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ENHANCING PROGRAMME APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT
AND FEEDBACK IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION:

Case Studies, Commentaries and Tools | https://tinyurl.com/NFprogramme

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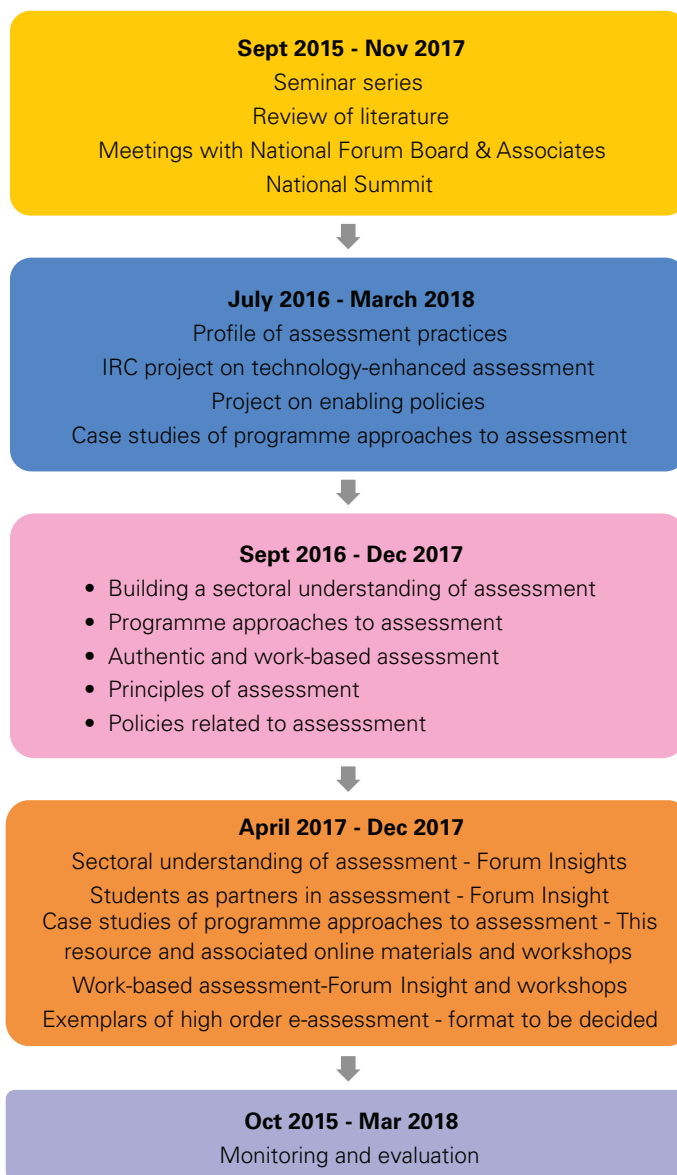
Commentary: Policies and Projects Related to Programme Assessment

National Forum Team

The National Forum Enhancement Theme 2016-18 focuses on Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning. The aim of the enhancement theme is to support and leverage an enhancement approach to assessment, in order to ensure that Ireland adopts and promotes innovative, engaging, collaborative, learner-oriented and integrated approaches to assessment that take account of the complex dynamics and requirements of higher education.

There are a number of phases in the enhancement theme process: (i) the theme is informed through consultation with the sector and relevant literature, (ii) evidence is built regarding current practice, (iii) structured and unstructured conversations take place to build capacity across the sector, (iv) good practice is shared and (v) the work in the theme is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis.

As part of the building capacity phase of the assessment enhancement theme, advisors and experts from around the country were invited to gather and discuss a number of aspects of the theme, considered to be enablers to reaching the overall aim (see Appendix). These aspects included developing a sectoral understanding of assessment, clarifying assessment principles within the Irish context, enhancing understandings of the meaning and application of authentic assessment, discussing needed policy developments to enhance assessment practices, and promoting effective programme assessment practices within and across institutions and fields of study. While each of these aspects interact, it is this latter element of the assessment theme, programme approaches to assessment and feedback, which is the focus of the current collection of resources. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of this aspect of the enhancement theme alongside the overall enhancement theme development.

Overall Enhancement Theme

Sept 2015 - Nov 2017
Seminar series
Review of literature
Meetings with National Forum Board & Associates
National Summit

July 2016 - March 2018
Profile of assessment practices
IRC project on technology-enhanced assessment
Project on enabling policies
Case studies of programme approaches to assessment

Sept 2016 - Dec 2017
- Building a sectoral understanding of assessment
- Programme approaches to assessment
- Authentic and work-based assessment
- Principles of assessment
- Policies related to assesssment

April 2017 - Dec 2017
Sectoral understanding of assessment - Forum Insights
Students as partners in assessment - Forum Insight
Case studies of programme approaches to assessment - This resource and associated online materials and workshops
Work-based assessment-Forum Insight and workshops
Exemplars of high order e-assessment - format to be decided

Oct 2015 - Mar 2018
Monitoring and evaluation

Informing the theme

Building the evidence

Building capacity through conversations

Sharing good practice and policies

Monitoring and evaluation

Programme Aspect of Enhancement Theme
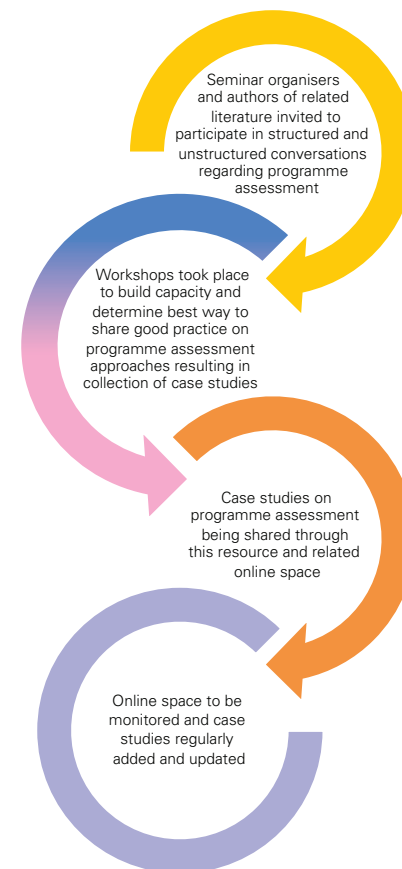
Seminar organisers and authors of related literature invited to participate in structured and unstructured conversations regarding programme assessment

Workshops took place to build capacity and determine best way to share good practice on programme assessment approaches resulting in collection of case studies

Case studies on programme assessment being shared through this resource and related online space

Online space to be monitored and case studies regularly added and updated

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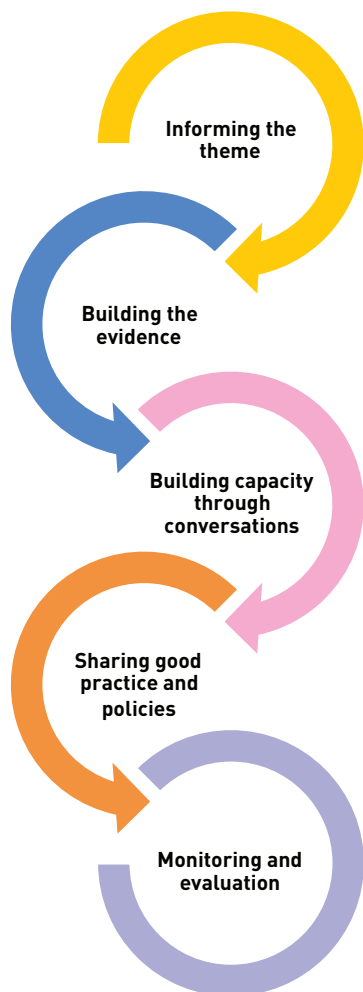
Place Within National and International Policies and Projects

There are a range of international and national policies and projects that influence and support programme approaches to assessment. These are presented below with reference to leadership, gathering evidence for change, and design interventions.

Leadership

Strategic vision and leadership is needed to fully engage staff in the potential offered by new modes of learning, teaching and assessment (European Commission, 2014, p27). Nationally, institutional leaders are now required, through their institutional mission-based compacts, to benchmark their programmes by the appropriate assessment of teaching and learning (HEA, 2013, p11). Students should be involved in these institutional benchmarking processes and become involved in the design and implementation aspect of programme assessment (HEA, 2016). In addition to dialogue with students, programmes should be developed through dialogue and partnerships with graduates and other stakeholders (European Commission, 2013, p41).

To support this leadership activity at national level, in addition to the National Forum Enhancement Theme, the *Professional Development Framework for All Staff who Teach in in Higher Education* supports the idea of staff 'leading' the development of programme assessment and feedback approaches (National Forum, 2016). For example, the Framework sets out the following professional development elements that should be developed/ pursued by those in this leadership role:

- Supportive of active student-centred approaches to learning that engage students and build towards students as partners in their learning.

- Design and management of sessions, modules and/or curricula (programmes) appropriate to the learning environment.

- Application of appropriately aligned assessment and learner-oriented feedback approaches from one's own discipline and, where relevant, from other disciplines.

Connected to the ongoing pilot of the Framework, a non-accredited digital badge on 'Programme Focused Assessment' is in under development. This will assist programme leaders to develop skills in this area in the future. Also connected to the Framework, the most recent round of *Teaching and Learning Enhancement* Funds focused on supporting the creation and provision of professional development opportunities for middle/senior managers across collaborating institutions that align with the new Framework and support their development as leaders of teaching and learning enhancement and as digital champions.

Another national development which promises to support the enhancement of programme approaches to assessment across the sector is the recently-launched discipline-focused National Forum learning impact award, the *Disciplinary Excellence in Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) Award*. Assessment OF/FOR/ AS Learning is one of the key elements to be considered by disciplines in preparing their applications for the award. This key element includes the following statements:

- Teaching and Learning Enhancement requires systematic, coherent, creative planning and development of assessment approaches within a programme.

- The discipline group's assessment policies and procedures should highlight their commitment to a student-centered approach to assessment and feedback: developing students' abilities to peer-review and self-monitor so they can regulate their own learning and demonstrating a commitment to students as partners in Assessment OF, FOR and AS learning.

Gathering Evidence for Change

There are national requirements to gather and discuss evidence on assessment and feedback approaches that currently exist in the programme. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt Report) recommends that higher education institutions should put in place systems to capture feedback from students, and use this feedback to inform institutional and programme management (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). In addition, the HEA (2013) institutional mission-based compacts emphasise using student feedback to inform programme content and delivery (p11). Suitable measures should be put in place across the institution to ensure that students are facilitated in providing feedback (HEA, 2016). As a consequence of these drivers, institutions and programmes are supported at national level in the use of ISSE (Irish Survey of Student Engagement), which specifically gathers feedback on students' experience and engagement in their programmes (ISSE, 2016).

A National Forum project that supports the idea of gathering existing evidence for the purpose of enhancing student learning and wellbeing, is the National Forum project Learning Analytics and Educational Data Mining for Learning Impact (National Forum, 2017).

Design Interventions

There has been a range of international and national policies that support the idea of the development of student as partners, a key aspect of this assessment enhancement theme. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) emphasises that institutions should ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students in an active role (European Commission, 2015). The HEA working group report, in particular, maintains that students as partners is key in moving beyond legal compliance to embed a culture of engagement throughout the institution (HEA, 2016). It also notes that institutions should embrace innovative learning techniques which incorporate the student as creator of their own learning.

Whereas many policies highlight the importance of timely feedback *to* students (European Commission, 2015; QQI, 2016), there is also a recognition that students have a part to play in developing their own judgements (Assessment AS Learning):

- to encourage a sense of autonomy in the learner (QQI, 2016); and

- to empower students in the learning process, i.e., the principles of universal design for learning (HEA, 2015).

As highlighted by ISSE, students gain most when they invest time and energy in their learning and institutions and staff have key roles to play in providing an environment that both encourages and facilitates that engagement (ISSE, 2016).

The National Forum has some ongoing and earlier projects that link with the Assessment Enhancement theme and in particular link with a programme approach to assessment, for example:

- Supporting Transition: Enhancing Feedback in First Year Using Digital Technologies (Y1Feedback)

- Assessment for Learning Resources for First Year Undergraduate Mathematics Modules

- ePrePP (Preparation for Professional Practice)

- Technology Enhanced Assessment Methods (TEAM) in Science & Health Practical Settings

These national and international polices and projects give some sense of the context in which programme approaches to assessment and feedback are situated.

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Appendix: Assessment Theme Advisors and Expert Group Participants

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