



## Forum Insights

# REPORT Profile of Assessment Practices in Irish Higher Education

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This *Forum Insight* summarises the key findings of a research project which profiled documented assessment practices across a sample of 30 undergraduate degree programmes in Irish higher education. The research also aimed to explore whether and how assessment practices differ between fields of study and to share insights regarding students' experiences of assessment across Irish higher education.

## Introduction

The National Forum enhancement theme 2016-18 focuses on Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning. To inform the enhancement theme, advisors and experts from around the country have come together to discuss the definition and principles of assessment within the Irish context, to explore how authentic assessment might best be achieved and to consider how to promote effective programmatic assessment practices within and across institutions and fields of study. In addition to building capacity through conversations, the enhancement theme aims to build evidence on assessment practices from across the sector. The research reported in this insight aims to inform assessment practices through an examination of (i) current documented assessment practices in Irish higher education and (ii) students' experiences of higher education as it relates to assessment.

Two data sources were drawn upon for this study:

- Module descriptors of 30 randomly-selected undergraduate degree programmes across the Irish higher education sector. In each programme, modules in the first semester, final semester and one mid-programme semester were profiled.
- First year and final year response data from the 2016 Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE)<sup>1</sup> specific to students' experiences of assessment.

**Table 1 Overview of the profile**

Number of degree programmes profiled	30
Three-year degrees	12
Four-year degrees	17
Five-year degrees	1
Level 8 programmes	22
Level 7 programmes	8
Based in institutes of technology	16
Based in universities	10
Based in colleges of education	2
Based in HECA colleges	2
Number of fields of study profiled	10
Number of modules profiled	487
Number of individual assessments profiled	1260

<sup>1</sup>Studentsurvey.ie

## Key Findings

### Assessment OF Learning

This is assessment that is completed to demonstrate learning; it is usually graded assessment that has high stakes.

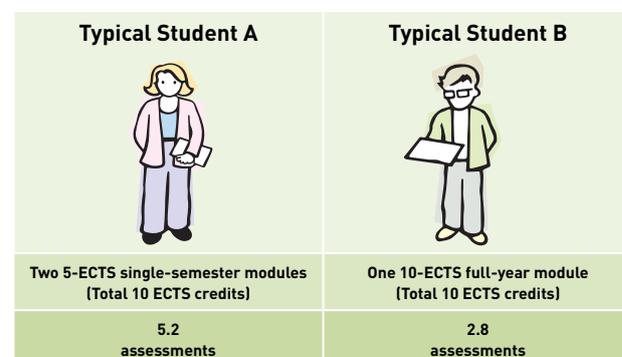
#### • Assessment transparency

The amount of information publicly available about modules, and the assessment happening within them, differs within and across institutions. The level of transparency is somewhat dependent on whether institutions have online templates for gathering such information. Of the 30 selected undergraduate programmes in this study, 14 had detailed module descriptors on their institutional websites. Of the remaining programmes, 12 listed only the titles of modules within the programme, while four provided online module descriptors with only partial assessment information, such as the percentage breakdown between examinations and continuous assessment.

Despite a relative lack of transparency evident in assessment practices as documented in module descriptors, the ISSE data suggests that 69% of first years and 67% of final year students perceived lecturers/teaching staff as having clearly explained course goals and requirements 'quite a bit' or 'very much'.

#### • Assessment loads

On average, students complete a much higher number of assessments per ECTS credit in single-semester modules than in full-year modules. For example, the average number of assessments in a single-semester 5-ECTS module was 2.6; the average number of assessments in a full-year 10-ECTS module was 2.8.



**Figure 1 Average assessment load by module duration and size**

In effect, this means that a typical student enrolled in a full-year 10-ECTS module could expect to complete an average of 2.8 assessments throughout the year, while a student enrolled in two single-semester 5-ECTS credit modules during the same period could expect to complete an average of 5.2 assessments.



Figure 2 Proportion of credit value associated with top four assessment methods in each field of study

The modular system has been criticised for compartmentalising assessment, resulting in recent moves to develop more integrative assessments. The ISSE data suggests that across all fields of study, final year students are more likely than first year students to combine ideas between subjects/modules. While it is not possible to conclude the extent to which integrative assessment across modules is taking place, many students are combining ideas from different subjects, which is an important foundation for integrative assessment to occur.

• **Assessment methods**

Examination is the most common assessment method, although its value differs between fields, programmes and stages of programme. 61% (n = 296) of sampled modules used one or more formal examinations as a method of assessment. The average weighting given to examinations within these modules was 65%.

However, because 39% of modules did not contain any examination, this only gives a partial picture. When looking across all modules (n = 487), and taking credit load into account, Figure 2 shows the proportion of credit value associated with the top four assessment methods in each field of study. Some fields focus mainly on a few assessment methods while others have a more balanced range of methods.

Within the module descriptors, many assessment methods were described as taking place in groups, such as ‘group projects’ and ‘group presentations’. Although it was not possible to get an accurate picture of the proportion of group work from the module descriptors, the ISSE data suggests that overall the likelihood of groups work happening at least sometimes is quite high (89% among first year students and 91% among final year students).

**Assessment FOR Learning**

This is assessment that is concerned with giving feedback on teaching and student learning.

Overall, 79% of first year students and 78% of final year students reported having received feedback on a draft/work in progress at least to some extent, although there was some variation between fields of study and stages of programme. The likelihood of students receiving prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments was higher in first year, compared to final year, across all fields of study. Overall, 80% of first year students and 76% of final year students reported having received such feedback at least to some extent. Although again there was some variation between fields of study.

**Assessment AS Learning**

This is assessment that facilitates students’ empowerment and engagement to become better learners.

Whereas Assessment FOR Learning is especially important in first year, when students are being introduced to new ways of thinking and engaging with their learning, it is also important that staff ensure students begin to develop their self-monitoring and self-regulating skills (Assessment AS Learning) in the early years of their programme. The ISSE findings show that students are more likely to ask questions, discuss course material and engage in behaviours which help them to assess their own learning at the end of their studies than at the beginning. For example, 82% of first year students and 87% of final year students reported having prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students at least sometimes.

**In Conclusion**

It is challenging to provide assessment that is transparent, efficient and diverse while also being engaging and supportive of student learning. It is hoped that this research will inform and enable effective and critical conversations about how assessment and feedback might best impact on teaching and learning in Irish higher education.