Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: Transforming Assessment in Higher Education

A guide to the Advance HE Framework

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1. Transforming Assessment in Higher Education Framework
2. Overview

This guide to the Framework for Transforming Assessment in Higher Education is one of a series of guides to the Advance HE’s Essential Frameworks for Enhancing Student Success.

All assessment is situated in the local context and the particular traditions, expectations and needs of different universities and academic disciplines. Consequently, this resource does not prescribe standardised changes but presents a framework for self-assessment and evidence-informed planning based on available knowledge of effective assessment practice. It can be used to evaluate and benchmark existing approaches and inform future developments. The growing evidence base of research on university assessment provides a useful basis on which to build and review policy and practice. However, it leaves the onus on institutions to develop and critically evaluate assessment processes and procedures, as they are used and developed within their local context, comprising students, tutors, resources, regulations, and disciplinary and professional requirements.

This guide is designed to help higher education institutions, and their faculties, schools, departments and programmes, in using the framework to review current policy and practice in assessment and feedback, with a view to rethinking and repositioning their assessment strategy, processes and practices. In that sense, it is aimed at any member of staff who has a responsibility and interest in assessment matters. In particular, it will be of use to those with responsibility, both centrally and in subject areas, for learning, teaching and assessment quality assurance and enhancement.

As a guide, this resource may also prove useful to students, particularly those individuals and groups with a remit for academic matters within students’ unions. Finally, and importantly, it is also conceived of as a resource educational developers can use in working with staff teams and groups at different levels in an institution to help them review and develop assessment practices and procedures.
3. Assessment in HE

Assessment of student learning is a fundamental function of higher education (HE). It is the means by which we assure and express academic standards and has a vital impact on student behaviour, staff time, university reputations, league tables and, most of all, students’ future lives (Carless, 2015).

It is generally acknowledged that assessment practices in most universities have not kept pace with the vast changes in the context, aims and structure of contemporary higher education (Higher Education Academy, A Marked Improvement, 2012). As traditionally conceived, assessment practices can no longer do justice to the outcomes expected from a university education in relation to wide-ranging knowledge, skills and employability (Medland, 2016). Modularisation has created a significant growth in summative assessment, with its negative backwash effect on student learning and its excessive appetite for resources to deliver the concomitant increase in marking, internal and external moderation, administration and quality assurance (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013).

Assessment is also at the heart of many challenges facing HE. A significantly more diverse student body in relation to achievement, disability, prior education and expectations of HE is putting increasing pressure on retention and standards (Gun, Morrison and Hanesworth, 2015; Hanesworth, Bracken and Elkington, 2018). In a massified HE sector where tutor-student ratios have been in steady decline, students can remain confused about the purpose(s) of assessment and what is expected of them in and through assessment activities. Efforts to make this transparent through learning outcomes, assessment criteria and written feedback have proved no substitute for tutor-student interaction. Newer groups of students are particularly likely to need and value this type and level of interaction (Carless, 2015; Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013).

University assessment traditions remain resistant to change (Deneed and Boud, 2014). Following the framework, this guide recommends a fundamental rethink of assessment practices and regulations, capitalising on what existing knowledge and experience we have of effective and efficient assessment to make it a foundational consideration for educational design and practice, rather than a secondary one. However, there are no quick fixes that will give rapid results in assessment. An integrative and proactive approach is supported throughout this guide, rather than an atomised response to individual assessment issues.

This is particularly important at a time of huge change for the UK sector. It is an opportunity to re-establish learning and standards rather than measurement and grades as central to effective assessment and, crucially, to return to a focus on students as learners (Elkington and Evans, 2017). It is a chance to think about how we put the significant resources devoted to assessment to better use to support learning, safeguard standards, improve retention and increase student approval; to improve assessment’s fitness for purpose for a sector that is in a state of flux. This guide aims to promote widespread development in HE assessment processes and practices by helping staff at all levels recognise the need for – and the means to bring about – evidence-informed change.
4. Transforming Assessment

Transforming assessment is a process that requires wide-ranging stakeholder engagement in a cycle of review, planning and implementation. Doing so has implications for the infrastructure, the dialogue(s) required between staff and students about assessment and for curriculum review and development. Transforming assessment in this way can have a positive impact upon student learning and student satisfaction, as well as promoting greater confidence in academic standards. Assessment that is more clearly fit for purpose will entail changes related to four main areas: assessment design, students, staff and infrastructure.

**Assessment design:** assessment methods are diversified to improve their validity, authenticity and inclusivity, making them clearly relevant and worthwhile in the eyes of students and firmly focused on assessing programme level outcomes. Relatedly, grading concentrates on fewer and more challenging summative assessments, which can be effectively measured in a quantitative way, and there would be an increase in truly formative assessment that is thoroughly integrated with teaching and learning. In short, assessment design would promote academic integrity.

**Students:** students are offered greater opportunities for partnership in assessment, with a clear voice in institutional decision-making regarding assessment, and great flexibility and choice in how they engage with assessment and feedback at course level. Efforts are made to increase their understanding and trust in assessment through greater opportunity for self-and peer review, providing them with information about assessment safeguarding and embedding support for study skills and academic integrity. Inclusive modes of assessment are promoted and embedded in policies and practice to enable all students to demonstrate their capabilities.

**Staff:** the assessment literacy of academic staff is paramount for such transformation to take hold and be sustained. Placing value on, and making appropriate space for, professional judgement and recognition that academic standards cannot easily be made transparent. Confidence and trust in such judgements are strengthened by introducing consistent methods through which to share and safeguard these, often tacit, standards and expectations.

**Infrastructure:** available technologies are effectively harnessed to enhance assessment practice, improve feedback and streamline assessment information and administration. Aligned to this, regulations are regularly reviewed and honed to promote assessment change. Students’ achievements would be communicated in fair and consistent ways.
At the practice level, the framework highlights three interrelated areas of focus (see Figure 1) that can and have been used to transform assessment in sustainable and impactful ways. Each of these areas is presented below, alongside contemporary evidence of how each is being developed in practice and at scale.

![Figure 1: Three interrelated areas for focus](image)

### 5. Innovative assessment

New forms and methods of assessment can promote student learning, as well as performance, and should be challenging, realistic and meaningful relative to stated programme learning outcomes.

#### 5.1 Programme-focused assessment (PFA)

- A programme-wide view of assessment has gained increasing recognition in the literature as a useful aid in curriculum design to consider fully the learning journey and experience of the student and to evaluate critically what needs to be assessed and how (Jessop et al, 2014)

- A programme-focused approach to assessment shifts the balance away from assessment at the module level and emphasises the holistic coherence of the learning experience in the design of the curriculum, teaching and assessment and feedback
assessment should be specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course. As a result, the assessment is likely to be more authentic and meaningful to students, staff and external stakeholders

- see Hartley and Whitfield (2012) for a more detailed look at programme-focused assessment (see also Whitfield and Hartley, 2019)

synoptic or patchwork assessment approaches are integrative in nature, assessing the knowledge, understanding and skills that represent key programme/course aims

- the Patchwork Assessment Practice Guide (Jones-Devitt, Lawton and Mayne, 2016) has been designed to help practitioners to develop and implement patchwork assessment processes across a range of domains, showcased by three illustrative case studies. one – two

5.2 Inclusive assessment

Careful consideration is needed to ensure inclusive assessment and feedback approaches are designed, implemented and managed to enable all students to demonstrate their potential.

Embedding inclusivity in the curriculum is to create learning, teaching and assessment environments and experiences that proactively eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster positive relationships in ways that value, preserve and respond to diversity (Hanesworth, 2015).

- The Model for Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum is intended as a tool to enable change in learning, teaching and assessment practice and programme/course level.

Using a variety of assessment methods rather than relying on one or two signature assessment methods ensures each student has the opportunity to enhance their strengths and challenge their less-developed learning and skills, helping to develop a broader range of potential learning outcomes.

Incorporating choice and flexibility into assessment design can empower students to take responsibility for their learning. This can be effectively achieved by identifying which aspects of the assessment process lend themselves to greater direct involvement from learners. For example, students might be involved in designing aspects of an assessment task (through choice of topic or assessment method), provide feedback to peers on draft work, or use assessment to develop learning resources for fellow students.

- Case study (Kleiman, 2017) discusses the need to take a ‘negotiated’ approach to assessing creativity and creative assessment in an arts-based setting. A key feature
of the approach presented is the use of a range of assessment fields or lenses through which to assess the subtleties of the learning process.

6. Feedback practices

Feedback is integral to assessment and most effective when devised as part of a ‘dialogic’ learning and teaching process.

6.1 Developing student engagement with feedback

+ There is now an established body of research around encouraging students’ ongoing engagement with feedback that builds and expands upon the principles of assessment-for-learning; the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.

+ Such approaches foster a learning culture that enables students to monitor their own progress and engage with feedback to improve performance continuously through active and student-led strategies that encourage productive dialogues with and between students (Carless, 2015; Winstone and Carless, 2019).

+ It is generally acknowledged that a programme focus on assessment offers a vehicle to more explicitly promote responsibility sharing in assessment feedback. This is what Winstone and Nash (2016) term ‘proactive recipience’ of feedback: supporting students to actively seek out and make use of feedback, rather than receive it passively.

- The Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit (DEFT) was developed to emphasise and support the role of the student in making sense of and using feedback, and lessen student dependency on inputs provided solely by the tutor.

- Case study (Winstone and Nash, 2017) showcases the Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit (DEFT) and how it builds on a wider body of work that has sought to develop an evidence-based, sustainable and systemic approach to maximising the impact of feedback. It outlines the development of an integrated set of approaches to assessment and feedback, and wider course design.
7. Self and peer assessment

Self-assessment and peer-assessment within the curriculum helps students develop as autonomous learners with reflective and evaluative skills, and capabilities for working collaboratively.

7.1 Developing students’ evaluative expertise

+ Students’ evaluative expertise is co-dependent on them developing their ‘assessment literacy’; an appreciation of the relationship between assessment and learning, a conceptual (and theoretical) understanding of assessment, understanding of the nature and meaning of assessment criteria and standards, skills in self and peer assessment, familiarity with new and established assessment techniques, the ability to select and apply appropriate approaches to assessment tasks, and an understanding of attribution and plagiarism (Price et al, 2012).

  - case study (Heels, Marshall and Riddle, 2017) provides valuable practice insight into how assessment literacy and engagement has been developed with level 4 software engineering students

  - case study (Mayhew, 2017) outlines how a sense of transparency and shared interpretation of assessment processes has been achieved using on demand audio-visual materials as a means of supporting students’ assessment literacy in the area of politics and international relations.

+ It is now an established view that assessment, if well-designed, is central to building students’ self-regulatory capacity to make judgments beyond immediate tasks or learning outcomes, through creating opportunities for students to develop the capabilities to operate as judges of their own work (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Evans, 2013).

+ The focus of such assessment (as learning) focuses on the explicit need for learners to understand what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘quality’ in their discipline, and how to make judgements about their own work, as well as that of their peers (see Boud, et al, 2018 and Carless and Boud, 2018).
Engaging with the framework, and its component parts, is to commit to an evidence-informed approach for transforming assessment, and is an important first step towards bringing about necessary changes in policy and practice. The six tenets (see Figure 2) that surround the three areas for practice provide an organising framework to take forward and embed these changes successfully. This section unpacks each of the tenets, along with key points for consideration.

Figure 2: Six tenets for transforming assessment
Tenet 1: Promoting assessment for learning

Dialogue(s) around expectations for practice need to focus on the ways in which high standards of learning can be achieved through different forms of assessment. This requires a greater emphasis being placed on assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning.

+ assessment has to serve many purposes including gauging achievement of learning outcomes (of learning), promoting learning (for learning) and quality assurance

+ formative assessment is a key part of assessment for learning. It has been shown to be extremely influential in promoting high-quality student learning

+ assessment of learning is unduly favoured by current practices because of the emphasis on summative assessment in modular course structures

+ truly formative assessment provides students with opportunities for preparation and practice before they are summatively assessed. It helps them understand what is expected, track their progress and take action to improve

+ learning from formative assessment involves opportunities for rich feedback which students need to recognise and learn to use in order to help them progress and ultimately reach their potential

+ where summative and formative assessment are combined, evidence shows that summative purposes can often dominate. The mix and spread of summative and formative assessment needs to be regularly monitored

+ assessment within programmes should be planned to support progression of learning (across and between levels) as well as accreditation of learning

+ learning is fostered by well-thought-out assessments with an emphasis on authentic and complex tasks

+ assessment for learning provides useful information about the effectiveness of teaching methods. This information should be factored into the ongoing review of staff practice.

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1 These tenets are themselves derived from Assessment Standards: a manifesto for change. ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange). Available at: [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/assessment-standards-manifesto-change](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/assessment-standards-manifesto-change)
**Tenet 2: Ensuring assessment is fit for purpose**

An emphasis on assessment ‘for’ learning requires us to shift our focus from systems and processes focused on marks and grades towards the valid assessment of the achievement of intended programme outcomes.

- modular assessment methods encourage students to focus on gaining marks for each assignment and exam rather than developing a coherent understanding of the overall subject matter or professional learning.
- assessments should be designed to enable students to demonstrate that they achieved the learning outcomes. This is assessment validity.
- the qualification students are awarded should reflect their ability in relation to the programme outcomes at the end of a programme. In the case of integrated programmes with extensive modular choice, these may be generic higher level outcomes.
- the higher order and more complex learning associated with graduate outcomes is often difficult to assess reliably because it involves academic judgement rather than measurement (see Tenet 6).
- it is also difficult to represent complex performances with a simple grade or percentage mark. Using multiple sources of information, multiple assessment opportunities and multiple assessors to assess essential learning is key to capturing such complexity in student learning development.
- this can also be tackled through the use of integrated (synoptic or capstone) assignments which involve the use of learning from across a programme of study.
Tenet 3: Recognise that assessment lacks precision

There are limits to the extent to which we are able to articulate standards explicitly in advance of learning. This must be recognised since seeking ever more detailed specificity and striving for reliability can diminish the learning experience and threaten its validity. There are important benefits of higher education which are not amenable either to the precise specification of standards or to objective assessment.

- expert academic judgement in assessing student work is a complex, holistic process, which draws on accumulated understanding and expertise to determine suitable standards
- it is extremely difficult to convey these standards to those new to the subject matter; tutors may not always be conscious of all the influences that shape their decision-making as ‘experts’
- assessment criteria are provided to make standards more transparent to students but the nuances and complexity of academic judgement cannot be fully expressed in a list of criteria or a marking scheme; they cannot capture all the different aspects of quality
- there has been an overreliance on detailing criteria and levels as a way of conveying standards. Such detail doesn’t necessarily chart student learning development accurately
- more active methods are needed to help students grasp the necessary standards (see Assessment Literacy, tenet 4) and students need to be encouraged to recognise assessment criteria as a guide rather than the specification of an exacting standard
- the difficulty of specifying and defining quality should not prevent the use of higher order assessment tasks just because it is difficult to assess them reliably. There are some aspects of learning that cannot be reliably assessed
- efforts to define standards very precisely could narrow the learning experience and potential achievements, as well as encourage strategic approaches to learning from students.
Tenet 4: Developing standards in communities

A greater emphasis needs to be placed on assessment and feedback ‘processes’ that actively engage both staff and students in dialogue about standards. Learning is most effective when students share an understanding of academic and professional standards in an environment of mutual trust and active involvement.

+ Academic standards (e.g., subject benchmark statements, qualification descriptors, assessment criteria, professional standards) are developed by members of academic and professional communities; they represent a shared, contemporary view of quality in a given field.

+ Statements of standards use indefinite language. Research and student surveys consistently reveal the potential for different interpretations of criteria between staff and between students and staff. Students often perceive this as unfairness.

+ Fairness and transparency are most effectively obtained when staff and students have regular opportunities to develop a shared understanding of relevant standards, such as the assessment criteria that will be used to mark an assessment task.

+ As with the act of learning itself, student work is complex and unpredictable, there are often no correct answers and considerable variance exists in how learning can be demonstrated. Therefore, students and staff need to be helped to understand that, despite the sharing of standards, such work necessarily generates some differences in interpretation of standards. A sense of fairness requires mutual trust and regular dialogue between staff and students.

+ Students need to be explicitly informed of the processes for moderating variation in assessment judgement and protecting them from unfair treatment. This is best achieved by actively involving students with these same processes, so as to develop an informed appreciation of their nature and intricacies.

+ Sharing standards should happen at different points in the assessment cycle and at different course levels to model and explicate key points of progression for students.
Tenet 5: Integrating assessment literacy into course design

Active engagement with assessment standards and expectations for learning should be an integral and seamless part of course design and the learning process so as to allow students to develop their own, internalised conceptions of standards and to monitor their own learning over time.

+ A significant factor in student success is active involvement in their learning. This applies equally to their learning about assessment and standards; their assessment literacy

+ Assessment literacy encompasses an appreciation of the relationship between assessment and learning, knowledge of the principles of assessment including the meaning of terminology, familiarity with standards and criteria, skills in self and peer assessment, familiarity with assessment methods, skills and techniques and the ability to select and apply appropriate approaches and techniques to assessment tasks (Price et al, 2012).

Tenet 6: Ensuring professional judgements are reliable

Effective assessment is dependent upon professional judgement and confidence in such judgement. This in turn requires the establishment of appropriate forums for the development and sharing of standards within and between disciplinary and professional communities.

+ achieving institutional and disciplinary consistency in standards is difficult and dynamic; statements of standards are subject to individual interpretation influenced by previous experience

+ taking steps to create a learning environment wherein appropriate standards are shared and discussed is central to fairness in assessment

+ academic staff need regular opportunities, both within their institutions and between institutions, to discuss and calibrate their standards, aligning them with reference points such as benchmark statements, professional standards and qualification descriptors.
8. Useful reflective questions

The following reflective questions should be used in conjunction with the framework. Each subset of questions is designed to support reflection and inform action in the transforming of assessment at institutional, programme and practitioner level. Responses to and dialogue around these questions can provide a useful source of data from which to evidence or communicate achievements in practice, benchmark performance, progress and impact or to inform planning and/or decision-making for future developments.

8.1 Taking a ‘strategy’ view

1. To what extent are you ensuring that strategic documentation clearly articulates the rationale for assessment and feedback as a strategic priority?

2. Do you provide opportunities for a range of institutional stakeholders (students, staff, students’ union, industry partners) to input into assessment policy and design decisions?

3. Are you providing regular opportunities for teaching staff to share effective assessment practices and raise the profile of assessment and standards at the institutional level?

4. Do you promote institutional approaches to assessment design that emphasise the consistent use of a range of assessment types at programme level?

5. Does your institutional policy promote feedback as an integral part of the assessment process?

6. Is it required that programme-level guidance and support is provided to each student to help them engage effectively with different forms of feedback at each level of their studies?

7. Do your own institutional quality and management processes require the continued development of staff assessment literacy in the setting and achievement of assessment standards?

8. To what extent are academic colleagues formally supported in shaping their professional judgments in collaboration with their disciplinary and professional communities?
8.2 Taking a ‘programme’ view

1. Do you clearly articulate the rationale for, and approaches to, assessment and feedback for students at each level of study in programme documentation?

2. Do you make assessment decisions in relation to design, development and variety within a programme context, focusing on programme learning outcomes?

3. Are you encouraging students to engage and participate in assessment design decisions within the wider context of a discipline and/or professional community?

4. Is particular attention paid to the issue of equity in assessment timing, spread and loading at programme level when designing assessment?

5. To what extent are you encouraging students to actively engage with assessment standards within the discourses and practices appropriate to specific disciplines and professions?

6. Are you implementing and supporting ‘programmatic’ approaches to assessment feedback that promote regular use of formative assessments and dialogue between staff and students?

7. To what extent are you actively and consistently involving students in the clarification of the different forms and sources of feedback available to them?

8. How are you promoting an assessment culture that encourages colleagues to substantiate their professional judgments collaboratively through open and honest discussions?

8.3 Taking a ‘practice’ view

1. To what extent are you employing an assessment ‘for’ learning approach to your assessment design and practice?

2. Are you taking steps to proactively develop inclusive assessment approaches that enable the full and equitable participation of all students?

3. At the point of design, do you ensure assessment tasks are aligned with the learning outcomes of the programme?

4. To what extent do you ensure students have a level of flexibility, choice and ownership in how they are assessed?

5. In what ways do you focus feedback on student performance on their learning and/or other actions under the students’ control?

6. To what extent do you use assessment feedback as a source of information used to help continuously inform and shape your own practice?
7. How and where are you providing students with structured opportunities and support for reflection, self assessment and/or peer assessment?

8. How do you provide students with opportunities to engage in dialogue with staff about assessment criteria and standards?

9. Tools for change

9.1 Transforming assessment in higher education: a dialogue sheet

This 'dialogue sheet' (developed by Sam Elkington at Teesside University) is designed to be a tabletop tool for sharing and exchanging thoughts and ideas.

+ in a 'good dialogue' we use and develop each other's thoughts/input – rather than presenting the 'winning' arguments. There are spaces where you can briefly summarise the view of the group and/or write very short summaries of the dialogue

+ the dialogue sheet is your notepad. Write on it, make sketches and drawings. Consensus is not necessary – but all opinions should be listened to and made visible in the notes

+ in practice the individual closest to a task or question reads it out loud – and writes the notes. This can also be shared with others as an artefact that represents a certain group's views on assessment or set out key issues and considerations

+ it is important the group works through the three steps as set out on the sheet as each step is intended to guide reflection and discussion in a systematic and structured way.

9.1.1 Optional pre task

Consider working first through the relevant reflective questions (section 4 of this guide) for the level of change being sought as a means of initiating critical thought around the pertinent issues and considerations. These questions are aligned to the framework, and so are a good way of introducing key features and terminology.

Major issues and challenges relating to transforming assessment in your context (at the level chosen) can then be captured around the outside of the dialogue sheet in Step 1.

Access the Transforming Assessment in Higher Education Dialogue Sheet here.
9.2 Assessment: The Game

Assessment: The Game (developed by Ian Turner at University of Derby) is a playful tool for allowing people to think and talk about assessments. The activity is designed to break down existing barriers and preconceptions about assessment modes that can be used in higher education.

Assessment: The Game is supported by a player’s guide, a facilitator’s guide, assessment mode cards and assessment purpose cards. These resources can be freely downloaded here.

The game itself can be played in as little as 15 minutes. However, its ideal length is 30-40 minutes. Player numbers are only limited by the resources, though one facilitator per eight staff (in two groups of four) is optimum – i.e. in course teams.

It is important to remember that the primary purpose of the activity is the discussion around the game, rather than the game itself. Though full instructions on the game can be found in the resources, these should be freely modified to aid the discussion.

The cards are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of assessment modes in higher education. You are encouraged to modify or add to the cards.
9.2.1  Supporting the game

It is important to consider how Assessment: The Game can be used as part of a broader activity. The game could be used, for example to signpost to assessment design workshops or consider programme approaches to assessment.

Access Assessment: The Game here.

10. Key texts and resources

10.1 Case studies

General assessment (higher education)


Patchwork (synoptic) assessment

HEA Patchwork Assessment Case Study (1): Pre-registration nursing degree programme at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Jones-Devitt, S (2016). HEA Patchwork Assessment Case Study (2): UG Health and Social Care Leadership at Sheffield Hallam University.

Lawton, M (2016). HEA Patchwork Assessment Case Study (3): Level 7 module on the PGCert in Higher Education and Professional Practice at University of Wolverhampton.

10.2 Practical guides


10.3 Useful references

10.3.1 Articles and chapters


Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: Transforming Assessment
Sam Elkington


Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: Transforming Assessment
Sam Elkington


10.3.2 Key books

**Higher education assessment (perspectives and innovations)**


**Assessment literacy**


**Assessment for learning**


Rethinking effective feedback


10.3.3 Journals

To keep up to date with the latest literature be sure to check the latest issues of:

+ Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education
+ Assessment in Education: Priorities, Policies and Practice
+ Studies in Higher Education
+ Teaching in Higher Education.
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