

# Practical support for assessment scholarship that acknowledges academic workload and prior (in)experience

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Growing acknowledgement of the importance of the scholarship of assessment has led to the emergence of support structures and resources. There is also now recognition in the form of grants and awards at both institutional and national level to support further participation in this area of scholarship. However, recognition at this level is usually dependent on the successful completion of previous work on a smaller scale. It is possible, and indeed common, for academics to engage in small-scale scholarship of assessment in their own courses, and to introduce assessment enhancement at the program level as a response to institutional quality assurance requirements. However, the additional effort required to consult authoritative assessment literature, develop an evaluation plan and related instruments, collect and analyse data and represent outcomes in a way that constitutes worthwhile contributions to the scholarship of assessment can present significant obstacles to busy academics and those who are inexperienced in educational scholarship. This poster reports the findings of two assessment-enhancement projects implemented at the University of Queensland. Of significance was the availability of a research assistant to a network of academics undertaking projects in their own educational settings. The research assistant was asked to perform a number of tasks ranging from the drafting of ethics submissions to the observation of teaching sessions. A major conclusion of this project is that too little attention has been paid in the past to the provision of such practical support, and that this is an important consideration in the design of future assessment-enhancement projects.

**Keywords:** assessment scholarship; assessment support

**Theme:** sustainable assessment practices and standards

## Introduction: aims and background

A growing acknowledgement of the importance of the scholarship assessment (Rust, 2007) has led to the emergence of support structures and resources, and the recognition of achievement. These take the form of grants to support participation in this area of scholarship and awards at both institutional and national level. For example, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) identified assessment as a priority for its Priority Projects grants scheme, which invites submissions for substantial support and lists “Approaches to assessment, feedback and learning that support and foster independent learning” as a specific criterion for awards for Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning and Teaching Excellence (ALTC, 2010a). However, recognition at this level is usually dependent on the successful completion of previous work on a smaller scale. Indeed, ALTC evaluations of submissions comment that “Pilots could have been conducted to justify this work ahead of the funding request being made” (ALTC, 2010b). The problem for many academics new to this area of scholarship is how to get started.

It is possible, and indeed common, for academics to engage in small-scale scholarship of assessment in their own courses, and to introduce assessment enhancement at program level in response to institutional quality assurance requirements. However, the additional efforts required to consult authoritative assessment literature, develop an evaluation plan and related instruments, collect and analyse data and represent outcomes in a way that constitutes worthwhile contributions to the scholarship of assessment can present significant obstacles. Not only do many discipline academics have heavy teaching and administrative workloads but they also face the additional hurdles of unfamiliar terminology, theories and methodologies when engaging in scholarly activities related to curriculum,

teaching and assessment. As Morris and Fry note, “moving into the field of education has turned international researchers into research novices in need of support and advice” (2006, p. 54). This poster will be of interest to those responsible for supporting sustainable assessment practices and standards.

## **Methodology**

A two-stage assessment enhancement initiative, whose design paid particular attention to the support of academics in the practicalities of participating in assessment scholarship, was introduced at the University of Queensland in 2007. The first stage was an assessment mentoring program undertaken in 2007 through an ALTC Associate Fellowship (Goos, Hughes & Webster-Wright, 2009). The second was a follow-up University of Queensland Assessment Network (UQAN) supported by an institutional strategic teaching and learning grant. The network was a mechanism to provide collegial support to academics from across all faculties who were simultaneously engaged in assessment enhancement projects appropriate to their own education contexts. Funding enabled all participants to access the support a project research assistant.

Extensive evaluation of each project was undertaken through a plan incorporating several complementary mechanisms: notes taken at group meetings, individual and group interviews, review of individual project outlines, records of the type of assistance requested by and provided to each project team and a comprehensive report completed by each team.

## **Findings**

This poster reports those findings of the project evaluation that illustrate the type of practical assistance most commonly sought by project participants and their perceptions of its usefulness and contribution to project processes and outcomes. The research assistant was asked to perform a number of tasks, including the drafting of ethics submissions that would enable participants to disseminate the findings of their projects, the development of instruments such as surveys and audit complaints, the observation of teaching sessions and the conduct of literature reviews. As Morris and Fry (2006) have reported, the ability to ‘buy in’ expertise was considered a vital success factor by project participants. However, in this case the expertise was more concerned with the practicalities of conducting an assessment project in a way suited to making a contribution to assessment scholarship than it was with other forms of support such as the effective use of technology. In particular, participants’ written reports indicated the value of support in the development of ethics submissions in an unfamiliar area – the scholarship of teaching and learning – which allowed them to share the outcomes of their work, and also opportunities to share ideas, methods and instruments across projects.

## **Conclusions and implications**

The collaborative assessment enhancement projects reported in this poster have identified the practical support that enables busy and often inexperienced academics to achieve successful outcomes when undertaking scholarship of assessment projects. While much assessment support takes the form of resource provision or mentoring, without the practical support that enables academics to make best use of the resources provided such initiatives are often destined to fail. Broadening the base of assessment support to include these practicalities should therefore be an essential consideration in the design of assessment enhancement initiatives.

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