seeing in the Compact the educational values they would like to follow but could not always achieve.
- Initiative fatigue - staff had been asked to engage with several major initiatives in the recent past and not all were enthusiastic to engage with yet another one.
- There was great difficulty in holding ADIs in semester time when students could attend because of lack of staff availability to attend. Consequently most were held outside semesters with limited or no student involvement.
- Concerns about the complexity of the wording used in the Compact (as mentioned above) were raised frequently in the ADIs by staff. Their comments were often framed around concern for the students and many were worried that the Compact must be discussed with students to develop their understanding of it which would take time. In addition, some staff felt that their own understanding of the Compact was not strong enough to discuss it with students.
- We have also recently discovered that the concern about the complexity of the language of the Compact has led to some staff writing their own 'simpler' handouts in support of, and/or as additional guidance to the Compact. While some of these clearly try to capture aspects of the Compact, they do not encompass all the meanings within it.
- In line with those approving the Compact, the ability to envision the change being proposed both in scale and nature was limited and consequently the initial changes planned were minor. Some staff even concluded their practice was already aligned with the Compact, so did not require change, even though they could not illustrate the claim with examples.

The challenges to understanding the Compact

There are possibly three main reasons why, for at least some staff, there have been problems of understanding. Firstly, as has been said already, there is the issue of terminology. For some staff, terms like 'communities of practice' and 'relational' are seen as jargon and therefore dismissed as such rather than stimulating engagement and deeper consideration.

Secondly, partially because of the enforced brevity in order to keep the Compact to one page, and especially if read quickly and superficially, it is possible to see much of what is written in the Compact as obvious and something that, of course, everyone does. For example, a word like dialogue, taken at face value, can be assumed to simply mean 'talking about' assessment - and most staff can claim to do that at some point or other. And who would question that "assessment is central to learning", or that it should be seen as a "joint responsibility between staff and students"? However when examined in more detail these simple and largely uncontested statements raise questions such as:

- How, and in what ways, do we give students responsibility within our assessment practices? How might we and should we?
- In practical terms, how do we recognise the centrality of assessment in our course design?
- To what extent do we consider the effect of our assessment choices on student learning behaviours?

And so on.

Thirdly, the Compact (Fig. 1) includes a tenet that almost certainly requires most staff to reconceptualise much of their approach to assessment. Once one accepts that “the ability to assess the work of both self and others is an essential skill for all graduates” (tenet 4) one needs to see that skill as a learning outcome in its own right. Self- and peer-assessment cease to be simply choices amongst a range of possible assessment processes. This, combined with the importance of student responsibility and the need for true dialogue between staff and students within the development of a “community of assessment practice”, is arguably a huge conceptual shift for the majority of academic staff and also for students.

Therefore both the complex wording and the apparently deceptively simple parts of the Compact need to be examined and discussed at length by staff and students if the full meaning is to be understood and enable them to envision new practice and bring about significant change. ADIs were a start in this process as they challenged staff to look at the ideas and implications of the Compact. It is critical that staff and students are supported to achieve the assessment literacy referred to in the tenets of the Compact.

Evaluation

In recognition that what is being attempted through the Compact is significant culture change and a shift in conceptualisation of assessment and feedback a long-term approach to evaluation was planned and is still in process at the time of writing.

A two-year multi-faceted evaluation study was started in 2010-11 to research the implementation of the Compact and whether it is having an impact. The evaluation process is comprised of:

- An annual questionnaire gathering data on awareness, understanding and impact on practice.
- A focussed study of the Compact related to changes in a number of specific modules.
- Examination of annual programme reviews.
- Student focus groups exploring assessment issues and understanding of the Compact.

While the university will continue to monitor future NSS scores regarding assessment and feedback they do not form part of the formal evaluation of the Compact because we have always maintained that sound assessment practice may not necessarily lead to increases in student satisfaction. In fact, without a developed assessment literacy, students may express a preference for practices with which they are familiar but which the Compact is seeking to change.

Alongside this evaluation, there is also a qualitative study being undertaken by ASKe, investigating the concept of assessment literacy and how, if at all, students develop it. This study uses audio diaries, where students provide commentary on their assessment experience, and also semi-structured interviews as data collection methods. While not directly focussed on the Compact, it is possible that this study may also supply data that can be used in the evaluation as well as to further efforts to bring about change through the implementation of the Compact.

The impact so far.

Awareness

In autumn 2010 the survey of all students and staff revealed that the majority of teaching staff respondents had heard of the Compact (78%), with nearly a third stating that awareness of it has changed their assessment practice; disappointingly student awareness of the Compact was very low with just over 18% of student respondents stating they “had heard of it”.

It seems that the staff development programme had had the effect of at least raising awareness but results suggested that many academics were not engaging in the necessary dialogue with students about the Compact nor was it being sufficiently promoted through other avenues such as the Student Union.

Following the first evaluation report for the University AESC a target of 85% awareness among students was set for the 2011 survey with the onus largely on Faculties to achieve this target and improve student understanding of the Compact. In addition recommendations were accepted to interrogate assessment strategies in relation to the Compact, as part of course validation processes, and for programmes to report, in annual review, progress made towards alignment with it.

The extent of initiatives in Faculties is unclear but unfortunately the next survey carried out in autumn 2011 which was directed only at students revealed that the awareness rate remained low at 23%. Subsequent to this, ASKe mounted a publicity campaign directed at students which will be continued into the autumn semester. To assist in the publicity campaign, ASKe produced a leaflet (in its ‘123 leaflet’ series – see <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/resources/index.html>) focused on the Compact, designed to convey ideas within the Compact and to

prompt dialogue between staff and students. This leaflet has been widely distributed in the university.

Practice

As already stated, the initial survey indicated that about a third of staff were changing practice as a result of the Compact. The annual review documents focussing on 2009/10 provided limited information on changing practice but annual reviews focused on 2010/11 were required to specifically address changes made in response to the Compact. Although change has not been consistent throughout all departments in the university, the reviews have revealed many initiatives and new practices within programmes and modules such as time devoted to enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and increased use of peer review. Regarding the focussed study of specific modules, in most cases, the data collected shows positive signs that the Compact related changes have had positive effects as measured in different ways, including student performance, student attitude, and staff perception. A resource of case studies, exemplars and innovative ideas about how to implement the messages of the Compact is now being developed to support further change.

Student understanding

Student focus group data is very limited because the cascade method used to set up and run the groups did not work well. The first focus groups run by ASKe consisted of student representatives who were then themselves trained to set up and run focus groups within their own constituencies. Very few focus groups actually took place. However the data that was collected revealed that within exploratory discussion students understood and supported the ideas and ambition of the Compact. Student diary data from the qualitative study has not yet been fully analysed but initial impressions suggest that students' understanding of assessment purpose, process and outcome is extremely variable, ranging from a focus on learning to a focus solely on marks. Most of the diarists respond positively to new assessment initiatives they have encountered, especially opportunities to engage in discussions about assessment with staff and their peers.

Reflections

Aiming to achieve reconceptualisation around difficult ideas is ambitious so inevitably some initiatives within the change process have worked while others have been less successful.

What worked?

- The use of a strong theoretical and practical evidence base for the proposals for change. This provided a strong and persuasive rationale for the Compact.
- Provision of a single, succinct, values based framework to which everyone can reference their practice
- Adherence to unambiguous, if technical language, has helped to prevent over simplification or changes to meaning
- High stakeholder involvement and commitment especially from senior management and the SU.
- Commitment to the need for fundamental reconceptualisation of assessment and assessment processes, rather than looking for 'quick fixes'
- Commitment to embedding as a long term process, including monitoring and evaluation
- Persuading a critical mass of staff and, although staff are not yet talking enough to students about the Compact, they are changing practice in the classroom.

What have we learnt, and what could we have done better?

Envisioning a changed assessment landscape is very difficult, especially for those who are fairly unfamiliar with the complexity of assessment and the research in the area. The introduction of the Compact instigated a steep learning curve for many staff. A staged process to raise awareness before attempting to reshape practice might have been preferable. The opportunity to piggy back on the programme redesign may have led to the initiative seeking to achieve too much too fast. In order to bring about significant changes in staff attitudes to assessment and the pedagogic culture staff first need to be able to engage in a considerable amount of discussion. But the opportunity and time for such discussion has in fact been very limited. And to bring about the necessary structural change needs considerable commitment and buy-in from staff.

The failure, due to the need to hold workshops outside semester time, to involve students in the ADIs meant that dialogue with students in the planning and development of practice was insufficient. If there had been greater opportunity for such dialogue it may have served to illustrate the need for such dialogue in the classroom and build staff confidence to engage in that dialogue. This could be the focus of future course team development.

The process of developing and adopting the Compact within the university was relatively smooth but the extent of real buy-in by stakeholders has to be questioned. Perhaps, rather than just involving those with a particular interest in learning, teaching and assessment there should also have been a broader consultation so that the barriers to embedding the ideas could have been more clearly understood at an early stage.

On-going issues

This chapter has made clear that throughout the process there has been a tension between precision of language and communication. As noted above, an insistence on retaining the wording of the carefully crafted Compact is seen as important in providing a reference point throughout the university. So has the eventual production of a '123 leaflet' compromised the Compact? It is too early to say but the '123 leaflet' does not seek to replace the Compact; it is intended to be read alongside it, i.e. inviting students (and staff) to look at the Compact. It is hoped that it will boost engagement rather than become a substitute.

Until the Compact's ideas are part of the broad culture of the organisation, the tensions arising from the current wide range of different views of assessment (e.g. purpose, relationship to learning, role of peers etc.) will be a constant challenge to envisioning and fully achieving the desired changes. The Compact calls for staff and students to become assessment literate but, until that is more fully achieved, it is likely that staff seeking to change will face conflicting messages. For example, while the SU may be promoting the Compact, and the ideas behind it, a large majority of the student body are still requesting practices such as more traditional, teacher written feedback (in preference to involvement in self- and peer-assessment - activities which they may even initially be resistant to); and anonymous marking – practices that are counter to those promoted by the Compact. Staff have a major role to play in supporting the development of students' assessment literacy but they need to feel confident in their own understandings of assessment theory in order to do this.

Measuring the impact of the Compact is a challenge in line with capturing evidence of cultural change. It is essential that the evaluation is multifaceted. The revelation, in a survey, that students are not aware of the Compact may not particularly matter if other data reveals that the assessment practices they encounter are aligned with the Compact, enhance their learning and their assessment literacy. Clearly there is still much work to do, and within the evaluation reports for AESC it has been noted that, "[t]he real impact of the Compact, where its messages have become unrecognisably interwoven with practice, can only be measured long-term via a variety of measures and only indirectly evidenced by such indicators as changed practice at the modular and programme level". (Benfield et al., 2011 pXX)

Conclusions and messages for others.

It is still too early to judge whether a device such as a Compact can bring about institutional change in its approaches to assessment or if this initiative will, in the long run, prove successful - but the initial signs are at least tentatively positive.

Many aspects of the Compact's introduction and adoption have gone well but if we were starting again we would definitely consider taking longer, with a staged process to raise awareness and achieve 'grassroots' buy-in, thereby essentially educating both staff and students to understand the terminology and underlying concepts, so that they could then, more confidently, reshape practice.

We would therefore provisionally recommend adopting a similar process of constructing a compact for your own HEI and, although wording and presentation might vary, we hope that the content of your compact would turn out significantly similar to ours, certainly avoiding more simplistic, piecemeal approaches; but the process of its creation is a vital contribution to the institutional 'owning' of it. In terms of implementation the organization of a focused but long term campaign which does not have to compete with many other initiatives for attention would seem to be ideal if the necessary reconceptualisation is to be fully achieved..

References

Astin, A. (1997) *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Benfield, G.D. Price, M and den Outer, B. (2011) *Assessment Compact Survey – Early Messages Report*, OCSLD/ASKe, Oxford Brookes University, May 2011.

Price, M., Carroll, J., O'Donovan, B. & Rust, C. (2010) "If I was going there I wouldn't start from here": a critical commentary on current assessment practices *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*

Price, M., O'Donovan, B., Rust, C. & Carroll, J (2008), Assessment standards: a manifesto for change, *Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching*, Vol.2, No. 3. (Online December 2008) Available at:
http://bejlt.brookes.ac.uk/article/assessment_standards_a_manifesto_for_change

Rust, C., O'Donovan, B & Price, M. (2005) "A social constructivist assessment process model: how the research literature shows us this could be best practice", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol.30, No. 3, 233-241.

Rust, C., Price, M & O'Donovan, B (2003) "Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 147-164.