

Assessment 2020

Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education

Preamble

Universities face substantial change in a rapidly evolving global context. The challenges of meeting new expectations about academic standards in the next decade and beyond mean that assessment will need to be rethought and renewed.

This document provides a stimulus for those involved in the redevelopment of assessment practices. It draws on the expertise of a group of highly experienced assessment researchers, academic development practitioners and senior academic managers to identify current best thinking about the ways assessment will need to address immediate and future demands.

Underpinning principles

- > Assessment is a central feature of teaching and the curriculum. It powerfully frames how students learn and what students achieve. It is one of the most significant influences on students' experience of higher education and all that they gain from it. The reason for an explicit focus on improving assessment practice is the huge impact it has on the quality of learning.
- > Assessment is the making of judgements about how students' work meets appropriate standards. Teachers, markers and examiners have traditionally been charged with that responsibility. However, students themselves need to develop the capacity to make judgements about both their own work and that of others in order to become effective continuing learners and practitioners.
- > Assessment plays a key role in both fostering learning and the certification of students. However, unless it first satisfies the *educational* purpose of ensuring students can identify high quality work and can relate this knowledge to their own work, the likelihood that they will reach high standards themselves is much reduced.

The purposes of the propositions

The propositions have been developed to guide assessment thinking in the light of the increasing focus on standards, and to address criticisms of current practice. They set directions for change designed to enhance learning achievements for all students and improve the quality of their experience.

The propositions, however, do not stand alone. They must be considered within overall curriculum thinking alongside teaching and learning strategies and changing disciplinary content. They need to be supported by a range of development opportunities to foster the shifts in thinking and practice on the part of teaching staff and students that they imply.

The propositions are posed in a form that needs to be embraced and be taken up at different levels - specifically, by educational institutions, by programs and courses of study, and by those responsible for teaching and learning. They have implications for resources and the nature of workload; when addressed thoughtfully they may contribute to reduced costs through a better focusing of effort on those features of the curriculum and teaching that have most direct impact on learning.

ASSESSMENT HAS MOST EFFECT WHEN ...

1. ... assessment is used to engage students in learning that is productive.

i. ... assessment is designed to focus students on learning

To improve student engagement in learning, and to support better quality learning outcomes, it is necessary that assessment tasks are designed to direct student attention to what needs to be learned and to the activities that best lead to this. Effective learning can be hampered by assessment tasks that focus student attention on grades and marks or reproductive thinking.

ii. ... assessment is recognised as a learning activity that requires engagement on appropriate tasks.

Assessment tasks should be significant learning activities in themselves, and not only enable judgements to be made about what has been learned. The potency of student engagement in learning is enhanced when assessment tasks require substantial involvement over time, and when they are designed in an interlinked, constructive, organised and coherent sequence.

2. ... feedback is used to actively improve student learning.

i. ... feedback is informative and supportive and facilitates a positive attitude to future learning.

Students benefit from clear and helpful feedback on their learning. Everyday learning activities as well as special tasks and tests provide opportunities for the provision of feedback. This places responsibility on staff to plan assessment in order to (a) develop their own skills in providing quality feedback, and (b) develop in students the skills they need to provide sound feedback to each other.

ii. ... students seek and use timely feedback to improve the quality of their learning and work.

Students' own skills of judgement are developed by their utilisation of feedback, guidance provided by those already inducted into the culture and standards of the discipline, and opportunities to grow their own skills of critical appraisal. They need to be able to seek and employ feedback from a variety of sources to develop a full range of outcomes from their studies.

iii. ... students regularly receive specific information, not just marks and grades, about how to improve the quality of their work.

Marks and grades provide little information to students about specific qualities of their work and do not indicate how it might be improved. While marks and grades may provide a crude tracking measure of how well students are doing, they do not help students move beyond their present standard of performance. Specific and detailed information is needed to show students what has been done well, what has not, and how their work could be better.

3. ... students and teachers become responsible partners in learning and assessment.

i. ... students progressively take responsibility for assessment and feedback processes.

The overall aims of higher education include developing students' critical thinking abilities, which include self-critique, independent judgement, and other skills for continuing learning. Personal responsibility for assessing performance and providing and responding to feedback is a desired graduate outcome. It is necessary and appropriate for university programs to foster this development throughout the curriculum.

ii. ... students develop and demonstrate the ability to judge the quality of their own work and the work of others against agreed standards.

Students need confidence and competence in making informed judgements about what they produce. They need to develop the ability to evaluate the quality, completeness and/or accuracy of work with respect to appropriate standards, and have the confidence to express their judgements with conviction. This requires deliberately managed assessment processes and practice that relates to judgements required in professional practice and mature community engagement.

iii. ... dialogue and interaction about assessment processes and standards are commonplace between and among staff and students.

Assessment activities and standards require disciplinary and contextual interpretation if they are to be understood, yet discussion of processes and reference points for determining standards is relatively rare. Assessment judgements are more consistent when those making them are able to reach consensus as to ways of establishing levels of performance. Student understanding of processes they can use to judge their own performance are similarly enhanced when they participate in dialogue about them with peers and teachers.

4. ... students are inducted into the assessment practices and cultures of higher education.

i. ... assessment practices are carefully structured in early stages of courses to ensure students make a successful transition to university study in their chosen field.

For students to become independent and self-managing learners, they need to be supported in the development and acquisition of the skills they need for learning, including those of assessment. Critical to this attainment is early engagement in manageable assessed tasks to build confidence, and the expectation that learning requires not only an investment of effort but also the taking of initiative. This contributes to alleviating anxiety around assessment information, instructions, guidance, and performance. Early assessment provides information to both students and teachers on progress and achievement, and allows for identification of students in need of additional support.

ii. ... assessment practices respond to the diverse expectations and experiences of entering students.

Students come to higher education with great diversity in preparedness and understanding of what it involves. To ensure that all can engage equitably with assessment tasks, the implicit rules and expectations around what is required for success in any discipline need to be made accessible to students and opportunities provided for them to develop the academic skills they require to perform those tasks.

5. ... assessment for learning is placed at the centre of subject and program design.

i. ... assessment design is recognised as an integral part of curriculum planning from the earliest stages of course development.

Assessment is not an 'add-on' to the curriculum structure of a program. It needs to be considered from the outset of course design and intimately embedded and linked to considerations of student learning as part of the curriculum. Assessment tasks, types and means of deployment need to be fully aligned with all other aspects of the curriculum.

ii. ... assessment is organized holistically across subjects and programs with complementary integrated tasks.

The development of a full range of graduate attributes requires a systematic approach to assessment that builds and enhances those attributes through tasks that are diverse, complementary to each other and embedded strategically throughout a program of study. Integrated whole-of-program curriculum design needs to incorporate assessment and feedback as well as learning outcomes and teaching and learning activities. If carried out in this way, an emphasis on feedback for learning can be the focus of teaching and learning engagement in the early curriculum, leading to capstone and integrated assessment in later years.

6. ... assessment for learning is a focus for staff and institutional development.

i. ... professional and scholarly approaches to assessment by academic staff are developed, deployed, recognised and rewarded by institutions.

Academics need particular support in developing expertise required for subject and program assessment responsibilities. Such support could include mentoring, dialogue with peers in informal and formal moderation activities or formal courses. However, while enhanced assessment skills are essential, their acquisition is not sufficient to ensure good assessment practice. Institutions should have explicit requirements that professional and scholarly proficiency in assessment is necessary for satisfactory teaching performance. Further, leadership and exemplary performance in assessment matters should be recognised for promotion, awards and grants.

ii. ... assessment practices and the curriculum should be reviewed in the light of graduate and employer perceptions of the preparedness of graduates.

The impact of courses on student learning, and the role of assessment in them, can only be fully evaluated following graduation. Common post-graduation measures (eg. the Course Experience Questionnaire, the Graduate Destinations Survey) presently provide insufficiently detailed information for the improvement of programs. In particular, they do not enable assessment and feedback processes to be sufficiently monitored. Systematic study of the impact of such experiences on graduates (at, say, one and five years from graduation) and employers' perceptions of such preparation and standards are needed to ensure that courses are effective in the longer term.

iii. ... assessment of student achievements is judged against consistent national and international standards that are subject to continuing dialogue, review and justification within disciplinary and professional communities.

The quality of awards in higher education will be increasingly scrutinised nationally and internationally. Assessment practice needs to provide convincing evidence of students' accomplishments that can be judged against external reference points. Disciplinary and professional communities (both within and beyond the academy) are the focus for ongoing collaboration and dialogue to determine, review and moderate academic achievement standards. Such collaboration and dialogue requires clarity of expectations and persuasive evidence of learning outcomes.

7. ... assessment provides inclusive and trustworthy representation of student achievement.

i. ... interim assessment results used for feedback on learning and progress do not play a significant role in determining students' final grades.

For purposes of certification, care must be taken to avoid the formal use of early grades that do not represent the outcomes reached by course or program completion. Entry-level knowledge, learning rates and final achievement levels differ. Although learning itself is cumulative, progressively adding marks throughout the learning period towards the final grade can distort representation of end-of-study achievement. What is important is using interim outcomes to improve learning.

ii. ... evidence of overall achievement to determine final grades is based on assessment of integrated learning

Many separate low-value pieces of assessment can fragment learning without providing evidence of how students' knowledge and skills from a unit of study are interrelated. This is often compounded across subjects, leading students to experience knowledge as disconnected elements. Strong evidence of achievement of the totality of outcomes can be provided by larger-scale tasks that require students to demonstrate coherent integrated learning, not isolated or atomistic performance.

iii. ... certification accurately and richly portrays graduates' and students' achievements to inform future careers and learning.

An academic transcript that lists subject titles and grades provides limited information to students, employers or educational institutions. Increased scope and sophistication of the reporting of achievement is needed to communicate outcomes well. Two areas for improvement are: *veracity*, in grades that are fully and robustly aligned with learning outcomes and standards; and, *richness*, in the documentation of student accomplishments to convey information about what students can and cannot do.

Suggestions for use

These propositions can be used to focus debate and action on those features of assessment that have the greatest impact on learning and the quality of courses.

They might be most productively used by:

- > planning teams and program directors in new course design and course review and renewal
- > teaching and learning committees and academic boards, institutionally and locally
- > groups of Associate Deans and Directors of Teaching and Learning within and across Faculties
- > those running courses and workshops for academic staff on assessment, and particularly within Graduate Certificates in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
- > those running leadership programs to ensure that leaders at all levels have a strong appreciation of assessment issues and directions
- > those with academic development roles who consult with staff and course teams
- > those guiding staff-student discussions about the improvement of courses

The challenge is to consider how these might be best pursued within existing cost constraints. This must necessarily involve deciding which assessment tasks should be discontinued in order to provide space for more worthwhile initiatives.

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