

Assessment, Feedback & Technology

Contexts and Case Studies in Bloomsbury

Edited by

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Chapter 2

Electronic Management of Assessment —Administrative Perspectives

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Chapter 2: Electronic Management of Assessment – Administrative Perspectives

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Introduction

Assessment and feedback are generally understood as key elements in the work of academic staff and in the education of students; this realm of activity also often forms a major proportion of the workload of the administrative staff who support programme delivery. The roles performed by administrators can tend to be overlooked in discussions around the management of assessment methodologies and practices.

In May 2015, the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) Consortium organised an event specifically for administrative staff from the BLE partner institutions, who were invited to come together and share their practice in the use of technology to support and manage their roles. One of the main aims of the afternoon was to discuss how attendees were involved in the process of the electronic management of assessment (EMA), to inform the BLE project investigating online assessment and feedback processes and practices.

There were a total of 115 registrations for the event; out of these, 77 administrative staff from Birkbeck, LSE, LSHTM, Oxford Brookes University, RVC, SOAS and UCL attended (although not all were ‘participants’ in the EMA exercise). Attendees were asked to create ‘process maps’ depicting the EMA workflow in their situation and indicating where their input was required. In total, 20 process maps were generated: 13 in which the process being described was (in our view) reasonably clear and detailed, and 7 in which we found it to be somewhat unclear. All the maps also contained additional observations including the explicit mention of ‘pain points’.

This paper serves to capture the ways in which administrators are involved in EMA activities and highlights the challenges it poses to them. It is important to consider that the information referenced here was correct at the time of the event and represents the views of the participants taken on that day.

Approach

The role of ‘administrator’ is used in a broad sense for the purpose of this paper; event attendees identified themselves as being academic, course, programme, faculty, departmental, research or project administrators, as well as examination officers, team leaders and school or course managers. A small number of attendees commented that they are not closely involved with EMA processes. As we suspected this might be the case, and that some attendees would be colleagues who work together, we suggested they should work together in small groups to map out the various activities involved in setting up and managing the assessment process from their own context. We provided A3 paper and multi-coloured felt-tip pens and asked attendees to visually represent how the following elements of EMA mapped to each other, indicating their individual involvement:

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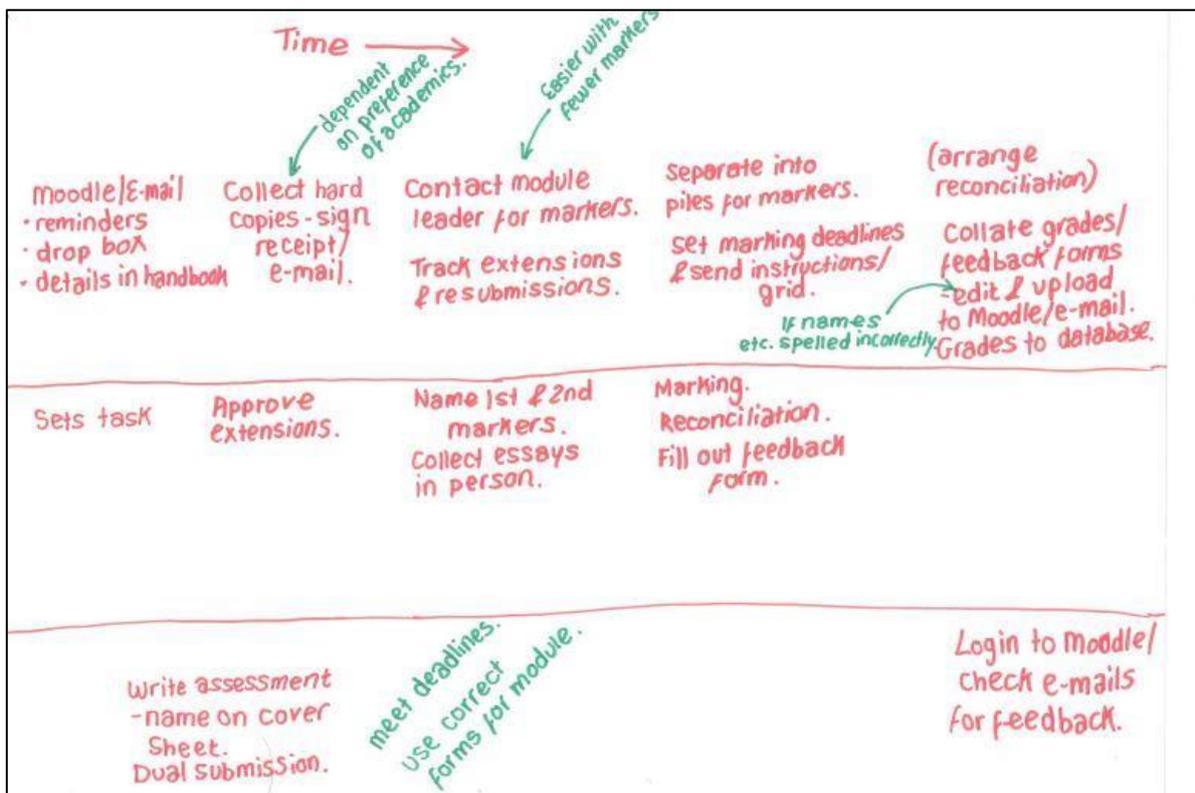
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- Pre-submission (e.g. setting, setup, anonymity)
- Submission (e.g. online, paper, dual)
- Pre-marking
- Marking (first, second markers, moderation)
- Feedback/return to students
- Post feedback (e.g. external/exam board)

Attendees were also asked to consider and discuss the following questions:

- How is EMA managed? What is your involvement?
- How are markers/moderators assigned?
- What works well?
- What doesn't work so well (pain points)?
- How might it be improved?

Below and overleaf are three examples of the process maps developed at the event:



Findings

Processes in the EMA workflow

Across the sample of administrators that were consulted in this study, a number referred to common practices within the process of managing online assessment, but there was also variation. Regardless, it should be noted that these experiences alone cannot be used to draw assumptions around *general* practice across an entire institution, as it appears there is not a standard approach to EMA taken by any one of the BLE partners. The similarities and differences of the experiences are described in this section, and are based on the four administrative-focused aspects of the Jisc (2016) assessment life-cycle (Submitting; Marking and production of feedback; Recording grades; Returning marks and feedback).

Submitting – Before online submission can take place, procedures need to be put in place, such as guidelines for teaching staff, dates and deadlines. The format of the assignment activity has to be agreed; for example, whether it is to be submitted via Turnitin or the Moodle Assignment tool. Finally, a decision around whether the markers receive the papers anonymously has to be made. When online submissions are made in Bloomsbury, they may also include a hard copy submission, which the administrators themselves may be tasked to print. In addition, in some cases, two paper copies are required. Some departments provide signed or emailed receipts of submissions. Extensions might be managed by email exchange between students and staff.

Marking and production of feedback – The administrative staff reported that the allocation of assignments to markers is usually made by the lead academic, but in rare cases the administrator is responsible for recruiting both first and second markers. In general, the BLE partners differ - both internally and from each other - in the *way* markers are allocated and whether rubrics are used.

Administrators are often involved in the physical allocation of the hard copy assignments and/or downloading and providing markers with electronic copies, except where academics mark online. In some cases, administrators manage the process of anonymous and/or double marking, which can involve online submission, but is otherwise handled offline.

There are many extra tasks that a few administrators are expected to manage, which would more usually be the responsibility of an academic. For example, checking the Turnitin similarity reports, checking students have submitted and then chasing students who have failed to submit and setting marking deadlines (which includes informing academics when they should start marking). In some cases, students are expected to inform administrators directly when they have submitted. In preparing the marking, some administrators have to provide hard copies of marking grids/sheets or upload marking rubrics (if used). Administrators may then be expected to enter the assignment and submission data into the relevant systems to record the information.

Across the consortium, it also varies over who publishes and informs students that their results are available, for example, the administrators or the academics themselves.

Recording grades – In many cases, administrators coordinate the liaison between first and second markers, which usually involves sharing spreadsheets containing marks and communicating via email or at face-to-face meetings. Although the *final* agreed marks and feedback are accessed by students in Moodle, they may be entered either by academics or administrators; all mark sheets are, generally, returned to administrators.

Not all partners have integrated their student record system with the Moodle grades database. This is a big piece of work to develop, but the payoff is very high in terms of saving time and improving accuracy and efficiency.

Returning marks and feedback – Administrators tend to enter marks on their institution’s student record system, which can either be a manual process, the upload of a CSV file or by 'push of a button', which activates an automated transfer from a holding table into the system. This is already taking place at SOAS, as the case study in Chapter 25 by O’Sullivan and Leedham describes.

In terms of moderation, often only a sample is sent to external markers; this may be in hard copy, but sometimes they are given special access to the relevant Moodle courses.

One example that stood out as an interesting case was where an academic completed a feedback form, which was scanned by the administrator, saved online and stored. The marks were entered into Moodle and the student record system, but the student was provided with a hard copy.

Challenges

The administrators highlighted areas they found particularly challenging, which have been sorted into the following seven categories.

Time – Administrators felt that they spent too much time working on extraneous processes that could be better used to support students. For example, the duplication of managing paper and online submissions is avoidable if the processes are fully digitised. Requiring students to physically travel to hand in an assignment was deemed unfair and unnecessary. Administrators also spent time chasing academics to receive their marks; and when deadlines were not met, it was the students who inevitably suffered.

Training – Administrators complained about the lack of available training on the systems they use to manage the assessment processes, for themselves, academic staff and for students. Turnitin was the most frequently mentioned technology that required support – for example, students’ interpretation of the similarity index score. Pedagogic training to enable academics to produce consistent feedback was also recommended.

Technological barriers – Comments regarding unreliability and flaws with the Moodle and Turnitin Assignment plugins, which are both used widely to support online assessment, related to the issues with handling the anonymity of assignments and the difficulties in enabling first and second (and even sometimes third) markers to comment, mark and agree grades. It was therefore felt that Turnitin does not completely meet the needs of the UK HE assessment practices, thus explaining why academics still mark in hard copy.

Administrators made reference to the use of ‘too many’ platforms and systems that are not integrated (e.g. student record systems, Turnitin and Moodle grades). One participant expressed a worry that, due to the manual nature of the procedures and lack of integration of systems, a single point of failure in the workflow would be the individual administrator. Incompatible file types and large file sizes (in the case of videos for example) were also a source of concern, as this precludes submission of some practical assignments through Turnitin, which thus increases the workload of the administrative staff who may have to email these files directly to markers. Finally, administrators noted that if it were possible to receive automatic notification of late submissions, this would reduce the use of administrator time taken in manually checking assignment inboxes.

Dependence on other people – Reliance on others during the assessment process was viewed as another potential point of failure. This referred mainly to academics not meeting the deadlines by which marks had to be returned to administrators. Academic engagement with online processes is often lacking and there were some challenges with students, who were not keen to use online tools.

Manual, labour-intensive processes – Many references were made to an insistence on submitting hard copies of assignments, which was deemed unnecessary. There were numerous laborious, manual processes involved in the workflow such as inputting grades from spreadsheets received from academics into the student record system. Checking for plagiarism was also described as being labour intensive.

Some administrators reported the requirement to scan feedback forms, manually enter marks and return hard copies to students. One administrator even reported that they were required to check word counts on assessments.

Institutional procedures – Administrators noted a lack of clarity and consistency regarding standardised policy within the institutions; there was no common set of procedures across any individual institution. It appears that departments often manage the EMA workflows in different ways. This can cause alarming difficulties, as for example Turnitin reports are inconsistently viewed and interpreted. In addition, it was reported that the assessment responsibilities of job roles were not well defined.

Legal issues – In addition to unnecessary cost and time-consuming activity, there was some concern about the data protection issues around providing hard copy samples of assessments to external examiners. It was also noted that high similarity scores could go unnoticed and not acted upon if academics only mark/moderate paper copies of assignments.

Concluding remarks

The process we have used to gather the data discussed here cannot be described as a representative reflection of practice across the institutions as we cannot be sure what additional insight might potentially have been provided by non-attendees. However, from this quite large and diverse sample, we are able to determine that there is a wide range of EMA practices across the institutions and even within them. We have also noted that there is a continuum of EMA adoption from those who make use of online submission only, through to those who handle submission, marking and feedback to students almost entirely online. It is important to note that ‘almost entirely’ is a key point here, as there are key elements of the marking process which EMA systems currently do not adequately support. Overall, this exercise has proved valuable in understanding the issues from the point of view of the administrative staff, whose voices are less often heard in discussions surrounding assessment. Analysis of the event’s evaluation, which was conducted by anonymous survey, revealed a desire for a new local community to share practice more regularly and formally.

Our research has indicated that there is a lot of variance in the practice of assessment administration, not just across the individual institutions but *between* different organisational sub-units. This lack of consistency makes it difficult for the institutions to source technical solutions that would support and enhance all desired approaches. Anecdotally, we have noted that differences in practice are often thought to arise because of differences between disciplines, although some of these differences may stem from ‘tradition’ rather than pedagogy. In any case, a standardised approach to EMA across a diverse institution is not pedagogically desirable. However, a common approach at department level assists in maintaining processes that are streamlined, efficient, accurate and non-repetitive or duplicating.

Regarding our opening questions to the participants, the prompt which generated a (perhaps surprising) volume of feedback was the one asking for identification of particular ‘pain points’:

- Lack of training
- Academics having little/no training on how to use Moodle/Turnitin
- Anonymous submission not currently available on Moodle Assignment
- Technology unreliable
- Academics not meeting deadlines for
- Too many processes
- Manual data entry of marks on student record system (SRS)
- Lack of clarity across the institution (policy); not using the same systems across the College
- If academics are not checking online submissions because they refer to

<p>returning the mark sheets to admins (2); reminders have to be sent Students receive grade marks late; fuels disgruntled students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics resistant to marking online/ don't want to use technology (2) • Technophobe students • Need to remove paper copies, using Moodle for return 	<p>paper copies, it is very likely that high similarity scores for plagiarism may go unnoticed and so not be acted upon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard copy samples for external examiners – costly, time-consuming and data protection issues • Inconsistent viewing of originality reports due to submissions being downloaded to shared drive
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Overall, the preference of the administrative staff who took part in this exercise was that assessment activities are conducted online. It is not the use of online technologies per se that is generally regarded as the most significant pain point involved in EMA, but rather the necessity for offline 'sub-routines' to handle aspects of processes that fall outside of the available systems. The wider list of pain points can be categorised into three key areas: people, technology and pedagogic requirements.

In terms of 'people', it was felt that academics should be encouraged to mark online to help streamline the workflow. According to the participants, there is still a strong preference among the academic community for paper-based marking. As well as online marking in Turnitin, downloading of electronic copies for offline marking (e.g. using 'track changes' in Word) is quite common, but creates some administrative overhead in returning marked copies to students.

A further strategy in common use is dual submission (that is, both online and hard copy), which can be a useful interim strategy when moving towards online marking. However, the participants felt that this halfway house of dual submission involves a double workload of managing two sets of submissions, and is therefore not suitable as a permanent process. Administrators' preference appears to be strongly for marking to be done online; those who attended our event indicated that they are generally willing and able to support academic staff with this. Additionally, support improvements, such as more frequent or timely training sessions, were also recommended. We also observed a lack of consistency in relation to the academics' and administrators' areas of responsibility.

In terms of 'technology', this report provides evidence of a strong demand for automation between Moodle, Turnitin and student record systems. Some unusual practice has been highlighted here, which could be better managed by using Moodle and/or Turnitin for assignment processes. In addition, administrators felt that they expend excessive efforts in notifying academics of submissions, liaising between markers, reminding academics to mark and chasing for grades. It was thought therefore that systems could better support these processes to make them more automatic. Interestingly, occasional technical failures were not reported as a pain point. This may indicate an understanding and acceptance that technology is not always perfect, and a belief that it is still valued despite potential issues.

In terms of 'pedagogic requirements', a number of issues were revealed. There was significant use of anonymous marking although it was not as common as we might have expected. Also, there were frequent requests for improvements to double marking (i.e. support for second marking, moderation and reaching agreement between markers) within Turnitin. We were surprised that some instances of checking for plagiarism (or rather suspicious levels of text-matching) were reported as being conducted by administrative staff. It appears that some administrators are very involved with aspects of the marking process such as assigning markers, checking word counts and even finalising grades.

It was interesting to see the different approaches that the participants adopted in illustrating or explaining the EMA processes in which they are involved. If repeating the exercise described in this paper, we would want to ensure the participants are completely clear and explicit in their explanation of the assessment workflow including who does what. Also, we would ask for contact details on the activity worksheets so we could follow up with them after the event, as this would have enabled us to clarify some points or ask further questions. We deliberately chose *not* to do this at the time in case the participants felt uneasy about ‘naming and shaming’ their institution or department, but, in hindsight, we might have been able to provide better support if we had known who was experiencing the most difficulties. It would also be a useful exercise to survey academics regarding their experience of moving to marking online. A further study could look more closely at how administrators and academics interact with each other and among themselves throughout the EMA workflow.

References

Jisc (2016). Electronic management of assessment: Using technology to support the assessment life cycle, from the electronic submission of assignments to marking and feedback. Available: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/electronic-assessment-management>