TESTA and Internal Review

'Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment'

TESTA is a process that helps Departments/Schools to understand their students' perceptions of assessment and feedback, and supports them to make programme improvements. By collecting and analysing a range of data, TESTA gives a birds-eye view of the impact that assessment and feedback processes are having on students, and provides a space for staff to reflect on what is working and what improvements might be possible.

TESTA acknowledges that many of the challenges of assessment and feedback (e.g. making sure that students use feedback they receive, encouraging students to use their understanding as well as their memory when completing tests and exams) cannot be properly addressed by individual teaching staff but require a whole-team approach. The focus of TESTA is at the programme level: how assessment and feedback within classes fit together to create a coherent whole.

TESTA has been running at Strathclyde since 2014-15, and feedback indicates that Departments/Schools find it very useful in identifying issues and bringing staff together to discuss solutions. From 2018-2019 onwards, TESTA is part of the Internal Review process, to give Departments/Schools more evidence on which to base their self-assessment and broader reflection.

What TESTA is, and what it isn't

TESTA is designed to help Departments/Schools to reflect on their assessment and feedback practices and systems, and make positive changes. In order to be as helpful as possible, TESTA has a particular ethos:

What TESTA **is**:

> *Supportive*. The TESTA report is confidential to the Department/School. It is a tool for reflection rather than an attempt to provide a judgement of quality for external audiences

> *Programme-level*. The focus is not on what individual members of staff do or don't do, but on how the programme fits together as a whole to carry students through from the first week to the last week

> *Team-based*. The intention is to help colleagues to collectively reflect on their students' experiences, and to develop a broad consensus about what could be improved

Evidence-based. TESTA is intended to provide practical support, but it uses an established research methodology and is directly based on a range of research into how assessment and feedback support student learning. Information about the research behind TESTA is included as an Appendix

What TESTA **is not**:

Judgemental. TESTA is not designed to provide a simple measure of the quality of assessment and feedback. It is designed to help staff who teach and support students to reflect on whether assessment and feedback are achieving their intended aims, and if not, how they could be changed

About blaming individuals. TESTA is about how the programme as a whole fits together. It is not focused on what individual members of staff do, or on individual classes, but on the cumulative effect of multiple classes and the whole teaching team

Tips and tricks. TESTA does not provide off-the-shelf solutions or easy answers. It provides detailed evidence about students' experiences, broad recommendations, and a space for programme teams to reflect and discuss

About simply satisfying students' demands. While the primary focus of TESTA is the analysis and discussion of student feedback, that feedback is not presented as objective fact. Staff must use their own knowledge of the programme and their professional judgement in order to interpret the evidence and to collectively determine their response

How does TESTA work?

Data collection

Firstly, staff from Education Enhancement collect data from a range of sources:

- An audit is undertaken of programme paperwork and Myplace pages to build a picture of the number and type of assessments that students encounter on the programme.
- Samples of feedback are reviewed in order to estimate the average amount of feedback received by students over the course of the programme.
- A questionnaire focused on students' experiences of assessment and feedback is administered to students in all years of the programme, and a mirrored version is administered to staff who teach on the programme to explore their perceptions of students' experiences.
- Focus groups are held with students to explore their experiences in more detail.

Data analysis

Secondly, the data is analysed by staff from Education Enhancement. The primary aims of the analysis are to compare students' experiences with the reality revealed by the audit, to explore whether assessments aid learning, and to find out whether feedback is helpful to students. The findings are described in a concise report of around 20 pages along with implications and suggestions for improvement. A data appendix containing more detailed analysis of the quantitative data is also provided.

TESTA workshop

A workshop-style meeting is held with the staff who teach and support students on the programme. Staff are supported to reflect on the findings of the report, to compare the findings with their own experiences, and – most importantly – to discuss what their collective response might me.

Follow-up

Following the workshop, a debrief is held with the programme leadership (usually the Head of Department/School, Director of Teaching and Programme Lead), a member of the TESTA team, and a colleague from the Organisation and Staff Development Unit (OSDU). At this meeting, the priorities for the Department/School are clarified further. Departments/Schools may then opt to hold a developmental session facilitated by OSDU to address particular elements of assessment and feedback: this is optional, but Departments/Schools are strongly encouraged to make use of this opportunity.

Internal Review process

Prior to their Internal Review (normally in the year following TESTA) the Department/School provides the panel with a self-assessment document that contains information and reflection on a range of areas. The self-assessment document should include reflection on the TESTA findings and actions taken. The TESTA report remains confidential to the Department/School, but the Internal Review panel will expect the Department/School to provide an overview of the key lessons learned and how they have responded. The Internal Review panel can make recommendations which are then addressed in a follow-up process, and TESTA findings can contribute to those recommendations.

Feeding back to students

An important part of the TESTA process is closing the loop with students: letting them know the findings of the project and how the Department/School has responded. Students give their time and energy to complete questionnaires and attend focus groups, and to provide their opinions about topics they often feel deeply about. It is crucial that they know that the Department/School has listened and responded. Colleagues from the TESTA team help with the process of closing the loop by providing a poster or brief report summarising the findings.

What is required?

Staff from the TESTA team in Education Enhancement do the following:

- Review Myplace pages, module descriptors and other paperwork as part of the assessment and feedback audit
- Administer student and staff questionnaires in class and online
- Run student focus groups
- Analyse the data
- Write the report and data appendix
- Facilitate the TESTA workshop with the programme team
- Facilitate the follow-up meeting with the programme leadership (Head of Department/School, Director of Teaching, Programme Co-ordinator etc)

Staff from OSDU do the following:

- Attend the debrief after the TESTA workshop
- Facilitate an (optional) developmental session with the programme team

The Department/School is expected to do the following:

- Decide which programme of study should participate in TESTA (in conjunction with the Vice-Dean Academic of the Faculty)
- Provide access to Myplace pages, module descriptors and other relevant paperwork
- Help to arrange lecture visits to administer the student questionnaire
- Encourage teaching staff to complete the staff questionnaire
- Ensure that all relevant teaching and support staff attend the TESTA workshop
- The Head of Department/School, Director of Teaching, Programme Coordinator etc. attend the debrief following TESTA workshop
- Ensure that teaching and support staff attend the developmental session with OSDU (this is optional but encouraged)
- Reflect on TESTA findings as part of the Internal Review process
- Close the loop with students

Approximate timeline

TESTA normally takes place in the academic year prior to Internal Review, in either Semester 1 or 2

Start of Semester	Initial liaison with Department/School, including selection of specific programme to participate in TESTA
Weeks 1-8	Data collection (paperwork/Myplace, administration of questionnaires in classes, focus groups)
End of Semester	TESTA workshop with programme team and provision of TESTA report
Shortly after TESTA workshop	Debriefing with programme leadership (e.g. Head of Department, Director of Teaching, Programme Coordinator etc) and OSDU
Following Semester	Developmental session with OSDU (optional)
Three months prior to Review	Reflection on TESTA findings and actions taken as part of Internal Review self-assessment document
During Review	The Department/School's reflection on TESTA findings and the actions taken in response are considered as part of the Internal Review, and may contribute to the recommendations of the Review panel
After Review	A summary of the TESTA findings and the Department/School's response should be provided to students at an appropriate time. The TESTA team will support this by providing a poster or brief report designed for a student audience

Appendix: What is the research behind TESTA?

TESTA is primarily a way of helping Departments/Schools and programme teams to make practical improvements to assessment and feedback, but it is firmly rooted in research. This document provides an overview of the research into assessment and feedback that inspired the TESTA methodology, and publications that describe the development and application of TESTA.

1. Research that inspired TESTA

The quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system. (Elton & Laurillard, 1979, p. 100)

TESTA is inspired by a range of research into the importance of programme-level coordination of assessment and feedback. Modularisation has had many benefits but it has also created challenges, particularly around the way in which assessments within modules work together to support programme-level learning (e.g. Brown and Saunders 1995). And while much of the effort dedicated to enhancement is focused on the development of individual teaching staff and the improvement of individual modules, addressing programme-level challenges is key.

A. Students' approaches to study

There is a large body of evidence that students' approaches to studying can be broadly divided into 'deep' approaches – focused on understanding and motivated by intrinsic factors such as interest in the subject – and 'surface' approaches – focused on memorisation and reproduction and motivated by extrinsic factors such as grades; and that deep approaches are associated with higher levels of successful learning (e.g. Prosser and Trigwell 1999). Research suggests that assessment is a crucial factor in determining which approach students adopt (e.g. Lizzio et al 2002). Therefore a key way of ensuring successful student learning is to ensure that assessments encourage deep approaches to study. There are three main programme-level issues highlighted by the research:

- What matters to how students approach assessments is not primarily staff intentions or explicit descriptions but students' expectations, which are formed by their programme as a whole rather than individual classes or individual teachers (e.g. Biggs 1996).
- Another important factor affecting students' approach to assessments is their perceptions of the workload: if students perceive the workload as being too high, they will tend to adopt surface approaches (e.g. Kember et al 1996). As students are normally taking concurrent modules, managing perceptions of workload requires coordination across modules.
- There is evidence for the benefits of purely 'formative' assessments, i.e. assessments that do not contribute towards students' class, year or degree outcome but are solely to provide opportunities for students to practice and to receive feedback from staff. Due to the competition for students' time and attention created by modularisation – what has been called an "assessment arms race" (Harland et al 2014) – the effective use of purely formative assessment requires a coordinated programme-level approach. Purported benefits of purely formative assessment include:
    - The reduced requirement for reliability in assessments that do not contribute towards students' grades allows for more complex assessment tasks (Knight 2000).
    - Formative assessments provide students with opportunities to try out new things with reduced fear of failure (e.g. Knight and Yorke 2003).
    - It is easier for staff to provide feedback on assessments that do not count towards students' class or programme grade, as the requirements for reliability are lower and there is no need to justify a mark. It is also easier to implement peer feedback for formative assessments (e.g. Gibbs 1999).

      o   Feedback comments can be more helpful to students if they aren't accompanied by a grade (e.g. Black and Wiliam 1998).

B. Students' use of feedback

The importance of feedback to effective learning is well-supported (e.g. Black and Wiliam 1998), however the evidence for the value of feedback relates to feedback that is *used* by students, rather than simply transmitted to students by staff. Students' use of feedback is influenced in important ways by their experience of the wider programme.

- In order for students to make effective use of feedback, there needs to be an element of consistency between the format of assessments (e.g. Jessop and Tomas 2017) and the expectations of markers (e.g. Winstone et al 2017a).
- Feedback is sometimes overly focused on the specifics of assessment tasks, and is hard for students to apply to assessments in subsequent modules (e.g. Lea and Street 1998).
- In order to make effective use of feedback, students need to develop an understanding of how to take responsibility for acting on comments from teachers (self-regulation and 'feedback literacy') (e.g. Winstone et al 2017b). Supporting students to learn those skills requires specific focus across multiple modules (e.g. Boud and Molloy 2013).

C. Students' understanding of goals and standards

There is good evidence that the explicit statement of criteria and standards is not sufficient (though it is necessary) for students to develop a good understanding of what is required of high-quality work in the discipline, as key concepts (e.g. 'analysis') and evaluative terms (e.g. 'excellent') are often subjective and/or tacit (e.g. O'Donovan et al 2001).

- As key elements of the criteria of quality can only be tacitly understood (as a kind of connoisseurship) developing students' grasp of what high quality work looks like is a complex process involving repeated exposure to the criteria through evaluative experiences and useful feedback about performance, which can only take place at the level of the programme as a whole, not the module (e.g. Sadler 1989).
- The informal development of students' understanding of tacit criteria is hindered by modular systems, with shorter periods of contact experiences between students and individual teachers, and fewer shared evaluating experiences (e.g. O'Donovan et al 2008). Explicit attention may be required across a programme to allow students to develop an understanding of tacit criteria, through exercises such as grading exemplars and assessing peers' work (e.g. Rust et al 2003).

2. Literature describing the TESTA methodology and its application

The TESTA method was developed by researchers at the University of Winchester between 2009 and 2012, with funding provided by the Higher Education Academy through the National Teaching Fellow Scheme (NTFS). The primary aim was to improve student learning by changing assessment patterns specifically at the *programme* level. The project was formally reported in Jessop (2012).

TESTA was explicitly based on work by Graham Gibbs and co-researchers which was motivated by evidence that students' learning activities are largely driven by what they are required to do by the assessment system, and that therefore "assessment is the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners" (Gibbs 1999). Drawing on a range of research, 10 'conditions under which assessment supports learning' were developed (Gibbs and Simpson 2004):

1. Assessments encourage appropriate amount of time on task

2. Assessments encourage appropriate distribution of time on task
3. Assessments encourage engagement in productive learning activity
4. Enough feedback is provided (frequency and detail)
5. Feedback focuses on the right things
6. Feedback is timely
7. Feedback is linked to purpose/criteria of assessment
8. Feedback is comprehensible
9. Feedback is attended to
10. Feedback is acted upon

A student questionnaire, the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) was developed to evaluate the extent to which programmes met these conditions (Gibbs and Simpson 2003). The AEQ drew substantially on the Course Experience Questionnaire, which was designed to measure aspects of students' course-level experiences that are related to whether they adopt 'deep' or 'surface' approaches to their studies (Ramsden 1991).

Gibbs then went on to develop a methodology for capturing and describing patterns of assessment at programme level, using the AEQ and an audit of paperwork (programme and module documentation, samples of feedback etc) to capture key characteristics such as the volume of summative assessment and the volume of written feedback (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet 2007, 2009). The NTFS project reported in Jessop (2012) drew on this methodology in order to create TESTA.

Tansy Jessop, the lead researcher on that project, has (with co-researchers) undertaken a range of research using the TESTA methodology: Jessop et al (2012) found low levels of purely formative assessments in a range of programmes; Jessop et al (2014) investigated assessment patterns and students' responses in 23 programmes; Jessop and Maleckar (2016) identified differences in programme assessment patterns and students perceptions between disciplines; Jessop and Tomas (2017) explored 73 different programme assessment environments; Tomas and Jessop (2018) found clear differences in assessment load between institution types; and Wu and Jessop (2018) developed an updated version of the Assessment Experience Questionnaire.

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