Inspera on-Campus - Oxford - Key Takeaways

Version 1.0

Transforming to Digital

Moderator: Dr Dee Scadden, University of Cambridge

What are the main challenges when introducing a new digital platform to academic staff?

- **Change fatigue**. In recent years, and certainly due to the pandemic, many academics have had to change their ways of working and embrace new digital technologies. This has often been a 'transfer' of work from analogue to digital rather than a full 'transformation' of the underlying processes. Academics want a period of stability so that they can get a return on the time invested for more recent business change initiatives they have been forced to embark on.
- **Not articulating the benefits of digital**. It was acknowledged by the group that HE professionals may not always be eager to or good at promoting the benefits of new digital platforms. This means there can be a lack of excitement or confidence that a new platform will be able to improve their delivery of research, teaching or assessment.
- **Confidence of direction**. Some academic staff may feel resistant to a new digital platform if they are not confident that either (i) it will meet their requirements or (ii) the platform will be used enough, or long enough, for them to get a return on the time invested to learn how to use it effectively.
- **Lack of or inappropriate support**. Digital transformation projects need to be aided by appropriate levels of training and technical support for academic staff members. It is important to recognise that different individuals will have significantly different support requirements in relation to digital tools.
- **Access to academics.** The group explained that central learning technologists who may be responsible for embedding the use of the platform may find it difficult to gain access to the academics who will be instrumental in the transformation.

How might the resistance barrier be lowered, and how can engagement be increased?

- **Clear sponsorship and direction.** Dee understood how Inspera could best support Cambridge School of Biological Sciences assessment. As a senior leader and academic, Dee was able to help others to see the benefits. It was acknowledged that the project benefited from an academic sponsor, who was able to influence her peers through use of the platform.

- **Focus on the right benefits**. Many academics will be wary of a digital transformation project that does not help their teaching or assessment processes. By explaining how the platform can help them (e.g. by saving them marking time, by allowing them to design better or more authentic assessments) you can achieve greater academic buy-in.
- **Make it easy.** Focus on the exams that lend themselves well to digital transformation, and show academics how it will benefit them and their students. Create examples of how their assessments will look, and short training videos. Dee has created a suite of resources in the Cambridge VLE for different staff groups, as well as students. These resources embed Inspera within the Cambridge context, and provide easy access to exactly what is needed for different contexts.
- **Focus on the impact on students.** The focus for one university in the implementation of digital assessment was to improve attainment gaps and module feedback. Academics are generally ready to engage with these crucial aspects.

How do you reach the stage where use of the new digital platform is 'business as usual'?

- **Showcase results and celebrate milestones**. Celebrating the successful adoption of a new platform can help build momentum and win over the hearts and minds of academic staff.
- **Normalise the platform**. Showcase the platform in a real world setting as often as possible. Utilise user champions from the academic community (as opposed to external specialists) as a way to help this normalisation. Even simple tactics such as demonstrating the platform live rather than using slides or documents to articulate the benefits or workflows can help to reduce anxiety amongst academic staff.

Using assessments to improve the student experience

Moderator: Dr Mark Roberts, University of Oxford

Does assessment need a grade?

- **Summative assessments have a stronger need for a grade**, as a method of comparing attainment/skill levels between students and between cohorts. Grades allow for longitudinal comparisons over time.
- **Student perception** of grades can have a damaging effect on performance and learning outcomes. For example, motivation and engagement levels for students can drop if they either (a) achieve a high grade relatively easily or (b) receive a low grade despite significant effort.
- **The quality of feedback impacts on the relative need for a grade**, particularly for formative assessments. If the feedback is rich enough that the student can understand their relative performance and attainment of a learning outcome, then it may not be necessary for a grade to signpost their performance.
- Often, academics and examiners use a relatively small proportion of the full marking/grading scale. It is also difficult for students to recognise the difference between small increments within a marking scale (e.g. 66% or 67%). **Stepped marking** can help examiners make a judgment about the relative quality of a student's response. This can help students to better understand and recognise the reasoning behind the grades they receive.

What is the right balance between feedback and scale?

- **Written feedback** can take a long time to compile, which can make it difficult to provide high quality feedback for large scale cohorts or modules.
- The use of **feedback rubrics** to provide personalised feedback from a bank, can help save time for written feedback.
- **Audio feedback** is a relatively new method of providing feedback. Many academics have reported that recording audio feedback is a quicker method of providing large scale student feedback to an assessment.
- **The purpose of the assessment can dictate the amount of feedback required**. For example, if an assessment is formative, it is likely to require a substantial amount of feedback in order to help the student focus their learning. If an assessment is purely summative, or for other purposes such as admissions, it may not require rich feedback.
- **Peer feedback.** Peer feedback can be useful at certain stages of a formative assessment, but it must be supported by explicit and clear development of assessment literacy in students so that they are able to provide meaningful feedback and to respond to the feedback they receive.

Student stress - what assessment is better?

- **Traditional in-person timed assessments** (e.g. exams) are generally seen as anxiety inducing for students. This is due to:

- The high-stakes nature of the assessment, with many traditional in person exams accounting for all or most of the credit bearing work for a module
- The limited amount of time, meaning that the students have to rely on recalling knowledge

- **Assessment bunching** can have a negative impact on student stress, specifically when there are many submission deadlines or time assessment events crammed into the same time periods.
- **The familiarity of the assessment format** can have a significant impact on student anxiety levels. For example, many students are familiar with the format of traditional in-person timed exams. This can lead to inertia, as students are not comfortable with trialing new assessment formats which may ease anxiety once they're familiar with it.
- **Preparation and subject proficiency (confidence)** impact on assessment anxiety. If a student takes an assessment that they are not ready for, or that is above their skill level, it increases anxiety.
- Assessment anxiety is not always a negative. Many professions and subjects require individuals to **deliver knowledge and information under pressure**, therefore an exam can be seen as an authentic assessment of these situations. This being said, institutions are rightly focused on student wellbeing and accessibility of learning. Adding unnecessary anxiety and stress due to ill thought through assessment practices is not aligned to a positive student experience.