

# Exploring TESTA: Under the skin of assessment and feedback

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# Plan for talk

1. What is TESTA?
2. What is TESTA for?
3. TESTA at Strathclyde
4. What has TESTA revealed about assessment and feedback?

# 1. WHAT IS TESTA?



# Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment

[testa.ac.uk](http://testa.ac.uk)

- Over 50 UK universities
- Over 100 programmes
- Used in Australia, India, South Africa
- 7 Scottish universities: Dundee, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier, Robert Gordon, University of the West of Scotland and Strathclyde

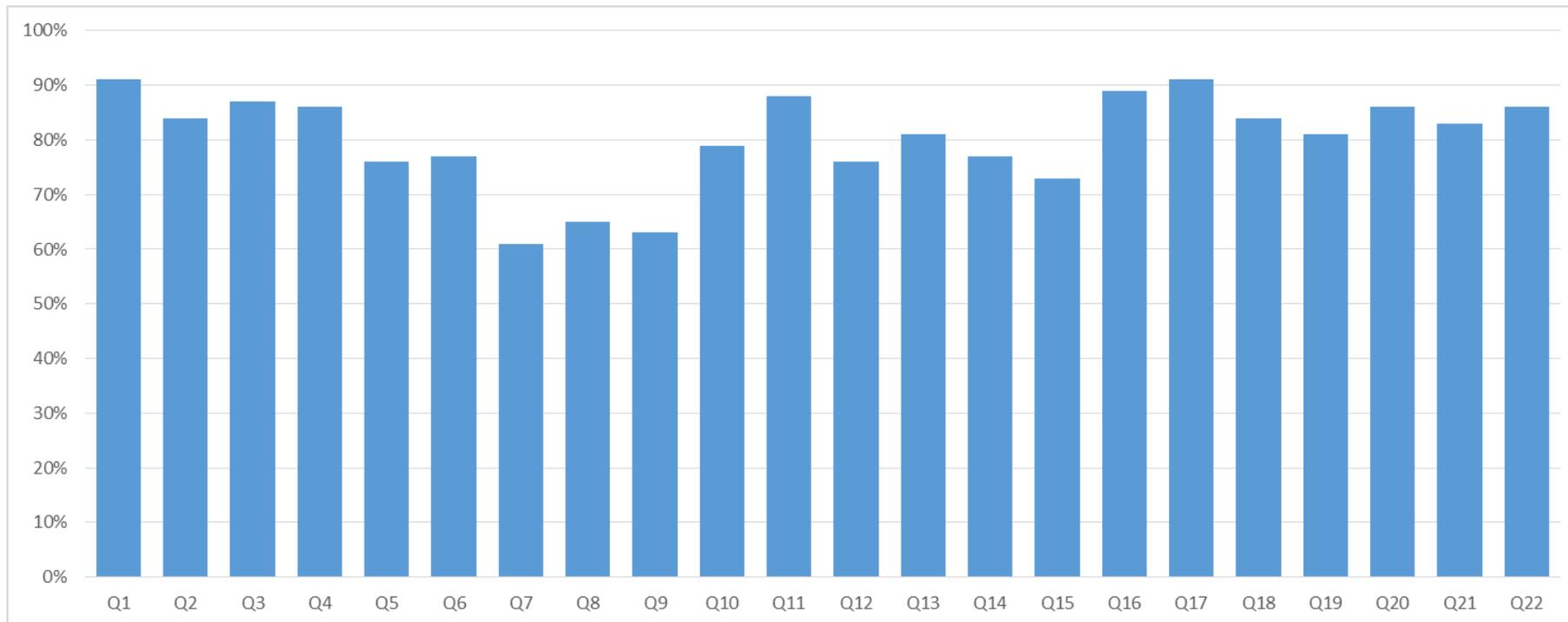
# How does TESTA work?

1. Programme audit
2. Assessment Experience Questionnaire
3. Student focus groups
4. Compiled into case study
5. Workshop with programme team

## **2. WHAT IS TESTA FOR?**

# Challenge: Assessment and feedback is a perennial problem

“Assessment [and feedback] sometimes appears to be, at one and the same time, enormously expensive, disliked by both students and teachers, and largely ineffective in supporting learning.” (Gibbs and Simpson 2004)



# Challenge: Lack of programme-level coordination

“TESTA’s focus on programme-level features of assessment recognises that individual teachers can solve assessment problems at module level only to a very limited extent: **programme-level solutions are usually necessary.**”  
(Jessop et al 2014)

# Challenge: Understanding the impact of assessment and feedback

“From our students’ point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum” (Ramsden 2003)

# Challenge: Understanding impact of assessment and feedback

- Whether assessment generates student effort
- Whether students use feedback
- Whether assessments motivate understanding or rote-learning
- Whether exams support learning

# Challenge: Understanding impact of assessment and feedback

1. Sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time
2. These tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course.
3. Tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind
4. Sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail
5. The feedback focuses on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under the students' control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics
6. The feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance
7. Feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success
8. Feedback is appropriate, in relation to students' understanding of what they are supposed to be doing
9. Feedback is received and attended to
10. Feedback is acted upon by the student

(Gibbs and Simpson 2004)

# Discussion 1

Does your programme face any of these challenges?

1. Assessment and feedback are perennial problems
2. Assessment and feedback are insufficiently coordinated at programme level
3. Impact of assessment and feedback on student learning isn't well understood
  - a) Whether assessments generate student effort
  - b) Whether students use feedback
  - c) Whether assessments motivate understanding or rote-learning
  - d) Whether exams support learning

# Formative use of student feedback

“[T]here is an assumption that when teachers transmit feedback information to students these messages are easily decoded and translated into action. Yet, there is strong evidence that **feedback messages are invariably complex and difficult to decipher**, and that students require opportunities to construct actively an understanding of them (e.g. through discussion) before they can be used to regulate performance” (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006)

# Discussion 2

What would it look like if student feedback was used *formatively*?

How would the feedback be:

- Analysed?
- Presented?
- Discussed?

# Formative use of student feedback

- Report is confidential to the programme team
- Descriptive not judgemental (Generates questions rather than answers)
- Emphasis on the professional judgement of staff
- No 'box-ticking' reporting mechanism
- Response is owned by the programme team

# Formative use of student feedback

“[T]here is an assumption that when **students** transmit feedback information to **teachers** these messages are easily decoded and translated into action. Yet, there is strong evidence that **feedback messages are invariably complex and difficult to decipher**, and that **teachers** require opportunities to construct actively an understanding of them (e.g. through discussion) before they can be used to regulate performance” (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006)

“[A]cademic staff and universities are likely to act as their students do when they perceive an assessment system to be inappropriate: **they will learn to perform certain tricks in order to pass subjects they do not understand**. They will not become qualified to teach and assess better, but to hide their inefficiencies better.” (Ramsden 2003)

# **3. TESTA AT STRATHCLYDE**

# TESTA at Strathclyde

## Our challenges:

- Assessment and feedback is a perennial problem
- ‘Distributed authority’
- Research-intensive departments



# TESTA at Strathclyde

- 6 programmes, 2432 students
- 1311 survey responses
- 24 student focus groups, 121 participants

### **3. WHAT HAS TESTA REVEALED ABOUT ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK?**

# National figures from the TESTA audit

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Median</b>
<b>Number of Summative Assessments</b>	16 - 303	
<b>Number of Formative Assessments</b>	0 - 155	
<b>Varieties of assessment</b>	5 - 21	
<b>Proportion of tasks by exam</b>	0% - 87%	
<b>Time to return marks &amp; feedback</b>	10 - 42 days	
<b>Volume of written feedback</b>	1,248 - 29,333	

# Discussion 3

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Median</b>
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# Discussion 3

Characteristic	Range	Median
Number of Summative Assessments	16 - 303	<b>57</b>
Number of Formative Assessments	0 - 155	<b>7</b>
Varieties of assessment	5 - 21	<b>11</b>
Proportion of tasks by exam	0% - 87%	<b>20%</b>
Time to return marks & feedback	10 - 42 days	<b>21 days</b>
Volume of written feedback	1,248 - 29,333	<b>8,220 words</b>

# Discussion 4

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/4oi0uzp0x5z0bsk/AEQ%20items.pdf?dl=0>

- Quantity of effort (2 items)
- Coverage of syllabus (4 items)
- Quantity and quality of feedback (3 items)
- Use of feedback (3 items)
- Appropriate assessment (3 items)
- Clear goals and standards (3 items)
- Surface approach (3 items)
- Deep approach (3 items)
- Learning from the exam (3 items)
- Satisfaction (1 item)

# Discussion 4

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/4oi0uzp0x5z0bsk/AEQ%20items.pdf?dl=0>

- Quantity of effort **6, 13**
- Coverage of syllabus **4, 5, 11, 17**
- Quantity and quality of feedback **3, 15, 16**
- Use of feedback **1, 2, 8**
- Appropriate assessment **10, 14, 18**
- Clear goals and standards **7, 9, 12**
- Surface approach **19, 23, 24**
- Deep approach **20, 21, 22**
- Learning from the exam **25, 26, 27**
- Satisfaction **28**

# Discussion 5

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/0k08heb0c1l1nyt1/Sample%20focus%20group%20comments.pdf?dl=0>

Which focus group extract resonates with you, and why?

# What does TESTA say about assessment and feedback?

## 1. Students' don't have a clear sense of what is expected of them

*“Most of the time, I feel completely lost, and I think with almost every assignment I've submitted, I have no idea of really what I'm going to get in this assignment. I don't know where the marks come from, how to get better marks”*

“Arguably, for students to fully ‘come to know’ assessment standards of their discipline, they must participate as partners in the assessment process, both formal and informal.” (O'Donovan et al 2008)

# What does TESTA say about assessment and feedback?

## 2. Assessment frames student learning

*“I think they try to get us to think about what it is that we’re actually doing but when it actually comes to studying for the exams, it then becomes more about just remembering”*

“Assessment is the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners.” (Gibbs 1999)

# What does TESTA say about assessment and feedback?

## 3. Feedback doesn't always help students to improve

*“Sometimes the feedback is really specific to that topic that the essay is on. So the next essay that we’ll get will be on something completely different. So we can’t always transfer it.”*

“When feedback is given, it is often ineffective as an agent for improvement. Students seem to show the same weaknesses again and again. Feedback does not apparently transfer from one task to the next.” (Sadler 1983)

# What does TESTA say about assessment and feedback?

## 4. Students were unsure about getting ad hoc feedback

*“Some of them, you get the impression they don’t even want to be lecturing and it’s just something they do on the side for them, it’s not really important to them.”*

“The onus was on a student to seek help, and this was not necessarily straightforward. It could take time to develop the confidence to approach staff for help, especially if the student did not feel they had some relationship with them.” (Hounsell et al 2008)

# What is the impact of TESTA at Strathclyde?



“Perhaps most valuably of all, it encourages collective reflection on a process that is, understandably, often carried out under pressure. I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend the tool to other Schools.” (Director of Teaching)

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