**Thresholded assessment: does it work?**

**Janet Sumner:**

Sally you’ve just been working on a project funded by eSTEeM called Gender Differences in Completion and Credit obtained in Level 2 study in Physical Sciences. Now we’ll go on to talk about that in a minute but before then you’ve got a bit of a back story with eSTEeM haven’t you?

**Sally Jordan:**

Yes I had teaching fellowships with two of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the CETLs back, more than ten years ago now. And it was those that led to the formation of eSTEeM. It was reckoned that, you know, that a scholarship centre like that was a good thing to do.

So I was involved right at the beginning and I’ve been involved in a number of projects through the lifetime of eSTEeM. I think probably the most significant one that’s completed was one which was investigating the use of formative thresholded assessment. And particularly the impact of the use of that sort of assessment on our students.

**Janet Sumner:**

Hang on, formative threshold assessment. You’ll have to tell me what that is.

**Sally Jordan:**

OK. So it’s assessment that the mark doesn’t count towards a student’s overall grade so it’s formative in that sense. But it has a threshold and the reason it has a threshold and that means that the students need to get more than a very low threshold in order to pass essentially. Low as in about 30%. And the idea is because it’s formative students can relax. They don’t need to worry about their mark. They can learn from the feedback. They can engage with assessment as a learning process. But because this is threshold it encourages them to engage.

And basically it appears to be very successful.

**Janet Sumner:**

So that’s a couple of projects. How would you say though that eSTEeM has helped you in your research or personally if you like?

**Sally Jordan:**

I consider myself to be a physics education researcher. And I always feel that for me what you might call scholarship or what you might call research and what you call, might call teaching in fact they all kind of interrelate, the boundaries are very fuzzy.

I’m passionate about getting it right for students but on making decisions that are based on real evidence, if you like. And as you can imagine eSTEeM’s helped me hugely in that. It’s helped me financially. It’s helped me in lots of practical ways. And it’s helped me with lots of encouragement.

Those things combined have enabled me to go to conferences. They’ve enabled me to write papers. And a particular thing that’s of relevance for the project that we’re going to be talking about in a minute is that eSTEeM actually paid for us to have a visiting researcher called Hilary from Canada who was with us for two months. And we couldn’t have had her over without eSTEeM. We needed to be able to pay for her to come obviously. And that was good for her but it was also good for me because I’m now Head of the School for Physical Sciences and that means I don’t get very much time to do a lot of the things. And we had a load of data that needed analysing, she wanted the experience, she was able to come to do the work.

She put in a poster to the eSTEeM Conference. It won the poster prize so we were obviously pleased about that. And she’s also submitted a project, a paper on the work to a leading physics education research journal so we’re just waiting to hear whether that’s been accepted or not.

**Janet Sumner:**

What did Hilary find out?

**Sally Jordan:**

OK. She found that men do slighter better than women on most questions but the difference actually was smallest on the multiple-choice questions. In other words multiple-choice questions or at least the ones that module team were asking, just not a problem.

She then looked at the scaffolding idea. There she found that if you compare two questions that are otherwise the same it may be that scaffolding is having an impact but that there were other bigger factors at play as well. And the really significant thing that she found was that we found three particular questions where there was a huge difference between men and women. And each of those had got a really complicated diagram that students needed to interpret before they were able to go on and do the question.

So what we’re looking at at the moment is whether it might just be the presence of that diagram and the fact that female students are less able to interpret it in some way. That might be causing the problem.

So I think I should probably emphasise that this is just part of a bigger piece of work that’s ongoing.

**Janet Sumner:**

Sally, thank you very much. I shall come back and speak to you when you’ve got more results.

**Sally Jordan:**

Thank you Janet, thank you very much.