

PROJECT REPORT

DEVELOPING ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract – *The Faculty of Education at the University of Malta has just introduced a set of Assessment Guidelines (see Chetcuti, 2006). These guidelines offer lecturers in the Faculty of Education a view of the traditional, creative and innovative assessment practices which are in use in the Faculty of Education. The main aim is to try and ensure that lecturers within the Faculty of Education provide assessment which is fair, valid, reliable, efficient and effective for all student teachers. This report is a review of the project including the major principles of assessment for learning which form the basis of the document, the contents of the guidelines and the lessons learnt in the process of developing the guidelines. While the development of the guidelines is specific to the Maltese context, the lessons learnt in the process can easily apply to other situations and can be of use to anyone interested in bringing about change in assessment practices in higher education.*

Assessment for learning

Traditionally in universities including the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, assessment is carried out for the purpose of certification ‘to provide a student with a qualification which signifies that he or she has reached a certain level of competence of knowledge’ (Gipps & Stobart, 1993, p. 16). The methods of assessment used are varied and may include tests and examinations, assignments in the form of project work, group work or the preparation of resource materials for teaching. The student’s performance in the assessment of the study units is expressed as a percentage mark or grade which is recorded in the student’s academic record and contributes to the final award classification (see University of Malta, 2004). The assessment is mainly summative and little or no information is given to students about how they can improve, they are simply given information about success or failure.

Current debates in the field of educational assessment suggest that there is a strong move away from ‘*assessment of learning* (assessment for the purposes of grading and reporting with its own established procedures) towards *assessment for*

learning (assessment whose purpose is to enable students, through effective feedback, to fully understand their own learning and the goals they are aiming for)' (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002, p. 244). This move from traditional modes of assessment based mainly on tests and examinations is a reflection of current ideas about learning and teaching. The idea that intelligence is something fixed which can be measured is no longer thought to be valid. Nowadays individuals are considered to have multiple intelligences and diverse cognitive and stylistic profiles which range from the logical-mathematical to the bodily-kinaesthetic and intrapersonal knowledge among others (Gardner, 1999). Ideas about the ways in which students learn have also changed and the constructivist approach to teaching and learning suggests that learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but rather that they actively construct their own knowledge (Vygotsky, 1962). As stated by Dann (2002), 'constructivist theory highlights the importance of the pupils' role in making sense of learning. Implicit from this perspective is the view that pupils must also be able to make judgements about their learning through assessment and self-assessment' (p. 123). Within such a framework of learning the student becomes central to the assessment process and it needs to be recognised that assessment takes place within a social context (Murphy, 1996). Assessment is seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning process rather than something which happens at the end of a course or study unit (Gipps, 1994).

Assessment for learning, or what is also known as formative assessment, has been shown to improve learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Black & Wiliam (1998) suggest that the key characteristics of formative assessment include:

- Giving quality feedback to students regarding on what they can do to improve their work.
- Allowing students to engage in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning.
- Allowing students the opportunity to express their own views about assessment and what they think that they are learning.

Most of the research which has been carried out on *assessment for learning* has been carried out within the context of primary and secondary schools. In tertiary education it is taken for granted that it is the formal examination and grades obtained which matter and which make a difference for students. The 'high stakes' of the summative assessment of student performance for accountability purposes leaves little space for *assessment for learning*. In my view, the principles of assessment for learning being put into practice in primary and secondary schools can easily be transferred to tertiary education. As argued by Mckeachie (1986), in higher education 'evaluation is a great deal more than giving a grade. In teaching,

the major part of evaluation should be in the form of comments on papers, responses to student statements, conversations and other means of helping students understand where they are and how to do better' (p. 110). In teacher education this is considered to be very important since if they are to become the teachers of tomorrow, student teachers should be able 'to understand what they actually did know and how that knowledge was acquired' (Sultana, 2005, p. 236).

The Maltese context

In Malta, examinations have traditionally exerted a powerful influence on educational practices (Chetcuti, 2001). There is a large preoccupation with measuring, predicting performance, selecting and channelling children, and certification based on ability (Sultana, 1996). The life of the majority of Maltese students is typically characterised by a number of highly selective examinations which include: (i) an examination at the end of primary school which allows the successful candidates to enter either State Junior Lyceums or Private Church Schools. These schools are similar to grammar schools and cater for the more academically able; (ii) the Secondary Education Certificate examination (the O-Level) set by the local MATSEC (Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate) examinations board at the end of secondary school, success in which allows students entry into post-secondary education; and (iii) the Matriculation Certificate (the A-Level) which qualifies students for entry into University. These examinations all have a direct impact on the development of student self-esteem and identity (Chetcuti & Griffiths, 2002) and from an early age Maltese students start to identify their success or failure in life with success or failure in examinations.

Concerns with the negative effects of examinations which can lead to labelling of students, teaching to the test, shallow learning and an inaccurate picture of student learning (Chetcuti & Grima, 2001), have led to a shift in ideas about assessment. The National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) proposes a number of changes in assessment practices within a culture of assessment which is predominantly dominated by tests and examinations. The call is for assessment practices which are more formative in nature, focus on the individual learner, focus on process rather than product and giving a more holistic picture of what the learner has learnt (Chetcuti & Grima, 2001). However, if one looks at the general situation in schools, research (Grima & Chetcuti, 2003) has shown that when primary and secondary headteachers were asked to talk about their current assessment practices, the majority (64%) stated that they make use of annual tests and examinations, and promotion from one year to the next is based

solely on the marks attained in these examinations. Despite the theoretical move toward new 'assessment paradigms' and new models of assessment in practice, the assessment system in Maltese schools is still very much dominated by the model of *assessment of learning*. As argued by Carless (2005), barriers to reforms in assessment practices are presented when teachers' existing beliefs are not congruent with those assessment elements which are being promoted. For the reforms to be successful there needs to be a lot of training done with teachers in schools and with prospective teachers.

In Malta, teacher education is carried out within the Faculty of Education, University of Malta. The students who enter the Faculty of Education do so with the intention of becoming primary or secondary school teachers. They enter the Faculty of Education after having been successful in a number of selective examinations throughout their years in schools. They are the students who have learnt how to work within an examinations oriented culture, and they bring with them these experiences and traditional models of assessment. At University they are also faced with a culture of examinations and their success continues to be determined by the accumulation of marks and grades. However, as trainee teachers they are in the theoretical parts of their teacher education course learning about new models of assessment, about the principles of assessment outlined by the National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999), and they are expected to use these models during their teaching practicums in schools. Yet, simply learning about new models of assessment in theory is not enough to enable student teachers to understand what they really mean. Black et al. (2003) state that implementing assessment for learning requires personal change and means that teachers or prospective teachers need to change their views or the models of assessment which they are familiar with in order to be able to use assessment for learning in a profitable way. Klenowski (2002) suggests that when student teachers are exposed to the experience of formative assessment themselves they can better understand the underlying principles and equips them to adopt these ideas as part of their own practice as teachers. It is therefore necessary 'for teacher educators to model progressive assessment practices so that trainee teachers can themselves experience their impact' (Keppell & Carless, 2006, p. 179).

The need was therefore felt within the Faculty of Education to promote the philosophy of *assessment for learning*. It was deemed necessary to ensure that lecturers within the Faculty of Education were not only teaching the theory of new assessment paradigms but were themselves acting as role models and using the principles of *assessment for learning* in their own teaching. Hence, the idea to develop a set of assessment guidelines for the members of the Faculty of Education was born. A sub-committee of the Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Education started to work on trying to develop a set of guidelines which

would outline the main principles of assessment which the Faculty of Education believed in and would adopt. The idea was to explore the diverse and exemplary assessment practices being used by members of the Faculty of Education and come up with a set of principles and exemplars which would provide lecturers with alternatives to their current assessment practices.

The guidelines were not intended to be a prescriptive cookbook type recipe but rather a guide providing snapshots of various techniques which could be used to provide quality assessment for student teachers. Lecturers could feel free to select and choose what they liked from the guide. While it was intended to include a set of diverse ideas and examples of practice, it was also meant to make a statement about the Faculty of Education's commitment to the use of assessment for learning rather than simply for providing information about success or failure in the course. As stated by Chetcuti (2006):

'The Assessment Committee has developed these guidelines which inform and offer practical suggestions for full-time lecturers, part-time lecturers and especially newly enrolled lecturers within the Faculty of Education. This has been done so as to ensure that all student teachers are receiving a fair and authentic account of the competencies, skills and academic abilities which they have developed throughout their study units and the course ... Hopefully these guidelines can act as a catalyst for the evaluation of current assessment practices and the continued development of alternative and innovative examples of quality assessment.' (p. 5)

The Assessment Guidelines

The *Assessment Guidelines* (Chetcuti, 2006) include information about a number of different topics ranging from the purposes of assessment to assessment for learning to methods of assessment including assignments, tests and examinations, and feedback. In each case, the theoretical aspect is embedded within a familiar context of practice such as the teaching practice, the dissertation or long-essay and the Professional Development Portfolio (all of which are core components of the teacher education course at the University of Malta). The guidelines also include examples of feedback sheets which can be given to students with comments and critical feedback regarding their work.

The *Assessment Guidelines* are based on the following ideals:

- 'Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, and cannot be separated from it.
- Assessment practices should be fair, transparent and authentic.
- Multiple forms of assessment are used to encourage learning in different situations.

- Assessment methods are carefully planned and chosen so as to allow all student teachers to show their knowledge, skills and competencies.
- Clear guidelines and criteria are given to student teachers so that they know what is expected of them at the beginning of a study unit.
- Student teachers are given qualitative feedback which allows them to understand their strengths and areas of improvement in order to grow and develop as professionals.
- Assessment practices are to be constantly monitored to ensure standards, consistency and comparability among the different subject areas.’ (Chetcuti, 2006, p. 5)

These ideas reflect the principles of *assessment for learning* as described in the previous section. They are embedded within a constructivist framework for learning where, as stated by Murphy (1996), students are expected to engage in dialogue with each other and with their teachers to validate their own understandings rather than merely accept transmitted views. The emphasis is on a Faculty committed to the improvement and development of competence and professional practice rather than one which is interested only in providing certification for teachers. As stated by Bezzina & Camilleri (2001):

‘The University of Malta Faculty of Education is slowly moving away from a skills-based approach to teacher development to one of personal reflection as a means of teacher formation ... Through this process of development at undergraduate level, it is hoped to inculcate the right type of attitude that all teachers are considered to need to have as they take on the challenging but essential work of building schools as learning organisations.’ (p. 163)

Within such a framework the development of assessment practices by University lecturers which encourage deep and active learning and help the learner to plan, monitor, orchestrate and control his or her own learning through a variety of self-awareness processes (Gipps, 1994) becomes of utmost importance.

The *Assessment Guidelines* also place great emphasis on the feedback which is given to student teachers. Black et al. (2003) state that ‘an essential part of formative assessment is feedback to the learners both to assess their current achievement and to indicate what the next steps to their learning trajectory should be’ (p. 42). In higher education the feedback is usually given solely for the first reason, to assess current achievement and in very few instances are qualitative comments given to the student teachers to try and help them improve their learning. The assignments or examinations handed in are considered to be the final effort of student teachers showing standard rather than tools which can be used for learning.

First of all, the problem with giving feedback at tertiary level is that once a grade is assigned it cannot be altered unless it had been previously agreed between the student teacher and lecturer to present a draft assignment and to give a provisional grade. In the case of tests and examinations, once a grade is assigned it cannot be changed. Therefore, in this scenario, some lecturers consider it superfluous to give qualitative feedback which the student teachers might not even read because any changes to be made will not enable them to change their grade anyway. In research carried out by Black et al. (2003) it was seen that students very rarely read comments, preferring to compare marks with peers as their first reaction after getting their work back. A second difficulty faced by lecturers in giving feedback is the large number of student teachers who take up some of the compulsory study units. It is one thing to give qualitative feedback to thirty student teachers and another one to give feedback to more than two hundred student teachers following a particular study unit.

The *Assessment Guidelines* try to make practical suggestions on how to deal with these issues. Firstly, it gives ideas about how to give good quality feedback which indicates the difference between the attained level and the set level of the target outcome and supplies information about how to improve learning and/or applications of knowledge, skills and competencies (Chetcuti, 2006). It also focuses on the quality of the work rather than on the individual and on comparisons between individuals (Black & Wiliam, 1998). This helps the student teachers to gain a better understanding of achievable targets and enables them to believe in themselves and their abilities. Ways of giving feedback to groups are also identified, such as giving group feedback, allowing student teachers to self-assess and also peer feedback. Most important of all, the *Assessment Guidelines* include examples of Feedback Sheets which can be given to student teachers with comments on the work. The Feedback Sheets are actual sheets used by lecturers in the Faculty of Education. A wide selection is included ranging from feedback sheets for essay type questions, philosophical essays, project and scientific work, and feedback given during seminar sessions. The Feedback Sheets show that there is a wide variety of ways in which feedback can be given to students and once the criteria of success are developed it is then not so difficult to give qualitative feedback, even to large groups of student teachers.

Developing the *Assessment Guidelines*

The guidelines were developed by members of the Assessment Committee who worked together as ‘a community of practice’ (see Black et al., 2003, p. 66). We wanted to create a common understanding of our assessment practices drawing on the diverse experiences of the members of the Faculty of Education.

The members of the community came from different disciplines ranging from educational studies, arts and languages to the sciences and all had their own views about what constitutes good assessment practice. Like Elwood & Klenowski (2002), we wanted to develop a general idea of what constitutes the assessment practices of the community (in this case the Faculty of Education, University of Malta) so that these ideas could be taken up by other lecturers and provide student teachers with an understanding of why and how they were being assessed in a particular way. We wanted to develop a community of assessment practice where ideas about assessment were shared and made accessible to all lecturers and student teachers. The main audience for the assessment guidelines were the lecturers, but in order to make the guidelines more authentic, the views of the student teachers regarding assessment practices within the Faculty of Education were also included. As argued by Elwood (2006), 'changing the culture of assessment means developing a shared language regarding goals of learning and teaching as well as shared understandings of the purposes of assessment in meeting such goals' (p. 220).

The development of the assessment guidelines enabled us to reflect on our assessment practices both on a personal and professional level and to come up with ideas of good practice which could be shared. We also constantly shared our ideas and drafts of the guidelines with all members of the Faculty and the University Student Teachers Association, asking for feedback and additional examples of good practice. This reflection enabled us to grow professionally through what Sultana (2005) describes as professionalism evolving through participation in active learning communities, providing a dynamic interchange that drew on all the strengths of the different individuals involved in addressing issues of assessment within the Faculty of Education. Like Elwood & Klenowski (2002), 'working collaboratively we were engaged in meaningful conversations related to our aims in teaching, our values in relation to teaching and learning, theories of educational assessment and implementing those theories of educational assessment into practice' (p. 253). The reflective evaluation of good assessment practices and their philosophical underpinnings will hopefully act as a catalyst to ensure that assessment within the Faculty of Education becomes a vehicle for learning.

The development of a 'community of practice' and a shared understanding of assessment was not an easygoing initiative. The main problem was taking into consideration all the diverse needs of the different lecturers who all had differing views of what assessment meant. We needed to develop a strategy which celebrated difference in line with new assessment paradigms, but at the same time we needed to come up with a holistic understanding of an assessment culture which the Faculty of Education has been building over the years. We realised that

assessment practices are ‘not all value-free but have social consequences’ (Elwood, 2006, p. 229) for both student teachers and lecturers. Therefore, the context and the relationship between the lecturers themselves and the lecturers and student teachers needed to be considered when developing a common set of guidelines. We worked from the premise that, as pointed out by Elwood (2006), the success of assessment practices necessitates a changed lecturer-student relationship, but not everyone was willing to embrace this need for a changed relationship. We needed to constantly dialogue, reflect and review our ideas and we needed to ensure that both lecturers and student teachers engaged with the principles of assessment outlined in the guidelines. We therefore organised a number of meetings with individual members of the Faculty of Education, with the student teachers and held a Faculty Seminar where all issues were open to debate and review. Finally, the Assessment Committee itself had to take a stand and decide on what would be included in the final version of the guidelines.

Another difficulty which the members of the Assessment Committee faced was writing the guidelines in line with the regulations of the University of Malta. We needed to be careful that although we wanted to suggest new ideas, such as negotiating assessments and developing criteria with student teachers, these fitted in with the University regulations and we could not go about reinventing the whole Assessment Programme. While we were trying to encourage innovative assessment practices within the Faculty of Education, we were also limited by the existing University regulations. For example, even though we wanted to suggest that lecturers and student teachers negotiate the type of assessment together, this was not possible as University regulations explicitly state that methods of assessment need the approval of the Board of Studies at the time the study unit description is being considered followed by approval by Senate. Once approved and published, it cannot normally be changed. A draft of the guidelines was therefore edited by the Assistant Registrar of the University of Malta who gave her feedback and comments and brought the guidelines in line with University regulations.

The lessons learnt

The *Assessment Guidelines* draw on existing good practice in the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, but they are similar to a number of initiatives which have been carried out internationally at primary and secondary level (see Black et al., 2003) and tertiary level (see Elwood & Klenowski, 2002). The lessons learnt from the Maltese context can be applied to other institutions. While they draw heavily on international ideas about new assessment models, the *Assessment Guidelines* are unique in that they try to introduce a new model

of assessment within a traditionally examination oriented context and within the constraints of University regulations. The *Assessment Guidelines* thus attempt to 'align formative assessment with accountability mechanisms' (Elwood, 2006, p. 228).

The three main lessons learnt are:

- (i) Lecturers, especially those in the Faculty of Education, need to act as role models for student teachers to transmit to them the major philosophies of new models of assessment. As stated by Buhagiar (2006) in his review of the guidelines:

'With actions speaking louder than words, teacher educators can do much to promote the current local assessment reform efforts by translating into good practice the spirit of the newly emerging assessment paradigm in their dealings with student teachers. Towards this end, teacher educators need to have a good grounding in current assessment theories and a willingness to move from words to action. The published guidelines can be considered as an important first step in this direction.' (p. 24)

- (ii) Change and innovation can be carried out even within a context of traditional assessment. 'The challenge facing the lecturers at the Faculty of Education is therefore to adopt new assessment practices that help students become self-monitoring, autonomous learners in spite of an educational system that is still largely bent on simply passing or failing them' (Buhagiar, 2006, p. 25). Once the new assessment practices are in place and they have been evaluated by rigorous research, then they can be used to introduce and implement innovation and catalyst change which will make assessment practices more fair, valid and authentic for all students. 'By attempting to put learning into the assessment discourse within the Faculty of Education, these guidelines may serve to bridge the gap between what is being advocated by assessment experts on one hand and the contextual barriers to improved assessment practices on the other. To their credit, these guidelines offer what appears to be an opportunity to integrate better the lecturers' assessment practices with teaching and learning – a vital step towards guiding the first and facilitating the latter' (Buhagiar, 2006, p. 25).
- (iii) The getting together of members of a Faculty to discuss assessment issues and principles created 'a community of practice' which grew and developed professionally and provided 'a catalyst for change' (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002, p. 254). As stated by Black et al. (2003), discussion among colleagues is essential for clarifying understandings of the purposes and practices

involved and for ensuring a context of collegial support as individuals take on the risks of changing practice and it promoted reflection on numerous issues raised and how they could be tackled by individual lecturers. The forum of discussion created by the development of the *Assessment Guidelines* helped members of the Faculty of Education understand better the difficulties and constraints faced by members of different departments and different disciplines. It enabled members of the Faculty to reconstruct their definition of what it meant to provide fair, valid, reliable and authentic assessment practices for student teachers. It also enabled lecturers to engage in dialogue with student teachers to try to understand the shortcomings of current assessment practices and to try to build new models based on the needs of the student teachers themselves. The discussions based on communication, collaboration and leadership focused on learning, teaching and assessment to foster improvements for both lecturers and student teachers and lead to assessment practices which would enhance learning.

The impact of the *Assessment Guidelines* on actual assessment practices within the Faculty of Education still needs to be evaluated, but it is a first step in providing lecturers with the tools they need to continue working on their exemplary practice and leaves enough room for innovation and change. It also makes transparent to student teachers the assessment philosophy of the Faculty of Education and helps them understand how assessment can be turned into a positive experience. The challenges facing lecturers and student teachers in the Faculty of Education are to actually implement the ideas of the guidelines and constantly examine and re-examine the practices. This process, as Roger Murphy's comment reported on the back cover of the *Assessment Guidelines* augured, will hopefully inspire some new and effective assessment innovations.

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