The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA / CLA+)

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), now known as CLA+, is a performance assessment of students within a formal education setting, it was first introduced in the year 2,000 by College for Aid Education (CAE) – a non-profit organisation based in the USA.

The CLA+ has been widely used across the USA where it has been used by more than 1,000 education institutes. The assessment is digitally administered to undergraduates where it tests individuals’ reasoning, problem solving and critical thinking skills through the use of ‘real world’ situations. The total score achieved by an individual is based on responses to two components; the first part is a set of ‘Selected-Response Questions’ which tests scientific and quantitative reasoning; critical reading and evaluation; and critique an argument also. The participants are expected to provide answers drawn from accompanying documents and are given 30 minutes to answer 25 questions.

The second more well-developed and sophisticated element is the ‘Performance Task’. Participants are provided with a real-world situational problem/issue is presented, individuals are asked to create, develop and propose their response; again a series of accompanying documents are provided. The second aspect tests individuals’ skills of analysis and problem solving; writing effectiveness and writing mechanics with individuals given 60 minutes in which to complete their response.

The CAE have provided a scoring Rubric which details the criteria for the results achieved, details of the scoring can be found here. Individuals that complete the assessment receive a personalised total score, 6 sub-scores and a CLA+ Mastery Level also. Institutions receive an ‘institutional report’ which allows institutes to assess the institution average score achieved, with ‘growth estimates’ indicating the effect sizes (growth shown across classes) based on calculating the standard deviation of scores against subsequent classes. The ‘value-added’ scores also contribute to the growth estimates in CLA+ skills relative to other institutions, measured by calculating the difference between expected and actual CLA+ performance.

Each institution receives an Institutional Report which can include percentile scores, summary CLA+ scores, growth estimates, demographics and survey responses. Institutes also receive a student data file and have the opportunity to drill down scores of individuals which could be used to identify where student specific intervention might be required to increase performance. These scores can also be translated to achieve percentile rankings.

Whilst the CLA+ has been used in some studies and does challenge the students to demonstrate a measure of their skills, there is a wider debate whether the CLA+ approach could be used as an accurate measure of ‘Learning Gain’. The skills assessed in the CLA+ are general and not specific to the subjects being studied by participating individuals. Therefore, whilst comparability can be undertaken of achieved CLA scores between institutions, this might not be viewed as an appropriate method for comparability (and analysis) at the subject or institute level.

Moreover, while students are being tested on their skills, the CLA+ does not describe how it accounts for the measure of quality in teaching and learning within a HE institute. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether, or how, the CLA assessment takes into account emphasis of specific HE institutes have on particular subject related skills as well as just generic skills. This leaves the results open to interpretation and subject to further debate.
In England, The Learning Gain Pilot Programme is being funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), this £4 million investment programme is funding 14 project consortiums to investigate, test and evaluate methods of measuring learning gain within higher education across England. The funding programme aims to build knowledge and capacity and stimulate sector dialogue, thereby developing a shared understanding underpinning future developments in the future.

These funded projects are using various approaches to determining and measuring Learning Gain, some projects are testing existing methodological approaches such as CLA+, whereas others are developing new tools to assess whether specific metrics are appropriate to measurement and assessment of Learning Gain. Further information regarding Learning Gain Pilot projects can be found here.