The LEAF project is using Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment methodology or TESTA methodology to audit programmes in three disciplines. Today I'm going to tell you a little bit about how we've used the TESTA methodology and some of our preliminary findings.
The LEAF project is made up of four partners: ourselves, Glasgow, Birmingham and Nottingham.
SUBJECTS

- History
- Economics
- Biological Sciences
  - Molecular Biology
  - Zoology

The project is currently auditing programmes in History, Economics and the Biological Sciences with Zoology and the Biological Sciences with Molecular Biology. However, Edinburgh individually also has plans to expand our use of TESTA across the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the College of Science and Engineering.
These audits act simply as a mirror to the programme, reflecting back the feedback and assessment processes and capturing the students experiences of them. It doesn’t provide any solutions, but does allow teams to gain an birds eye view of their programmes.
The audit can be split into two main sections each with two parts: course information and experiential data.

Firstly, we collected together course information such as types of assessment and feedback, hand in dates, and activities around assessment and feedback which support and enhance learning.

This can, for the most part, be found using the course handbooks, our centrally managed course information and the virtual learning environments. But of course there is often a wealth of activities and opportunities available out–with the information formally provided. So to capture these less formal activities and to ensure accuracy I then conducted interviews with members of staff.
And then I collated it into a summary table for analysis – which looks something like this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Types of Assessment</th>
<th>Varieties</th>
<th>Summative</th>
<th>Formative</th>
<th>Exams %</th>
<th>Written Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Exam, Tutorial journal, Essay, Primary source analysis, Short exercise</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3 compulsory and 3 optional</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>122 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Exam, Tutorial journal, Non-written skills assessment, Essay</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2 optional</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>130 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Exam, Essay, Workshop task report, Project, Non-written skills assessment</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3 compulsory and 2 optional</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>143 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dissertation, Exam, Essay, Non-written skills assessment, Research proposal</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2 compulsory and 3 optional</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>257 words</td>
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</table>
At the same time I was also collecting experiential data about the students’ experiences of feedback and assessment on the programme. We did this by using the standard TESTA assessment experience questionnaire the addition of four free text comment boxes to work enable us to understand more fully the students’ reasoning behind their numerical scores.

This gave them, for example, an opportunity to identify whether their scores applied solely to their core courses or equally to their elective outside courses, what they’d liked, what they would change.

Once I had collected this data, I combined it with some of the information that we already institutionally hold about students experiences of assessment and feedback on these programmes and used it to add to the standard TESTA focus group questions.

For the focus group we split the students into two focus groups per programme: one for the sub–honours group (first and second year), and one for the honours group (third and fourth year).

TESTA is quite a straightforward, mechanistic methodology, but despite this we did have a couple of initial challenges.
Firstly, the TESTA methodology relies upon a singular, standardised pathway through any given degree programme. Whereas, in Edinburgh and indeed across Scotland that programmatic structure is far more flexible and able to be shaped to the individual student’s interest.

For any given programme the home school may only have control over a student’s experience for one third of their time, if they are only taking a single 40 credit course from there. The rest of the time they may be taking elective courses from other parts of the University.

To overcome this, I used the Key Information Sets data to identify the courses taken most often by students on our four programmes. I then looked at what courses could be taken together as a suite of courses and constructed what a popular pathway through the programme might look like.

These were the suites of courses that we applied TESTA to.
The second problem was student engagement fatigue.

We are currently undertaking a huge number of enhancement activities across the whole of the University.

- personal tutor survey and focus groups
- the Edinburgh Student Experience Survey
- the NSS survey
- the programmes and course information management focus groups
- the new student survey
- and much, much more

Our students were near their engagement saturation point.

And because we were working with four specific single honours programmes it made it a rather limited pool of students that we could recruit from, making it even harder!

However, after much emailing around we managed to get between 24 and 31% of our programme populations responding to the assessment experience questionnaire (depending on which programme).

And after liaising with some of the other universities involved in the project, we offered a £10 amazon voucher we managed to recruit students for the focus groups too!
What do students think makes ‘good feedback’?

We’ve just completed the audits for two of the disciplines and are in the process of completing the third. All of the experiential student data has been captured for the four programmes, and so I’m going to talk through some of the findings that were consistent across the three disciplines, this is by no means exhaustive but I hope that this presentation will capture some of the headlines of this research.
GOOD TIME MANAGEMENT

- Set a schedule and stick to it!

“The School recently changed the hand-in deadline for coursework so that this was earlier. The reasoning behind this, we were told, was so that we were able to receive feedback before the end of the term.

However, by being earlier, some of the topics in essay titles had not yet been covered in class. With one of my modules, I have not received this work back yet and therefore this change in deadline date seems pointless and unhelpful.”

I think it’s clear why the student might feel doubly hard-done-by.

It was very important that students knew exactly when they could expect their feedback returned.

Despite most students knowing about the University’s 15 working day turn around policy for feedback, it was very important that this was reinforced by their school so that they knew exactly when they could expect their feedback. It was also important that when this policy was violated they were told well in advance, and the reasoning behind the breech was explained clearly to them.

Keeping the relationship clear cut and professionally managed is key.
Participants were concerned about fairness in both the marking standards and the feedback provided – this concern spanned all disciplines and all year groups.

And this was consistent, many respondents said that they felt like the marking standards owed a lot to luck and that they didn’t understand why they’d got a particular grade. Now of course in some of these cases this could be a problem with the consistency of markers, but often this was not the case. Instead this problem stemmed from a lack of clarity around the assessment criteria in the first place meaning that students simply did not understand the marking system or the reasons behind their marks. It exposed a real need for course specific, even assignment specific marking criteria.

At the same time, many students also made comment on the quantity and quality of their feedback compared to their peers. They noticed that there were vast variations in the amounts of feedback that students for the same assignment on the same course were being given meaning that some students felt their classmates were getting vastly more help than them.
Students wanted to both understand why something got a particular good or bad mark, but also how they could improve in subsequent assignments.

Feedback that simply stated what was good or bad about their work but omitted saying why it was good or bad did not help them to improve in future, and was unhelpful to them and their progress.

They were also quite clear that this wasn’t just about correcting mistakes in the content, but about ensuring that the students received feed-forward which was broad enough to use across future assignments on different topics.
As mentioned earlier students stated that they struggled to know what was expected of them specific to each course and each assignment. Explicitly stating what is expected of each assignment and where possible accompanying this with exemplars would be especially useful.

Many students understood that academics might be nervous about providing exemplars in case the exemplar were thought of as the only ‘right way’ of doing things, and suggested that it might be possible to provide sub sections of examples. Using the example of an essay, this could be a sample introduction from one essay, a methods section from another, and a conclusion from another for each grade boundary.
Students who received continuous assessment throughout the semester (whether formative or summative) found that this really helped them to keep on top of their work, and they felt a stronger sense of progression throughout the course. They both valued the ability to check their own progress and see what grades they were likely to achieve, but also to get some feedback in order to improve their work before it counted towards their grade.

In addition, they also valued the opportunity to check the progress compared to their peers. They therefore also appreciated seeing a grade distribution curve to allow them to see how well they were achieving comparatively.
This was particularly interesting because whilst students in most surveys say that they really would like greater opportunities for personalised, individual, face-to-face feedback, academics in the staff interviews reported the under-use of office hours being a particular frustration. In our focus groups we tried to explore this a little bit more.

Participants talked about feeling as if they were burdening their lecturers, taking up their precious time to discuss something which wasn’t of any great importance in the grand scheme of things. They also thought that in order to attend an office hour they would need to have a very specific pointed question, and did not believe that there were there to support the discussion of ideas, or for example essay plans.

Secondly, students talked about feeling nervous about exposing their lack of understanding to their professors, the people who would one day be grading them or even supervising their dissertation. They expressed concerns about making the wrong impression.

And finally, students identified a feeling of distance between them and their professors with one saying that they had felt a little anonymous in the experience. It is easy for a student who views their professor as an expert to put them on a pedestal, thus creating distance between them.
At the end of the focus group, we asked students to identify the one single change that they would make to feedback or assessment to improve their learning experience. Although there was variation in the answer across all the focus groups, there were four things which were mentioned over and over again.

Firstly, exam feedback. Students felt that they weren’t getting much exam feedback, and that often when they received exam feedback, it was way too late to be useful to them as they couldn’t remember the exam. It was particularly important for them to have access to both their own script and the question paper, which some students had found difficult in the past. It was also an added bonus when they could talk through the exam script with some of the teaching staff from the course.

Secondly, plans or drafts were identified as a useful source of formative feedback as students saw its direct benefit to their summative grade.

Exemplar assignments were of particular use because it allowed students to see for themselves the components of an excellent assignment.

And finally, and probably most difficult, students wanted to feel less of a burden when they were accessing office hours or one-to-one feedback.
Please feel free to contact me on hazel.marzetti@ed.ac.uk.

Thank you!