



Conference Report: Assessment in Higher Education

Birmingham, England 24th and 25th June 2015

We know that assessment systems and the assessment practice of educators have a powerful impact on learning and learners in higher education. This educational research conference, held in the city of Birmingham in England every two years, is organised by the University of Cumbria and led by an independent steering committee of academics. The conference is very much an international affair and brought together a wide range of lecturers, academic developers, university leaders and educational researchers from 25 countries with a shared interest in understanding and improving the multiple purposes and consequences of assessment.

A key challenge addressed by the conference was to consider how assessment systems and practice, including design and feedback, might encourage deep approaches to learning by students and avoid encouraging strategic or surface approaches. It was notable at the conference that many presenters were building links across the age phase sectors from schooling to higher education. In particular, the influence of high stakes exam results, high levels of accountability, and managerialist institutional leadership provided a shared theme that is influencing learning, teaching and assessment from nursery to university.

Keynote speaker Madallena Taras from the University of Sunderland has played an important role in questioning the definitions of formative and summative assessment that have been so taken for granted as part of the 'assessment for learning' research and professional guidance that has influenced so many educators in schools, colleges and universities. Keynote speaker Jo-Ann Baird from the University of Oxford focused on the tensions caused by 'transparency' in assessment. Her presentation raised the challenge that by focusing so much on sharing the assessment criteria and preparing learners for examinations we may have developed a generation of students, coming from school to university, with a very strategic approach to learning.

The conference included master classes on rethinking feedback (David Boud from Deakin University, Australia), assessment design (David Carless from Hong Kong University), student experiences (Tansy Jessop, University of Winchester, England) and students' assessment literacy (Margaret Price, Oxford Brookes University, England). Research presentations focused on a wide range of assessment related issues including institutional change, programme level development of assessment, student experiences and responses to assessment, assessment literacy of students and tutors and diversity and inclusion. Research presenters included colleagues from Ireland, USA, Italy, Canada, Mexico, Australia, The Netherlands, Hong Kong, South Africa, Denmark, Vietnam, Spain, Sweden, Croatia, Norway, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Japan, Austria, New Zealand, Belgium and England. There were forty poster presentations at the conference and the first prize of an iPad in the highly competitive poster competition was whisked away by a collaborative team from Irish institutions.

The conference committee thanked conference chair Professor Sue Bloxham for her huge contribution in leading the establishment of the conference. The next Assessment in Higher Education conference will be held in Birmingham in June 2017. The new chair of the committee is soon to be announced and the conference organiser will be Professor Pete Boyd, University of Cumbria. The committee wishes to publicly thank the conference administrator, Linda Shore, who does most of the actual work and is largely responsible for the success of this friendly, international, well-focused research conference.