ENHANCEMENT THEME
Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning: Continuing the Debate and Creating a Focus

Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning is the National Forum's enhancement theme for 2016- 2018. The National Seminar Series 2015-2016 has already facilitated some initial conversations on this theme. Feedback captured at the National Summit for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2015 highlighted the significant changes to assessment practices and policies that could be driven by this enhancement theme. This Forum Insight differentiates between Assessment OF, Assessment FOR and Assessment AS Learning; it highlights some of the tensions that have to be accommodated, identifies a range of enablers that should drive this significant change, and it provides some questions to drive further discussion.

Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning: What do we mean?

Assessment OF Learning: completing assessment to demonstrate learning

This is the classic approach to assessing students' learning in order to ensure that they have achieved the learning outcomes and have met a specified standard. Designed to provide evidence of achievement, *Assessment OF Learning* is the assessment that becomes public and results in statements or symbols about how well students are learning; it often contributes to pivotal decisions that will affect students' futures (Earl & Katz, 2006). It is important, therefore, that they *'produce sufficient information to support credible and defensible statements about the nature and the quality of their learning, so that others can use the results in appropriate ways'* (Earl & Katz, 2006, p57).

Assessment FOR Learning: using assessment to give feedback on teaching and student learning

This involves teachers taking the lead in exploring and understanding student progress in order to enhance teaching approaches. It focuses on how teachers can use information about students' knowledge, understanding and skills to inform their teaching strategies and their students' learning. *Assessment FOR Learning* is strongly formative in nature, as, in addition to giving feedback to staff, it also is used as the basis for providing descriptive feedback to students.

Assessment AS Learning: student empowerment and engagement to become a better learner.

The process of students actively engaging in self monitoring or self-regulating their own learning is often described as *Assessment AS Learning*. This has some overlap with *Assessment FOR Learning* and it is also described as formative assessment (O'Shea, et, al, 2016). It is *'characterized by students reflecting on their own learning and making adjustments so that they achieve deeper understanding'* (Earl & Katz, 2006, p.41).

There have been strong arguments to rebalance the traditional assessment in the curriculum, reducing the level of weighting given to high stakes *Assessment OF Learning* (summative) and giving stronger emphasis to *Assessment AS* and *Assessment FOR Learning* (See Figure 1). This shift in emphasis gives the student a more central role in the assessment process (Earl & Katz, 2006; Knight, 2000; Sadler, 2010).
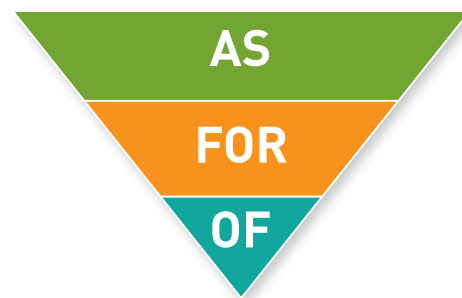

Figure 1: Shift from Assessment OF to Assessment FOR and AS Learning

How do we enable significant changes to assessment practices and policies?

Students' and *Teachers'* knowledge, skills, attitudes and emotions are central to enabling changes in many of these assessment tensions in higher education. *Students'* involvement in *Assessment AS Learning* is pivotal to the cultural shift towards this purpose of assessment (Carless, 2015; Sadler, 2010). In addition, assessment changes can be supported by the professional development of the range of **staff across the disciplines** who teach (i.e. academic staff, educational developers/technologists, teaching assistants, library staff). Given the importance of teacher skills and professional development in assessment innovation and enhancement, the emerging National Professional Development Framework will be key to supporting this activity (National Forum, 2016). Strategic approaches to **design** of both the curriculum and the learning environment can also enable change (Knight, 2000), recent accelerated opportunities in the digital learning environment have a part to play in enabling significant assessment changes (Bennett et al, 2016). National, institutional and disciplinary **policies and standards** in the areas of assessment and feedback can also be strong enablers of change for some of the more complex and challenging changes that are required.

Key differentiating and integrating questions (re assessment OF, FOR and AS) might include:

1. What is the purpose of assessment?
2. What is meant by the terms Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning in different contexts?

3. Should there and can there be a balance in designing Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning across a programme?

4. How might we enhance learning by shifting towards more Assessment AS Learning by partnering with and engaging students in the development of assessment?

Key enabling questions on the enhancement of assessment include:

1   How can students become more engaged with assessment enhancement?

2   How can academic departments, staff and programme leaders be supported to collaborate around assessment enhancement?

3   Are there policies that need to underpin assessment enhancement?

4   How can the curriculum and the learning environment be designed to enhance assessment?

5   In general, assessment approaches are underpinned by a range of principles. The challenge is that there is sometimes tension between such principles.

'The most reliable, rigorous and cheat-proof assessment systems are often accompanied by dull and lifeless learning that has short lasting outcomes — indeed they often directly lead to such learning' (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p3).

What principles might underpin assessment in the Irish higher education context and how do we deal with any resulting tensions?

Additional questions that might be addressed could include

• How do we develop valid and authentic assessments for students that are relevant to today's context and will be relevant to future contexts? What is important in assessment in higher education today?

• How can equitable, creative, engaging assessment also be efficient and sustainable?

• How might enhanced assessment promote and support academic honesty and integrity?

• How can technology assist in the enhancement of assessment in Irish higher education practices and policies?

• How might assessment enhancement at programme level improve teaching and learning while also taking into account workload issues for both teachers and students?

• How best might we promote assessment literacy among students and support students to become more engaged in the assessment process?

• Do students share the same understanding of quality in assessment as that held by the teacher? Is assessment viewed as a shared responsibility between staff and students?

• Can group or peer learning enhance Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning?

• How do we develop strategic approaches to assessment with reference to institutional context and the development and fostering of identified graduate attributes?

• What policies and procedures are required to support institutional change to assessment and how might these policies be developed or articulated?

• Is there an integrated and coherent approach to assessment across the programme?

• What disciplinary considerations need to be accounted for when developing an approach to enhancing and transforming assessment?

In summary: How can the enhancement theme facilitate conversations to create innovative, engaging, collaborative, learner-oriented, integrated approaches to assessment that take account of the complex dynamics and requirements of higher education (see Figure 2 below)?
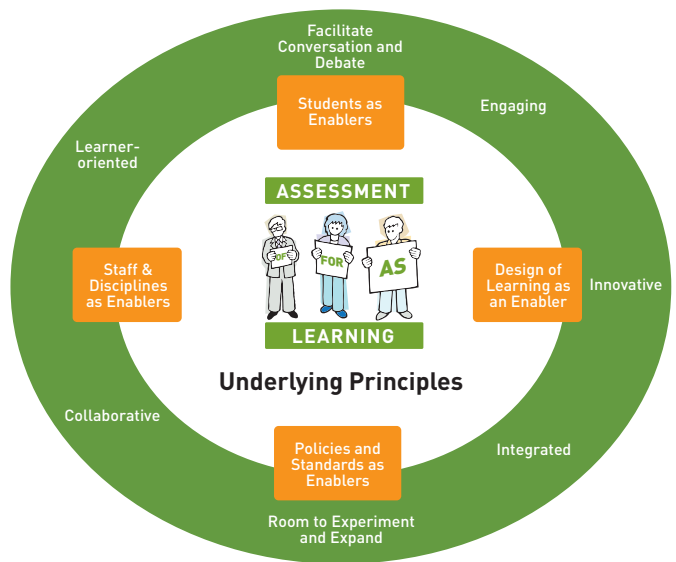

Figure 2: The complex dynamics of assessment in higher education

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