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Sustainable assessment for long term learning

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Need for clarity amongst the complexity



Focus on the main game:

Whatever else we do in assessment we must

- Promote desirable learning by students now and into the future, and
- Assure the learning that occurs

Everything else is subordinate to this!

Overview

Need for clarity amongst the complexity

The Assessment 2020 agenda as the next step

Why do we need to be concerned about learning in the longer term?

How do we reconceptualise assessment for longer term learning?

Where do we need to invest our resources?

Will this involve turning some of our beloved assumptions on their head?





The neglect of assessment for learning undermines students and staff

It tends to drive us to compliance

Fosters dependency by learners on assessors and *being* assessed

Looks to others to judge us

It is backward looking:

To what has been achieved, not on what capacities need to be achieved

Makes students fearful rather than building confidence

Depletes capacity rather than builds it

It does not need to be this way!



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.

The first steps: **Assessment 2020**

We need to get much *more savvy about assessment for learning*:

1. Assessment must always require *engagement of students in productive learning activities*
2. Active and appropriate *feedback must be consciously designed*
3. Teachers and *students must be partners* in learning
4. Students must always be *inducted well* into learning processes
5. Assessment for learning needs to be at the *centre in course design*



Purposes of assessment

Certifying achievement
(summative assessment)

Aiding learning
(formative assessment)



Purposes of assessment

Certifying achievement
(summative assessment)

Aiding learning
(formative assessment)

Fostering lifelong learning
(sustainable assessment)



Sustainable assessment

“Assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs.”

(Boud, 2000)



Sustainable assessment

“Assessment that meets the needs of the future without compromising the ability of students to meet their present learning needs.”

(Hounsell, after Boud, 2000)

Needs also to be sustainable for academics!



Sustainable assessment implies:

- Focusing on learning outcomes needed now.
- Building *constructive alignment* between
 - (A) desired learning outcomes
 - (B) teaching and learning activities, and
 - (C) all assessment practices.
- Equipping students to learn and assess themselves beyond the immediate task.



Assessment for longer term learning

Key features:

1. sustainable
2. develops informed judgement
3. constructs reflexive learners
4. forms the becoming practitioner



Feature 1. Sustainable

Looks beyond the immediate content

To what is required beyond the end of the course

Avoids creating dependency

eg. through pleasing the lecturer, or always looking to others for judgement

Focuses on higher-order knowledge and skills in context

Unless lower-order thinking is embedded in higher order tasks, it fosters bad learning habits



Feature 2. Develops informed judgement

Students must develop the capacity to make judgments about their own learning

Otherwise they cannot be effective learners now or in the future

Assessment is about informing students' own judgements as well as making judgements on their work

Summative assessment alone is too risky and does not equip students for new challenges. Assessment is more important than grading

Opportunities for developing informed judgement need to be staged across a program

Working across subjects is essential



Feature 3. Constructs reflexive learners

Students must necessarily be involved in the assessment process

Assessment is a key influence in their formation and they are active subjects

Students are positioned to see themselves as learners who are pro-active and generative

Such learners take responsibility for driving learning

Reflexivity and self-regulation is fostered through every aspect of a course from the very start

not just assessment tasks.



Feature 4. Forms the becoming practitioner

Assessment used to help calibrate judgement

Learners act on their belief in judgements; if these are flawed it is more serious than particular knowledge gaps

Students develop confidence and skills to manage their own learning and assessment

Understanding is not enough

Students develop capacity to work effectively with others and mutually develop informed judgement

Assessment in work settings occurs with and for others



Building sustainable assessment for long term learning



Assessment 2020 agenda is only a start

Operate at three levels: institution, program, course/module

Develop our assessment capacity individually and collectively

Realise the implications of standards

Take a more holistic approach to course design—seriously linking assessment with teaching and learning, (eg. in feedback, program-level assessment tasks)

Thinking the unthinkable, confronting the sacred cows

What would sustainable assessment look like?



Some assessment might not appear terribly different to what we do now, but it would be 'joined up'

We would be able to identify the elements that make it build capacity and show students how it works

Some illustrations:

1. Understanding criteria and calibrating judgement
2. Using active and purposeful feedback



Example 1: Understanding criteria and calibrating judgement

Context: any subject with a substantial assignment

1. Group exercise on what constitutes a good example of the assignment— characteristics are noted, discussed and agreement reached
2. Students write statements about the ways in which their assignment meets or doesn't meet these criteria and hand these in with their assignment
3. Assignment marked in normal way, but comments to students focus not on what is good or not so good, but on discrepancies between student judgement and tutor judgement
4. Follow up as needed through dialogue or practice in subsequent assignments



Example 1: Understanding criteria and calibrating judgement

What features of sustainable assessment can be seen?

1. Student early active engagement in the task
2. Discussion with peers to clarify the nature of good work
3. Reflexive loop built in prior to submission of assignment
4. Staff comments used to calibrate student judgement



Example 2: Using active and purposeful feedback

Context: almost any assignment, but with opportunity to use comments from others in identified subsequent work

1. Group discussion among students on ‘what kind of comments would I find most useful on my work to help develop it further’.
2. Individuals complete the task and produce a statement about what *specific comments* they want (*no statement, no comments!*)
3. Staff mark the work and generate requested comments (grades provided later)
4. Students utilise comments in an identifiable following assignment
5. If improvements not noticeable, the nature of staff comments are refined (staff calibrate their own judgements)



Example 2: Using active and purposeful feedback

What features of sustainable assessment can be seen?

1. Early active engagement by students in the task
2. Use of peers as a sounding board, rehearsal
3. Positioning a given task in the context of future learning
4. Student agency in identifying comments required
5. Completion of the feedback loop with an identifiable changed output
6. Staff gain useful information on the effect of their own comments so they can complete their own feedback loop in subsequent marking

Assessment Futures

Key assessment elements
Conceptual framework
Designing and redesigning assessments
Examples by subject area
Share with us
References and links
Glossary
FAQs
Contact

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Assessment Futures

Many students currently graduate without appropriate skills in assessment.

Assessment serves many purposes, including:

- helping students improve their learning, and
- certifying their learning.

This website is about an **important** additional purpose for assessment.

It is about equipping students for the learning and assessing they will need to do **after** completing their course and the challenges they will face after graduation.

Broad structure of the website:

This site provides information on:

- ideas and strategies to browse and consider, but no prescriptions for what you should do.
- ideas that are potentially applicable across a wide range of disciplinary areas.
- examples of how these ideas and strategies have already been used and tested.
- how to adapt and extend these ideas to suit your own subject matter and local circumstances.

Key assessment elements

- ENGAGING STUDENTS
- AUTHENTIC ACTIVITIES
- STUDENTS DESIGN ASSESSMENTS
- INTEGRATIVE TASKS
- LEARNING AND JUDGEMENT
- MODELLING AND PRACTICE
- WORKING WITH PEERS
- GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Who is this Assessment Futures website for?

- Experienced teachers in higher education, who have completed some study in the area. (It is not a basic introduction to teaching and assessment.)
- Teachers who have developed knowledge and skills in teaching and learning. They will know how to take ideas and design guidelines to develop and rework effective activities and strategies for their students.

Evidence and research findings

Assessment Futures is supported by theory and empirical evidence. For clarity this information is not foregrounded, but it can be accessed through hyperlinks to the various examples and to the references section of the site. Where evidence is partial or incomplete, the professional judgement of the author has been applied.

Research on assessment practice in Higher Education is limited and is often generated by a local problem or situation. It rarely tracks a major intervention or brings together different studies of the same thing. It tends to be suggestive and ambiguous. Implications are not always easily drawn from it.

If you have evidence that informs the practices described here, please [contact us](#).

What sacred cows might we need to deal with?

Unilateral assessment

Feedback as telling

Grading instead of useful information

Inappropriate and excessive choice

Cooperation as cheating

'Reducing assessment is always good'

Over-modularisation, over-fragmentation



Why do we need to change?

What matters is substantial and sustainable learning not amount of assessment

Students need to have an active stake in assessment *processes*

Assessment needs to be 'joined-up' to learning, both current and anticipated

Practice always beckons, and it doesn't tolerate the strange features of educational courses that get in the way





The *time* to start is now,
the *place* to start is where it will have most positive
impact on continuing learning

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