



Advancing assessment in co-design with students: an evidence-informed approach to enhancing practice

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Presentation abstract

Students' views are shifting in how they want to engage in higher education, driven by the complex socio-economic landscapes they are operating within (Hughes, 2023). This has prompted Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to reconsider how they support students with diverse ranges of needs and wellbeing issues (Firth et al., 2023). Central to this is their experience of assessment and feedback, which remains a point of weakness in their overall university experience. Therefore, it is imperative that HEIs hear their voices around learning development and assessment journeys, especially given the other demands on their time (Neves et al., 2024) and develop in co-design to build connectiveness (McIntosh and May, 2025).

The University of Southampton has developed a five-year *Advancing Assessment Strategic Major Project* to enhance assessment thinking and embrace new ideas and practices across the institution, underpinned by a set of principles with inclusivity and accessibility at the core. This has included the introduction of the Assessment Consultancy, established within the Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP), providing bespoke individual and whole-programme assessment development with a core ethos of student co-design. It also supports the recently developed Southampton Transformative Assessment Redesign with Students (STARS) programme, providing an evidence base to the programme teams to support enhancements (CHEP, 2025).

This session presented recent findings from the project and relayed the initial evaluations of these approaches, including discussing the challenges and impacts that the project has enabled. The session aimed to inform learning development peers and enable learning from their own and others' experiences. The session also explored how HEIs can lay the

foundations for innovation that aligns with emerging trends in assessment and feedback, such as assessment optionality and cohesive programme development design (Walker, 2025).

Keywords: advancing assessment; co-design; student partnership; assessment practice; inclusivity.

Community response

This workshop provided an excellent overview of the Advancing Assessment Strategic Major Project at the University of Southampton (UoS), with opportunities for delegates to discuss their own policy and assessment practices and challenges. The project was driven by a core set of principles (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Advancing Assessment SMP at the University of Southampton (CHEP, 2025).

"The long-term aim of this multi-year Strategic Major Project is to transform assessment thinking and practice. Its purpose is to build upon existing effective assessment practices and, through a set of interrelated workstreams, initiate enhancement activity through professional development, the creation of guidance and resources and the procurement of appropriate integrated technology solutions across the institution."

Advancing Assessment Strategic Major Project University of Southampton

Working across all aspects of the assessment journey from start to end, including processes and systems

Driven by a core set of principles

- Assessment is accessible
- Assessment is inclusive
- Students actively participate in assess design
- Assessment is proportionate
- A contemporary approach to supporting design, delivery and administration of assessment is adopted
- Assessment purpose is communicated effectively
- Assessment is trusted
- Assessment practice is sustainable and embedded in the wider strategy
- All assessment is conceived across the programme
- Formative work is valuable and valued
- Assessment is developmental
- Feedback promotes learning
- Assessment is varied, interesting, kind, compassionate and fun

The project aims to develop the full assessment eco-system, including processes, systems, quality assurance, digital technologies (including Artificial Intelligence [AI]) and the learning development design created through six workstreams. One of these workstreams was the formation of the Assessment Consultancy, which supports programmes and colleagues across the university in enhancing assessment and feedback practice. The Assessment Consultancy comprises six members and, as part of the co-design ethos, includes, to date, 13 Advancing Assessment student interns, who work

collaboratively in delivering the project. So far, the Assessment Consultancy has worked with over 25 programme teams across four out of five faculties and delivered CPD to over 300 colleagues. Through the work on STARS, the project identified seven key enhancement theme areas (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Seven key enhancement themes (CHEP, 2025).

Theme Categories	Description/Associated topics
Academic Literacies	Formative and summative assessment literacy, peer review, academic skill development.
Belonging and Community	Cohort cohesion, (professional) identity.
Co-Design	Student-staff collaboration, incorporating the student voice, seeking a 'student experience' perspective.
Communication	Clarity of assessment guidance and criteria, alignment of assessment with learning outcomes (LOs).
Design	Assessment design, inc. modality, optionality, formative vs. summative, weighting, scaffolding.
Feedback	Clarity of feedback, amount of feedback, consistency of feedback, actionable feedback.
Organisation	Scheduling and volume.

The conference workshop used Padlet-based activities that enabled participants across the community to discuss a number of themes. The questions and community participant responses are summarised below to illustrate the sector-wide initiatives and challenges.

What Learning Development initiatives are you focusing on?

Three significant themes from the peer community discussion emerged for Learning Development work being undertaken at this time. First, most teams were working on learning and teaching enhancement projects, for example, the development of asynchronous learning resources, supporting the transition to a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) with reflective elements, and considering programme-level design discussions. The second theme focused on AI integration and policy, including the need to upskill staff to understand how to use AI within teaching and learning so they can support students. Connected to this were other forms of assessment guidance being written, including oral assessment. Finally, there was a core focus on integrated models to embed skills in the curriculum, focused on both subject knowledge and merging 'functional skills' (academic skills, maths, statistics and digital literacy). This approach was designed to support employability skills, as well as to assist in retention and continuation by helping students feel more prepared during their transition into higher education, particularly in their first year.

How does Learning Development interact with academic teams?

Participants discussed how Learning Development teams engage with academic departments in varied ways, ranging from programme-level dialogue and consultation to more ad hoc requests for support. A key area of collaboration involves assessment literacy, with Learning Development teams organising a range of continued professional development and focused events for academics within departments and the wider institution. Other areas focused on supporting academics to scaffold assessment support throughout modules and programmes. Learning Development colleagues also identified areas where they directly supported students in interpreting the assessment.

What are your biggest challenges for advancing assessment and feedback practices?

The discussion of challenges was clearly one of the most substantial discussion points, reflecting the strongest volume of responses from community participants. It was clear that Learning Development teams face several challenges, but also some clear opportunities, mostly focused on collaborating with academic staff and championing new initiatives.

The most significant challenge focused on the time and resources available. There was a feeling that iterative, developmental, and formative assessment approaches can be difficult to resource, compounded by increasing staff workloads. In combination, they created a barrier, which led to challenges for staff to find time to collaborate and adopt new practices.

There was also discussion around how to create supportive environments for academics to encourage innovations in assessment to overcome potential resistance to working 'outside of comfort zones' where 'tried and tested' methods were preferred.

Due to the changing focus for discussions around assessment and feedback, for example, responses to AI leading to assessment adaptations, or new curriculum design approaches such as programmatic level assessment, several community peers noted that quality assurance processes were a challenge where credit and assessment need to be separated. They thought any changes led either to long lead times or regulations that did not fit, thus reducing agility in what can be achieved and limiting many key innovations in teaching, learning and assessment.

There was also some discussion on the very nature of assessment and feedback, noting that these are distinct elements to consider. They raised the issue of ensuring all academic staff were consistently supported in their development year on year and whether this was sustainable. This was especially in the context of staff changes and a mixture of permanent and hourly-paid lecturers. However, they thought this could be created through trust and shared understanding to become an embedded practice.

How are you working towards inclusive assessment design?

While an important question, there was less discussion on this topic, perhaps as it was towards the end of the activity. It was noted that in some cases, Learning Development teams were not directly involved, and for others, they were asked to contribute as guest speakers or to facilitate interactive activities. This is an important area to address as Learning Developers need to be champions in this area and challenge and support this topic across every element of work undertaken.

Next steps and additional questions

This interactive workshop clearly raised many interesting questions around the role of Learning Development in assessment. Key takeaways included:

- 1) There is a strong drive for consistent approaches to scaffolding assessment literacies to support students. It was acknowledged that this is a team effort, requiring the collaboration between academics and learning development.
- 2) There are many diverse ways in which academic and Learning Development teams can work together. The key is to create strong collaborative relationships to build trust and shared visions to ensure sustained enhancement.
- 3) There are significant challenges around enhancing assessment and feedback practices. Time and resource availability stand as the largest barriers, alongside the need to review quality assurance processes that enable agile innovation.

Authors' reflection

Throughout the discussion, there was a clear desire to work collaboratively with academic teams to support the enhancement of assessment literacies and to scope the future of assessment to develop inclusive and accessible design from the outset, including several mentions of programmatic-level assessment. As part of the Advancing Assessment Strategic Major Project, and within the Assessment Consultancy, there is a strong focus on these assessment practices in both the short and longer term. This includes working with programme teams using the STARS methodology to identify what enhancement should be developed and using a staff-student partnership and co-design approaches to create both immediate and lasting impact. Other work includes more future-focussed areas, including piloting initiatives such as programmatic level assessment and a series of thought-provoking events, such as the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) workshops in which academics consider what the purpose of the assessment is and ensure this is conveyed through the brief, along with the task and criteria (TILT Higher Ed, 2025).

Enhancing assessment and feedback practices, especially in the current fast-changing education landscape, is not an easy task and the peer community agreed that there needed to be a 'joining up' of good practices and projects across institutions to ensure that effort and innovation are supported and not just appearing in 'siloed pockets' with limited

visibility. This joined-up approach is part of the overall aim of the Advancing Assessment project at Southampton, which not only aims to identify areas for institutional enhancement but also to develop areas of effective disciplinary-led practice. In creating a space and place for academic, education development and professional service colleagues to collaborate and discuss we hope it will lead to assessment journeys that are connected, developmental and inclusive.

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