Designing an Assessment Scheme

Assessment schemes incorporate the assessments tasks, weightings, marking criteria and due dates for submission. They need to be well balanced to prompt the right kind of learning. Many complex decisions have to be made about what and how to assess, what methods to employ, the technologies to use, and how to communicate this to students in a clear and transparent way.

The design of an assessment scheme requires high levels of an academic judgment and expertise. The assessment scheme is designed by the unit assessor in consultation with the course coordinator or an academic nominated as reviewer/moderator. Consider the prompts below when designing your assessment scheme.

1. Analysing the unit context

The following broad questions help to shape the assessment design, particularly in relation to issues of diversity, inclusivity and fitness for purpose.

- Where does this unit belong in the course? (1st year? core? elective?)
- What graduate attributes will the unit be developing? (Each course has a set of graduate attributes and every unit in the course contributes to the overall development of a suite of skills and attributes)
- How is this unit to be delivered? (internal only? online? blended mode? residential?)
- Who are my students? (background, prior knowledge, language proficiency, technological capacity)
- What are the unit objectives? (Note verbs such as ‘describe’, ‘critique’ or ‘evaluate’. These words provide important cues about the nature and level of required assessment tasks.)

2. Selecting appropriate methods

There are a wealth of assessment methods, however, only a relatively small number may be appropriate for your unit. In the table below, you will find a list of eight broad learning outcomes, and the corresponding assessment methods that are commonly used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcome</th>
<th>Assessment methods commonly employed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking critically and making judgements</td>
<td>Essays, reports, journals, case studies, debates, blogs, wikis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solving problems and planning</td>
<td>Scenarios, group work, role play, case studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performing procedures and techniques</td>
<td>Demonstrations, role plays, oral or video assessments, poster presentations, laboratory reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing and developing oneself</td>
<td>Journals, portfolios, autobiography, learning contracts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessing and managing information</td>
<td>Annotated bibliographies, applied tasks or problems, wikis and other online search tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrating knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>Written examinations, online quizzes, oral exams or vivas, essays and reports, student-created assessments and marking criteria, group problem solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Designing, creating, performing</td>
<td>Portfolios, projects, performances, presentations, group work, brainstorming activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Written, oral or online presentations, group work reflection, discussions, debates, role play, e-portfolios</td>
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3. Determining an appropriate load, weighting, frequency and timing

These factors are a critical part of the fine-tuning of your assessment. Consider the following questions:

- What is considered to be a reasonable volume of assessment for a unit in your course? Most courses have agreed or established caps regarding assessment load.
- Are all planned assessment tasks necessary? Is there overlap? Can assessment be pared down?
- Are the weightings of each task commensurate with the relative time spent and degree of difficulty of the task? Do your weightings send an appropriate message to students about time on task?
- Do students have sufficient time to prepare each assessment task adequately? Is there sufficient spacing between tasks to allow feedback to be incorporated by students?

It is worth remembering that overloading students with assessment, or creating non-essential 'busy work', has a counterproductive effect, often creating anxiety and surface approaches to learning.

4. Developing marking criteria and grading standards for tasks

Assessment tasks are normally accompanied by marking criteria and standards. Designed well, they should inform and guide a student, without giving the task away.

Criteria are the categories that the marker will be using to judge the student work. (e.g. quality of argument, research, technical aspects, etc).

Standards are statements about the level gained within each criterion (e.g. HD, D, Credit, etc).

Rubrics combine the criteria and standards into a matrix or table.

Criteria and standard should be explicitly clarified with students and integrated into teaching and learning activities, so that students learn to understand what is expected and how they can improve their work.

5. Communicating your assessment tasks effectively to students

Many well-designed assessment tasks can be undermined through inadequate information on what is required. Consider some of the following strategies:

- Provide a rationale for the task – let students inside the logic of your assessment
- Terminology needs to be clear and consistent. Give students explanations of assessment terms they might misunderstand (e.g. ‘critically analyse’, ‘reflect’, ‘evaluate’)
- Assessment tasks take different forms. Explain your expectations (the report format, the essay form)
- Inexperienced students need assistance in how to approach the task. (e.g. Have a pre-assessment tutorial in class or online).

6. Review of tasks before release to students

All assessment tasks, especially examinations, should be reviewed by an academic colleague before released to students. Review should ensure that:

- tasks are aligned with unit learning objectives and relevant graduate attributes
- tasks are developed to an appropriate level of skills and knowledge
- the overall assessment load is appropriate
- criteria and standards are clear and are developed into an effective marking scheme
- the tasks are actually answerable or feasible for student to complete
- instructions and supporting information to students are clear, complete and unambiguous.
Sources

