

## Sam's Q&A Responses

- 1. Getting to know students is great and would really help with ensuring assessments are inclusive, but when cohorts get bigger and bigger, it's challenging – how do you think we can overcome this?**

**Sam:** This is a very real challenge, for sure, and it also links into the current discourse around student mattering and belonging (see [Gravett et al., 2021](#)). A key point to make here is that adopting more relation approaches through our assessment processes doesn't need to lead to huge administration workloads for staff. It can be as simple as setting up regular opportunities for dialogue with and between students around shared assessment tasks – i.e., discussion board tasks, or peer-led interaction and dialogue considering assessment criteria for a particular task. If captured via the VLE or another digital tool/platform, such approaches can provide tutor and students useful, actionable, information to help support and develop their assessment work. It is about being more intentional with our assessment designs to include and value these relational activities. If done regularly and consistently, the literature shows us that such formative practices help to build positive engagement from students around assessment tasks.

- 2. Which section is best? In your quadrant model, do you think we need to be doing assessments in each quadrant, or be aiming to go for one more than the others?**

**Sam:** If we approach our planning from an assessment-as-practice (practice = outcome + practise = process) perspective, rather than being completely task-focused (i.e., to do this assessment, students must complete 'x' task), we position assessment work as a constellation of appropriate practices (mapped across the quadrants) that help and support students to: 1) situate their own assessment and learning work; 2) take advantage of opportunities to explore and work with key concepts in relation to their assessment; 3) have a range of opportunities for generating and consolidating meaning through their work; and 4) be able to determine the appropriate means of expressing or applying their learning aligned to assessment criteria. The key dynamic here is that we want to try and encourage a transition in and through this work from tutor-led work (which models for the kinds of learning we want students to demonstrate) to student-led work that enables them to hone and utilise their own learning strategies and, ultimately, express their learning in ways that make sense to them and the approaches they undertake.

- 3. Regarding the four Practice Frames, is there an order through which we might move through these frames within one assessment, or is the idea that an assessment sits in one frame only?**

**Sam:** Based on the research evidence that sits behind the model – and considering the response to question 2 (above) – rather than systematically working through each quadrant (though this might work for some colleagues, depending on the nature and aims of the assessment work being undertaken) and rather than ordering the quadrants and related work, it might be more

practically useful to think/visualise the quadrants as layers in a spiral-like series of exchanges, from which you build out or up. For instance, the Situative Frame might be thought of as the backdrop or foundation (or anchor) for the work being undertaken. This is tutor-led and situates the assessment work within the broader narrative of the programme (CLOs) as well as related authentic models for learning. From there, we need to support students in building a working appreciation and understanding of key concepts and criteria (the building blocks for the work). This again likely needs to be tutor-led initially. We then want to encourage and support student agency in and through their work using the foundations and structures introduced through this initial work (above). Our goal here is to aid students to develop self-regulatory behaviours through different meaning making activities in the proximal frame – this is where students are actively pulling out the ‘meanings’ from their assessment work (i.e., in the form blogs or their contributions to online discussions or reflections on peer review exchanges around draft work). The key here is for there to be a range of different opportunities for students to develop meaning through the work they are doing and that encourage them to pay attention to how this meaning takes shape for them. Ultimately, what students express as their overall ‘learning’ through assessment artefacts should be self-directed; that is, students are encouraged to decide what aspects of their assessment work best represents their learning against the criteria and their own goals for the work. These practices are not experienced in the abstract: they may be operationalised as a series of steps in the assessment process, and they may also be components in a network of assessment practices students are involved with. Whatever the approach adopted, an understanding of the dynamic of moving between tutor-led work to student-led work and from an understanding of where the work sits in the process of student learning and the role assessments tasks play therein are what is important.

**4. How do you have a flexible and dynamic approach to the assessment enabling it to be inclusive to the cohort but manage to get it delivered on time? How do we truly provide flexible assessment?**

**Sam:** Great question! As we discussed during the session, a key set of considerations when attempting to embed greater flexibility in assessment is to think about the ‘manageability’ of the work aligned to its ‘sustainability’. Manageability speaks to the scalability and practicability of the arrangements we put in place. If you’re working with large student cohorts, setting up assessment work/processes that requires you to feedback individually to each student on multiple formative tasks is unmanageable and may create an admin burden on your part and workload issues for students (i.e., overassessment). Instead, building in different opportunities for students to reflect on their understanding that you can then aggregate and speak to collectively as a series of issues or insights means you’re able to be responsive to students learning needs (in general) but also garner valuable insight to inform your ongoing practice. That’s one form of manageable flexibility. Another form of flexibility is to introduce managed or negotiated choice in assessment tasks – i.e., when completing this assessment task, you are able to express your learning through a choice of different mediums or outputs, such as a digital (audio-narrated) poster, or a written reflective narrative task. This can also be operationalised through enabling students to

choose the topic or focus of assessment. A combination of these approaches tends to work best, but all the time keeping in mind that 'in practice' they need to be manageable for us and our students. They also need to be sustainable – that is, they need to lead to worthwhile learning for students in the context of what they will be asked to do in their studies, as well as having clear consequential validity (being relevant beyond the task itself) for the world of work. From here, you can see how adopting a traditional examination approach to assessment might be 'manageable' but won't necessarily satisfy the sustainability consideration. Both need to be considered together at the point of design, and ideally not just at the module level but instead at the programme or course level to ensure consistency and coherence of the student assessment experience.

## **5. What does sites of practice mean?**

**Sam:** This speaks to the work of [Boud et al. \(2018\)](#) and refers an appreciation of how we position and connect assessment activities to particular periods of time and/or locations. From this perspective, assessment tasks should not be operationalised as a series of abstract tasks, but rather as a network of interconnected work – again, the need to consider assessment through the lens of the programme/course and not only at module level becomes crucial to be able to appropriately situate the work.

## **6. How can we effectively promote employability/transferable skills in assessments? Some students actively avoid modules with assessments that include these (e.g., presentations, non-essay-based tasks), and others have needs that prevent engagement with these.**

**Sam:** Ensuring we are undertaking what [Svenesson et al \(2021\)](#) describe as “authenticity work” in our assessments is an important step here. Paying attention to the work we engage in with our students to establish their learning environments as authentic and pedagogically appropriate. This requires an intentional focus on the discursive strategies we draw on to establish inclusive and authentic learning environments. Within these learning environments, we need to be providing students with a range of different assessment opportunities, alongside a degree of choice and ownership in how they navigate the terrain.

## **7. How can we encourage staff to change? It can be scary and uncomfortable and time consuming.**

**Sam:** There's a need to practice what we preach here, in my view. That is, in order to encourage positive and productive student engagement in learning, we have evidence that tells us that positioning them as active agents in the assessment process, having shared and transparent exchanges around the expectations around certain practices, and their needs in relation to these, and the importance of enabling a certain level of ownership over the assessment/learning process. The same rules apply for staff, and their motivation and will to change. In addition to those features noted above, I would add there is need for us to provide safe spaces for meaningful staff dialogue and experimentation around different aspects of assessment practice. I would add to this that assessment practice (at course and module level – my preference is

course level, as I'm sure you have gathered by now) needs to be the focus of a regular cycle of reflection and review led by staff.

**8. Optionality seems to be a great approach for accessible assessment, but how do we ensure it meets the LOs equitably? We're really struggling with this.**

**Sam:** We can back ourselves into corners with little room for manoeuvre sometimes by the way we structure and word our LOs – i.e., being overly specific as to what we expect to see from students, or only focusing on prescriptive features of student performance in response to assessment tasks. Instead, we might look to design-in some flex through our LOs – these should open students up to the possibilities of learning offered through different assessment tasks and approaches, and not close them off to these benefits through enforcing overly defined parameters. Having LOs that are 'process' as opposed to only 'task' focused is another practical way of opening up our LOs to different learning strategies – i.e., students being able to articulate, examine and evaluate their learning strategies in relation to the approach(es) they have undertaken for a specific assessment task.

**9. How can we authentically diversify assessment to be more inclusive when most students demonstrate through NSS scores and SSLCs that they prefer 'safer' – more familiar – assessments?**

**Sam:** The research (as well as the NSS and our internal review protocols) tell us that students will form their behaviour and learning approaches around how assessments are arranged on their modules and courses. A traditional pattern and diet of assessment perpetuates normative attitudes towards assessment and learning. A question I asked during the workshop is relevant here: what are we modelling for through how we arrange our assessment tasks and approaches? What types of learning are we trying to encourage? If we want our students to experience an inclusive learning environment, we must tune them into its opportunities (and expectations) during the early stages of their HE careers. The first-year experience, therefore, becomes crucial in helping to scaffold for new ways of thinking and working with regards to assessment. This early work helps to develop familiarity and confidence when working through choices offered in assessment, for example. We cannot expect students to turn this kind of orientation on at the wall as they differ between modules (so to speak) – they take their lead from us and what we say is important and valuable in and for assessment.

**10. What does authentic mean in the context of academic assessment?**

**Sam:** [Vallerroel et al. \(2018\)](#) have distinguished three dimensions of authentic assessment design – which remain relevant to our post-pandemic context (if not more so). These are realism, cognitive challenge, and evaluative judgement:

- **Realism:** The assessment context is realistic when information about the described situation-problem comes from real and/or professional life, involving pertinent and relevant questions to solve, applicable to realistic

situations. A second way to create realism is through performance-based tasks, where students produce work or demonstrate knowledge, understanding and skills in activities that demand a true representation of performance in that field of employment.

- **Cognitive challenge:** Authentic assessment aims to generate processes of problem-solving, application of knowledge and decision-making which correspond to the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills. Being able to reproduce knowledge in a decontextualised examination does not guarantee that knowledge can be used in a real-life environment. Students need to be challenged to practice these applications and knowledge transfer skills to solve real problems.
- **Evaluative judgement:** Authentic assessment also asks students to develop an understanding of criteria and standards about what a good performance means, in order that they can judge their own performance and regulate their own learning. Students need to build a precise judgement about the quality of their work and calibrate these judgements in the light of evidence. Thus, students can identify areas that need improvement and see changes over time, developing a growing understanding of acceptable standards of performance.