St Mary's University Assessment Policy

September 2016

1 Introduction

The Assessment Policy sets out University's principles for systematically managing the processes and procedures for the assessment and feedback of students' work. The Policy applies to all taught programmes at Levels 4 to 7, including those taught through collaborative arrangements.

The importance of assessment to the student learning experience is well established across the Higher Education (HE) sector. Students regard assessment as important and as such assessment is commonly considered to be a key driver of the curriculum. St Mary's recognises that high quality assessment practices are an essential element of the student experience and that the outcomes of assessment can influence the student experience, opportunity and success. Student assessment takes several forms, principally diagnostic, formative and summative modes of assessment.

The purpose of assessment is to enable students to develop and demonstrate their potential. In order to achieve this assessment should:

- motivate and challenge the learner;
- stimulate learning and provide feedback;
- test achievement and accredit learning objectively against intended learning outcomes;
- provide a mechanism for ensuring quality assurance;
- provide a consistent and reliable mechanism for the recommendation of an award;
- assist staff in evaluating the effectiveness of their teaching.

The role of assessment is complex and interdependent, and it is important to note that the differing purposes are often at odds with each other. This can create a tension, in particular between assessment as a vehicle of measurement *and* to promote learning. This tension may be difficult to resolve easily and balancing the importance of the differing elements provides an ongoing challenge for academics in assessment design. The necessary focus on assessment as a measurement tool by students, academic staff and programmes (through module results and overall degree attainment achieved) places a high level of importance on the marks achieved by students.

The fundamental challenge placed on academic staff in designing an assessment strategy therefore appears to be ensuring that the focus on student learning and satisfaction can be maintained in light of the need to provide a means of measuring student achievement.

2 Internal Context

St Mary's has a strong reputation for providing high quality learning opportunities within a supportive environment. The institutional vision for teaching and learning is to provide a distinctive and high quality academic experience for students in an inclusive, student-focused learning community that allows students to fulfil their academic and career potential, and which is highly regarded across the sector for its excellence in teaching and learning.

St Mary's has undergone significant changes in the last five years with a curriculum restructure which involved a change from 15 to 20 credit modules at undergraduate level. This provided a particular opportunity for staff to review and refresh their programme/module aims and objectives, and to consider fully their assessment strategy in relation to this.

The revalidation process has also been updated, which has provided impetus for students to be involved in the design of the updated programme at an early phase, providing an opportunity to place students at the heart of curriculum development in a more systematic manner across the institution.

However, St Mary's results in the 2015 National Student Survey (NSS) indicate that assessment and feedback is still is a key area for improvement, as the institutional score for this area decreased from the 2014 results and also fell below the sector average. As a result, assessment and feedback has been deemed an area for enhancement in 2015/16 and will continue to be a key area for development going forward.

In response to the 2015 NSS results, the Learning and Teaching Directorate, in consultation with the Academic Directors responsible for Teaching and Learning within the Schools, led a review of the undergraduate Annual Programme Statements and the NSS Programme Action Plans to develop a register of good pedagogical practice in the area of assessment and feedback which serves to:

- highlight pedagogical practice that might usefully be adopted and contextually adapted within and between Schools;
- signal targeted actions to further develop learning and teaching specifically in relation to assessment and feedback.

The implementation of this Assessment Policy by academic staff will assist in enhancing the student learning experience in relation to both assessment and feedback.

3   External Context

The nature and role of assessment and assessment feedback has come under increasing scrutiny over recent years, mainly due to the lower grades achieved across the sector in the sections relating to assessment and feedback as part of the NSS. Key areas of concern nationally include the timeliness of student feedback and the role of feedback in clarifying things students did not understand.

The role of assessment in student satisfaction and in the overall achievement of students in the ever changing HE environment will continue to come under increasing scrutiny, particularly with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The 2016 Government White Paper on HE refers to student satisfaction (using the teaching on course, assessment and feedback and academic support scales from the NSS) as one of the core metrics for the second year of the TEF.

4   Relationship to Internal and External Frameworks

This Assessment Policy provides information on the ways in which St Mary's undertakes to assess its students, and the principles which underpin these. The Policy also provides an outline of the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the assessment of students.

Some areas of assessment practice, such as the extenuating circumstances system, are managed through the Academic Regulations. The Academic Regulations are updated annually and are made available to all staff via StaffNet. The Academic Regulations also form the basis of relevant information in programme handbooks and module guides for students.

The Academic Regulations relating to assessment are primarily concerned with maintaining academic standards and ensuring fairness, consistency and transparency through the

assessment process, with the outcomes of assessment leading to the award of degrees and other qualifications. The Assessment Regulations within the Academic Regulations should be read in conjunction with this Policy.

The design of curricula and assessment at St Mary's is in line with a number of external reference points. These include:

- QAA Quality Code, in particular Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning (QAA, 2013);
- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) (QAA, 2008);
- QAA Subject Benchmark statements;
- Relevant Professional and Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB) accreditation guidelines;
- Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC, 2010) credit level descriptors.

In order to assure and enhance the quality of the standards of programmes and modules, a range of monitoring processes take place across the University, using both internal and external review. These include the following:

- Review of annual Programme Review reports by the School and University Teaching and Learning Quality and Enhancement Committees;
- Consideration of institutional statistics and survey data by relevant University committees;
- Updating of relevant strategies, action plans and policies, which are approved and/or monitored by the University Teaching and Learning Quality and Enhancement Committee (and possibly Academic Board);
- Regular scrutiny of programmes by external examiners;
- Involvement of external reviewers (and PSRBs and/or employers as appropriate) in the validation and revalidation of new and existing programmes;
- QAA Higher Education Review;
- Review by other regulatory bodies such as Ofsted.

The Assessment Policy is one of the documents related to the core processes for teaching and learning quality and enhancement at St Mary's, and therefore informs the internal monitoring and review mechanisms outlined above.

5 Changes to Assessment Policy since 2012

Consultation about possible changes to the 2012 Assessment Policy has taken place primarily through the Assessment Policy Review Working Group. The Working Group was convened in December 2015 and has included representatives from all four Schools, the Students' Union, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Office (now the Quality and Standards Office) and the Learning and Teaching Directorate. School representatives on the Working Group were asked to obtain feedback from across their Schools so that as many views as possible were taken into account.

As a result of the feedback received, the principles and process outlined in Section 6 are primarily unchanged from the 2012 version of the Assessment Policy. The most significant changes are the updating of the narrative on the implementation of Principle 11, which reflects changes in staff development since 2012, plus the addition of Principle 12 in response to changes to the QAA UK Quality Code Chapter B6 since the last version of the Policy was published.

6 Principles of Assessment

The University believes that assessment should:

- promote student learning;
- be fair and equitable;
- be transparent;
- be reliable and valid;
- be evidence-informed;
- be accessible;
- be sustainable.

The University believes that assessment processes should:

- maintain standards;
- provide timely and effective feedback on learning;
- report performance against the intended learning outcomes;
- be evaluated on a regular basis (with feedback from staff, students and others);
- demonstrate progression;
- develop student self-regulation in learning;
- recognise the value of technology to enhance the assessment process, where appropriate.

Principle 1: Assessment practice should promote effective learning.

Implementation of Principle 1:

- The design of assessment should not be separated from the design of the overall curriculum. Learning and teaching methods and assessment should be fully integrated to promote student learning;
- Assessment should be designed to build upon and consolidate knowledge, understanding and skills;
- Assessment should provide an appropriate and varied range of both formative and summative methods across different subject areas which enables students to demonstrate how they meet the intended learning outcomes of the module or programme;
- Students should be provided with timely, constructive and formative feedback (from staff or peers) which allows students to improve performance in the next assessment, including feedback on oral assessments;
- Students should experience a variety of assessment methods to accommodate different learning and communication preferences;
- In some areas which are required to fulfil requirements of PSRBs, assessments are designed to assure the practitioner's fitness to practise and to safeguard the public.

Aspects which support student learning may include:

- Extended assignments that involve students researching a topic and producing work based on their research;
- Peer assessed activities during formal teaching sessions or practical sessions where students can undertake peer review or marking activities, to enhance their understanding of an assessment task and how to improve their own performance;

- The use of reflective accounts on student performance provided by the student themselves or informed by feedback from others;
- The involvement of students in the evaluation of assessment practices;
- The use of assessment outcomes in a positive manner to provide advice on improving the performance of a student.

Principle 2: Appropriate and timely feedback should be provided to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment.

Implementation of Principle 2:

- Feedback should be sufficient, constructive and timely in respect of all types of assessment;
- Feedback should be provided at a time when students are able to make most use of it, preferably during a module in response to a formative assessment task, rather than at the end of the module – in order to promote this, academic staff may like to consider fully the resources committed to feedback to ensure that an emphasis is placed on formative modes;
- All feedback should be provided to students as soon as possible, and normally within three working weeks after submission of a summative piece of work;
- It is strongly recommended that staff provide an element of electronic feedback to all students to ensure that students have an opportunity to receive summative feedback in a timely manner;
- Staff must ensure that marks, even if the marks are provisional and have yet to be ratified, are provided to students alongside the electronic feedback;
- In order to manage resources effectively, use of a hierarchy of feedback may be appropriate – with students requesting more detailed one-to-one follow-up on an individual basis;
- Student learning may be facilitated by opportunities for self and peer assessment during the assessment process;

In managing student expectation of feedback on their progression and attainment, staff are expected to:

- Publish details regarding the timing, nature and extent of feedback that students can expect in programme and module handbooks (including electronic handbooks);
- Relate feedback to intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria, in order to help students identify areas for improvement as well as commending them for achievement;
- Implement oral feedback, either on a group or individual basis, as a means of supplementing or replacing other forms of feedback;
- Provide guidance about the point in the module or programme where it is no longer appropriate for a member of staff to continue providing feedback on student work.

Principle 3: The amount and timing of assessment enables effective and appropriate measurement of students' achievement of intended learning outcomes.

Implementation of Principle 3:

- Staff are expected to link the organisation and delivery of the curriculum, including formal teaching, to opportunities for students to demonstrate the extent of their achievement of the intended learning outcomes through appropriately scheduled assessment;
- Excessive amounts of summative assessment should be avoided. No more than two summative assessments are expected for each 20 credit module;
- With the exception of work placement modules, attendance should not be a component of any assessment which contributes to the overall module mark;
- Staff should promote and support student learning through appropriately timed formative assessment;
- Staff should ensure that the assessment burden for students and staff is manageable, while ensuring that students have sufficient opportunity to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes;
- In addition to the publication of the nature and timing of programme and module assessments, care should be taken to ensure that the assessment schedule is fully available for students on joint honours programmes;
- The assessment burden for students taking single and joint honours programmes should be comparable and consistent;
- The overall time taken between completion of an assessment by a student and the date at which the results are required, either by the student or the institution should be kept under review to ensure that those involved in marking student work have enough time to complete it satisfactorily.

Principle 4: Students are expected to adopt good academic conduct in respect of assessment and seek to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities.

Implementation of Principle 4:

- Students must receive information at institutional, programme and module level about the consequences of academic misconduct;
- Procedures regarding academic conduct must be applied consistently across Schools in line with the Academic Regulations (Section G Part 30);
- Assessments should be designed in order to reduce opportunity for academic misconduct by students;
- In order to promote the equitable management of student submissions of written coursework, all such coursework must be submitted online via Turnitin in order to provide scrutiny by staff – staff training for Turnitin is ongoing to enhance consistency in applying this method.

Principle 5: The mechanisms for marking and moderating marks are fair and transparent.

Implementation of Principle 5:

- Assessment criteria must be clearly publicised to ensure that marking is carried out fairly and consistently across all subjects – this relates equally to students submitting work as well as staff involved in the marking process;
- For written summative assessment, students would normally be expected to adhere to a word count not exceeding 10% of the specified word limit. A penalty may be imposed for exceeding the specified word count set out for each programme. Details of such penalties must be clearly publicised in programme handbooks and module guides;

- It is expected that the mechanisms relating to indicators and explanations of external scrutiny and moderation of marking are also publicised;
- Internal moderation processes must be applied and evidenced appropriately (see Appendix C (Marking and Moderation Practices) of the Assessment Policy and Section G (Assessment Regulations) of the Academic Regulations).

Principle 6: Assessment is conducted with rigour, probity and fairness and with due regard for security.

Implementation of Principle 6:

Clear policies and regulations are provided in covering all aspects of the conduct of assessment as part of the Academic Regulations (see Section G) which include the following:

- Extenuating circumstances;
- The accommodation of students who need additional assessment arrangements (for instance, those with dyslexia or disability);
- Guidance for invigilators;
- Penalties for late submission of assessed work;
- The management of assessment results arising from different learning situations such as, for example, study abroad and accredited prior learning;
- How, and for how long it is necessary, to retain assessed work.

Principle 7: Assessment decisions are recorded and documented accurately and systematically and that the decisions of relevant assessment panels and examination boards are communicated as quickly as possible.

Implementation of Principle 7:

- It is expected that students are provided with information about who will provide them with results and how and when this will occur;
- Students should know who to contact if they need clarification of their results;
- When disclosing assessment results to students, staff must ensure that clear guidance is provided about whether the result is final, or whether it is subject to confirmation by an assessment panel or examination board whose decision may include input from an external examiner;
- Where provisional results are provided for students, it is important that they are not in any doubt about the standing of the results and, if they are not final, how and when they will be ratified;
- If the MyModules grade aggregation tool is used in individual modules, students must be made fully aware of the standing of the results, particularly when the results on MyModules are not in line with the overall module results;
- Overall it is important that all individuals concerned in the assessment process, especially the student, are aware of the different stages of the process and that results may be provisional if released before formal approval by the relevant committee.

Principle 8: Clear information must be provided to staff and students about specific assessment outcomes or other criteria that must be met to fulfil the requirements of PSRBs.

Implementation of Principle 8:

All applicants and students must receive, as soon as possible, information about how PSRB accreditation affects any module or programmes for which they are applying or are registered.

This should comprise the exact terms on which the accreditation is based including:

- Where appropriate, the modules that must be passed, and at what levels, to meet the requirements of the relevant PSRB;
- Whether the institution is in the process of seeking accreditation from a PSRB;
- Details regarding the status for overseas applicants as soon as possible;
- Where appropriate, applicants and students may find it helpful to be made aware of relevant contacts in PSRBs whom they can approach for further information;
- Expectations after graduating from an accredited programme.

Principle 9: Clear rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award are publicised and implemented.

Implementation of Principle 9:

- The results required to pass each stage and to progress to the next stage of a programme need to be clearly stated and explained to students at the beginning of the programme;
- It is important to make clear the effect that passing or failing an individual module will have on the student's eligibility to take other modules, as well as the overall implications for progression and completion;
- The procedures for combining individual marks and/or grades to come to a final programme mark and rules for progression are available for students, staff and examiners (see Academic Regulations Section G).

Principle 10: The policies for the membership, procedures, powers and accountability of assessment panels and boards of examiners are clear and consistent, and publicised and implemented effectively.

Implementation of Principle 10:

Guidance relating to this Principle is provided in the Academic Regulations (see Section G Parts 9 and 10).

Principle 11: All individuals involved in the assessment of students must be competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.

Implementation of Principle 11:

- All new staff at St Mary's involved in the assessment of students will be required to attend an Academic Induction event and a follow-up session on assessment, which covers key aspects of the Assessment Policy;

- All staff new to teaching, in addition to Academic Induction, are expected to attend a 'New to Teaching and Learning in HE' course delivered by the Learning and Teaching Directorate;
- All new academic staff without a HE teaching qualification will be required to complete one of two Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited pathways at St Mary's:
    - PGCert Academic Practice (Higher Education) programme which also to Fellowship of the HEA upon completion;
    - The Accredited Individual Route (AIR), in which staff can achieve Associate Fellowship, Fellowship or Senior Fellowship of the HEA depending on their experience and level of responsibility.

  The PGCert and the AIR are mapped to the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning, which includes assessing and providing feedback to students as one of its five Areas of Activity.

- Professional development opportunities will also be offered to staff, including those in collaborative partner institutions, through the St Mary's Teaching and Learning Development Framework. The types of sessions offered include the following:
    - Optimising the effectiveness of staff time spent on assessing students' work;
    - Assessment design;
    - Requirements and purposes of formative and summative assessment;
    - Assessment feedback;
    - Minimising plagiarism and other forms of unfair practice;
    - Cultural differences and the ways in which these may affect student perceptions of assessment and their ability to perform assessment tasks successfully.

Principle 12: The University systematically evaluates and enhances its Assessment Policy, Academic Regulations, and other associated regulations, policies and processes.

Implementation of Principle 12:

- The Assessment Policy and its associated appendices will be reviewed formally by the University every four years, but will monitored regularly by the Learning and Teaching Directorate in the interim, with enhancements proposed as and when necessary between the formal review;
- The Academic Regulations will be updated annually;
- Other associated policies, such as the Research-Enriched Teaching and Learning Policy, will normally be formally reviewed every four years with regular monitoring by the responsible department or officer in the interim.

- Information which may be used to evaluate and enhance the Assessment Policy, Academic Regulations and other associate documents include:
    - Data on student retention, progression and attainment;
    - Data from the NSS, module evaluations and the national HEA surveys (UK Engagement Survey at undergraduate level, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey at postgraduate level);
    - Feedback from staff, employers and other stakeholders;
    - New external requirements or policy developments within the HE sector.

Document record

Document title	Assessment Policy 2016
Version	2
Person responsible	Director of Learning and Teaching
Author	Director of Learning and Teaching and the Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator
Document date	June 23rd 2016
Last amended	June 8th 2016
Effective from	September 2016
Review date including impact assessment	January 2020 (for implementation in September 2020)
History (where discussed/who circulated to/ committees considered by)	Assessment Policy Review Working Group January to April 2016 Approved TLC May 25th 2016 Approved Academic Board November 9th 2016