

## The importance of authentic assessment in the 'new normal' for HE

My interest in assessment dates from my school and university experiences. As the family failure, struggling first with speech then with writing, and spelling always at the bottom of the class it's quite a surprise that I made it to University let alone finishing my career in academia. It was my passion for nature and the support of an enlightened biology teacher that gave me the confidence to try for A levels and, despite dismal grades, got place through clearing place to study physiology. I absolutely loved it and realised by the end of the first year that I was getting much better marks than my peers with impressive A levels, a trend continuing throughout my degree. Awareness of this discrepancy led to a cynicism about exams and questioning a system that places students in stressful situations answering a few questions in time limited conditions. Surely this is not an effective way to demonstrate future potential despite being the basis of the UCAS points-based system. My views were reinforced when one of my daughters failed to achieve the requirements of her offer to study dentistry but was rung on results days by her first choice confirming her place. This was on the basis of her interview to which she had taken things she had made, demonstrating her manual dexterity – impossible from A level results. This suggests not all HEIs take exam results alone as seriously as might appear.

Over my years in teaching environmental conservation it has become increasingly apparent that, with the increases in fees, most students are investing to secure a well-paid job rather than going to University out of a thirst for knowledge alone although I appreciate that this may not apply in all subject areas. I feel strongly that our role as teachers is to facilitate their goal while simultaneously maintaining academic standards. Fine words are spoken about access for all, providing support for those with additional needs and the like, but the standard assessment practice remains essays and exams, particularly for undergraduates. Are these ever experienced in the workplace? Is the ability to learn, retain information and regurgitate it under exam conditions a skill required by employers? My area is applied ecology and landscape management and I've worked closely with industry and the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), to find out what employers expect from graduate entrants to inform programme content. To this end I was involved in the development of the developing a Competency Framework, the prerequisite to degree accreditation and piloted this on the MSc I was leading. More recently I carried out research, with CIEEM, into the sector Skills Gap<sup>1</sup> and then with a diverse group of employers to develop the Level 7 Ecologist Degree Apprenticeship<sup>2</sup>, approved in June 2019. This has provided clear evidence that employers do not appoint graduates on the basis of a 'good' degree alone (that is simply expected) but require graduate applicants able to demonstrate competency, defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and behaviours.

While exams test knowledge I removed all exams and essays when I took on programme leadership, replacing them with more 'authentic' means of assessment. These are based on tasks likely to be experienced in job roles and designed to evidence competencies as well as meeting the academic standard. A particularly assignment has been the reflective portfolio, providing students the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning describing what they have done - from attending outside events, doing fieldwork, readings and the like - and reflecting on how this has moved their learning forward. This helps evidence skill development, similarly to the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) record required by many professions and be identified as good practice by external examiners. Other examples are reviewing documents, identifying shortcoming in reports, writing method statements, and preparing advice for clients in response to scenarios. Where possible practitioners are invited to present work they have done, which can then be used as the

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett D & Gomez-Martin E (2017) *CIEEM Skills Gap Project*. In Practice 96 pp45-47

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/ecologist-degree/>

basis for an assessed task. Every reference request asks questions about behaviour. This is something that tends to be forgotten in our teaching and students do not readily identify the transferable aspects of their learning unless it is made explicit to them. I struggle to get students to see that shop work or waitressing can be highly important demonstrating competency, for example in reliability and handling clients, rather than an afterthought on their CV.

So my approach and commitment to authentic assessment strategies is clear and popular with students, particularly those already working in the sector. However, the reaction from colleagues is rather mixed. Some are happy with this although others, particularly those with no industry experience – the career academics – see no reason to move away from exams (despite the increasing difficulty of marking as handwriting seems increasingly illegible with the use of IT). I have found it particularly challenging (and have failed) to influence the teaching of computer applications – such as GIS – to reflect changes in the industry. The defence is that IT skills are transferable which, while true, disadvantage students in the job market if they are lacking experience of current techniques. To be competitive and attract students it is vital that we, as teachers, are up to date and maintain close links with industry.

There is an old saying along the lines of “if you want a better answer ask a better question” maybe those of us in teaching should reflect on this and look for more effective ways to facilitate students to simultaneously demonstrate achievement of academic standards and, simultaneously, their competency to employers.