**Assessment equivalence frameworks: to be or not to be?**
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In the summer of 2011 a discussion on the issue of assessment equivalence frameworks was conducted by self-selecting interested parties via the SEDA JISC list. The original question was phrased in the following way:

*Dear Colleagues*

*As an Educational Developer I have been asked (a few times) what the '**equivalent alternative assessment**' would be in relation (for example) to a 2000 word essay.*

*On the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) at Plymouth we negotiate various forms of assessment with our participants. For example while some participants chose to hand in a standard 4000 word essay for one module, other submissions included: a staff briefing paper accompanied by a reflective blog; a video; the schedule for an event plus a reflection on its organisation and delivery which drew on relevant literature; delivery of a workshop plus excerpts from a blog. The negotiation of the assessment type takes place between the tutor and the participants at the beginning of the module, with the Intended Learning Outcomes, SEEC level descriptors and QAA guidance at their fingertips.*

*However colleagues across the university seem to want a more **definitive framework** outlining what equivalent 'alternative' assignments might look like, for example:*

*Original assignment: 2000 word essay*

*Equivalent assessments for the same learning outcomes: captured online discussion between 4 participants with reference to relevant theory 6000-8000 words; 8 minute video; 5 min presentation + 4 minutes for questions; 1500 word annotated bibliography plus 3 minutes audio reflection*

*Has anyone come across such a framework, or indeed had a go at developing one?*

*My initial foray into this area makes me wonder whether a framework might be limiting, as assignments in different disciplines may call for very different approaches in order to make them relevant and useful. Would a framework limit peoples' imagination? Thus far I have gone more in the direction of pulling together the guidance from QAA Code of Practice, SEEC level descriptors, HEA assessment resources and so on, with the aim of inviting colleagues to consider principles of*

*good assessment practice as they decide for themselves what merits equivalence in their particular field. I have paired these guidelines with developmental workshops.*

*However I would be interested to know if anyone has come across a framework of 'assessment and equivalence' or has any thoughts on this issue.*

This article will explore the notion of what an assessment equivalence framework might be, and start to unpack some of the debates around the whys and wherefores of whether such a framework should be attempted or left well alone. The following discussion draws out a number of key themes from the online responses to the initial query.

## Getting assessment right

Before looking at the responses to the question of assessment equivalence frameworks, it is worth acknowledging the wider context of the role of assessment and where the debate about frameworks has come from. We must acknowledge that, at its most base level, assessment is the process by which students are awarded marks towards their final degree classification. Equally, most parties working in the Higher Education sector will also be aware that the National Student Survey (NSS) has consistently told us that students are not happy with assessment and feedback practices. So on the one hand assessment is arguably one of the most critical parts of the educational experience for students, and on the other hand the universities annual report card essentially says, 'could do better'.

In an effort to redeem themselves many universities have taken a good look at the most recent research into assessment and started to ask how they might use these findings to inform their own updates to assessment strategies, policies and practices.

In this process a number of agendas have taken centre-stage these include: 'alternative', 'innovative' and 'authentic' assessment, and inclusive practice. It is precisely these discussions which have brought a number of academics to the point of asking for a framework that demonstrates how these things work in practice so that they can gain a better sense of what assessments they should be offering.

## Alternative assessment

The first agenda of 'alternative assessment' was largely in response to various pieces of legislation including the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001). The interpretation of these acts highlighted the duty of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to make 'reasonable adjustment' for students with specific needs. At the most basic level many institutions interpreted this as providing special examination arrangements for disabled students. This might include the opportunity for students with dyslexia to have 'extra time' in

exam situations, or perhaps allowing a student with limited dexterity to have an 'enabler' to pour the chemicals, as instructed by the student, in a laboratory assessment.

## Inclusive assessment

The intention of the Equality Act (2010) was to rationalise key agendas from disparate pieces of legislation and take a more inclusive line. It lists a number of 'protected characteristics': age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation (Equality Act, 2010:16).  This shifted the discussion about assessment in Higher Education away from 'alternatives for disabled people' towards a more inclusive approach for the wider community.  For example a teacher training programme for sports specialists with an assessed element in the swimming pool or on the sports pitch might carefully consider its changing facilities.  Has the institution considered the changing facilities for the transgender trainee, or those with specific religious practices? Equally if one key part of a programme is to enhance students' communication skills and assessed presentations are included as an important part of this: what strategies have the programme team built into that process so that all students, including those with extreme anxiety levels, might be able to participate?

So rather than making ***alternative arrangements*** for those with specific needs, the conversation has moved on to designing ***inclusive*** assessment whereby the assessment modes on offer are available to ***all*** students.

## Innovative assessment

The discussion about innovative assessment was born out of changing views about the ways that we judge students' work. Broadfoot (2002:199) criticised the way that Higher Education had become driven by data and was, 'obsessed with the collection and dissemination of . . . statistics, measures, grades, marks and categories'. On a practical note Brown and Smith (1997) identified that increasing student numbers, modularisation and more complex assessment regulations placed additional workload on academic staff thereby giving rise to the need for more creative approaches to assessment. Others such as Barnett (1999) went on to point out that a changing, high-risk society brings with it uncertainty and unpredictability and that our traditional forms of assessment did not connect with these factors.  What was needed was a greater range of innovative forms of assessment that demonstrated the skills and abilities of the student and how they can apply their learning in this unpredictable world (Bryan and Clegg, 2006).

Innovation arrived, and close on its heels was the debate about authentic assessment. In his work on the Transforming the Experience of Students Through

Assessment (TESTA) project Graham Gibbs (2010: http://tinyurl.com/bomkene) noted that, 'Assessment innovations at the individual module level often fail to address assessment problems at the programme-level, some of which . . . are a direct consequence of module-focused course design and innovation.' The data from this project seemed to demonstrate that some modules had indeed had an injection of innovation, but that in some cases this had led to over assessment and in others it was unclear how a multitude of different assessment formats were helping students to develop their skills longitudinally across the programme. So the message is that innovation needs to be coupled with a strategic outlook at programme level to ensure that over the period of their studies, students will gain the opportunity to develop and extend their skills, knowledge and abilities.

## Authentic assessment

In the process of building a strategic approach to innovative assessment, research began to pick up on the idea of focusing on the most authentic tasks. However as Gulikers Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004:67) pointed out, 'Authenticity is an important element of new modes of assessment. The problem is that what authentic assessment really is, is unspecified.' Some think of authentic assessment as a performative task, or a competency focused task. Others stress the importance of the link between the value of the task and its context, whilst others discuss the importance of the authenticity of the cognitive and meta-cognitive skills which would subsequently enable students to apply their learning in a range of different contexts. This is where the notion of frameworks begin to kick in.

## Assessment Frameworks

There are already a number of 'assessment frameworks' in existence. Each one has a slightly different emphasis, for example Gulikers,et al. (2004:70) proposed a 'Five-dimensional framework for authentic assessment' which identified those five dimensions as: the assessment task; the physical context; the social context; the assessment result or form; and the assessment criteria. Middlemas (2010) has produced some guidelines for the assessment of multi-format coursework which explore factors that should be considered, and explains the benefits of a multimodal approach. In their report on innovative assessment across the disciplines Hounsell at el (2007) provide a typology of genres of assessment. Waterfield and West's (2006) detailed project examined staff and student perspectives on assessment change and evaluation, and provided case studies of a range of possible assessments. All of these help to inform and enhance our understanding of assessment, and encourage the reader to consider important aspects of assessment design and strategy. What they do not do is provide an assessment equivalence framework whereby the reader can see at a glance what an equivalent to writing a 3000 word essay might be.

**Assessment equivalence frameworks**

An assessment equivalence framework might be seen as the magic bullet that would help the time-strapped academic to identify a number of ways that students could be assessed to meet a specific set of learning outcomes or assessment criteria for a named module or programme. So here's the rub: it sounds like a helpful idea, but the discussion that took place via SEDA@JISCMAIL.AC.UK demonstrates that the notion of assessment equivalence frameworks is in fact quite controversial!

**Arguments in support of a framework**

A number of respondents to this online discussion noted that many colleagues in the disciplines have little time to sit and ponder many of the initiatives that arrive each year, which fall on top of an already busy teaching and research schedule.  Research by Kinman and Jones (2003) supports the claim that there are indeed increasing demands upon the academic community.  In particular they report that there are poor resources; conflicting job demands, and that many academics are working in the evenings and at weekends to catch up with administrative tasks rather than research activity. It is also true that student numbers have increased (Blanden and Machin, 2004) and that staff to student ratios are currently being stretched to their limits.  This being the case, it is not difficult to see why academic staff have difficulty in addressing new initiatives and want a 'quick fix'.

The initial enquiry gave an example of a programme which includes negotiated assessment formats. A couple of respondents picked up on this and pointed out that taking time to negotiate assignments is '*well nigh impossible with modules being sat by 300+ students*'.  However responses from academic colleagues within the disciplines all seemed to agree that a short framework, produced by the 'experts', including examples, would greatly help them to apply concepts such as authentic, inclusive and innovative assessment  within their disciplinary practice.  In addition to this respondents also made strong representation that, '*A framework makes it easier to justify to periodic review/course approval/QA committees*'.  This points to a concern over 'equivalency' and the lack of confidence of some colleagues in being able to articulate how a piece of assessed work constitutes the relevant number of credits at a given level.

**The 'time principle' or 'equivalency' debate**

The most vibrant part of the online discussion focused on the issue of equivalency. One respondent noted that '*a 1000 word piece is often much harder to write than a 2000 word one, and worthy of more credit*'. So when we start to think about equivalency we might actually challenge our original notions of what makes for a more skilled piece of work.  Is it true that constructing a coherent and well-argued piece in 1000 words should be more highly valued than completing the same exercise with 2000 words?  Should writing in a concise format be the desired skill, or is there equally strong argument for extended pieces of work that enable students to develop and explore ideas in greater depth?

Another respondent suggested that, '*rather than thinking about wordage, we think in terms of learning hours, and design assessments and thus equivalents that way*'. This again proved controversial, '*equally problematic is 'learning time' - some learn much faster than others*'. However others stuck to their guns pointing out that, '*we do not modify standard classroom hours for individuals, so making an estimate of learning hours on a specific task is perhaps a valid and reasonable approach when thinking about assessment.*' This does seem rational, particularly when one takes into account the guidance from the Quality Assurance Agency which equates 1 credit with 10 hours of study (QAA 2009). This suggests that programmes should be developed with a limited and reasonable number of required study hours in mind. More to the point many universities require the number of study hours to be made explicit in their online materials and module handbooks. This debate was summed up by one respondent as follows, '*What are the intended learning outcomes, and what is the reasonable amount of student learning hours to expect the task to take?*'

The upshot of this discussion was that it gave rise to vibrant debate and divergent opinions from a group of educational developers all well qualified to hold an opinion on the matter. However there was a point of convergence on one central issue – that of whether an assessment equivalence framework would be a useful tool or not.

**Arguments to support some 'guiding principles' rather than a framework**

A number of different points were raised in this part of the discussion. One central theme was that a "definitive framework" for alternatives may offer '*quality 're-assurance*'', however it '*flies in the face of the principle of negotiating and designing those alternatives on a bespoke basis*'. A number of respondents agreed that academic colleagues should be offered 'development' opportunities that would enable them to justify their assessment approaches in terms of quality assurance. There was some feeling that academics needed to take responsibility for some of these quality issues as a core part of their understanding and development of programme design, rather than relying on 'the quality assurance bit' to have been attended to by someone else in the guise of a framework.

One respondent, who asked that neither she nor her institution should be identified, had experience of using an 'in-house' equivalence framework, and commented that although the framework had been well-intended, it could be used as '*a very blunt tool that can be wielded with nasty consequences*'. This insight seems to suggest that a framework might be too rigid a beast, and that perhaps guiding principles may be of more use to all concerned.

The equivalency debate surfaced again when one respondent suggested that devising a framework is an '*essentially meaningless task because the starting point is flawed - i.e. asking what is equivalent to a 2000 word essay. A 2000 word essay is not a meaningful and consistent unit. It will depend on the complexity of the question, how much research will be required, how difficult the subject matter, the level of the student, etc*'. This comment starts to indicate some of the issues that those who are

thinking about innovative, inclusive and authentic assessment need to consider. Rather than giving a framework it asks pertinent questions about the level, complexity, purpose of the assessment, suggesting that this questioning approach might be a more useful strategy.

**Assessment equivalence frameworks: to be or not to be?**

We have to acknowledge that the busy academic would indeed welcome a magic bullet to facilitate the development of more innovative, authentic and inclusive assessment within their programmes. However the louder voice seems to be making a strong case for a strategy that helps colleagues to more actively consider the pedagogical value of the assessment modes within their programmes. So perhaps this is the moment to put the notion of an 'assessment equivalence framework' to bed and look towards the development of some guiding principles instead.  This brings us almost full-circle to the work already done by Middlemas (2010) Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004) and Hounsell at el (2007) which shied away from providing a rigid framework, and opted instead to offer genres, guidlelines and questions to prompt further development of assessment.

The next step then, is to explore what key ideas might form the basis for a useful set of principles and what strategy might be used to help our time-strapped academics to engage with them. It seems that the approach outlined in the initial call to the SEDA JISC list has some support. This highlighted an approach where educational developers work with academic colleagues in developmental sessions, thus opening up the discussion about the purpose of assessment and the underpinning pedagogy. These developmental workshops also enable the educational development team to share the most recent research into assessment, and do some practical thinking in terms of: formative and summative assessment; staff to student ratios; the value of peer learning and feedback; online assessment and what authentic, innovative and inclusive means in practical terms for that discipline.  It's not quite a magic bullet, but perhaps that's the point. Perhaps two hours working as a disciplinary team, taking time for a deeper discussion with some guiding principles, will actually produce a more holistic, developmental and relevant assessment portfolio and a better understanding of what 'equivalency' looks like.

**Acknowledgements**

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