

# ASSESSMENT COMPACT EVALUATION FINAL REPORT

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June 2013

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## Executive Summary

This is the third and final Assessment Compact evaluation report. It updates the interim report to AESC of February 2012. The Interim Report was substantive, reporting the results of the second annual survey of students' awareness of the Assessment Compact and eight module evaluations.

The interim report discussed results from two annual Compact awareness surveys and eight module evaluations. It reported a high level of staff awareness of the Assessment Compact but low levels of student awareness of it. Where students were aware of the Compact they generally appreciated it. There was evidence of exemplary practice in assessment and feedback, but a continuing need to extend the reach of implementation beyond pockets of exemplary practice. Further, module evaluations showed that where substantial assessment redesign had occurred to align practice with the Compact there were very high levels of student satisfaction with assessment and feedback and sometimes measurably improved performance.

We also noted that there are considerable challenges for staff in redesigning assessment to implement the Assessment Compact. These include designing and delivering good feedback processes, especially where there are large teaching teams; developing students' assessment literacy; and taking a coherent, programme approach to assessment design.

For the final phase of evaluation we focused on two main things: gathering and analyzing other available data about assessment and feedback practices and developing approaches to 'keeping the Compact alive' as a factor for influencing and developing practice. We tackled the former by analyzing annual programme reviews from 2010-11 and 2011-12. The latter element consists of designing a new annual survey to monitor changes to assessment practices, developing formal course renewal processes, and providing staff development opportunities.

In summary, our analysis of two years of programme annual reviews are consistent with and reinforce the messages from other sources of data reported on previously. These are:

- there are pockets of excellent, exemplary practice in assessment and feedback that have been prompted by alignment with the Assessment Compact;
- there is strong evidence from both student satisfaction and performance data that alignment with the Assessment Compact offers desirable outcomes;
- it will take some time yet, measured in years, before alignment with the Assessment Compact is a universal feature of Brookes programmes

We propose that there be two main strands of Compact implementation drivers that should continue into the foreseeable future, practices that will keep the Compact alive in course improvement activities:

1. Annual, reliable monitoring of Compact-related changes to assessment practice, to identify areas of progress and opportunities for further improvements.
2. Keeping the Compact objectives current and in the awareness of staff and students, especially when there are formal opportunities for course enhancements, as with periodic review and validations.

The specific recommendations are:

1. Include an assessment and feedback scale in the Brookes NSSE to monitor progress towards Assessment Compact implementation  
(Action: OCSLD/ASKe)
2. Provide a coursework assignment brief template in the Moodle module guide to support good practice and refer explicitly to the Assessment Compact as an active policy framework  
(Action: Moodle project board, Done)
3. Provide a set of Assessment Compact guide reflective questions to PDTs and validation panels to support curriculum enhancement in periodic review/validation  
(Action: OCSLD/ASKe/APQO)
4. Provide a staff development resource in the form of a set of web-based case studies of exemplar assessment designs, expandable by faculty request to OCSLD

(Action: OCSLD, available beginning July 2013 at <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/assesscompact/>)

5. Faculties continue to conduct periodic Compact awareness-raising activities for students using the ASKe 1,2,3 leaflet
6. Faculties to promote a programme focus to Compact implementation, i.e. beyond consideration of individual modules

## Background: review of previous findings

This is the third and final Assessment Compact evaluation report. In June 2011 we submitted an *Assessment Compact Survey – Early Messages Report* to AESC. This was followed by an interim report to AESC in February 2012. The interim report was substantive, reporting the results of the second annual survey of students' awareness of the Assessment Compact and the results of eight module evaluations.

The interim report found:

- while staff awareness of the Assessment Compact was quite high there was a generally low level of awareness of the Assessment Compact by students; student awareness was noted as increasing significantly with each year spent at Brookes
- a general appreciation of the Compact by students aware of it
- evidence, particularly from module evaluations and open comments on the annual survey, of changes to assessment practice stemming from the Compact
- exemplary practice in implementing aspects of the Compact in the eight modules evaluated
- very high levels of satisfaction with assessment and feedback by students in these modules
- student performance can improve by shifting the balance of assessment from summative to formative tasks; there was evidence of direct impact on student performance from frequent and timely feedback, active engagement in assessment (as assessors, peer and self), marking and feedback activities with exemplar pieces of work, and most especially from drafting/redrafting with feed forward at the drafting stage
- providing good feedback to students is challenging, especially in large teaching teams
- students have mixed views about the value of self and peer assessment; managing student expectations of feedback and peer review demands developing students' assessment literacy
- there is value in taking a programme approach to assessment design, because it can take time and multiple experiences for students to appreciate the value of active engagement in assessment, especially as assessors (self or peer)

We refer the reader to the interim report for a list of all its recommendations. The main ones were:

- Faculties to conduct a Compact awareness campaign for students at the start of the next academic year (i.e. Sept 2012) using the ASKe 1,2,3 leaflet and poster.
- Faculties to ensure a programme focus to Compact implementation, i.e. beyond consideration of individual modules.
- Faculties to ensure that programmes *offer opportunities for dialogue* between staff and students about the Compact, e.g. discussing the Compact in early classes in core modules and subsequently when assessments are introduced and/or reviewed. These discussions should include opportunities to 'unpack' the language of the Compact, link module assessments with Compact clauses and emphasise the student responsibilities in the assessment process.
- OCSLD/ASKe to revise the annual Assessment Compact survey to monitor changes in assessment practices as the Compact becomes embedded
- OCSLD/ASKe to develop and publish case studies, exemplars and staff ideas of how to implement Compact-related assessment practices with large classes.
- APQO to ensure all validation/revalidation panels interrogate how the tenets of the compact are enacted.
- OCSLD/ASKe to gather improved evidence of Compact implementation through analysis of annual programme reviews and audits of programme and module handbooks to check the Compact is included.

We reiterated in conclusion that the real impact of the Compact, where its messages have become unrecognisably interwoven with practice, would be a long-term process. Monitoring progress towards this would require a variety of measures and be only indirectly evidenced by

such indicators as changed practice at the modular and programme level, and increased student satisfaction in the national student survey.

We turn now to a discussion of the approach to and results of the final phase of evaluating the Assessment Compact implementation.

## The final evaluation phase

The first recommendation above was completed, with the publication of the leaflet, 'Assessment: Your entitlements and obligations - the Compact digested'. 5000 of these were printed and Faculty ADSEs took the lead in distribution within their areas. Further print copies are available on request from Nicola Ranjit in the Pedagogic Research Centre and it is also available as a pdf RADAR resource, a link to which is on the web together with the Compact itself at

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/BrookesACompact/>.

Following on from the recommendations above and feedback from discussion at AESC in June 2012 we decided to focus on two main things: gathering and analyzing other available data about assessment and feedback processes and developing approaches to 'keeping the Compact alive' as a factor for influencing and developing practice. We tackled the former by analyzing annual programme reviews from 2010-11 and 2011-12. We discuss this next. Following that we discuss the latter element, which primarily concerns the recommendations above about designing a new annual survey, developing formal course renewal processes, and providing staff development opportunities. We have tackled this through engaging with APQO and the NESE development project. We conclude this discussion with a series of recommendations.

## What do annual programme reviews tell us about changes to assessment practices?

### Method

We gathered the annual programme reviews for the years 2010-11 and 2011-12, extracted from them any commentaries about assessment in the programmes reported on, and read and analysed these commentaries. In total this involved 71 annual reviews for 2010-11 and 137 of them for 2011-12 (some of these reporting on multiple programmes). The complete tables of analysed data are available for reference on request from Greg Benfield or Margaret Price.

Some methodological issues to note:

- The review template for 2010/11 asked for a focus on the Assessment Compact in section 1b Implementation of university initiatives, while the 2011/12 annual review template did not. However the 2011-12 template did ask for commentary on the implementation of the Assessment Compact in section 3a Student satisfaction. No other sections of annual review form sought evidence of development related to the Compact. The differences in the forms between the two years means direct comparison is not possible.
- Many reviews did not address the Assessment Compact at all, despite prompts by the template to do so.
- Some annual review documents covered multiple programmes, sometimes with a range of subjects and different programme management/teams. This made quantitative analysis and direct comparison between reviews difficult.
- A significantly larger number of 2011/12 reviews were provided by faculties for analysis than for 2010/11. The different number of reviews available each year is likely to affect the overall picture.
- In coding the content of the annual reviews interpretation has been biased in favour of the Compact implementation where there was ambiguity of meaning.
- The enormous variety in how programmes responded to the Compact items means there that it is very hard to generalise from them. Because of this inherent unreliability in self-reported data we conclude that future monitoring of changes in practice requires a more reliable method.

## Findings

Once again we warn the reader to be careful about interpreting the following comments. They are conclusions that we drew from inconsistent and unreliable information. For example, we know of one programme whose annual reviews said next-to-nothing about how they had implemented the Assessment Compact, although we know that it has extensively adopted many Compact practices, from marking exercises and student-generated assessment criteria to self- and peer-assessment. Thus, one cannot infer that nothing has been done to implement the Compact from lack of mention or brevity about it in the annual review. We are inclined to think therefore that the annual reviews may well under-state the level of activity around implementation. On the other hand, it is also possible that some reports of what has been done to implement the Assessment Compact are a little exaggerated.

On our reading of the annual reviews we found:

- Many (more than 50%<sup>1</sup>) programme reviews failed to address the Compact explicitly or provide any evidence of enhancement initiatives related to its tenets and clauses elsewhere within their reviews. As noted above, this might not mean lack of action by these programmes.
- Where the Compact was explicitly addressed in the report, full implementation was sometimes claimed (about 11%), usually citing inclusion of the Compact in programme/module handbooks, the introduction of an assessment schedule and/or a set assessment feedback turnaround time (not specifically required by the Compact) and/or the inclusion of a wide range of assessment methods (also not advocated unreservedly by the Compact). This suggests a limited understanding of the Compact, notably where these programmes truly believe further alignment with the Compact is not required.
- The majority of programmes seem to have begun by introducing the easy to implement, administrative, types of changes to assessment and feedback processes (e.g. some of those mentioned above), without yet getting to the heart of the ideas embodied in the Compact. Some programmes have begun to increase the amount of formative assessment and feedback, but the more difficult cultural changes requiring greater involvement of students in the assessment process, programme level planning of assessment and the development of staff and students' assessment literacy have not yet been addressed on an institution wide scale.
- Where programmes have adopted practices aligned with ideas within the compact these often appear to be focused on just a few modules which may form the core of the programme. In some cases adoption may depend on a few committed staff engaged in innovation and enhancement. Where this is the case there is a risk that such innovations are lost when the module leaders concerned move on. Overall, there is little sign yet that the Compact has had a widespread effect or has achieved the changes that were envisaged at its design and implementation stages.
- Where programmes are engaged and working towards implementation of the Compact (36%) they have usually introduced one or two initiatives such as: increasing formative assessment/feedback; introducing the ASKe initiative to increase students' understanding of assessment standards; increasing opportunity for dialogue; peer review or peer assessment; and in a couple of cases having a clear strategy to develop students' assessment literacy.
- Programmes that have full commitment to the Compact (9%, part of the 36% noted above) have adopted new practices and introduced several initiatives aligned with the tenets and clauses of the Compact; often they reported improved student satisfaction.

### Additional findings

- *Buzz words.* There is a difference in vocabulary used and the focus of reviews between 2010/11 and 2011/12 annual reports. 'Engagement' and 'Formative' feature strongly in 2011/12 reviews, whereas in 2010/11 when the Compact was in the early stages of implementation, 'NSS', 'fairness', 'staff development' and the role of 'student support coordinators' were to the fore.

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<sup>1</sup> % refers to proportion of review documents, many of which cover multiple programmes

- *Evaluation.* Very few reviews mention any evaluation of the initiatives introduced beyond effects on NSS results. This is something that OCSLD and ASKe can assist course leaders with.
- *Programme focus.* There was little evidence of a shift towards a greater focus on programme views and management of assessment.
- *Differential progress.* There was no discernible pattern to reviews from each faculty. Each faculty had some good practice and some areas of apparent non-engagement.

### PETAL projects

Subsequent to this analysis we sought evidence for the extent to which implementing the Assessment Compact remains a live issue in course improvement processes. An indicator of this could be that significant numbers of programmes are focusing on assessment improvements in their current PETAL projects. We checked this and found that this is indeed the case. In February 2013 programme leads, subject co-ordinators and heads of department responded to a PETAL survey that asked them: What theme(s) have been identified for this year, and why? Assessment and feedback were a significant focus of PETAL work in almost half (43 of the 96) of the responses to that survey. It is heartening that so many programmes are seeking continued improvements in this area; it is also evidence that a root and branch renewal of assessment and feedback along the lines of the Assessment Compact is likely to take several more years of steady course improvements.

In summary, the headline messages from our analysis of two years of programme annual reviews are consistent with and reinforce the messages from other sources of data reported on previously. These are:

- there are pockets of excellent, exemplary practice in assessment and feedback that have been prompted by alignment with the Assessment Compact;
- there is strong evidence from both student satisfaction and performance data that alignment with the Assessment Compact offers desirable outcomes;
- it will take some time yet, measured in years, before alignment with the Assessment Compact is a universal feature of Brookes programmes

In winding up this formal Assessment Compact evaluation project, we turn to the question, what should happen next?

### Keeping the Compact alive

Given the pace of change in assessment and feedback practices that we predict and the tendency to want to 'tick this off as job done' in face of pressing requirements for other curriculum developments, we see achieving the long term goals of the Assessment Compact as largely being about embedding its requirements into our regular, institutional, course enhancement practices. Therefore we propose that there be two main strands of Compact implementation drivers that should continue into the foreseeable future, practices that will keep it alive in course improvement activities:

1. Annual, reliable monitoring of changes to Compact-related changes to assessment practice, to identify areas of progress and opportunities for further improvements.
2. Keeping the Compact objectives current and in the awareness of staff and students, especially when there are formal opportunities for course enhancements, as with periodic review and validations.

The first of these items has been touched on in a variety of ways already in this report. A recommendation of the interim report was that the Assessment Compact evaluation group shelve the twice-used annual awareness survey and design an instrument for monitoring assessment and feedback practices. Some initial scoping work on this was done, but it was overtaken by events, specifically interest in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE approach of seeking information about the frequency of student practices is highly suitable for monitoring changes in assessment practices. Given that Brookes plans to implement a form of the NSSE, we have engaged with the NSSE development project group that is working on the Brookes instrument. Our involvement is to help develop an assessment and feedback scale to be included in the Brookes NSSE.

The data that such a tool provides will enable annual monitoring of assessment practices and reports to programmes/departments of the development of Assessment Compact-related activities in the student experience like frequency of self- and peer-assessment, opportunities for active engagement in marking or developing assessment criteria, and so on.

We have three proposals about helping to keep the Compact alive as an issue in course enhancement processes. The first has already been implemented. This is that the Moodle Module Guide that will be available in all modules from September 2013 contain an Assessment section that a) refers to the Assessment Compact and provides a link to it and the ASKe 1,2,3 guide for students flyer about it, and b) an assignment brief template that encourages good practice in specifying coursework. It is not a requirement for staff to use these Module guide pages, but we hope that they remind staff and students of the Compact and its aims, and encourage clarity and consistency in briefing students about assessment across programmes.

The second proposal is to follow through on earlier recommendations about embedding Assessment Compact objectives in our formal course renewal processes, like periodic review and validations. In May 2013 Greg Benfield and Margaret Price met with Elizabeth Turner, head of APQO, to explore ideas about how this can be done. An outcome of this meeting was that OCSLD and ASKe would produce a series of guide reflective questions to support Programme Development Teams and validation/periodic review panels with curriculum enhancement objectives. We agreed that the objectives of the Assessment Compact would be included as one such set of guides, along with guides on developing graduate attributes. We hope that this will alert PDTs and validation panels to the need to develop a strong narrative about progress towards and further work to implement the Compact.

Finally, at the beginning of July OCSLD will launch a website of eight case studies of exemplar assessment designs based on the module evaluations previously conducted. When it goes live it will be found at <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/assesscompact/>. We hope that this resource can be built upon by faculties recommending additional modules for inclusion through their annual review process. Such recommendations can be made to the OCSLD link developer in the first instance. These case studies will serve as staff development resources for course teams, either independently or in OCSLD/ASKe-facilitated workshops.

In the next section the preceding discussion is distilled into a series of recommendations.

## Recommendations

The preceding discussion has implied a series of specific recommendations that we list here:

1. Include an assessment and feedback scale in the Brookes NSSE to monitor progress towards Assessment Compact implementation  
(Action: OCSLD/ASKe)
2. Provide a coursework assignment brief template in the Moodle module guide to support good practice and refer explicitly to the Assessment Compact as an active policy framework  
(Action: Moodle project board, Done)
3. Provide a set of Assessment Compact guide reflective questions to PDTs and validation panels to support curriculum enhancement in periodic review/validation  
(Action: OCSLD/ASKe/APQO)
4. Provide a staff development resource in the form of a set of web-based case studies of exemplar assessment designs, expandable by faculty request to OCSLD  
(Action: OCSLD, available beginning of July 2013 at <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/assesscompact/>)
5. Faculties continue to conduct periodic Compact awareness-raising activities for students, possibly at the start of each academic year, using the ASKe 1,2,3 leaflet
6. Faculties to promote a programme focus to Compact implementation, i.e. beyond consideration of individual modules