A resource anthology to support the implementation of the Southern Cross University Assessment Policy 2017
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A resource anthology to support the implementation of the Southern Cross University Assessment Policy (2017)

Introduction

This anthology has been developed to support implementation of the 2017 Southern Cross University Assessment Policy and procedures. It consists of ten key assessment resources – papers, book chapters, websites – selected with reference to one or more of the seven principles that underpin SCU policy (as indicated in the table below). The references reflect current scholarly approaches to assessment and focus on significant topics such as whole-of-course/program assessment planning, communication with students, authentic assessment, team/groupwork assessment, inclusive assessment, standards-based assessment, sustainable assessment – self- and peer assessment, assurance of standards, technology-enabled/enhanced assessment and assessment by examination. Feedback is not included as a separate category as the majority of the works refer to feedback either directly or indirectly. The Gibbs and Simpson (2005) paper (see reference list) is a seminal work on this topic and highly recommended to those interested in further reading. The resource draws on works produced by authoritative assessment scholars and practitioners from around the world. Each of the ten key resources is introduced through its abstract (where available) and/or a one-page summary and supplemented by additional material of a practical nature such as guidelines, rubrics or checklists, many of which can be used in support of assessment, review, enhancement or benchmarking activities.

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Whole-of-course/program assessment planning

Key resource


This chapter provides a comprehensive coverage of the decisions involved when planning assessment from a whole-of-course/program perspective. The authors are some of the most authoritative and prolific researchers in the field and provide a useful starting point for further investigation across a number of assessment topics.

Chapter summary

This chapter makes the following key points in addressing the practicalities of whole-of-course assessment planning:

1. Current fragmented, modular approaches to assessment planning can result in an over-emphasis on student marks; reduced opportunity for formative assessment and feedback on the higher order skills that are difficult to assess at module level because of the time taken for their development; a perceived lack of course cohesion by the staff and students; and questionable statistical practices in assigning grades. The chapter makes an argument for a focus on comprehensive and robust whole-of-course assessment planning to ensure the learning outcomes of the course have been met; to distinguish among the performances of individual students; and to improve student learning.

2. Course-level assessment planning involves the consideration of contextual factors: the institutional mission or strengths such as employability; the nature of the discipline being assessed; professional accreditation requirements; the validity of course outcomes and their alignment with assigned tasks; and the validity of how student achievement is to be represented.

3. Course level assessment decisions address:
   i. whether assessment is to be achieved through integrated assessment which directly assesses program outcomes or coherent mapping of unit level outcomes to ensure indirect assessment of course outcomes; or a combination of the two;
   ii. the relative importance of construct validity, reliability and manageability of assessment in allocating resources at unit and course level;
   iii. the resourcing implications of different types of unit learning outcomes and the types of assessment employed in different units and years/levels of the course, the particular needs of first-year students, and strategies for boosting student retention;
   iv. the balance of formative and summative assessment when considering their impact on student study time and learning behaviours; time required for staff feedback on formative tasks; the high stakes individual summative assessments assume when the number of summative assessment tasks is reduced; student misinterpretation of the intent of the feedback provided on combined formative/summative tasks; and the validity of the contribution of assessment outcomes from early years of the course to the awarding of final degrees;
   v. the variety and challenge of set assessment tasks and their impact on course coherence, student elective choices (e.g. to experience group work or to avoid examinations), the fit of assessment types with students’ long-term goals and aspirations.

4. Approaches to designing course level assessment include accumulative integrative projects; summative integrated projects and/or assessment periods; integrated assessment tasks; assessment blocks; and portfolios.

Supplementary material

An overview of different assessment patterns and their impact.

Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TFSTA) project. (n.d.). Revised Assessment Patterns that Work. University of Winchester.
Communication with students

Key resource


This paper focuses on how the course outline or profile can be used to communicate effectively with students. It encompasses all aspects of the unit or course but the rubric it contains deals fairly extensively with effective ways of communicating assessment and provides a useful checklist to guide the work of course/unit developers.

Paper summary

Abstract

To enrich the resources for measuring the impact of educational development work, we have created a rubric to assess the degree to which a syllabus achieves a learning orientation. The rubric provides qualitative descriptions of components that distinguish learning-focused syllabi and uses a quantitative scoring system that places syllabi on a spectrum from content-focused to learning-focused. It is flexible enough to accommodate a diverse range of levels, disciplines, institutions and learning environments, yet nuanced enough to provide summative information to developers using the tool for assessment purposes and formative feedback to instructors interested in gauging the focus of their syllabi.

The rubric described in this paper was developed as a resource for a week-long course design institute but has a range of quite flexible applications — for adaptation by workshop developers at other institutions, for reference by faculty developers when working with academic staff to design or evaluate courses, for reflection by individual academics, and for the evaluation of the learner-centeredness of a group of courses in a program.

The background of the rubric is outlined with reference to an extensive literature (there are 44 references provided for those wishing to investigate further). The rubric provided addresses Learning Goals and Objectives, Assessment Activities, Schedule, and the overall Learning Environment, Promise, Tone and Inclusivity, Motivation and value of course/unit, Expectations and confidence of success, and Organisation and navigation.

Rubric criteria that directly address assessment include:

- Clarity of alignment of learning outcomes and assessment tasks
- Clarity of definition of summative tasks, provision of rationale and task authenticity
- Planning for formative assessment and the source and timing of feedback
- Pacing and scaffolding of assessment tasks
- The basis of judgements and grading and how this aligns with leaning objectives and supporting assessments.

The rubric is also presented as a sample scoring sheet that can be used to evaluate the extent to which the curriculum document (syllabus) is learning-focused. Three rater conditions that ensure instrument validity are (1) fluency with Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning, (2) clarity on the institute’s definitions of learning goals and objectives, and (3) familiarity with alignment as a course design construct. An inter-rater reliability process is also described.

A separate, supplementary rubric addresses the characteristics of Learning Activities which may not be detailed in the syllabus document itself but which make an importance contribution to the student experience.

A summary section outlines ongoing application and evaluation of rubric effectiveness and future plans for expanding its use.

Supplementary material

Companion document to Palmer et al. (2014)

Authentic assessment

Key resource


This chapter has a very practical orientation to course/program assessment. It provides concrete examples of how assessment can be enhanced through authentic outputs and the nomination of specific audiences for student work. It acknowledges the challenges of switching to more authentic task design and illustrates implementation across a range of disciplines.

Chapter summary

The basic premise of this chapter is that as the range of forms of student assessment used across the sector is growing so is the need to make students’ experiences of assessment as authentic, effective and efficient as possible. It asks, “How can we do this – for students, for teachers and assessors, and even for wider society?”. The chapter discusses some very practical suggestions.

While traditional approaches may embody good practice, research suggests new possibilities for assessment and feedback. The thoughtful inclusion of the kinds of communications undertaken by researchers and enquiring professionals into the overall pattern of programme assessment in many fields enhances assessment authenticity.

Possibilities for practice

Four key questions are posed to guide assessment design.

1. What kinds of ‘outputs’ might students produce?
   Examples include narrated slides, poster displays, exhibitions, student-run events (research conferences or events for alumni or employers);
2. To whom is their research directed?
   Examples include student peers in the same class, practitioners in a given field, publishing companies, a local charity, residents or interest groups;
3. How will students’ research outputs be collated and curated?
   A sequence of activities can be connected through a programme-wide or programme-long portfolio (discussed in terms of its benefits and challenges);
4. How will assessment and feedback processes be affected?
   A revised sequence of assessment activities is outlined as a possible consequence of implementing a more authentic approach to assessment.

Challenges for departments

In recognition of the potential impact of changing approaches to assessment on rhythms and cultures of engagement within and across university departments, an incremental and staged approach to change is suggested.

Vignettes of practice

A set of vignettes illustrates the suggested assessment approach in practice in several disciplines:

- History students producing a presentation in person and with digital media to explain the historical significance of an object or place
- International Relations students produced 10-minute documentary films on topics such as the global politics of beards, a behind-the-scenes look at London’s Russian elite and a political ethnography of London’s nighttime economy and its workers
- Business students worked in small teams to investigate the business information needs of a local business partner – a messy, unstructured, real-world enquiry
- Management students research business sustainability through activities such as editing a Wikipedia article and providing reports to inform university sustainability activities.

Supplementary material

Companion document (rubric) to Fung 2017.

Teamwork assessment

Key resource


Groupwork (now more commonly referred to as teamwork) is beneficial in terms of the learning it can promote but is also problematic in terms of the challenges posed to task design, and equitable judgements. The CSHE publication provides a comprehensive overview of all the factors to be considered when planning teamwork.

Web resource summary

The Centre for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE) website provides a comprehensive overview of the factors that underpin effective team/group work planning.

Guideline topics discussed include:

Three good reasons for group learning:
1. Peer learning can improve the overall quality of student learning.
2. Group work can help develop specific generic skills sought by employers.
3. Group work may reduce the workload involved in assessing, grading and providing feedback to students.

Common issues and concerns:
1. Lack of perceived relevance, lack of clear objectives
2. Inequity of contribution
3. Overuse.

Designing group activities that work. Is there a best model for group work?
1. Providing explicit guidelines
2. Determining group membership
3. Establishing the role(s) and responsibility of group members
4. Scheduling group meetings
5. Defining group processes and procedures.

Weighing-up the options for group assessment

Options are provided for each of the questions below and discussed in relation to their potential advantages and disadvantages. Final decisions are largely (but not exclusively) dependent on the educational context in which the assessment task is undertaken and the support available.

1. What is to be assessed – the product of the group work, the process of the group work, or both (and if the latter, what proportion of each)?
2. What criteria will be used to assess the aspect(s) of group work of interest (and who will determine these criteria – lecturer, students or both)?
3. Who will apply the assessment criteria and determine marks (lecturer, students – peer and/or self-assessment or a combination)?
4. How will marks be distributed (shared group mark, group average, individually, combination)?

Effective teamwork relies on good task design, guidelines for which are provided in:

Inclusive assessment

Key resource


This occasional paper discusses the origins of and issues associated with requirements to address student diversity through inclusive assessment. The companion document provides a useful guide for addressing the issue on a number of levels.

Annotated Table of Contents

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2. Debates about assessment practice – contextualises the importance of assessment diversity and inclusiveness through discussion of a range of recently debated assessment issues ................................................................. 2

3. The reframing of assessment – the disability dimension – explains that while diversity and inclusiveness apply to the student population as a whole, the need to cater for students with a disability has historically been a strong driver of inclusive assessment ........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 4

4. The legislative duty for inclusive practice – traces the increasing attention to matters of diversity and inclusiveness to legislative attempts to negate disability discrimination in society at large, through making education one of the key loci for positive action .................................................................................................................................................................................... 6

5. Making assessment inclusive – argues for an increased assessment flexibility that is less (i) the reactive provision of a different mode of assessment in a circumstance where the existing assessment mode is not suitable for a candidate; and more (ii) a proactive provision of assessment choice, offering different ways to all candidates to demonstrate their acquisition of the learning outcomes.

...the imperative to not discriminate against disabled people will have benefits for all students. In alluding to ‘each student’ and to ‘as many students as possible’ the disability legislation is promoting the fact that making assessments flexible is of a general benefit to all students in the sector ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 7

6. The legislative duty and the setting of ‘competence standards’ – identifies assurance of standards as the basis for resistance to the participation of disabled people in HE .................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 9

7. A clarification of the terms of reference – discusses three approaches to addressing student diversity in assessment. The ‘contingent approach’ and the ‘alternative approach’ (both of which focus on accommodations for students with disability) and the ‘inclusive approach’ which addresses the diversity of ALL students ........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 10

8. The use of the term Inclusive Assessment ... provides a set of (10) statements intended to help clarify intentions in using the term ‘inclusive assessment’ including to:

• Indicate a fair way of assessing for learning that achieves the objective of measuring the learning outcomes of a course and awarding grades, while recognising student diversity and different learning styles.

• Maintain academic standards while offering flexibility and assessment choice as a complementary element of taking a flexible approach to delivering teaching and learning .............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 12

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Supplementary material

Standards-based assessment

Key resource


As Hendry et al. report, rubrics alone are insufficient in developing student understanding of the standards to be applied to judgements about their achievement. Though rubrics are helpful tools they need to be used in conjunction with appropriate teaching and learning activities.

Rubrics can be difficult to develop so the additional reference is included because of its useful language.

Paper Summary

Abstract

Many universities are moving to greater use of standards-based assessment to support effective student learning. Implementing a standards-based approach includes involving academic staff in writing descriptions of standards [e.g. rubrics] for assessment tasks both to guide the marking process and clarify staff expectations for students. However, recent research shows many students find written descriptions of standards difficult to understand unless they are helped to engage with assignment exemplars. Teacher-led marking and discussion of exemplars in class result in increased student understanding of standards and higher achievement. This mixed-methods study explores students’ perceptions of the usefulness of exemplars, and the effects of different teacher styles in leading in-class marking of exemplars. An interactive style in which the teacher provides a balanced explanation of the standards embedded in exemplars is associated with higher student achievement. A minimal institutional approach to implementing standards-based assessment, in which staff simply construct and distribute written grade descriptors to students to support effective learning may have little or no overall benefit, particularly for students transitioning to their first year at university. Staff development activities may need to focus on helping teachers expand their conceptions of the role of assessment for learning while also supporting their development of written assessment standards.

The paper is structured as follows:

Introduction discusses the literature reporting the ineffectiveness of relying on rubrics as the sole means of communicating standards to both students and assessors in order to support the completion of assessment tasks and to develop student ability for self-assessment.

Background and context summarises previous research in this area and teacher misgivings about the proposed use of exemplars to develop student understanding of the standards that would form the basis of assessment judgement.

Method describes investigation of the usefulness of exemplars and a marking class in developing understanding of standards and consequent impact on student achievement.

Results identifies themes from the focus group data [(1) usefulness of exemplars as templates; (2) generic marking sheet; and (3) usefulness of the marking class]; questionnaires (differing student perceptions and outcomes associated with different approaches used by the different teachers); teacher interviews (different teacher beliefs regarding the purpose of marking guides or rubrics resulting in different approaches to their incorporation into teaching and assessment).

Discussion suggests that different teachers use the same marking sheets or rubrics in different ways produce different student understanding and achievement of standards. The paper concludes that providing examples of past students’ work and engaging in class discussion about the standards they illustrate is consistent with learning-oriented teaching and assessment.

The paper provides 22 references.

Supplementary material

(AACU) articulates criteria and standards for 16 learning outcomes including Civic Engagement, Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking, Ethical Reasoning, Global Learning, Information Literacy, Inquiry and Analysis, Integrative Learning, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, Foundations and Skills for Lifelong Learning, Oral Communication, Problem Solving, Quantitative Literacy, Reading, Teamwork, Written Communication.

The VALUE Rubric Development Project
Sustainable assessment – Self- and peer assessment

Key resource

Boud, an internationally recognised Australian assessment authority, here with Soler discusses sustainable assessment, which meets the present needs of the unit/course, but also prepares students to meet future learning needs. Panadero et al. contribute to this discussion through their guidelines for self- and peer assessment.

Abstract
Sustainable assessment has been proposed as an idea that focused on the contribution of assessment to learning beyond the timescale of a given course. It was identified as an assessment that meets the needs of the present in terms of the demands of formative and summative assessment, but which also prepares students to meet their own future learning needs. This paper reviews the value of such a notion for assessment; how it has been taken up over the past 15 years in higher education and why it might still be needed. It identifies how it has been a successful intervention in assessment discourse. It explores what more is needed to locate assessment as an intervention to focus on learning for the longer term. It shows how sustainable assessment can help bridge the gap between assessment and learning, and link to ideas such as self-regulation, students’ making judgements about their own work and course-wide assessment.

Keywords: sustainable assessment; assessment for learning; self-assessment; student judgements; purposes of assessment

The paper provides 40 references.

Supplementary material
Assuring achievement standards

Key resource

Sadler, an internationally recognised Australian assessment authority, proposes calibration as an effective way of developing a shared understanding of assessment standards among assessors and students alike.

The Sefcik et al. paper describes a process of cross-institutional calibration and assurance of standards.

Abstract
The course (module) grades entered on higher education academic records (transcripts) purportedly represent substantive levels of student achievement. They are often taken at face value and accepted as comparable across courses. Research undertaken over several decades has shown that the underlying standards against which student works are appraised are poorly understood and can vary widely from assessor to assessor. At the same time, it is commonly held that academic judgements should be respected and form the basis of any quality assurance scheme. This article is about some of the conceptual foundations relevant to a particular approach to assuring academic achievement standards. The final concept discussed is that of ‘calibrated’ academics who are able to make grading judgements consistent with those which similarly calibrated colleagues would make, but without constant engagement in moderation. The overall aims are to achieve comparability of standards across institutions and stability of standards over time.

Keywords: moderation; teacher judgement; peer review; academic standards; higher education

The paper provides 27 references.

Supplementary material
This paper adopts a critical but ultimately positive perspective on the capacity of technology-enabled assessment to live up to the expectations of its proponents.

The JISC paper offers suggestions for technological support of different stages of an assessment and Feedback Lifecycle (see diagram) and links to other resources on various assessment themes.

Abstract

This chapter brings recent critical thought from the field of educational technology to bear on the challenge of scaling up Assessment for Learning (AfL). Three different types of ‘scaling up’ are presented, illustrated through three different ‘technology-enhanced’ AfL approaches. Recent advances in providing feedback through audio, video and screencast technologies are used to explore ‘doing more with less’ as a form of scaling up. Technology enables providing more and richer feedback information while requiring less staff time – but it remains unclear if this results in better learning or just better student experience. Technology’s ability to scale up our thinking from individual tasks up to programme level matters is explored through portfolios and curriculum mapping tools. Although these tools provide affordances for programmatic thinking, implementing these thoughts in the complex social environment of higher education presents its own challenges. Finally, scaling up AfL to serve large cohorts without linearly scaling up resources like teacher time is explored through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). However, given the low completion rates in MOOCs, we question if access to AfL is the same as real AfL opportunity.

The chapter concludes with implications for scaling up AfL that have been synthesized from these illustrative examples.

The chapter provides 53 references.

Supplementary material

Assessment by examination

Key resource


Bridge et al. offer useful advice for systematic development of examinations which are common to assessment traditions in some disciplines.

Abstract

Measurement experts generally agree that a systematic approach to test construction will probably result in an instrument with sound psychometric properties. One fundamental method is called the blueprint approach to test construction. A test blueprint is a tool used in the process for generating content-valid exams by linking the subject matter delivered during instruction and the items appearing on the test. Unfortunately, this procedure as well as other educational measurement practices is often overlooked. A survey of curriculum administrators at 144 United States and international medical schools was conducted to assess the importance and prevalence of test blueprinting in their school. Although most found test blueprinting to be very important, few require the practice. The purpose of this paper is to review the fundamental principles associated with achieving a high level of content validity when developing tests for students. The short-term efforts necessary to develop and integrate measurement theory into practice will lead to long-term gains for students, faculty and academic institutions.

The paper provides 21 references.

Supplementary material


Haladyna et al. have reviewed and summarised guidelines for developing multiple choice items (including optimal number of options) and classified item formats into seven categories.
References


