

Bulletin number 25

Diversity and Innovation in Assessment Practices in Higher Education Institutions and by Employers and Training Providers

Prepared for SQA by Anne Galloway

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ
Ironmills Road, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1LE

www.sqa.org.uk

The information in this publication may be reproduced in support of SQA qualifications. If it is reproduced, SQA should be clearly acknowledged as the source. If it is to be used for any other purpose, then written permission must be obtained from the Publishing Team at SQA. It must not be reproduced for trade or commercial purposes.

SQA is committed to the use of robust evidence in the development and evaluation of policy and its implementation, and carries out or commissions research across a range of topics to support this.

The publication of Research Bulletins allows us to disseminate the results of our research activity to practitioners, policy makers, parents, academics and anyone else who has an interest in the key role that qualifications play in economic growth and social inclusion in Scotland.

Contents

Diversity and Innovation in Assessment	1
1 Overview of the Literature	2
2 Overview of Current Practice	11
3 Findings and Conclusions	19
4 Recommendations	23
Appendix 1	25

Diversity and Innovation in Assessment

Introduction

Aims of the project

This short project was set up to consider the range and diversity of assessment methods currently offered in vocational courses in Scotland, and to identify:

- ◆ whether innovative methods of assessment are replacing what might be seen as ‘traditional’ methods of assessment
- ◆ the reasons for selecting innovative assessment methods
- ◆ the benefits and drawbacks of doing so
- ◆ how innovative assessment is being used to assess ‘soft’ skills

The project also sought to identify emerging good practice on diversity of assessment for inclusion in SQA’s own assessment guidance.

Scope

The scope of the project was assessment practice in Scotland in higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers and training providers (ETPs), supplemented by a review of the relevant literature. In the light of another SQA project being undertaken into assessment in HNC/Ds, colleges of further education (FE) were not included in this sample.

Methodology

The project methodology comprised interviews with representatives from sample HEIs and ETPs, and some meetings with specified SQA personnel. A brief review of the literature on innovative and diverse assessment practice was also undertaken in May 2006, to identify:

- ◆ the way in which diversity of assessment is being handled in HEIs and ETPs in Scotland
- ◆ examples of diversity of assessment
- ◆ particular gaps in the literature

There is a short bibliography of relevant material in the Reference Section of this report, together with some website addresses.

1 Overview of the Literature

Defining diverse and innovative assessment

The literature search revealed a wealth of papers on diverse and innovative assessment which gave good examples of innovative assessments in use. These examples usually included all or some of the following:

- ◆ forms of examinations such as open-book and take-away examinations
- ◆ projects and investigations
- ◆ varied writing tasks
- ◆ multiple choice and other objective tests
- ◆ oral assessment
- ◆ realistic or problem-solving tasks
- ◆ assessment based on simulations or role play
- ◆ computer-assisted assessment
- ◆ portfolios and profiles
- ◆ negotiated assignments and learning contracts
- ◆ group assignments
- ◆ self, peer and co-assessment

Many of the assessments in this list (McDowell, 2002) are familiar in terms of workplace assessment, where they have been in use for over 20 years.

McDowell also provides a definition of innovative assessment. She notes that assessment might be considered new and innovative for learners and teachers if it is:

- ◆ new in their context
- ◆ trying to do something new

Assessment that is new in the context includes different methods of assessment being used to test the same knowledge, understanding and skills. So, an examination that is offered online would be regarded as innovative because, even though it is being used to test exactly the same knowledge and understanding as a conventionally administered written examination, it is new in context to the learner. Similarly, an oral presentation which simply presents facts that could also have been gathered for a written examination or essay would be regarded as innovative.

Assessment that is trying to do something new includes changes in the purpose of and reasons for assessment. Assessors need to consider what the assessment is designed to demonstrate and therefore what activity or skill actually needs to be assessed. So, soft skills might need to be assessed using more diverse methods of assessment. These would enable the assessor to identify whether the learner both knows and understands the thinking behind the attitudes and behaviours that are required in particular situations, and is able to demonstrate these in real life situations.

Mowl et al, (1996), consider innovative assessment in terms of its characteristics and its mission. They define innovative assessment as any form of assessment which involves the application of a new technique or method. This is broadly in line with McDowell's definition. They stress the fact that innovative assessment can include 'a whole range of different techniques and methods, not all of which are new inventions. What unites them is a common goal: to improve the quality of student learning.'

The need for diversity and innovation in assessment

Purposes of assessment

The need to improve the quality of student learning is one of the drivers of diversity and innovation in assessment. It is a recurring theme in the literature, where it is noted that getting a close alignment between the teaching, the learning outcomes and the assessment will result in better learning on the part of the student (Biggs, 1999, quoted by Rust, 2004).

Sometimes the alignment is inaccurate and the assessment that is provided for a particular outcome is focused more on the aspects that are easy to assess than on what the outcomes themselves require (Lines and Mason, 2005). An example of this would be a tendency for a written examination to assess memory rather than analytical skills (Rust, 2004).

According to Hornby (2003a), assessment has four main functions:

- ◆ formative, to provide support for future learning
- ◆ summative, to provide information about performance at the end of a course
- ◆ certification, selecting by means of qualification
- ◆ evaluative, a means by which stakeholders can judge the effectiveness of the system as a whole

The separation of diagnostic, or formative, assessment from the other purposes is again significant. Formative assessment is designed primarily for the learner.¹ It is through formative assessment that learners receive feedback on their performance in assessment and can, as a result, take action to improve and enhance the quality of their learning. If the quality of their learning is good this should ultimately lead to a better performance in summative assessment.

There is a need to get the balance between formative and summative assessment right. Learners and those who fund and teach them have always put a good deal of emphasis on the latter, since this is what allocates a grade or contributes to performance tables or can allow easy comparisons to be made. This has, in the past, sometimes been at the expense of formative assessment. However, formative assessment is now being increasingly used to give learners the opportunity to develop to reach their full potential.

The literature reports that Scottish HEIs are discussing the need to shift away from summative to more formative assessment for the benefit of the learners (Lines and Mason, 2005).

The QAA enhancement themes initiative

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in Scotland has embarked upon an enhancement themes initiative. This is aimed at enhancing the student learning experience in higher education. It has identified specific areas for development over a five-year rolling programme and aims to encourage the sharing of good practice in learning and teaching.

The topics for the themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees. *Assessment* was a theme in 2003–04, and resulted in a series of workshops offered in 2004. Details of the reports of the workshops and publications relating to them are given in the Reference Section of this report. *Integrative assessment* is a theme in the current year and this builds upon the outcomes of the assessment work in 2004. There are three strands of work in progress to support the integrative assessment theme. These are:²

- ◆ ‘a literature review on optimising formative and summative assessment’³
- ◆ a survey of good practice across a wide range of subjects and institutions, written up as case studies

¹ Of course, it is for other purposes too; teachers also use formative assessment to help them to identify the quality of their own performance as deliverers of learning.

² From the [Enhancement Themes](#) website.

³ An [invitation to tender](#) for four literature reviews, including one on Innovative assessment, was placed on the Higher Education Academy website in the Spring of 2006. The review will be delivered in July 2007.

- ◆ a small number of exemplars chosen from a range of case studies and analysed in greater depth and detail'

This work is being overseen by the Integrated Assessment Steering Committee.

While the enhancement themes appear to have engendered interest in diversity and innovation in assessment and learning and teaching, it is clear that HEIs had been looking to diversity in assessment for some time before the themes were announced. Many HEIs' websites provide access to learning and teaching sections which abound with information, advice and guidance on assessment and diversity of assessment.

Modular provision

The 2004 Quality Enhancement workshops reported that over-assessment had become an increasing issue, and identified the rise of modular courses as a possible cause of over-assessment. This was also noted by Hornby and Laing (2003), and is backed up by the experience of SCOTVEC at the introduction of:

- ◆ National Certificate Modules in 1985
- ◆ SVQs in 1986
- ◆ modular HN courses in 1989

Over-assessment was a feature of the early years of each of these three initiatives and steps had to be taken to encourage integrative assessment. It is possible that the introduction of modular provision in HEIs and outcome-based courses could have increased the tendency to over-assess — especially if there is a 'silo' mentality in the different departments and/or faculties and, therefore, little co-operation and limited sharing of experience. The literature notes that assessment strategies will be necessary to ensure that provision taught across a range of departments is appropriate to the demands of the programme.

Learners' commitment

There has been an increase in the numbers of learners in HE and this has had a number of effects. Firstly, the large number of learners slows down the process of traditional assessment. This in turn makes feedback difficult with the result that it is not given at all or it arrives too late to be of any use. This, as noted earlier, impacts adversely on the future performance of learners as they fail to get the message they should from feedback. Different ways of assessing learners have to be found in order to cope with the larger numbers.

Secondly, the entrants might not possess what are seen as the traditional entry requirements, and might not be familiar with traditional

assessments (Hornby and Laing, 2003). This in itself might require changes to the way assessment is handled.

Thirdly, while many entrants to HE are committed to learning and being assessed, it is possible that there is a sizeable minority which is not necessarily committed to the learning process and may lack focus in its learning. In light of this, teaching has to change to engage with learners. And if delivery and teaching change, then so must assessment methods. Assessment needs to reflect the learning process. If that is more diverse then the assessment will need to follow suit and itself become more diverse. So if there is more emphasis on coursework and assignments and perhaps a reduction in written examinations there will be a knock-on effect on assessment.

Plagiarism

MacAndrew (2002) notes that plagiarism is also an issue for traditional assessment. The ease of access to material on the internet makes assessors keener to set up assessment tasks that do not simply rely on essays and knowledge testing but which require original thought and effort to be put into the assessment task and for this to be able to be demonstrated by the learner.

Feedback

Mowl et al (1996) note that traditional methods of assessment easily provide feedback (in the shape of statistics and comparable results) to teachers, employers, parents, and agencies that are responsible for quality. Often, the result of traditional assessment is a single mark or grade being awarded, and this does not give enough information to learners about specific strengths or weaknesses. So, an unintended consequence of traditional assessment is that it sometimes overlooks the learners' needs for feedback.

They go on to note that the output from many forms of innovative assessment, such as portfolios and work-related tasks, is much less easily able to be quantified and rendered as tables of performance. Such material can still be used to give feedback to learners, however, and is much more likely to show where the quality of the learning is good and where further work will be necessary in order to meet the defined standard.⁴

Rust (2001 and 2004) echoes this view. He stresses that the aim of assessment is not only to provide a grade or give feedback on the quality of the learning process. It is also about enhancing and facilitating the learning of individuals and developing their motivation and commitment to learning. This in turn raises the quality of their performance in

⁴ This will still require the assessor to allocate time to giving feedback, however.

assessment. He goes on to note that formative assessment is not always carried out as and when it should be, and this is backed up by Hornby and Laing (2003).

There is also direct evidence from learners. On 24 August 2006 the results of the National Student Survey 2006 were announced. The survey was co-ordinated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and is based on information provided by students at universities across the UK, including three in Scotland. Details of the results have been placed on the education pages of the Guardian's website.

The survey gives information on learners' satisfaction rates. Of particular significance for the work on diversity of assessment is the report that about 40% of students said that they were unhappy with the quality of assessment and feedback from teachers. This fact will give added weight to the need to think about the ways in which:

- ◆ assessment is carried out
- ◆ individuals receive and act upon the feedback they are given

In a system involving modular provision, the literature notes, learners are likely to seek earlier feedback on their progress and performance. If it is to be effective, feedback has to be given in time for the learner to be able to take steps to amend and improve upon performance. Hornby and Laing (2003) noted that 'fish and feedback go off' after a few days and therefore there is a need for valid and reliable formative assessment to have been undertaken and fed back upon promptly if learners are to profit from the assessment.

The Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education noted that there is a need for an assessment strategy where a range of assessment methods is being used across a programme. If there is over-assessment then feedback is likely to be the first casualty of it, since assessors will be unable to keep up with the demands of assessment and the need to keep learners informed about their progress.

A word of caution

The literature warns, however, that HEIs should not diversify just for the sake of it. The *purpose* of the assessment must justify the use of the innovative method and the assessment must still be valid, reliable and practicable. For example:

- ◆ Sometimes examinations while testing knowledge also test the learners' ability to make decisions quickly when faced with a problem (Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, 2005)

- ◆ It's not simply about choosing a different way of doing things — the point of diversifying assessment must be that choosing a different method of assessment will be beneficial to the learners and what they are being asked to learn (Lines and Mason, 2005)

What is crucial, therefore, is that the assessment must assess what it **needs** to assess and, provided the purpose of assessment is clear, the method of assessment will follow.

Incidences of increased diversity in assessment

Introduction

There is evidence in the literature that the uptake of diverse assessment in HEIs is on the increase. Lines (2004) reports that Hounsell et al noted in 1996 that there was 'a wide variety of assessment techniques in use ... but in a somewhat haphazard way, with developments left largely in the hands of innovative and creative 'pioneers''. However, Hornby and Laing (2003) reported that, based on a representative sample of modules on offer at the Robert Gordon University, 'almost 50% of all modules surveyed are assessed by coursework only, with only 3.1% assessing exclusively by unseen examination.'

It is not known how representative the Robert Gordon University is in this case and whether it would be reasonable to assume that other HEIs offering vocational degrees might produce broadly similar results. Lines (2004) is cautious in his interpretation. Nevertheless, in one HEI there appears to be an increase in the provision of diverse assessments between 1996 and 2003, and this might very well be an indication of an increase in HEIs in general.

The benefits of diversity in assessment

The literature notes examples of good practice emerging from the experience of HEIs in offering a wide range of diverse and innovative assessment. For example, the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education notes (*Comprehensive Knowledge Review: Integrated Assessment* (2005)) that when a range of assessment methods is used across a programme, there needs to be an **assessment strategy** for the programme which:

- ◆ considers structures, procedures and processes
- ◆ outlines the different types of assessment to be used
- ◆ provides a rationale for use of these in every component

This will help to ensure that there is clarity about the way the assessment is to be carried out, and should help to eliminate any tendency towards

over-assessment and to look for opportunities to integrate assessment. When assessment is offered across departments in an institution this will be even more important.

Self and peer assessment can have a number of benefits. Rust (2004) describes a number of ways of involving learners in the process of marking either their own work or the work of others. He describes the benefits of doing so in terms of reducing the marking workload for the lecturer, developing the students' critical faculties and improving the quality of the students' learning.

Feedback can be improved by **the use of technology** (Rust, 2001) and looking for ways of automating feedback might in the longer term help the learners while not overburdening the teacher with the need to give clear and detailed feedback.

There needs to be even-handedness between the ways innovative and traditional assessments are regarded. There is evidence in the literature that the **practicalities** of offering innovative assessment might deter lecturers from making any changes to their assessment provision. However, Hornby notes '... the next time you sit down to mark 250 case studies, essays, laboratory reports or examination scripts ask yourself one question. Can I do this differently, in a way which makes my assessment more efficient and more effective?' (Hornby, 2003a)

Barriers to diversity in assessment

Although there is evidence in the literature of an increase in the use of diverse and innovative assessment methods, there is also evidence that there are barriers to changing assessment practice within HEIs.

Rust (2004) notes that reasons for not adopting new practices include:

- ◆ a lack of belief in the need for change on the part of the lecturer, the students or the institution
- ◆ inertia
- ◆ concerns about resources, including time
- ◆ the feeling that any change will be too difficult to implement
- ◆ regulations blocking the change

He notes that these barriers will need to be overcome in individual institutions if there is to be further progress.

What's missing from the literature

Most of the diverse types of assessment listed on page 2 have been used by employers and training providers for many years. Yet the literature search failed to identify any publications dealing with diversity of

assessment or innovative assessment specifically in relation to ETPs. The websites of different Sector Skills Bodies provide the assessment strategies for SVQs and NVQs (see the Lantra website for an example chosen at random) but these take a very similar approach and record requirements in terms of assessors, internal verifier and external verifiers, as well as fairly generic information on how simulation might be used.

There might be a number of reasons for this absence of detail. Firstly, assessment in the workplace or in the conditions of the workplace has become commonplace over the past 20 years and therefore the need to comment on this might long have passed. Secondly, the current emphasis on diversity in assessment in HEIs might be necessary because it is perceived as a significant change and therefore there might be need for practitioners to discuss it, record it and reflect on it. Thirdly, it is probably less in the culture of workplace assessors to research and publish on assessment matters.

However, it is plain from the publications under review in the HEI environment that diverse assessment is being undertaken because it has a range of advantages, including improved feedback to candidates, increased efficiency, improved integration and a reduction in the assessment burden. That being the case, even if assessors in the workplace are not **writing** about further ways of diversifying assessment, it would be useful to know that they are indeed **thinking** about it and taking action where necessary.

The literature search also revealed a number of publications relating to the management of workplace learning assessment for HEIs. Gray (2001) notes that for workplace learning, assessment methods need to be tailored to a student-centred problem-based approach. The methods of assessment which Gray suggests as suitable in the workplace are:

- ◆ self and peer assessment
- ◆ assignments and projects
- ◆ portfolio building
- ◆ presentations
- ◆ practical assessment of professional competence within the workplace

These assessment methods (and many more) have been and continue to be used in ETPs.⁵ It is clear, therefore, that practice within ETPs and HEIs, in terms of workplace learning, is similar, but it seems that there is very little communication between the two in terms of either learning from the experience of the other.

⁵ See Overview of Current Practice for information on what ETPs are saying about workplace assessment.

2 Overview of Current Practice

Discussions on diversity of assessment were held with representatives from a number of HEIs and ETPs.

Higher Education Institutions

Valid assessment

All interviewees agreed that the assessment must assess what is **supposed** to be assessed and not what is easy to assess. The starting point in identifying a method of assessment must always be to ask — is this assessment fit for its purpose? There was general recognition amongst HEI interviewees that examinations are not the only way of assessing students, and that lecturers need to use an array of assessment methods to ensure that their learners can demonstrate that they have achieved the outcomes of a programme.

One interviewee said it was important to ask whether ‘we are assessing learning **about** the subject or learning **for** the subject’. If the answer is that the learning covers theory **and** practice rather than the theory alone, then the assessment will need to comprise more than the traditional three-hour examination. Another noted that ‘if we have blended learning then we must have blended assessment too’.

Blended assessment might still, however, not involve developing a range of innovative assessment methods. But it might help learners to show their strengths across a range of activities. An interviewee noted that if the point of an assessment is to test the learner’s ability to:

- ◆ assemble the facts
- ◆ analyse them
- ◆ present them in a proper argument within a tight timescale

an examination might still be a good way of doing this. What would be important, however, would be to make sure that the test was not simply a test of the learner’s ability to memorise facts and that it did indeed test what it set out to test. Ways of ensuring this would involve:

- ◆ giving the question out in advance, allowing learners a given time to research it and to bring their notes into the examination for writing up
- ◆ providing an open-book examination

Such a set of competences could also be assessed by means of a presentation on the topic. One interviewee noted that a presentation might also help those who are less able to express their thoughts in formal written English to get their argument across. He cited the example

of a module assessed by an essay and a presentation. One student received low marks for the essay, because her poor essay-writing skills meant that she was unable to explain her argument clearly. However, her subsequent presentation on the subject was good and she handled questions well, showing a good grasp of the subject — something the essay had failed to draw out.

Assessors have to be clear about what skill they are assessing. The interviewee took the view that in the above case, the skill in question was the ability to make an argument and defend a position rather than the ability to write an essay. If the outcomes of the module or unit had been unclear this could have led to the student failing.

The range of learners

One HEI representative noted that it is no longer possible to say that there is one homogeneous group of students with a common wish to learn and a willingness to work in the way prescribed by an institution. The fact that there are higher numbers of students participating in higher education requires lecturers to adopt diversity in teaching as well as in assessment. Of course, in areas where there is a high level of competition for places, then there is a greater commitment to the learning process on the part of students. However, in areas where there is less competition to enter then it is likely that there will be issues of commitment to assessment and teaching. Assessment methods will therefore have to be developed to ensure that resources (human and otherwise) are not wasted.

Another interviewee suggested that access courses and learner support programmes might, in encouraging wider participation, also help to encourage a wider range of assessment methods to be incorporated in their subsequent courses. This might also mean that ‘access’ students, when they reach HE (or FE), have had limited experience of traditional essay writing activities.

It is not only access students who might lack essay writing skills. The 10 September 2006 edition of *Scotland on Sunday* reported that first-year students at Glasgow University have had to be taught ‘the art of writing essays ... amid growing evidence that many young students are incapable of constructing a written argument. Other universities, including Edinburgh, St Andrews, Aberdeen and Dundee, have recently introduced optional courses as concern grows that many undergraduates fail to pick up basic essay-writing skills at school.’⁶

⁶ From which it can be seen that the traditional essay is still alive and well in traditional universities in Scotland.

Examples of diversity in assessment

The interviewees gave examples of the ways in which assessments in their own subject areas are blended to cover a range of activities. At one HEI the example of the mix was essay 40%, examination 45% and presentation 15%, while at another there was no examination at all and the mix was essay 60%, presentation 20% and continuous performance 20%.

Their overall view was that a blend of assessment methods produces the best result all round. It allows:

- ◆ the students to:
 - play to their strengths
 - learn from the experience by being part of the assessment process
 - get immediate feedback which again improves the learning
- ◆ the assessment to test other skills and thus help to integrate assessment

While these were examples given from the interviewees' own experience, the point was made that these instances were not unusual and that other assessors in other faculties in their institutions were offering the same kinds of arrangements. This view is borne out by the literature which shows that the incidence of assessment by unseen examination alone in Scottish universities is low (Hornby and Laing, 2003). There was also recognition amongst the interviewees that the QAA Enhancement Themes initiative (noted earlier) had helped to drive the change. However, one interviewee, who had experience of further education as well, was of the opinion that colleges of FE had been more ready to be more innovative in developing assessment for HN qualifications.

Soft skills

All the HEIs sampled have considered the assessment of behaviours and soft skills. One interviewee uses the performance of students at workshops and discussions to make assessment decisions on these skills. The workshops are of two to three hours' duration and this gives time to review performance and to give general and specific feedback.

In the same programme the presentation forms a section of the assessment. There is therefore the opportunity both to record the presentation (for feedback as well as for the external examiner) and to review the behaviour. Marking sheets include sections on voice, eye contact, pitch and pace of presentation, stance and body language. All of these count in the assessment along with aspects such as the content and relevance of the approach to the topic.

Practicability

All interviewees indicated that practicability had been raised as an issue in relation to the introduction of innovative forms of assessment. The points raised had been to do with giving useful feedback and the time taken to carry out assessment. One institution noted that for one vocational course there are 450 undergraduates making final presentations each year. The assessment is carried out by a team of markers (including representatives from business) working over two weeks.

The interviewee made the point that the assessment is carried out in this way because the nature of the course demands it. Of course there had been practicability issues to consider, but when these had emerged in setting up the assessments, the approach had been to identify the problem and to deal with it. Often the solution had proved easier than might have been feared. It was also noted that there might be practicability issues about marking 450 or more examination scripts, yet over the years ways had been found of overcoming these.

This view was echoed by other interviewees. The feeling was that the resources required for marking examination papers were taken as read while there was a possible tendency to see arrangements to support diversity in assessment as being over-complicated and costly in terms of resources.

Self and peer assessment

Two interviewees had experience of self and peer assessment, and had different views about its efficacy.

In one instance the issue appears to be one of trust and familiarity with the process. The interviewee reported that in a course with high numbers of candidates from overseas, the learners were unfamiliar with self and peer assessment generally and were uncomfortable with the notion. Hence there had been cases where learners had expressed dissatisfaction with other learners giving a view on their performance. The use of peer assessment in this course is now under review.

In the other instance the interviewee uses self assessment in an unaccredited access course to mainstream learning. At the start of the course the learner identifies where he or she is and uses this as a yardstick to measure progress later on. This gives learners insight into their learning and development. The evidence is that learners are honest and accurate about their performances and that they do not mark themselves up.

Of course, there is a difference when certification is not an issue. However, the interviewee reported that he is about to extend self and peer assessment to some undergraduate courses. The students will be given

the grading criteria and will grade their own performances in discussion with the lecturer. The scheme will involve the lecturer acting as moderator to ensure that any tendencies to over-mark their own work or their own team's work will be moderated. So there could be three layers of assessment – the student, peers and the lecturer. It is hoped that this process will both aid the learners' understanding and help to moderate over-optimistic marking.

The interviewee also recognises that self assessment is part of QAA's and the Scottish Funding Council's arrangements, and therefore this is simply an extension of the self assessment culture.

Employers and Training Providers

Valid assessment

All interviewees stated that the main assessment method they use in the workplace is observation of practice. They also reported using the following:

- ◆ projects and investigations
- ◆ varied writing tasks
- ◆ oral assessment — to test knowledge
- ◆ realistic or problem-solving tasks
- ◆ simulations or role play — particularly required in the Care area when dealing with confidential and private matters such as complaints or difficult clients
- ◆ computer-assisted assessment – mostly trialling e-portfolio
- ◆ portfolios and profiles
- ◆ negotiated assignments

With such a wide range of assessments already in use in centres, it might be thought that diversity would not be a problem in ETPs. However, some of the interviewees noted that recent changes to SVQs had brought about the need to test knowledge in the workplace. This has caused some difficulties for some assessors, as the testing of knowledge has not formed such a significant part of assessment up till now. The centre concerned was having to take steps to assist its assessors' work within the new arrangements. One interviewee also reported that her centre would be introducing a written entrance test for potential SVQ candidates. This would mean developing a new assessment procedure.

Therefore ETPs are experiencing the same sorts of issues as HEIs in developing new competences required for delivery of a wider range of assessment methods than formerly.

The range of learners

It was pointed out by more than one interviewee that in some areas the learners are not volunteers. There are registration requirements in some occupations and this means that all workers are expected to achieve SVQs at a particular level. This puts the ETPs in the same situation as HEIs, with a more diverse body of learners and it might be necessary for ETPs to bear the experience of HEIs in mind when considering assessment for those who are taking a qualification because they have to rather than because they want to. On the evidence of the HEIs' experience this would mean that they might want to consider more diverse ways of delivering and assessing learning.

Examples of diversity

As the literature notes, diversity is not only about changing the purpose of assessment. It can also be about doing something in a context that is new to the learner. The interviewees from ETPs gave some examples of this latter type of innovation.

For example, a number of centres are trialling electronic portfolios. The interviewees who are doing so reported that the e-portfolio helped the assessment process and assisted the communication between learners and the assessors. It is still early days for drawing any conclusions but the views expressed by those interviewees whose centres are using e-portfolios seemed very positive.

It is not only in portfolios that technology is used to help assessment. A number of centres reported using e-mail generally to improve communication between assessors and candidates and to allow the assessor to give formative feedback on work before a visit to the centre takes place.

One centre offering child care SVQs also reported that the CCTV system in operation in nurseries could sometimes be used to provide evidence of how learners interact with youngsters, parents and colleagues. In such instances the assessment is regarded as formative and the assessor is able to give feedback to the learner almost instantly. The assessor does not set up the viewing and certainly does not keep the tape as evidence in such cases. It is simply that when the technology provides an opportunity to give feedback on behaviours which might not otherwise be seen by the assessor, the assessor takes advantage of them.

In a care or child care environment the use of CCTV in this way is probably acceptable since unprofessional behaviours could have a significant deleterious effect on the wellbeing of clients. However, there are issues about the use of CCTV in general which might make it less acceptable to use for assessment by observation. For example if learners were unaware that assessment was taking place this would not be

appropriate. The assessor in this case made it clear that she had discussed opportunistic assessment with her candidates and that she and they had agreed that such occasions could be used for the purposes of formative assessment and the giving of feedback on performance. It was unlikely that CCTV would feature much as a means of assessment by observation but if the opportunity presented itself it would be used.

One assessor noted that he uses his mobile phone to take pictures of the candidates' work, eg notice boards and learners' workspace, to provide authenticated evidence to internal and external verifiers.

An interviewee from one centre gave another instance of doing the same things in a different context (McDowell, 2002) which might help to increase the number of learners in the system. Again, the learners are in the care area but they are night shift workers in care homes. The centre is setting up a system of peripatetic assessors who will work only at night with those who are on the night shift. This would certainly help to make assessment of such candidates much more easy and appropriate, and would be likely to increase the number of candidates for the SVQ.

While this project was being undertaken, SQA began work on its 'Fast-track SVQ' initiative in the area of Construction. This is still in its early stages but it could count as innovative assessment as it is new in the context of the assessor. It seems to be a process of assessment of prior experiential learning based around a pre-determined set of agreed evidence. It might be necessary to review this initiative later on, when the work to support it is more established.

Soft skills

All interviewees were asked about the assessment of soft skills and behaviours. None was able to provide much information directly relevant to the terms of this project. The responses fell into two camps. On the one hand those who operated in a care environment tended to say that the behaviours and codes of practice and conduct were built into the competences. A learner who failed to demonstrate the appropriate behaviours would also fail to achieve the relevant competence. The interviewees from these centres were therefore not able to come up with detailed examples of how assessment of soft skills and behaviour is handled.

The other group of interviewees said that soft skills and behaviours are important, and that assessors can supplement their observations by:

- ◆ observing behaviour during visits to learners
- ◆ gathering information from e-mails and other communications
- ◆ taking evidence from line managers and others
- ◆ reviewing an individual's staff appraisal

Again the detailed evidence on this was not forthcoming. It is unclear whether this is because the assessment of soft skills:

- ◆ is not an issue for the sample of centres interviewed
- ◆ is not an issue for workplace assessment generally

More work may be required on this particular aspect.

Practicability

While there is no doubt that technology can help learners, assessors and the assessment process, there are occasions when it can itself become a barrier to the learner, and these occasions do need to be borne in mind. For example, in all cases reviewed as part of this project, the learners using the e-portfolio had management or administrative functions. The interviewees gave no examples of learners in a social care or child care environment using the e-portfolio. Indeed, they were concerned that access to the technology could be a barrier to learners in such situations.

One interviewee noted that his centre had tried to use video and audio evidence in the past, in portfolios, but that it is no longer doing so. Partly, this was because of the time it takes a learner, an assessor and internal verifier to find the relevant section of the tape/disc to review. However, the interviewee also noted that external verifiers had, in the past, often asked for a transcript of the tape. It was felt that this defeated the point of making the record in the first place, and so the decision had been taken to exclude such records from the portfolios.

The interviewees reported that they developed assessment plans suitable to the needs of each individual learner. While this might appear to be labour intensive, the interviewees noted that it was easier to do when the assessors were familiar with the standards and could help learners develop a process of relating their portfolios of evidence to the standards. One interviewee reported having 130 candidates in one SVQ and 120 in another at the same time. Knowing that others are able to plan and implement a diversity of assessments for such large numbers of learners might help to give heart to those in HEIs embarking on a more student-centred approach.

Self and peer assessment

One interviewee recorded using peer assessment for the Assessor and Verifier Units, but not for any other learners in the system. The 'peers' are co-equal colleagues carrying out assessor and internal verifier roles on candidate assessors. Peers can also provide witness testimony in nurseries, for example. No other instance of peer assessment was identified in the ETPs in the sample.

3 Findings and Conclusions

There is evidence from the literature and visits to centres that innovative and diverse methods of assessment are being used in both HEIs and ETPs in Scotland.

Issues specific to HEIs

The literature revealed that a wide range of material, directly related to diversity of assessment in HEIs, is available. These can be found in journals, information on individual HEI websites and websites of agencies and other bodies and organisations. The publications showed that diversity of assessment and the need to diversify assessment and become more innovative in administering assessment are under active consideration and discussion within HEIs.

There is substantial evidence from the literature that the use of innovative and diverse methods of assessment in HEIs has a wide range of advantages, most notably in:

- ◆ providing good feedback to learners
- ◆ enabling the learners to improve the quality of their learning
- ◆ increasing both efficiency and effectiveness
- ◆ reducing the assessment burden

Both the literature and the visits to HEIs confirmed that written examinations and essays still form a part of many assessments carried out in HEIs. Examinations and essays are seen as efficient and effective methods of identifying a learner's knowledge and understanding.

However, the literature and the visits to centres also identified drawbacks to using essays and examinations. These included:

- ◆ low validity
- ◆ take too much time to mark
- ◆ limited or ineffective feedback on performance
- ◆ labour intensive for lecturers
- ◆ students are no longer familiar with the art of writing essays

The use of diverse assessment can help to deal with such drawbacks.

Visits to HEIs showed that they are undertaking a more diverse range of assessment activities than formerly. Given the size of the sample of centres visited, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about the extent to which different and varied methods of assessment are used in HEIs, but the literature indicates that there appears to be a greater usage of a wider variety of assessment methods in HEIs than, say, 10 years ago.

The literature showed that there are still substantial barriers, such as perceived issues of practicability and the resistance of students, to developing a more diverse approach to assessment in HEIs. While these barriers are not an issue for SQA directly, they might have implications for any work that is to be undertaken within colleges of FE, especially as these have close links with HEIs.

The Higher Education Academy has commissioned four literature reviews including one entitled *Innovative Assessment across the Disciplines*. This will be published in July 2007.

Issues specific to ETPs

In ETPs, where assessment is very much more focused on real work activities and the demonstration of competence, there continues to be wide usage of a range of varied assessment methods. Owing to the size of the sample it is not possible to be certain, but there is an indication that knowledge testing may be becoming more prevalent within ETPs than, say, 10 years ago. This would need to be confirmed with a wider sampling of centres and courses.

The literature failed to identify any recorded consideration of diversity of assessment undertaken in ETPs, yet from the visits to centres it is clear that ETPs are carrying out assessment which is innovative (according to the definition) and that they regularly use a variety of diverse assessment methods. However, they do not appear to write about it or discuss it in the way that HEIs do.

ETPs are encountering a wider range of learners than they might formerly have done as some employers are **requiring** their employees to achieve SVQs at particular levels. In such cases the ETPs are having to adapt their delivery to ensure those who are taking a qualification because they have to rather than because they want to are engaged properly in the learning and assessment process. This might result in ETPs adopting more diverse assessment methods.

The papers and articles on diverse assessment developed by HEIs show that their practitioners are thinking about assessment techniques and approaches and reflecting on how to improve practice. The absence from the literature of information on assessment activities in ETPs might mean that they are missing the chance to consider assessment issues, and that good practice is not being captured and shared amongst the ETP community.

General issues

Soft skills

Assessment of soft skills has been considered by all HEIs, and some use has been made of innovative assessment to make assessment decisions about them. Evidence is limited, however, and this applies also to the responses from ETP representatives, whose views were not supported by detailed evidence of actual practice. This area will require further work.

Feedback

A substantial amount of the literature indicated that giving adequate and timely feedback on the performance of learners is not always handled well. A significant number of learners often complain that they receive little or no feedback, or that it arrives too late for them to take any action upon it.

Formative assessment

Formative assessment is important to learners because it gives them the chance to identify how to improve their learning. Using diverse assessment processes such as self and peer assessment may reduce the amount of time spent on marking and assist formative assessment, and thus improve the performance of learners.

Self and peer assessment

The literature contains good examples of the ways in which HEIs use self and peer assessment to aid learning. It is clear from the literature that there are real benefits in operating self and peer assessment and that, properly administered, these have rigour and quality. In summary self and peer assessment can:

- ◆ be an effective assessment method
- ◆ improve feedback
- ◆ aid learning
- ◆ help to reduce an assessor's workload

However, the visits to centres showed that while self and peer assessment is used in both HEIs and ETPs, this is to a very limited extent in HEIs, and almost non-existent in the ETPs. The reported experience of HEIs was mixed, in that one had used self and peer assessment successfully but another had experienced difficulties.

Use of technology

Technology (eg online assessment, using cameras, e-mail etc.) is being used to support learning. However, it appears to be less widespread and effective than might have been expected; the development of its use could be encouraged and good practice shared.

The literature gave helpful examples of how feedback to students could be assisted by the use of an automated reporting system.

Note on the FE sector

Although the FE sector was not included in the brief for the project, it was noted in the course of the literature search that most of the references related to HEIs. It is possible that a more concentrated search will provide more information on diversity of assessment in colleges of FE, but that would need to be checked.

4 Recommendations

In light of the size of the survey and the fact that the FE sector is not included in this project, these recommendations have been kept broad and tentative.

The use of diverse and innovative assessment has a wide range of advantages. Given that assessors in the workplace appear not to be reflecting on such matters, it might be necessary for SQA to facilitate such a debate within ETPs. This would involve a wider review of current practice on diversity of assessment and the sharing of good practice.

As part of this it might be helpful to develop guidance for ETPs on the benefits and uses of diverse assessment. Such guidance should cover improved feedback to candidates, increased efficiency, improved integration and a reduction in the assessment burden.

Thought needs to be given to the way in which the findings of this project relate to and impact upon colleges of FE. For instance, if colleges are using essays and examinations to the same extent as HEIs to assess students, it is possible that they will be experiencing the same difficulties attached to written assessments and might now be seeking ways of overcoming these. Much might be learned from the HEI literature and experience in terms of increased use of formative assessment to aid learning, self and peer assessment and overcoming resistance to the introduction of more diverse assessment methods.

Given that ETPs are not writing about their methods of diversifying assessment, it may be necessary to investigate whether the advantages of increased diversity identified by HEIs (of improved feedback to candidates, increased efficiency, improved integration and a reduction in the assessment burden) are under consideration within ETPs.

If more knowledge testing is being undertaken within ETPs, guidance on how it should be administered within such centres might need to be developed.

Further work may be required to identify whether the use of more diverse assessments would assist the assessment of soft skills in ETPs.

In view of the limited use and success of self and peer assessment for SQA qualifications in ETPs (when contrasted with the evidence from the literature of its effectiveness in HEIs), it might be necessary to develop guidance both on operating self and peer assessment and on the benefits of doing so. However, further work to identify the prevalence of self and peer assessment in ETPs would need to be undertaken first.

Given that the project identified fewer examples of the use of technology than might have been expected, further work may be required to identify examples of good practice for sharing in the form of guidance.

Appendix 1

Reference Section

Literature

Biggs, J. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University, 1999

Brown, S. and Glaser, A. *Assessment matters in higher education: Choosing and using diverse approaches*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1999

Crisp, B.R., Green Lister, P. and Dutton, K. *Integrated Assessment: New Assessment Methods, Literature Review*, Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, 2004

Follett, G. *The Place of Assessment in Quality Enhancement in Scotland*, published in Exchange, issue 4, Spring 2003

Gallacher, J., Ingram, R. and Reeve, F. *Differing National Models of Short-cycle Work-related Higher Education Provision in Scotland and England*, Glasgow Caledonian University and Open University, (2006)

Gray, D. *A Briefing on Work-based Learning*, Assessment Series No 11, Learning and Teaching Support Network, 2001

Hornby, W. *Dogs, stars, rolls royces and old double decker buses: Efficiency and effectiveness in assessment*, Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, the Robert Gordon University, 2003a

Hornby, W. *Strategies for Streamlining Assessment: Case Studies from the Chalk Face*, Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, the Robert Gordon University, 2003

Hornby, W. and Laing, D. *Assessment Survey Report No 1: Efficiency and Effectiveness in Assessment*, Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, Robert Gordon University, 2003

Hounsell, D., McCulloch, M. and Scott, M. *The ASSHE Inventory: Changing Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education*, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment and Napier University, Edinburgh in association with the Universities' and Colleges' Staff Development Agency, 1996

Johnson, R. and O'Neill, P. *Diversifying Assessment: Reviews, Reading Dossiers, Assessing Students in Seminars*, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 2000

Juwah, C., Macfarlane-Dick, D., Matthew, B., Nicol, D., Ross, D. and Smith, B.

Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback, The Higher Education Academy, 2004

Lines, D. *Developing a Variety of Assessment Methods, including Self and Peer Assessment: an Overview*, Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, The Robert Gordon University, 2004

Lines, D. and Mason, C. *Enhancing Practice: Assessment*, QAA, 2005

MacAndrew, SBG. and Edwards, K. *Essays are not the only way: A case report on the benefits of authentic assessment*, Psychology Learning and Teaching Journal, Vol 2, No 2, 2002

McDowell, E. *Students and innovative assessment*, The Higher Education Academy, 2002

Mowl, G. (with McDowell, E. and Brown, S.) *Innovative Assessment*, London Metropolitan University, 1996

Rust, C. *A Briefing on the Assessment of Large Groups: Assessment Series No. 12*, LTSN Generic Centre, 2001

Rust, C. *A Developing a Variety of Assessment Methods*, in *Enhancing Practice: Reflections on Assessment* Vol 1, QAA, 2004

Wilmot, J. and Murphy, R. *Securing Quality in Assessment: the Roles of Regulations, Awarding Bodies and Users*, Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, University of Nottingham, 2001

QAA in Scotland. *Reflections on Assessment volumes I and II*, 2004 (Contains all of the papers written for the Enhancing Assessment theme supporting the eight workshops held in 2004.)

Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (Glasgow School of Social Work, University of Stirling, University of Dundee with University of Paisley and the Open University). *Comprehensive Knowledge Review: Integrated Assessment*, 2005

Websites

Assessment Strategies in UK Higher Education — a website originating from a workshop for learning and teaching coordinators held at the University of Wolverhampton in 2002. Provides access to other documents.

<http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~le1810/astat.htm>

Skills and Education Network — an online community of professionals in post-16 education and training provision, managed and funded by the

Learning and Skills Council. The network covers a range of institutions but its main focus is on further education and sixth form colleges, work-based learning providers, adult education institutions, and private and voluntary sector providers. The network provides an online guide to assessment.

<http://research.lsc.gov.uk/>

The Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Robert Gordon University has a website which provides support for learning, teaching and assessment at the university

<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/celt/home/>

Deliberations is an international website on issues concerning learning and teaching in higher education. It provides access to a range of publications on assessment issues as well as a discussion forum

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/>

The website for the Sector Skills Council for the Environmental and Land Based Sector — **www.lantra.co.uk** — provides assessment strategies for SVQs and NVQs in land based industries.

The Guardian's education pages give the results of the National Student Survey 2006

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/students/page/0,,1855802,00.html>

The Learning Enhancement Unit in the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Dundee University has a website which provides access to innovative learning technologies for learners and staff in the university

<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/learning/leu/ilt/index.htm>

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland has a website dedicated to quality enhancement themes for higher education institutions. This provides useful links to publications developed in 2004 on assessment matters, including some of the papers referred to in this bibliography

www.qaa.org.uk

The Higher Education Academy — a website, the Resources section of which gives access to a range of reports and publications on assessment

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?id=1§ion=generic&process=filter_fields&type=all

The Psychology Assessment Archive (part of the Higher Education Academy) provides access to a range of information such as articles and bibliographical data on assessment and assessment issues including diversity of assessment

http://www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk/Specialist/MacAndrew/MacAndrew_Website/index.html

The website for Scotland on Sunday provides a reference to the essay writing classes for new students

<http://news.scotsman.com/education.cfm?id=1336612006>