JISC Assessment Careers Project Methodology for Pilot Studies v4

Pilot Project Aims and objectives

The 5 pilot projects each aim to explore the potential and practicality of a longitudinal (assessment careers) approach to assessment with the following objectives to:

a) promote a longitudinal approach to writing feedback (tutors)
b) promote a longitudinal approach to acting on feedback (students)
c) encourage reflection and dialogue over student progress both within modules and between modules
d) develop a set of Assessment Career principles to be used to scale up and embed the longitudinal approach to feedback
e) assess the role of technology in meeting the above objectives.

The intervention made to achieve these aims is different in each pilot. However, all pilots will use the same action research methodology, evaluation questions and undertake the same evaluation process using the same tools to ensure that findings are generalisable at least across the IOE.

Action research

Action research is a term used to describe a broad collection of methods, theories and values. There are probably as many interpretations of action research as there are action researchers and so a comprehensive review of these would be a fruitless endeavour. However, there are three key points that are relevant for these pilot studies.

Firstly, action research is concerned primarily with providing practical solutions to real situations (Reason & Bradbury, 2004). It originated in the 1930s and 1940s linked to social and organisational change from within and usually involves a cycle of planning, taking action, observation and reflection leading to further change (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This applied approach contrasts with traditional scientific research which does not influence the research context but aims to keep this as bounded as possible.

Secondly, while the overarching aims of action research are little contested, there are contrasting views on who takes part in action research and this in turn raises questions about the research paradigm(s) in which action research might be located. Historically it has been practitioners who led action research, and in education action research appears under the guise of 'teacher-as-researcher' and 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1991). Action research has grown in parallel with social justice agendas (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Somekh, 2006) and a key aim here is an emancipatory one as teachers research their own practice to benefit themselves and to improve their students' learning.

Finally, the role of theorising in action research which aims to change pedagogic practice needs to be stated as practitioners might be content with a descriptive record of their own understandings (Carr and Kemmis, 1986 p.118). Norton (2008) views pedagogical action research as a synthesis of theory and practice.

> The fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate one's own teaching/learning facilitation practice, with the dual aim of improving that practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge in order to benefit student learning. (Norton, 2008, 59

The pilot studies are practitioner-led and have an aim to improve student learning through feedback and so can be described as action research. Although the length of the project precludes many repeated cycles of action and reflection, there is a cyclical process embedded in the study. A baseline report identified assessment and feedback practice and some of the problems to be addressed before the interventions. Feedback profiles before the intervention on each programme in the pilot studies were also analysed. This will be compared with feedback profiles after the intervention to identify any changes. Students will also be invited to reflect on how they respond to feedback before and after the intervention. The interventions will be adjusted on the basis of the findings and recommendations will be fed into the next cycle which is cascading the interventions to a wider range of programmes and embedding change at institutional level – year 3 of the project.

The project employs independent researchers who will assist with data analysis and with writing pilot reports. The role of the researchers is two-fold:

Firstly, higher education lecturers are in good position for taking part in pedagogic action research and theorising as they have research and publication experience (Norton, 2008). However, lecturers also have high workloads which can be alleviated by working with other researchers who can assist with analysis and writing of reports.

Secondly, the small-scale nature of much practitioner-led action research also raises questions about its transferability beyond immediate contexts and its reliability (Costello, 2011). Action research employing a positivist paradigm may convince external stakeholders, while emancipatory action research may be condemned by sceptics for its lack of rigour. The independent researchers can provide a more objective interpretation of feedback than might be the case if the author of the feedback were to analyse their own feedback practice.

Furthermore, dialogue between researchers and practitioners might ensure that the research is transparent and provide the reflexivity to provide confidence in the quality of interpretive social research (Winter, 1996). In reflexive accounts there is a dialogue between writer and reader, interpretive judgements are transparent and multiple explanations for observed phenomena are explored. Each pilot with its different cohorts of students and staff and different approaches to the intervention will have a complex story to tell. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) sum up:

> ..a good action research project contains three main elements: a good story, rigorous reflection on that story, and an extrapolation of useful knowledge or theory from the refection on the story. p.15.

Evaluation questions

McNiff & Whitehead (2006) suggest that action researchers need to be very clear about what they aim to change, what evidence might be found and how the evidence will be evaluated.

The aim of the Assessment Careers project is to enhance student learning through taking a longitudinal view of assessment using what we term the assessment career approach. The literature on assessment identifies two key principles for ensuring that feedback supports learning: student self-reflection and dialogue between students and teaching staff (see Baseline Report literature review). These principles have now been accepted in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education:

> Indicator 9: Every student is enabled to monitor their progress and further their academic development through the provision of regular opportunities to reflect on feedback and engage in dialogue with staff. (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, QAA, 2012, p.22)

However, it is possible that an intervention might have such positive effects on learning but have an undesirable effect on staff (and perhaps student) workloads. The project aims to evaluate the impact on staff workloads to ensure that any further implementation is sustainable and scalable. The role of technology, e.g. Moodle, to support the interventions also needs consideration.

From these project aims there are 6 evaluation questions for each pilot study to consider:

Question	Source of data used
1. Are students enabled to progress through formal opportunities to reflect on feedback?	Student pre-intervention question, focus groups/interviews
2. Are students enabled to progress through formal opportunities to engage in dialogue with staff or peers?	Student pre-intervention question, focus groups/interviews
3. How does the intervention change the way that staff write feedback?	Feedback analysis, staff reflections
4. What is the impact of the intervention on staff workloads?	Staff reflections, workload distribution tool.
5. How has the intervention encouraged staff and students to review the value of feedback and feedforward?	Staff reflections, student focus groups/interviews. Feedback analysis.
6. What are the technological, organisational and social issues that need to be addressed for scaling up the pilot studies? i.e. what would convince other stakeholders that the change is needed?	Staff reflections, workload distribution tool, focus groups.

Participants

The interventions will apply to all students and staff teaching on the module(s)/programme used in the 5 pilots. All modules are evaluated using the IOE module evaluation form so all students will have an opportunity to express views on the intervention.

In addition, a sample of student volunteers (the target will be 20 for each pilot) will be included in the detailed research and evaluation process. All participating staff will be invited to be included in the evaluation. However, there may be some part-time staff on the programme who will choose not to take part.

NB The pilot studies have IOE ethical approval.

Data Collection

As the aim is to gather detailed evidence for the impact of a small scale intervention qualitative methods will be used. The following sets of data will be collected:

1. **Feedback analysis**. Written feedback for at least one module for each programme will be collected before the intervention and afterwards and analysed using a feedback tool (see appendix 1). This tool has been designed to identify categories of feedback and to provide a feedback profile which indicates the balance between praise, correcting and commenting on current work, and giving students developmental comments.
2. Any differences between feedback before and after each intervention will provide evidence for the impact of the intervention at both programme and institute level. Both formative and summative assessment will be collected and might be expected to produce different profiles before and after the intervention.

3. **Student reflection on use of feedback tool.** All students taking the modules will be asked to complete a brief reflection of their responses to feedback so far. This tool will be used both to prepare students for the intervention by asking them to reflect on their current experiences and practice and also to provide a snapshot of the attitudes to feedback that are commonly held by each cohort. See appendix 2.

4. **Student focus groups or interviews**. Student volunteers (target 20) will be interviewed or invited to focus groups to discuss the impact of the intervention on their longer-term learning. The focus group could be led by the programme leader but this might inhibit the students who may be anxious not to compromise their future prospects on the programme by being too critical. Thus, where possible focus groups or interviews will be conducted either by an independent researcher or by another pilot or programme leader.

   In the focus groups/interviews students will be invited to a) discuss the feedback categories from the tool and how helpful each is b) to discuss the intervention and how this has changed the way they approach feedback c) suggest amendments or improvements to the intervention for the future. The focus group will be audio recorded and with permission 1 or 2 students from each pilot will be video recorded on a separate occasion. For focus group questions see appendix 3.

5. **Workload distribution tool**. Programme leaders will complete an online tool to capture the workload distribution for the new approach to assessment. See appendix 4.

6. **Teacher reflections. All** programme team participants will be sent a request for a reflection on the intervention and on the assessment career principles using email. The prompt questions are suggested in appendix 5.

It is important to note that the tools used in this project were not only developed for data capture, but also have a developmental role. For example, data from the feedback profiling tool will be used by lecturers to reflect on their practice in workshops and the reflections by both students and staff also have a developmental purpose.

Analysis (evaluation of pilot)

Analysis of the written feedback will be undertaken by independent researchers and profiles at both programme level and institutional level will be compared before and after the intervention.

The student reflections before the intervention and focus group responses afterwards will be analysed by the pilot leaders (*and/or researchers by negotiation*) and compared for:

1. Evidence that students are able to develop and monitor their progress through formal opportunities to reflect on feedback
2. Evidence that students are able to develop and monitor their progress through formal opportunities to engage in dialogue with staff or peers.

Evidence will be gathered by interpreting the following:

- Changes of feedback profiles before, during and after the intervention.
- Changes in student reported use of feedback.
- Themes from focus groups on the impact of the interventions on reflection on feedback, action on feedback and dialogue over feedback.
- Staff reflections on changes to their approach to feedback and on the Assessment Career principles.

3. Change in the way that staff write feedback will be judged by:
- Changes of feedback profiles before, during and after the intervention.
- Teacher reflections on their practice

4. Impact on workloads will be judged using results from the information from staff on assessment practice and teacher reflections. This workload distribution will be analysed by the project leader and deputy leader using Diana Laurillard's workload analysis tool or an adapted version of this.
5. Impact on staff and students valuing of feedback and feedforward will be judged from student and staff reflections and focus groups/interviews.

6. Implications for scaling up pilots will be judged using this workload distribution tool and teacher reflections and focus group discussions on any practical or technological issues that arise.

Interpretation of the findings will be discussed by the research team with the aim of uncovering any hidden assumptions that might influence the analysis. The team will also discuss any revisions of the Assessment Career principles after the pilots have been completed.

Recommendations

Recommendations will be made for scaling up the pilot work using other programmes e.g. in the clusters of programmes which have been identified in each department as having common modules. The recommendations will arise from evidence of what has had a positive influence on student engagement with feedback and from suggestions for any improvements made by both students and staff. It may be that only some of the interventions in the pilot are recommended for institute-wide adoption and some are more appropriate for local adoption. It is possible that interventions may need modification before being used and re-evaluated elsewhere. The recommendations will provide a basis for another cycle of action research which will be addressed in year 3 of the project.

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Appendix 1 Feedback analysis tool

In documents on the blog at http://assessmentcareers.jiscinvolve.org/wp/about/

Appendix 2 Survey question for students

IOE LONDON

Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

Assessment Careers: enhancing learning pathways through assessment

Information for participants: Please will you help with our research?

The main aim of the project is to transform IOE assessment practice from one which focuses on individual assessment in modules to one in which the focus of assessment is promoting more effective learning pathways across modules. We call this longitudinal approach an Assessment Career.

The project leader is Gwyneth.hughes@ioe.ac.uk and more information is available at www.ioe.ac.uk/assessmentcareers.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please provide an anonymous answer to the questions below.

There is no penalty if you do not wish to do so, and consenting to do so does not imply that you consent to participate in any other future aspect of the Assessment Careers project.

If you have any questions about the project, or the questions below, please ask the member of the project team now.

Assessment Careers methodology

Your programme: ………………………………………………………………………….

Think about the last piece of written feedback that you received on an academic course (not necessarily this course). Was your work formative (a draft you could revise) or summative (final assessed work that contributed a grade)?

It was formative / summative (please circle)

What did you do with the feedback?

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NB suggested prompts:

•   If you didn't do anything with the feedback that is fine, you can write that.

•   If you discussed the feedback with anyone please write with whom and what you discussed.

•   Please could you indicate a timescale, so if you did this as soon as you got the feedback, or much later when you were preparing another assignment.

Appendix 3 Form for collecting information from staff about their assessment practice:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEhSVXJ5UEFscUJLc2JoUC1oN G95OHc6MQ#gid=0

Appendix 4 Focus group questions (adapt for interviews)

a)   What did you do with feedback you received on this module?

b)   How did (insert the intervention) help you act on feedback, if at all? (copy of intervention e.g. cover sheet available)

c)   If you acted on the feedback do you know if your action was appropriate or not? If so what informed you?

d)   What written or spoken dialogue did you have with your assessor or peers about your assignment and feedback?

e)   Did you consider responding to the feedback in the next module or longer-term? If so how?

f)   How might we improve or amend (the intervention) for the future?

g)   What are any other ways we could improve feedback on this programme?

If time please discuss the *Assessment Careers* principles with the focus group.

Appendix 5 Reflective prompts for programme team via email

In (insert module or programme) this year we have included (insert intervention) as part of the JISC funded *Assessment Careers* project. As part of our evaluation please could you write as much detail as you can in response to the following questions. Your responses will be anonymised before analysing and reporting the results.

a)   Did you read the student reflections/requests on the assignment cover sheets? If so how did you respond?

b)   How have you changed your approach to writing feedback in recent modules, if at all?

c)   If you have changed what encouraged and enabled the change?

d)   How did students make use of your feedback, it at all?

f)   If you have changed your practice, how has it affected the time you spend reading assignments and writing comments?

g)   If this took up more of your time might this change with greater familiarity with the process?

h)   How could technology (e.g. keeping records of past feedback for each student in Moodle) help?

i)   Would you recommend (insert the intervention) to colleagues and if not why not?

j)   What other changes to feedback practice at the IOE would you like to see?