



Meaningful student engagement programme

Institutional Case Studies: Northumbria University

The 'SEA' (Student Engagement with Assessment) Project

1. Understanding of Student Engagement at Northumbria University:

At the start of the project we were asked to define our understanding of the meaningful student engagement of disabled students in learning and teaching. The following outlines our working definition and this has not changed as a result of the project.

“Working with disabled student not on behalf of them, to develop, improve and ultimately ensure learning, teaching and assessment practice is inclusive and effective for all students.”

This definition is aligned with the core principles and values of Northumbria University which are academic excellence, community, inclusivity, integrity and professionalism (Northumbria, 2012a).

The core principle and value of inclusivity is at the heart of student engagement and the university is committed to quality of access to all of our opportunities and services – practising and promoting fairness and mutual respect and providing appropriate solutions to different needs and expectations. The university provides central support for students through its Academic Services with local support and engagement provided through each School. The university's commitment to equality and diversity is reflected in its Equality and Diversity Policy Statement and the Single Equality Scheme (SES) and is supported by an established staff training and development programme and action plan (Northumbria, 2012b).

There is a widely acclaimed student representation system in the university run by the students union. This includes programme and school representatives as well as representation from the different communities of students. The Students Union describes its relationship with the university as that of a '*critical*' friend and is represented on every significant committee within the university.

At the start of the project, the team with the support of the HEA used its self-evaluation framework (May and Thomas, 2010) to determine the extent to which equality and diversity has already been embedded within the design

and delivery of the curriculum. This proved useful and highlighted the strengths of the university vision on inclusivity. Although students have strong input into curriculum design, there were areas of weakness around curriculum design, academic assessment and feedback and staff engagement. In particular the team highlighted the following:-

- *There is not sufficient organisational flexibility in programmes to accommodate student diversity and individual pathways.*
- *Learning outcomes are not explicitly designed to ensure they do not adversely impact upon or discriminate against particular students or groups.*
- *The range of assessment and feedback approaches do not routinely provide more than one way for a student to demonstrate they have met learning outcomes or competence standards although the university does have a well established system for Disabled Student Support Recommendations (DSSR) (Northumbria 2012c).*
- *Staff involved in learning and teaching do not routinely work collaboratively or actively to embed equality and diversity into curriculum planning, design and delivery, informed by evidence.*
- *Individual staff performance and impact in relation to equality and diversity in the curriculum is routinely monitored and reviewed.*
- *Although this happens individually there is no programme wide mechanism in place to ensure staff with specific expertise in equality and diversity promote, facilitate and advise on the embedding of equality and diversity in the curriculum.*

These issues together with the university action plan for the single equality scheme and equality and diversity (SES Action Plan) helped inform the direction of the project.

2. Project Objectives, Activities and Outcomes

One of the key elements of the SES Action Plan within the university that still needed to be addressed was the provision of clear guidance for staff on the support of disabled students including alternative and inclusive assessment and inclusive IT provision. The project team used this as a focus for its work, and created the 'SEA' Project – Student Engagement with Assessment. The aim of this project was to create a roadmap for the university to move towards more alternative and inclusive assessment methods and practice. This road map will 'emerge' from the study and be based on the results of student engagement.

This led to five key objectives for the project with accompanying outcomes

Obj 1. Consult with a range of students (disabled and non-disabled) to identify specific objectives for the remainder of the project with respect to the process for creating the roadmap.

=> Outcome 1: Recommended methods from students for engaging with students

Obj 2. Consult with students on what issues there currently are, if any, with current assessment practice and how inclusive it is.
=> Outcome 2: Overview of assessment practice from the student viewpoint

Obj 3. Develop partnerships with students to address issues identified in Obj 2.
=> Outcome 3: Example (ie this project) of working as partners with students in a meaningful way (could lead to using similar methods for other projects in the future)

Obj 4. Design and implement a manageable pilot based on ideas from Obj 3.
Obj 5. Evaluate the pilot and use these results to construct the final roadmap for the university.
Objectives 4 & 5 => Outcome 4: Results from implementation of a pilot for inclusive assessment that builds on work from engaging students in this project.

The team have achieved the first three objectives and partially achieved the last two objectives. The initial project team comprised the Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, an Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching from one of the university Schools (Project Lead), a final year student (School Representative and disabled student) and the Disability Support Team Manager from central Academic Services. This team was joined by the Director of Quality and Student Experience and Student Wellbeing Officer within the main School and the Vice President for Academic Affairs from the Students Union. Key activities were as follows:-

Activity 1: Establishing mechanisms for student engagement.

The project team quickly established through initial face to face discussions with a number of disabled students that any further work with students on inclusive assessment practice should engage a diverse set of students – disabled and non-disabled. Disabled students did not want to be ‘singled’ out for the project. Following input from the students union on the benefits of their ‘Go Out and Listen’ (GOAL) days, the project team went ‘out and listened’ to students on two different occasions in and around the School. We created a flyer to distribute on this occasion to students on the SEA project so they had a basic set of information and our contact details. We were primarily interested in their views on two key aspects: how to involve students in our project as active and equal partners and what would they need to know in order to meaningfully explore inclusive assessment with us.

The results from this informed our next activities. The majority of students highlighted that any engagement should be face to face and not electronic. They did not value communication via flyers, posters or via social media. Some favoured email, others did not but the overwhelming view was that they preferred we talked to them face to face. The results also indicated that students did not need an incentive to engage with the project but valued activities that they could use for their CVs over financial incentives. They also valued the social aspect of engaging in a project and of ‘being heard’. Students indicated that they already had quite good knowledge around

assessment practice and thus would not require too much additional support. They talked of having some basic information and perhaps being given mind maps or pictures and diagrams of the main ideas. It should be noted that these students were mainly though not exclusively from the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences and thus are likely to be visual rather than verbal learners (Felder and Soloman, 2012). Finally the students indicated we should include all students in the project independent of race, disability, culture. background, etc..

Activity 2: Workshop on Inclusive Assessment and Practice.

A workshop was organised inviting those students that had shown an interest from the GOAL activity and the wider project team. This workshop explored the outcomes from previous work on inclusive assessment and practice (Hockings (2010), Open University (2006), Sheffield Hallam (2005), Waterfield and Best (2010)) and how these could be applied here at Northumbria, highlighting the positive drives and negative barriers for both students and staff. The majority of Northumbria's current assessments take either a compensatory approach or alternative assessment.

- **Modified Assessment Provisions (MAPs)**
 - a compensatory approach based on the medical model of disability.
 - No empirical evidence to show MAPs '*level the playing field*'.
 - Qualitative research shows a degree of student dissatisfaction with them
- **Alternative Assessments**
 - 'one off' attempt to match impairments to assessment methods.
 - Alternative assessments might always have validity for a small minority as a 'reasonable adjustment
- **Inclusive Assessments**
 - built into course design and meet assessment needs of the majority of students.
 - concerned with equality of opportunity.
 - Approach that recognises that students have different learning styles and offers a range of assessment methods necessary to assess the different ways in which students can demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes.”

The workshop discussed how the university could move towards an inclusive assessment approach. Interestingly one of the main outcomes was the concern raised by some students at using a range of assessment methods within the same module to assess the same learning outcomes. This led into Activity 3.

Activity 3: Student Survey on Inclusive Assessment and Practice

The Students Union agreed to make one of their next GOAL days on inclusive assessment. Together with a survey of student representatives this led to an internal Northumbria Students Union report on inclusive assessment. In the first survey (729 students), 61% of students preferred standardised assessment over a choice of assessment type. In the second survey (130 students) 50% of students agreed they would like to choose their assessment methods. As the report author concluded "*it is apparent from the feedback*

that more students would prefer not to have inclusive assessment on 100% of modules. Those who did, overwhelmingly preferred it for what could be argued as the wrong reasons i.e. will allow them to get better grades, play to their strengths or would make their degree easier.”

This survey together with the results from the workshop illustrated that in moving forward on inclusive assessment, there would need to be a focus on working with students to allay their fears and concerns and ensure they fully understand the benefits of such an approach.

Activity 4: Staff Workshop on Inclusive Assessment and Practice

A workshop was held with academic staff in the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences as part of a School Away day. This raised awareness of inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practices with staff and initiated discussions around taking this agenda further including highlighting possible pilot areas for the project.

Activity 5: Pilot Projects on Inclusive Assessment and Practice

Two areas were highlighted within the school for pilots on inclusive assessment practice. These pilots are still in progress.

The work from this project has been disseminated through workshops at the university student rep conference and at the Three Rivers Learning and Teaching Conference (Strachan et al 2012).

1. An evaluation of the strategies and practices you are implementing. This should include your outcome indicators, baseline and evidence indicating movement or change. You might also want to include other research or evidence that underpins or supports your programme of work.

The decision to include all students in the project work and not just focus on disabled students has proved to be of benefit. For example in the project GOAL activity, international students highlighted why they have to take timed exams in English, their 'second language and how an inclusive assessment approach could be of benefit to them.

The face to face engagement with students throughout the project has been very valuable and is clearly a very useful method of communication and engagement.

The work with students and staff on inclusive assessment has highlighted a number of perceived benefits and drawbacks to inclusive assessment (see Tables 1 and 2). Table 2 also includes comments on how these negative perceptions might be addressed.

Perceived Benefits for Students	Perceived Benefits for Staff
Students can be treated all the same irrespective of race, language, gender, etc and disabled students are not 'singled' out. For example students whose English is their second language often find time constrained exams difficult but no allowance is made for them.	Staff would be more conscious of the learning outcomes they are assessing
Students can choose assignments that suit their particular strengths. NOTE: this could also be seen as a bad thing)	Staff would be able to offer all students a similar experience and not treat disabled students in a 'special' way
Students would become more aware of the learning outcomes they are being assessed on rather than focussing on the type of assignment.	Staff would become more aware of good assessment practice. Research has indicated that adopting inclusive assessment practice can lead to improvements generally in assessment practice.
Students could ensure they have a balance of assessment types across a programme through choosing a good variety of the assessment types on offer rather than having no choice.	Staff would assess the learning outcomes and not elements outside this. For example marking the writing skills rather than the content of an essay when it is the content that relates to the learning outcomes being assessed.
	Staff would find marking less repetitive due to the variety of assessment types

Table 1: Perceived Benefits of Inclusive Assessment for Students and Staff

Perceived Drawbacks for Students	Perceived Drawbacks for Staff
Students think it would be difficult to standardise Counter Comment: This is of genuine concern among students and requires a student education campaign to go alongside any introduction of inclusive assessment practice.	Staff will need to set more than one type of assignment to assess a set of learning outcomes Counter Comment: This is true but ensures staff focus on the learning outcomes not the type of assignment
Students could choose the 'easy' option. If students are given a choice of assignments, they could be seen to take the 'easy' option. Counter Comment: Again this requires an education campaign with the students plus it is also useful to look at inclusive assessment types across a programme to ensure there is a sensible balance of these for any individual student.	Staff will need more time to mark the different types of assignment Counter Comment: If set up sensibly, the same marking scheme should be able to be used for each form of assessment.
Students think it could discredit their degree because employers and external bodies might view the assessment practice as not robust Counter Comment: This should not be the case as the different assessment options should still be assessing the	Staff may feel students are not gaining valuable skills because students could restrict the type of assignments they do. For example students could choose to never experience for example a presentation, or an exam. Counter Comment: Can ensure students

same learning outcomes and thus standardised against these in terms of their quality and robustness.	choose a range of assignment types across their programme rather than on a module by module basis.
Students could miss out on valuable skills for employability because they could severely limit the types of assignments they undertake Counter Comment: Can ensure students choose a range of assignment types across their programme rather than on a module by module basis.	Staff may not be able to standardise the marking of the different types of assignments Counter Comment: This should not be an issue if the different types are thought through carefully.
	Staff may not be able to cater for every case so what is the point in even trying Counter Comment: This may be the case but it should cater for the majority of cases

Table 2: Perceived Drawbacks of Inclusive Assessment for Students and Staff

It is clear that further work to embed inclusive assessment practice within the institution would need to address these perceptions and ensure staff and students were 'on board'.

3. Examples of where our work is likely to be used within the institution.

The approaches to student engagement taken within this project have proved successful and thus the project team has already disseminated with the School the value of informal face to face engagement with students and has used it for other purposes. The team also plan to encourage further take up of GOAL and similar approaches across the institution.

The involvement of all students irrespective of race, gender, disability, etc also proved to be useful and was highly valued by the student participants. Again this approach is one that will be used in the future to ensure that a full range of views and expertise is obtained in student engagement activities. The development of a road map for the university on inclusive assessment is underway. The project team highlighted initially that they might have to challenge the preconceptions of some staff and their reluctance to change their learning, teaching and assessment practice. However through the project, it is evident that work would need to take place to change student perceptions over assessment practice before inclusive assessment could be embedded within the institution.

4. Follow on Work

The pilot work is still underway with one pilot focussing on exploring inclusive assessment in depth with students to help challenge their perceptions of assessment practice and the other offering an inclusive assessment approach on a module. Early results indicate that students are reluctant to move away from the 'standard' assessment practice and adopt a more inclusive approach.

Inspired by the work of this project, the School has now instigated the 'SPICE' (Students as Partners in Information, Communication and Engineering) scheme which offers the opportunity for small amounts of funding (up to £500) to enable students to work in equal partnership with academic staff to strengthen the learning and teaching development of the School/University for the benefit of all.

5. Final Comments.

This project has allowed the university to explore both student engagement and inclusive assessment. The following highlights the main results from this work that others may find useful:-

- In looking at engaging a particular sector of students, consideration should be given to including all students to ensure the wider perspective of student views is included
- The majority of disabled students do not want to be 'singled out' for special treatment
- Informal face to face communication is a useful way of engaging with students and students generally do not welcome staff using social media for university related initiatives
- Students think they understand assessment practice but may need further support in fully understanding it in relation to inclusive assessment practice
- In moving towards inclusive assessment practice it is clear that work will need to be conducted to inform both students and staff of the benefits of such an approach.

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