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EMPOWERING STUDENTS IN THE ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING: KEY STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

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Abstract

There is a growing trend internationally to support students in their readiness for employment and life beyond academia. This movement has led to both a growth in work placements and the development of on-campus project-/problem-based learning opportunities, i.e., work-integrated learning (WIL). Empowering students with respect to how they are individually assessed across different WIL contexts can support a more valid and meaningful assessment process.

This nationally-funded study set out to explore the consistency and authenticity of assessment in WIL. It used a participatory action research approach to develop meaningful actions for the participants. The researcher facilitated inter-stakeholder dialogue through nine solution-focused workshops. 120 students, practitioners and higher education staff participated from nine discipline groups across eight higher education institutions in Ireland. The study also explored, through semi-structured interviews, the views of seven international expert authors in this field.

Using a thematic analysis approach, key themes were identified. This paper focuses on the theme of '*student empowerment in assessment*'. The analysis initially identified some key challenges, such as student readiness for empowerment. Despite the identified challenges, there was strong support for the concept of student empowerment and suggested solutions to the challenges included supporting students to judge their own performance, student choice in assessment and feedback methods, supporting readiness for empowerment, developing flexible and more holistic criteria, and the professional development of staff. The paper concludes with recommendations for practice and policy.

Keywords: empowerment, assessment, feedback, work-integrated learning, solutions.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is a growing trend internationally to support students in their readiness for employment and life beyond academia [1, 2, 3]. Ireland is no exception to this trend. A recent national policy emphasised that all students should have the opportunity to undertake a work placement or work-based project as part of their course and that employability statements be introduced for all disciplines in all higher education institutions [4]. This movement has led globally to both a) a growing number of programmes with work placements and b) the development of on-campus project-/problem-based work that supports the integration of employment and life skills. The combination of these on- and off-campus contexts are often described as 'work-integrated learning (WIL)' opportunities [5].

One challenge with WIL opportunities is that traditional forms of assessment do not often align well with the diversity of placement contexts, the complexity and range of tasks required and the unique skills and knowledge of each student [6]. In addition, there are multiple stakeholders in assessment in WIL contexts, such as the higher education staff, the practitioners in practice and the students. It may be that empowering students with a level of control over how they are individually assessed and engage in feedback across different contexts is one solution to supporting a more valid and meaningful assessment process.

The empowerment of a person or group of people has been defined as '*the process of giving them power and status in a particular situation*' [7]. Empowering students in the context of their curriculum is a growing trend in higher education. It aligns with concepts such as active learning and students-as-partners [8]. This trend also encompasses the idea of student empowerment in their assessment; it supports students having a stronger voice and more involvement in the design of, and decisions relevant to, their assessment. Francis described such empowerment as both 1) the ability of individuals to make personal decisions relating to how they are assessed and 2) the ability of the student community to democratically make decisions relating to how it will be assessed [9]. Leach et al elaborates on how empowerment can encourage '*learners to take direct action, both as individuals and in groups, to assess*

their own work, to critique the assessment regime and that of the academic world, and to negotiate practices different from those that are proposed' [10].

Empowerment in assessment has also been linked with the idea of inclusive assessment as it can support diverse non-traditional students and advocates practices such as flexibility in assessment, variety and choice of assessment, early and timely feedback, and giving students a stronger voice [11, 12, 13]. Empowerment makes sense as it puts students at the centre of their experience. Although international and national policies are supporting this approach, questions remain at the level of practice. As part of a wider study on the assessment of WIL, this paper aims to explore some of the challenges and solutions to the empowerment of students in the assessment of work-integrated learning (WIL).

Assessment, in the context of this paper, includes the wider concept of student feedback and student self-monitoring/regulating, i.e., assessment of, for and as learning [13].

2 METHODOLOGY

This nationally-funded study [14] aimed to explore key stakeholders' views on solutions to the challenges of a broader question of WIL assessment consistency and authenticity. A participatory action research approach was employed as it relies on inter-stakeholder dialogue to assist in developing meaningful actions for the participants [15].

The researcher facilitated this inter-stakeholder dialogue through nine solution-focused workshops with nine diverse discipline groups across eight higher education institutions in Ireland [16]. The nine disciplines were: Hospitality, Occupational Therapy, Diagnostic Imaging, Civil Engineering, Teaching (Physical Education), Veterinary Nursing, Physiotherapy, Survey & Construction Management and Business Information Systems. Key stakeholders from the discipline were represented in each workshop by a) higher education (HE) staff, b) the practitioner in practice and c) students. Two discipline groups had on-campus WIL experiences (project- or problem-based learning) and seven had off-campus work placement type experiences. In each disciplinary workshop, the group in question identified their own challenges and solutions with respect to the assessment of WIL. In all, 120 students, practitioners (including employers) and higher education staff took part across the nine workshops. The solution-focused workshops identified 27 key challenges, 308 solutions and 129 actions [16]. To allow for interaction between the participants' practical experiences and conceptualisations in the literature, the study also explored, through semi-structured interviews, the views of seven international expert authors in this field. The interviews resulted in 374 codes of data. Ethical approval was obtained to carry out the study [16].

Using an established thematic analysis approach, six key themes were identified across the full dataset [16]. This paper focuses on the theme of '*student empowerment in assessment and feedback*'.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis initially identified some key challenges that were agreed by stakeholders in the workshops and also mentioned by the expert authors. '*Student and staff readiness*' for empowering students was a key challenge mentioned across many of the disciplines and echoed in contributions from expert authors. One author suggested, for example, that not all '*students have the confidence to take the initiative*' (expert author 2). Many discipline groups also emphasised the lack of student and practitioner training in this area to support readiness for action. Some level of control in the area of feedback was a recurring challenge, with students mentioning that feedback was often lacking or too late for action. In addition, a lack of specificity around feedback was highlighted. For example, the higher education staff in Diagnostic Imaging emphasised the challenge of '*ensuring student feedback is meaningful*' (HE Staff, Diagnostic Imaging).

Many of the WIL had associated sets of defined competencies, often set out by higher education staff to ensure that there was clarity and some consistency in student outcomes in either the on- or off-campus learning experiences. The challenge with this, mentioned by many, was that the opportunities to achieve some of these outcomes varied greatly across different contexts, allowing little room for student empowerment. This was articulated by the Occupational Therapy group, who outlined how, on occasion, they had to create artificial tasks to tick a competency on the fixed assessment form. Lack of flexibility, therefore, was a challenge for creating new, or removing irrelevant, competencies that the student had to achieve.

Despite these and other challenges, the participants strongly supported the importance of empowering students in the assessment and feedback process. The solutions that were agreed by the stakeholders could be broadly divided into those specific to the individual student (See Table 1) and those that related more broadly to practice and policies that impact on the student cohort (See Table 2). This aligns to some extent with Francis's [9] interpretation of the concept of empowerment.

3.1 Solutions for Empowering Individual Students

One solution to the empowerment challenge was having students judge their own performance, often described as assessment 'as' learning [13], evaluative judgement' [17] or engaging students in an active portrayal of their achievements [18]. Students, it was suggested, can be empowered by having them '*continually monitor their performance in relation to the competency form*' (Occupational Therapy), in contrast to the traditional practice of assessing that is done by either higher education staff or practitioners. To achieve this, the stakeholders, in particular the students, highlighted a need to foster dialogue around a shared understanding of assessment expectations and standards. In recent years in the literature, there has been a strong argument for developing students' ability to judge their own work, an aspect of assessment that is acknowledged to be important [18, 13]. Students need to be able to judge their own work when they exit the higher education system and it is a key skill required for employment.

Having some level of choice of assessment or feedback gives a level of control to the student and supports the concept of empowerment [11, 12] This was highlighted by many of the discipline groups and expert authors as a solution to the challenge of how to empower students. The Hospitality group, for example, suggested: '*give students options of how to submit assessment - report, video, interviews or mix of these approaches*' (Hospitality). The idea of choice of method was also linked with feedback approaches, such as the use of peer or audio feedback. The Civil Engineering group suggested that a student could be more empowered and take ownership of feedback if they '*ask students to identify what issue they would like feedback on and request that*'. Further, the Physiotherapy group considered that they should ask a student to add their '*individual learning /feedback style to the placement CV or during induction at start placement*'. The expert authors emphasised the importance of '*creating opportunities for genuine dialogue*' between stakeholders and engaging students more in feedback. The use of more student agency in feedback is well documented in the recent move away from more teacher-oriented feedback approaches, for example, Nieminen et al [19], and this needs to extend to WIL contexts.

For graded assessment tasks, flexibility regarding which tasks/activity students receive feedback on was also suggested as a solution by the discipline groups and supported by the expert authors. Given the diversity of contexts and prior experiences of students, some level of choice of *what* is assessed could empower students. The increased use of tools such as ePortfolios and learning contracts were suggested to allow for some flexibility on what students present for assessment. For example, the Hospitality group suggested '*learning agreements – to be agreed in advance and to allow students' input to help direct their work placement*' and rather than a blanket use of ongoing assessment such as diaries '*students could document what they've learned, e.g., dealing with a particular challenge, rather than diarying all that happened*' (Hospitality). Learning contracts have been used by some institutions and disciplines internationally [18] to allow for flexibility in what is being assessed, but their use did not seem widespread in this study.

Finally, it was suggested that, during the WIL experience, the individual student should become more involved in the criteria used to judge their work, to become a co-creator of these rubrics and to discuss what are meaningful levels of achievement: '*the criteria for assessment should reflect individual goals, individual elements of placement, as well as the college requirements*' (Hospitality).

Table 1. Assessment & Feedback Solutions for Empowering the Individual Student

	Solution	Examples
Individual Student	Judging their own performance	Self-assessment; understanding of expectations and standards
	Choice of assessment method	Video diaries instead of reports
	Flexibility in the assessed tasks	Use of ePortfolios; learning contracts
	Choice in feedback method and task	Self-assessment, peer feedback; audio feedback
	Co-creation of tasks/criteria	Student created rubrics

Table 1 summarises some ideas from this study that stakeholders, including students, can consider to empower the individual student. However, it should be remembered that there can be associated changes to processes and procedures required to enhance the empowerment of the individual student or to further support all students in their cohort.

3.2 Solutions for the Student Cohort

The participants in the study suggested some solutions that would support the empowerment of the student cohort (Table 2). There is some overlap with the solutions suggested for the individual student but these solutions require more emphasis on design, planning and processes prior to the learning experience.

To create an environment for student empowerment, many of the discipline groups and expert authors highlighted that student cohorts need to be supported in their 'readiness for empowerment'. It does not always come easy to students. *'The importance of dialogue'* was suggested as an important step towards developing student understanding of their role in this activity (Teaching, Physical Education). Empowerment should be scaffolded as students progress in their assessed experience. One expert author gave a useful example of this: *'...to start we would like say allocate maybe 20 to 30% of the marks for the learning contract, but the learning contract becomes more complex as you go forward'*. Many discussed the developmental aspect of learning and that students on early placements/years of the programme can be less open to empowerment. This has been supported in the literature, which suggests that students in later years of the programme, or in postgraduate studies, can be more comfortable in engaging with choice of assessment [9, 12]. Mercer-Mapstone et al [8] in their work on students as partners, although in general noting very positive outcomes, did emphasise the feelings of vulnerability and increased stress/anxiety that can be associated with a more student-empowered approach. Students need to be ready for empowerment and this appears best achieved through scaffolding it into the learning experience and throughout the curriculum.

Linked with the earlier idea of students being involved in co-creating the criteria while on placement, there was a recommendation that more should be done at the assessment design phase to enable more flexible standards and criteria. Reducing the number of competencies and having more competencies that could be adjusted according to context were some related suggestions. For example, the Survey & Construction group suggested that their School should *'explore a flexible competency-based assessment which includes soft and hard skills'*. Similarly, Veterinary Nursing considered that they should *'create an assessment form that lists key skills for each rotation (placement) informed by student and supervisor feedback consensus'*. An extension to this idea of flexibility was the idea that even with any predefined competence there would be room for a wider understanding of the interpretation of what it meant in an individual context. This would support the practice of allowing each site to set specific interpretations of the tasks. The Occupational Therapy group described the value in *'some sort of flexibility in how a particular competence is interpreted, (i.e.).. that it's not group work as in this sort of group work that it might be different types of social interaction'*.

To support more student involvement in their feedback, many disciplines mentioned the need to incorporate this into all WIL designs. There was discussion on how this could be time-efficient for the practitioner or higher education staff. The Veterinary Nursing group, for example, suggested developing a *'master feedback document with suggested wording for various scenarios'* (Veterinary Nursing). Attention was given to the ideal sequence and use of feedback throughout the learning experience that could assist in the implementation of the suggested approaches. The Business Information Studies group considered, for example, *'self-assessment by student at week 6 after receiving feedback from supervisor'*.

Finally, students are not alone in needing to be supported in their readiness for empowerment. Staff, both higher education staff and in particular practitioners, were identified as a group that need to be upskilled in how to support this approach. The Civil Engineering group suggested that *'supports are needed for staff who teach to support engagement with more formative assessment (feedback approaches)'*, this was echoed by the Business Information System group who suggested that they *'develop training opportunities for industry supervisors'*.

Table 2. Assessment & Feedback Solutions for Empowering the Student Cohort

	<i>Solution</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Student Cohort</i>	Support readiness for empowerment	Inter-stakeholder dialogue; scaffolded tasks;
	Develop flexible standards/criteria	Rubrics
	Allow time for meaningful feedback	Timetabling feedback; early feedback
	Interpretation of context specific outcomes	Each site sets specific learning needs
	Professional development of practitioners	Training; supports

Some of these solutions have wider implications for resources, processes and policies in higher education. Professional bodies and accrediting agencies, in their role of ensuring certain competencies are achieved, may lean towards longer lists of competencies that all students, regardless of previous experience or opportunities on placement, can achieve. This allows little room for students to gain some power or control over what they may uniquely need to learn. As highlighted by Bates et al. [20], there is a *'tension between standardisation and contextual variability that plays out in many domains of medical education'* (p17). They suggest that policy makers and curriculum leaders consider more *holistic* types of review in disciplines such as medical education [20]. This has also been described, by Lester [21] as a more *capability-based* approach *'that ensures they apply across the breadth of practice rather than become treated as separate topics or areas of competence'* (p31). In a similar vein, there has been some movement by professional accreditation bodies towards more overarching principle-based standards rather than list of competencies sometimes called rules-based standards. *'Rules-based standards have been criticized for fostering a 'check-box' mentality'* whereas although principles-based standards can be vague and wordy, they do allow for greater flexibility for the ever-changing complex environment [22, p283]. However, principles-based standards do require professional judgement, knowledge and expertise [22].

Many of the ideas for individual and student cohort empowerment listed above require further student and staff education/training and resources. Lack of resources has also been identified by staff as a barrier to implementing diversity and choice of assessment [23]. Institutional policies that support the resourcing and recognition of staff and student training need further attention if student empowerment is to be realised within WIL assessment and feedback.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on a national research study involving nine disciplines and seven international expert authors, this paper explores some challenges and solutions to the empowerment of students in assessment and feedback in work-integrated learning. Despite acknowledgement of the challenges, there was strong support for the concept of student empowerment by both the staff and students in the study. Suggested solutions to empowerment challenges relating to the individual student included: supporting students to judge their own performance; choice in assessment and feedback methods and tasks; and co-creation of criteria. In addition, the stakeholders identified some ideas that would support the design and embedding of these approaches for the whole student cohort. These included supporting readiness for empowerment, developing flexible and more holistic criteria, and the professional development of staff.

With the growing emphasis globally on students having more work-integrated learning opportunities in their curriculum, institutions are under an obligation to support more valid and meaningful assessment processes. Empowering students to have some level of control over how they are individually assessed and engage in feedback across different contexts can support this activity.

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