Chapter 19
The Single Most Consequential Thing We Do in Universities:
A Case Study in Teaching Assessment to New Academics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assessing students (including giving feedback and making decisions based on assessments) is arguably the single most important thing done in universities in terms of tangible impacts on people's lives, but assessment is hard to do. Academics are seldom trained in assessment, and for many it is the most worrying aspect of the job. The University of Manchester operates a New Academics Programme for its probationary lecturers, running over three years and encompassing research, teaching, and administrative aspects of academic careers, culminating in a reflective portfolio. This case study describes the introduction of an assessment component into this programme, including its motivation, content, implementation, and evolution, and its reception by the new academics. The assessment component of the New Academics Programme is now delivered in two sessions at different times of the year. The first covers the importance of assessment and gives guidance for designing good assessments and giving feedback. The second session goes more deeply into constructive alignment and learning outcomes, leading on to decision making in exam boards, and ending with a focus on cultivating academic judgement.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities are complex places. In fact, higher education is a complex business. It can take decades of engagement with university activities and higher education issues to appreciate fully the complexity of challenges and the diversity of activities undertaken in universities. Even the tasks we engage with routinely, teaching and research, have subtleties and nuances that we only become attuned to over time. A healthy academic career is characterized, one would hope, by an increasing humility in the light of the profound philosophical, pragmatic, and practical challenges of engaging with education at the highest level against the changing social, political and economic contexts. At the start of an academic career, glimpsing the scope and complexity of academia and aspiring to master it can be daunting. This is, however, a strategically important moment in which to set new academics off in the right direction for an effective and rewarding career.

The Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS) at the University of Manchester operates a New Academics Programme (NAP) for its probationary academic staff. The programme is accredited by the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA); completion of the programme is a requirement for passing probation and also qualifies the academic for acceptance as a Fellow of the HEA. The concern of the HEA is solely with respect to the teaching activities of universities, but the NAP programme includes research and administrative aspects of academic activity as well. The elements of the NAP are undertaken by probationary lecturers normally over a three year period, culminating in a reflective portfolio. Passing the NAP is based on attendance at all the elements and on passing the reflective portfolio, which is assessed by two senior members of EPS staff, one from the probationer's School, the other from the Faculty's Teaching Support Unit.

The Faculty operates a system of Senior Mentors in each School, who co-ordinate the mentoring provision for new academics, and who mark the reflective portfolios. The Senior Mentors are also charged with delivering the elements of the NAP, with contributions from other senior staff.

This chapter describes the introduction of a new component into the New Academics Programme, to deal with Assessment. Assessment is "the 'core business' of universities" (Flint & Johnson, 2011, p. 12) and frequently the most frightening part of the job for a new academic. It seems important that an induction programme designed to equip new lecturers with at least the embryonic skills of academia should include an Assessment component.

The chapter is written as a case study from the first person perspective; I proposed the introduction of this Assessment session and I deliver it. The case study describes my background and motivation for introducing this session, how the content and implementation have evolved since its introduction, and its value and merits as perceived by the new academics.

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