

A new era in assessing student learning

The *Assessing Student Learning* resources have been developed to assist Australian universities to maintain high quality assessment and grading practices, and to respond to new issues in the assessment of student learning.

Renewal of assessment practices lies at the forefront of efforts to improve teaching and learning in Australian higher education. Many universities, faculties and departments have recently undertaken reviews to examine assessment issues and to develop comprehensive assessment policies. At the same time, there is new attention to developing creative ways to assess student learning. Much of the innovation is designed to align assessment tasks more closely with the processes of problem-solving in the workplace (access to resources and colleagues) in the belief that traditional examinations may not resemble the work and life situations in which graduates use their knowledge and skills. The new technological possibilities are also a major source of innovation, with universities actively exploring the potential of computer-based assessment to assess learning and provide students with rapid and informative feedback.

The imperative to renew assessment practices

Conventional thinking about the role and practice of assessment in higher education has been challenged by the convergence of a number of factors, including:

- heightened awareness of the importance of assessment requirements in establishing expectations and guiding student learning, particularly in more flexible, independent learning environments;
- the prominence attached to the development of generic skills, such as communication skills, teamwork skills and critical thinking, in the desired outcomes of higher education and the desire to assess these skills, one outcome of which is the rise of assessable group work;
- the perceived threat of an increase in plagiarism, particularly from on-line sources, and the damage any such trend would do to confidence in the quality of assessment and academic standards;
- the efforts of academic staff to find cost- and time-effective assessment techniques in the face of larger and more diverse student cohorts;
- the emergence of new technological possibilities for assessment, including the potential to integrate assessment in new ways with other teaching and learning activities; and
- the changing nature of the students themselves, in their diverse backgrounds, abilities, expectations and engagement with the learning process.

The final factor is of particular significance. Universities are recognising and responding to the changing nature of student lives and priorities. Many undergraduate students are less involved in university life than students of the past, in part due to the pressure of part-time work. Centre for the Study of Higher Education research into the first year experience shows that an increasing proportion of full-time first year students are working part-time and those who are working are tending to work longer hours than previously.

From the perspective of students with busy and complex lives, poorly planned continuous assessment, for example, can be just as tyrannous as the 'one-chance' final examination. For academics, the new realities of student lives indicates the need for imaginative assessment practices which do not in any way compromise on the integrity and rigour of academic requirements.

A final imperative for renewing assessment practices is associated with standards and accountability. As university entrance pathways and the modes of student participation diversify, the maintenance of standards through entry pre-requisites and 'time spent on task' are significantly less important mechanisms for ensuring standards than they once were. The accurate measurement and reporting of student knowledge, skills, achievement or performance is increasingly the final measure of academic standards.

Five contemporary assessment issues in higher education

1. Capturing the potential of on-line assessment

On-line assessment is an unparalleled opportunity for rethinking assessment in higher education. Extensive experimentation is under way in universities into the possibilities for effective and efficient on-line assessment. The experience of staff working in this area indicates that the design of assessment tasks rapidly becomes more sophisticated, since computers offer the potential to present students with complex scenarios and interactive resources.

Academics involved in developing on-line assessment believe this mode of assessment opens up exciting new possibilities for:

- providing interactive assessment tasks that are in themselves learning experiences (including on-line test questions that incorporate information-rich images, sound and text);
- improving the quality and rate of feedback to students, including capturing the potential for immediate feedback;
- providing greater opportunities for students to practise their knowledge and skills;
- randomising assessment tasks;
- reducing costs and staff workloads through automation of routine assessment tasks;
- offering students more flexibility in time, place and the selection of assessment options; and
- providing equitable opportunities for international students to demonstrate their knowledge (such as reducing or eliminating time constraints on answering questions).

The ways in which on-line assessment might be used to deliver benefits such as these are still to be fully explored. Key issues in the development of these approaches to assessment — and with most other forms of assessment too — are whether on-line assessment techniques are assessing the full range of higher order learning outcomes (as opposed to narrow reproduction), whether there is equity for all students in the opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, and whether the approaches being adopted by universities to verify individual student performance are robust. [On-line assessment](#)

2. Designing efficient and effective assessment for large classes

The growing size of the student body is a significant factor in the day-to-day decisions academics are making about assessment methods. Larger class sizes have encouraged academic staff to look for time-efficient assessment techniques as they find the time they are spending on marking and grading is rising. The introduction of modular and more flexible courses may also have increased the assessment workload for teaching staff.

In the search for time efficient assessment methods questions are naturally raised about the maintenance of the intellectual quality of assessment: which means being alert to approaches to assessment that might reward superficial, shallow or reproductive approaches to learning, or which may fail to direct students into the type of study that leads to the higher-order objectives of university education. Assessment for large classes must be highly targeted and strategic in measuring the desired learning outcomes: excessive assessment is neither helpful in directing students into effective approaches to study, nor any more precise in measuring their learning. The challenge for staff in assessing larger classes is to optimise the efficiency of assessment requirements while at the same time neither compromising the role of assessment in guiding student learning nor reducing the capacity of the assessment methods to validly and reliably measure student learning. [Assessing large classes](#)

3. Responding to plagiarism and developing policies to foster academic honesty

Universities have acted quickly and comprehensively to introduce policies to reduce the threat of plagiarism. Detection software identifying plagiarised material is in widespread use. While there is little reliable evidence to indicate whether or not the incidence of plagiarism has risen in higher education, there is a much greater awareness among both staff and students of the possibilities for plagiarism created by electronic technologies. When the new technological possibilities are coupled with the growing complexity of student lives, the conditions are ripe for plagiarism to occur: many students are under great pressure for success and many are working long hours in paid employment, circumstances in which plagiarism may be the act of a desperate student rather than an intrinsically dishonest one.

Plagiarism varies in both intent and extent, ranging from deliberate fraud, to negligent or accidental failure to acknowledge sources of paraphrased material and misunderstandings about the conventions of authorship. Many students who represent someone else's work as their own are aware they are cheating. Plagiarism also arises from ignorance of the conventions for attribution and differing assumptions in regard to the origins of ideas. The more subtle manifestations of plagiarism highlight the need for effective educative campaigns alongside rigorous detection methods. The problem of plagiarism needs a sustained attention that includes *educative, preventive and detection* strategies. [Minimising plagiarism](#)

4. Using assessment to guide effective group work

There has been a significant trend in recent years to incorporate generic skills explicitly alongside traditional subject-specific knowledge in the expected learning outcomes in higher education. Typically these generic skills include communication skills, leadership skills and teamwork skills — a direct response to the objective of preparing graduates with the capacity to function successfully as team members in the workplace.

One outcome of the broadening of intended learning outcomes is that students are increasingly required to participate in group learning activities. These activities are often designed to mimic the approaches to problem-solving found in the workplace and students are expected to learn approaches to resolving conflict, planning and managing time. Both the *processes* and *products* of these activities are often assessable course components.

There is a sound educational rationale for expecting students to participate in group work. There are also well-known challenges. Not all students believe they benefit from group work. Many academics are cautious about group assessment too — equity of individual contribution to group work and the verification of this contribution are significant issues, among others, in the implementation of effective group activities and fair assessment of them.

The design of assessment is central to the educational effectiveness of group work. Assessment requirements do a great deal to establish the dynamics of student groups. Carefully designed assessment, which fairly assesses as appropriate individual contribution as well as the achievements of the group as a whole, will help create productive groups. [Assessing group work](#)

5. Recognising the needs of students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education

In a mass higher education system, universities enrol a more diverse student body. This diversity is apparent in the differing cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and educational experiences of students and their families. One educational consequence of student diversity is that universities teach some students with little prior exposure to the unwritten rules and conventions of higher education. International students are a particular example of students less familiar with assessment practices in Australian higher education.

Assessment is one of the areas of possible confusion and uncertainty for international students, particularly during their first year of study in Australia. At the least, the diversity in grading nomenclature and interpretation across universities may confuse international students who are familiar with systems in which grades are handled in quite different ways. More significantly, misunderstanding and confusion about assessment requirements and the correct attribution of original ideas may result in inadvertent plagiarism. Academic staff have a critical role in recognising the likely areas of uncertainty about assessment experienced by international students, in offering clear guidelines on what is required, and in providing suggestions for studying efficiently and effectively in a new educational setting. [Providing advice to students less familiar with assessment practices in Australian higher education](#)