

# *Why Don't We Want to Reduce Assessment?*

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## Abstract

Assessment overload in higher education has received much attention in recent years. Discussions around this topic can relate to both staff and students' assessment load. However, the term 'overload' is complex and contested and the solution to reducing assessment load is not as simple it first seems. There can be a reluctance to reduce assessment. This short conversation piece explores this topic and presents some ongoing actions to address this challenge at national and institutional level.

**Keywords:** Assessment, feedback, overload, programme approach.

## 1. Assessment Overload.

[National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#) identified that although modularisation has given great flexibility, it has given rise to a different problem: '*Some undergraduate programmes have become fragmented and a course might consist of 12 separate five-credit modules. Such programmes are regarded by students as over-taught and over-assessed; they impose an undue and unnecessary burden on both students and staff*' ([Department of Education & Skills 2011, p57](#)). We know from good practice and from national and institutional principles that assessment should be manageable ([National Forum, 2017a](#)) and allow space for deeper learning ([UCD T&L, 2019a](#)).

Assessment overload is not necessarily impacted by the same variables for staff and students. Student overload can be impacted by their number of parallel modules, module size, and assessment weighting number and size. Individual students' experiences of the 'same load' can also vary depending on their discipline, knowledge and their interest in the subject. Student

'assessment overload' is therefore a contested term (Galvez-Bravo, 2016). There are some overlaps in the cause of assessment load for staff and students, such as assessment size. However, staff workload is less likely to be affected by the number of parallel modules than by class size, number of assignments, correction time and support for corrections.

Despite the common rhetoric of 'overload', staff in Irish Higher Education seem reluctant to reduce assessment and, in addition, students often ask for *more* continuous assessment. What's going on here? What steps could be taken to address this? I share here some of my thoughts, based on my work in University College Dublin and my time spent on secondment to the National Forum coordinating their [Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning Enhancement Theme](#).

## 2. Programme versus module approach.

Very few would dispute that the development of the modular approach to assessment has caused staff to explore their assessment practices in isolation, at module level. This has had consequences. For example, research undertaken within the National Forum Enhancement Theme highlighted that '*On average, students complete a much higher number of assessments per ECTS credit in single-semester modules than in full-year modules. For example, the average number of assessments in a single-semester 5-ECTS module was 2.6; the average number of assessments in a full-year 10-ECTS module was 2.8.*' ([National Forum, 2016](#)) Therefore, module size can impact on assessment load. Lack of programme oversight can lead to fragmented assessment and feedback approaches. Programme-focused approaches to assessment design, however, can be challenging as staff need to come together to explore what is going on in their programme and may need to make some changes to their assessment load. This can be a slow, iterative process.

A programmatic approach to assessment design requires national and institutional drivers of change. The Irish HE sector is responding slowly to regain a more programme-focused approach to assessment. For example, at national level:

- the National Forum established an award focused on disciplinary excellence in learning, teaching and assessment (the DELTA Award), which recognises discipline groups who take a programme approach to assessment ([National Forum, 2019a](#)). It has also published a number of case studies and resources aimed at enabling programme-focused

approaches to assessment ([National Forum, 2017b](#)) and a related open-access professional development short course ([National Forum, 2019b](#)).

- A recent Irish QQI Green paper on *Assessment of Learners and Learning* emphasises the importance of taking a programme approach to transforming assessment ([QQI, 2018](#)). See also a related [National Forum \(2019c\)](#) and QQI Insight.

In addition, at institutional level, for example:

- UCD are developing a Framework for Programme Approaches to Assessment and Feedback in a key strategic project ([UCD T&L, 2019b](#)).
- Dundalk Institute of Technology developed an institutional approach to group-work assessment (National Forum, 2017b, [Case Study D](#)).
- Some institutions have developed *assessment workload equivalence* in order to assist staff to develop some consistency in workload when planning assessment methods.

These examples are positive steps, nationally and across institutions, in helping to support assessment design to take place at the level of the programme.

### **3. Staff Competing for Student Time and a Pedagogy of Control.**

Another challenge to student assessment load is assessment and class time ‘competing’ against each other in parallel modules. When I talk to staff about why they won’t reduce assessments, they say that if they don’t assess, the students will focus their time on assessments from other modules: ‘If it’s not assessed, they won’t do it’. This has led to the prolific use of small, weighted assessments. There is a competition between staff for students’ time. This is not only an Irish issue: In New Zealand Tony Harland and colleagues described this as the ‘assessment arms race’ and a ‘pedagogy of control’ (Harland et al 2015) and in the UK it has been described as the ‘relentless diet of summative assessment’ which is more prevalent in research-intensive institutions (Tomas & Jessop 2019).

Students have also shared their dissatisfaction with the consequence of this assessment diet. For example, during the National Forum Enhancement Theme, one student noted that they were ‘*completely over-assessed to the point where people weren’t actually going to classes...*

*in the last three weeks in one of my lectures six people showed up consistently [out of 50]'* ([National Forum 2017b, p20](#)).

The conundrum is that although students wish for less assessment, they often seek out additional continuous assessment. This is particularly true for undergraduate students (Jonkman et al 2006). It has been shown that more assessment can have a positive impact on assessment grades and allows students to take small steps towards improvement (Galvez-Bravo 2016). In one study in which I was involved, when I asked students why they wanted continuous assessment as an option, some highlighted that it helped them get organised ([O'Neill 2011](#)). Another challenge is that staff introduce continuous assessment however, the traditional end of semester examination, often for fear of plagiarism, is still retained. Exams remain the most common assessment method in Ireland ([National Forum 2016](#)).

### **3.1 Some steps to consider.**

Staff need to explore ways of increasing their awareness of students' competing assessment demands, such as their different assessment deadlines. This can be done by developing assessment weighting maps, live assessment calendars, and conversations between staff (see [National Forum, ,2017b](#) for some examples). However, staff also need to let go. They need to resist the temptation to keep students on track through small assessments and allow them to become more independent learners. Alternatively, staff need to develop spaces in the curriculum for assessment and/or study catch-up time ([UCD T&L 2019c](#)) ([UCD T&L 2019a](#)).

Staff need to give opportunities for students to improve their grades, without assessment tasks. For example, more in-class feedback, working with assessment criteria and discussion on assessment standards that are not graded. The issue of preventing plagiarism needs further attention. Students need to develop their time management skills, to not rely on assessment to get them organised.

## **4. Our understanding of feedback approaches (feedback literacy).**

Small assessments are often used for letting students know how well they are doing, to give feedback. One way to address this is to explore other ways of engaging students with feedback.

Feedback is a challenging term as staff and students may only see this process as a one-way activity where staff are always the 'givers' of the information. We know from the literature that feedback is a much wider concept and that it also includes students self-monitoring and self-regulating their work. As part of the National Forum Enhancement Theme, an expert group of staff got together to develop a national understanding of assessment and feedback terms, in particular exploring the terms assessment *for* and *as* learning ([National Forum, 2017c](#)). Assessment as learning in particular supported the use of activities such as in-class quizzes, working with exemplars, developing student self-assessment and peer-review skills.

#### **4.1. One step to consider.**

A better understanding by staff and students of these terms, and their related activities, can go some way to addressing the situation where small summative assessments are primarily used as a feedback activity.

### **5. In Summary.**

Assessment load is a complex issue. If we want to sort out some of the identified tensions around this, some key questions that could drive the further conversations are:

- What enabling policies, frameworks and professional development could support a programme approach to streamlining assessment and feedback?
- How do we balance the support and feedback that, in particular, continuous assessment gives, with not overloading students and staff?
- How do we reduce the number of examinations and stand over the assessment's academic integrity?
- How do we improve staff and students' assessment and feedback literacy?

Let's keep talking about this.

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