



Assessing Learning in Australian Universities

Ideas, strategies and resources for quality in student assessment

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***Assessing Group Work • Quality and Standards • Academic Honesty
Online Assessment • Assessing Large Classes • Assisting International Students***



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION for the AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES TEACHING COMMITTEE

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The Assessing Learning website provides downloadable resources for free reproduction and use by university staff and students, including:

- case studies of good practice from across the disciplines*
- advice on reviewing assessment policies*
- a model of best practice in formative assessment*
- a comparison of plagiarism detection software*
- advice for staff new to university teaching*
- advice for international students on assessment in Australian higher education*

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Assessing Learning in Australian Universities

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Foreword

The fieldwork for this project allowed the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) to put a critical spotlight on student assessment in Australian higher education. During the past year we have seen outstanding examples of good assessment practice.

The project uncovered much innovative assessment, clever strategies for embedding assessment tasks in the learning process, and sustained efforts by faculties to review their assessment practices. These initiatives are taking place despite significant impediments to high quality assessment, such as larger classes and heightened academic workloads.

Notwithstanding the good practice we have seen, there is considerable scope to make assessment in higher education more sophisticated and more educationally effective. Assessment is often treated merely as the endpoint of the teaching and learning process.

There remains a strong culture of 'testing' and an enduring emphasis on the final examination, leaving the focus predominantly on the judgmental role of assessment rather than its potential to shape student development. In all, we believe assessment can be more fully and firmly integrated with teaching and learning processes. Assessment should not only measure student learning but also make a contribution to it.

The CSHE research also identified significant gaps and inconsistencies between institutional policies and faculty or departmental practices. While excessive central regulation can be counterproductive, a stronger

alignment of institutional assessment policy with faculty and departmental activities is critical for ensuring academic standards. Just as significantly from the point of view of standards, assessment criteria can be used more explicitly. There has been a strong and welcome trend in universities to provide clearer statements of criteria and standards for the benefit of students. A closer matching of these criteria to student grading, so that grades refer specifically to learning outcomes, is a desirable next step.

Enhancing assessment in higher education may involve assessing more strategically, providing assessment tasks that require the integration of knowledge, and expanding the use of assessment that provides early feedback in the undergraduate years. There is an inherent conservatism in universities towards considering new or alternative assessment practices. But changes are afoot, particularly in the use of on-line assessment, group assessment and new ways of assessing large classes. From what we have seen, any reluctance to challenge assessment traditions is balanced by the vision academic staff have for the learning of their students and by their commitment to assess student learning thoroughly and fairly.

Richard James, Craig McInnis and Marcia Devlin
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
September 2002

ABOUT THE ASSESSING LEARNING PROJECT

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) was commissioned by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee to develop practical resources and examples of good practice to support Australian universities and academic staff to maintain high quality assessment practices and to respond effectively to new issues in student assessment.

In developing this booklet and the accompanying *Assessing Learning* website, the CSHE project team met with many staff and students during state forums and case studies. The issues and ideas we discussed have been used extensively in the development of the project outcomes.

We are very grateful for the contribution of David Treloar, Kerry Adams and Greg Marie of the University of Western Australia who conducted components of the project in collaboration the CSHE. The project was also greatly assisted by the expertise and advice of Mantz Yorke, Liverpool John Moores University, who acted as a consultant throughout.

Many other people contributed to the project, including Vivienne Kelly (overall project coordination), Gabrielle Baldwin (fieldwork and the writing of resources), Ray Jalil (website design) and Karen Mecoles (website development).

Marcia Devlin prepared the guides to five assessment issues: minimising plagiarism; online assessment; assessing group activities; assessing large classes; and assessing students less familiar with assessment practices in Australian universities.

We would like to thank Jennifer Radbourne (Queensland University of Technology), Duncan Nulty (Queensland University of Technology) and Stuart Palmer (Deakin University), who prepared materials based on their personal assessment initiatives.

The project was assisted by an advisory group chaired by Kwong Lee Dow (University of Melbourne and member of the Australian Universities Teaching Committee), and comprising David Finlay (LaTrobe University), Wayne Robinson (University of Ballarat), and Department of Education, Science and Training representatives Greg Cox, Carol Nicoll and Robyn Martin.

A New Era in Assessment in Higher Education

Renewal of assessment practices is 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 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;
- the perceived threat of an increase in plagiarism, due to the ease of copying 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-effective and time-effective assessment techniques for 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 (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000).

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 has prompted a search for imaginative assessment practices which do not in any way compromise the integrity and rigour of academic requirements.

Five contemporary assessment issues in higher education

The *Assessing Learning* resources provide practical advice on five new assessment issues in higher education.

1. CAPTURING THE POTENTIAL OF ON-LINE ASSESSMENT

On-line assessment offers 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 for assessment tasks involving complex scenarios and interactive resources.

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

- providing interactive assessment tasks that are in themselves rich learning experiences;
- improving the quality and rate of feedback to students, including 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; and
- offering students more flexibility in time, place and the selection of assessment options.

Key issues in the development of these approaches to assessment — and with most other forms of assessment as well — 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 systems installed to verify individual student performance are robust.

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 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.

As time-efficient assessment methods are introduced, questions are inevitable about the intellectual quality of assessment. Universities are 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 not helpful in directing students into effective approaches to study, and rarely 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.

3. RESPONDING TO PLAGIARISM AND DEVELOPING POLICIES TO FOSTER ACADEMIC HONESTY

Universities have acted quickly to introduce policies to reduce the threat of plagiarism. While there is still insufficient 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 new possibilities for plagiarism created by electronic technologies. When the technological possibilities are coupled with the pressures on students to work long hours and achieve academic success, the conditions are ripe for plagiarism to occur.

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. As argued later in this booklet, the problem of plagiarism needs *educative, preventive and detection* strategies.

4. USING ASSESSMENT TO GUIDE EFFECTIVE GROUP WORK

There has been a significant trend in recent years to incorporate generic skills explicitly alongside 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 group learning activities are often assessable course components.

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, is essential for creating productive groups.

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.

Core Principles of Effective Assessment

ENHANCING LEARNING BY ENHANCING ASSESSMENT

The ideas and strategies in the Assessing Student Learning resources support three interrelated objectives for quality in student assessment in higher education.

1. Assessment that guides and encourages effective approaches to learning;
2. Assessment that validly and reliably measures expected learning outcomes, in particular the higher-order learning that characterises higher education; and
3. Assessment and grading that define and protect academic standards.

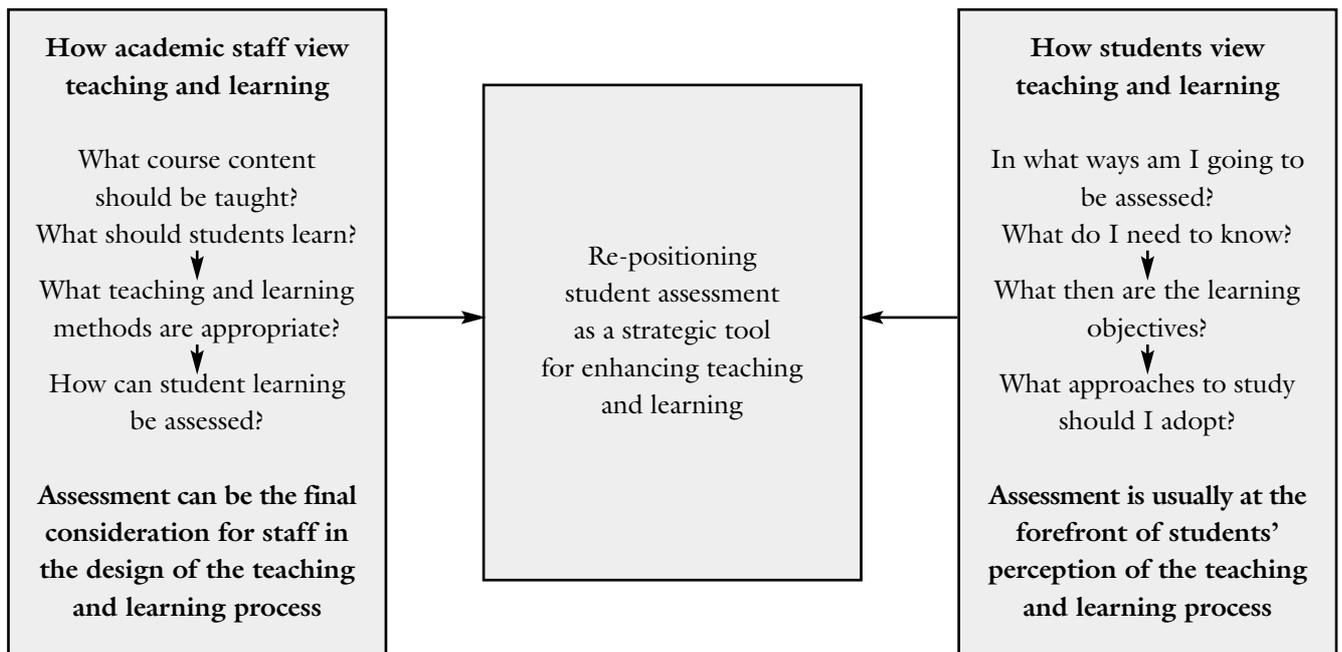
Assessment is a central element in the overall quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Well designed assessment sets clear expectations, establishes a reasonable workload (one that does not push students into rote reproductive approaches to study), and provides opportunities for students to self-monitor, rehearse, practise and receive feedback.

The relationship between assessment and the overall quality of teaching and learning is often underestimated, yet assessment requirements and the clarity of assessment criteria significantly influence the effectiveness of student learning. Carefully designed assessment contributes directly to the way students approach their study and therefore contributes indirectly, but powerfully, to the quality of their learning.

For most students, assessment requirements literally define the curriculum. Assessment is a potent strategic tool for educators with which to spell out the learning that will be rewarded and to guide students into effective approaches to study. Equally, however, poorly designed assessment has the potential to hinder learning or stifle curriculum innovation.

RE-POSITIONING THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT

For academic staff, assessment is often a final consideration in their planning of the curriculum. This is not to imply staff underestimate or undervalue the role or importance of assessment, but assessment is often considered once other curriculum decisions have been made. The primary concerns of academic staff are often with designing learning outcomes and planning teaching and learning activities that will produce these outcomes. In contrast, students often work ‘backwards’ through the curriculum, focusing first and foremost on how they will be assessed and what they will be required to demonstrate they have learned.



For university teachers, recognising the potent effects of assessment requirements on student study habits and capitalising on the capacity of assessment for creating preferred patterns of study is a powerful means of reconceptualising the use of assessment.

16 INDICATORS OF EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A checklist for quality in student assessment

1. Assessment is treated by staff and students as an integral component of the entire teaching and learning process.
2. The multiple roles of assessment are recognised. The powerful motivating effect of assessment requirements on students is understood and assessment tasks are designed to foster valued study habits.
3. There is a faculty/departmental policy that guides assessment practices. Subject assessment is integrated into an overall plan for course assessment.
4. There is a clear alignment between expected learning outcomes, what is taught and learnt, and the knowledge and skills assessed.
5. Assessment tasks assess the capacity to analyse and synthesis new information and concepts rather than simply recall information which has been presented.
6. A variety of assessment methods is employed so that the limitations of particular methods are minimised.
7. Assessment tasks are designed to assess relevant generic skills as well as subject-specific knowledge and skills.
8. There is a steady progression in the complexity and demands of assessment requirements in the later years of courses.
9. There is provision for student choice in assessment tasks and weighting at certain times.
10. Student and staff workloads are considered in the scheduling and design of assessment tasks.
11. Excessive assessment is avoided. Assessment tasks are designed to sample student learning.
12. Assessment tasks are weighted to balance the developmental ('formative') and judgemental ('summative') roles of assessment. Early low-stakes, low-weight assessment is used to provide students with feedback.
13. Grades are calculated and reported on the basis of clearly articulated learning outcomes and criteria for levels of achievement.
14. Students receive explanatory and diagnostic feedback as well as grades.
15. Assessment tasks are checked to ensure there are no inherent biases that may disadvantage particular student groups.
16. Plagiarism is minimised through careful task design, explicit education and appropriate monitoring of academic honesty.

WHAT STUDENTS VALUE IN ASSESSMENT

Unambiguous expectations

Students study more effectively when they know what they are working towards. Students value transparency in the way their knowledge is assessed: they seek a clear relationship between lectures, tutorials, practical classes and subject resources, and what they are expected to demonstrate. They also wish to understand how grades are determined and expect timely feedback that 1) explains the grade they have received, 2) rewards their achievement, 3) offers suggestions for how they can improve, and 4) can be used within the subject or their course.

Authentic tasks

Students value assessment tasks they perceive to be ‘real’: assessment tasks that present serious challenges, not only for the grades at stake, but also for the nature of the knowledge and skills required. Students respect assessment tasks they believe mirror the skills needed in the workplace. Students are keen to test themselves and to compare their performance against others. Assessment tasks that students perceive to be trivial or superficial may not evoke a strong commitment to study.

Choice and flexibility

Many students express a strong preference for choice in the nature, weighting and timing of assessment tasks. The preference for ‘negotiated’ assessment is a logical extension of the trend towards offering students more flexible ways of studying and more choice in study options. Students who seek ‘more say’ in assessment often prefer to be assessed in ways that show their particular skills in the best light. They also argue they will study more effectively if they can arrange their timetables for submitting assessable work to suit their overall workload. Providing higher education students with options in assessment — in a carefully structured way — is worth considering in many higher education courses, though it is not a common practice. Encouraging students to engage with the curriculum expectations in this way should assist them in becoming more autonomous and independent learners.

Reviewing and Renewing Policies and Practices

FRAMEWORKS FOR INSTITUTIONAL, FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT ACTION

The purpose of this section is to suggest practical ways in which assessment policy and practice can be reviewed and renewed. The key steps in making and managing change that follow are based on observations from case studies of educational innovations, including examples from the *Assessing Learning* project. Regardless of what level the change is targeted at — university, faculty, or department — the primary objective is to produce sustained effects that survive well beyond the enthusiasm of individual change agents. It is not simply about redrafting policy statements and regulations. The values underlying approaches to assessment are so deeply embedded in academic practices developed over many years that it is often extremely difficult to change them without challenging fundamental and often competing assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning across the institution.

Change at the institutional level requires a planned approach that is fully in tune with the core values of the institution, usually articulated in the mission and goals of the university as they relate to teaching and learning. However, the diversity of assessment practices across fields of study means that the specifics of change need to be implemented and managed at the level of faculty and department. Getting consensus is not easy and any significant rethinking and change can take a number of years to implement successfully.

In the ‘Immersing a Faculty in Assessment’ case study available on the *Assessing Learning* website, (see following page) Jennifer Radbourne and Duncan Nulty provide a case study of a planned approach to faculty change from Queensland University of Technology. They describe the way in which the faculty approach to assessment was successfully transformed over a sustained period. The key elements targeted in this process were: the academic programs; the staff who deliver the programs; and the organisational policies. The four principal phases involved: a review of the policies and practices; the development of an accountability model; the deployment of an in-house consultant to facilitate change; and the integration of assessment changes into curriculum redesign.

Visit www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning
for two case studies to assist in
reviewing and renewing policies and practices

A CASE STUDY OF AN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE SHIFT

Immersing a Faculty in Assessment

by Jennifer Radbourne and Duncan Nulty
(Queensland University of Technology)

Enhancing assessment practices and embedding new approaches to assessment within teaching and learning practices requires more than professional development for staff — it also requires a process of organisational change and development. This case study explains how processes for organisational change and professional development were successfully combined at the Queensland University of Technology's Faculty of Business.

The QUT case study is an excellent example of how a sustained focus on assessment issues can provide the vehicle for discussion of the wider curriculum and the quality of student learning. It provides a useful blueprint for considering how a similar change process might be undertaken in other settings.

A MODEL ASSESSMENT PLAN

Authenticity in Assessment

by Stuart Palmer (Deakin University)

Authenticity in Assessment provides an example of assessment best practice that recognises the importance of evolving assessment practices across the year levels: from first year assessment, when students have their entire undergraduate studies before them, to final year, the brink of professional practice. This is an outstanding example of a carefully designed, strategic assessment regime that is thoroughly integrated with teaching and learning goals. The features include:

- the use of assessment in first year as a foundational tool to establish student study habits and skills;
- the evolution of assessment tasks by fourth year to reflect the world of professional practice and to allow students to demonstrate their integration of knowledge and skills;
- the careful weighting of assessment tasks to indicate the value attached to particular tasks;
- the well-structured inclusion of group work;
- the concern for student and staff workloads;
- the recognition of student diversity, in particular the needs of off-campus and mature-age students; and
- the matching of assessment tasks to professional accreditation requirements.

A PLANNED APPROACH TOWARDS POLICY CHANGE

1. Identify the need for change

Obvious as it sounds, unless a genuine need to improve assessment can be identified then any efforts to produce change will produce a cynical response from the key stakeholders. However, the need for change in assessment practices is not necessarily recognised or widely supported by those engaged in teaching and learning. It can be useful to commission independent local research to identify precise aspects of assessment practices that require rethinking. This does not mean defining problems into existence: there has to be an overall acceptance that change in assessment will actually improve the quality of learning outcomes.

The local research could include analysis of data from existing student feedback surveys as well as purpose-designed surveys and focus groups of student perceptions of assessment practices. A critical aspect to look out for is the ways in which student learning behaviour is driven by current assessment requirements. Surveys and focus group interviews with staff can reveal patterns of shared concerns that would not otherwise be known in a setting where habit and tradition are the primary rationale for current practice.

Throughout the project for change it is essential to demonstrate the tangible benefits that flow from the renewal of approaches to assessment. The most crucial of these is the impact on improved learning outcomes. It is therefore vital that in the initial stage of the project that a systematic evaluation of student approaches to learning is undertaken, including their perceptions of the

role of assessment, and that some measures of learning outcomes are provided for comparative purposes.

Finding, reviewing and disseminating examples of best practice from universities and departments in similar contexts is useful in the early stages of a program of renewal. Staff need to be convinced that change is not only desirable but possible. They also need to believe that what they are planning to do is in some respects unique and innovative.

2. Recognise the everyday reality of obstacles to change

Most obstacles to changing assessment practices can be overcome with a planned approach that involves genuine consensus building. Opposition or resistance to change from academics is most likely where it poses a potential threat to their autonomy and integrity, and where changes simply do not make sense or appear unnecessary. Proposals to regulate assessment in isolation from other aspects of teaching and learning, or ignoring the disciplinary context are destined to fail. Even so, there will be a natural tendency to downplay the significance of assessment and so the case for change has to be argued and the evidence of need provided.

Ensuring that the nature and origins of existing policy is clearly understood is a critical step to removing obstacles to change. In case studies for the Assessing Student Learning project some staff made a series of erroneous assumptions about the comprehensiveness of university policy for assessment. For example, staff assumed that they were 'not allowed' to give ungraded passes, which was simply not the case. Likewise, it was asserted that staff were compelled by university policy to

distribute grades according to a particular formula: there was in fact no such policy, this was simply a matter of long-standing practice at the faculty and department level. The perception that the wheel is being reinvented is also a common source of irritation and resistance. In one university an internal review was held on the issue of special consideration and only on completion of the review was it discovered that an almost identical policy had been accepted only a few years prior.

3. Raise awareness of the issues and generate discussion

Getting consensus on the need for improving approaches to assessment is best achieved by the use of open forums that involve all academics, and especially, the senior executive and administrators. Gaining the political support of university and faculty leadership across all staff and from the outset will ensure the involvement. This in turn will promote the credibility of the change project.

A widely supported forum should have the effect of starting and stimulating conversations about assessment. An example from a University of Tasmania assessment symposium in 2002 illustrates the pattern of activities and outcomes that might be expected from effort to renew institutional assessment policy and practice. The open forum raised general questions from academics, support staff and administrators such as:

- How do we provide an appropriate range of assessment methods and maintain fairness across large classes, with diverse student groups?

- How can we more clearly and meaningfully link assessment to outcomes?
- How should we deal with the need to provide special consideration for students with disabilities – what are the parameters?

However, these forums too often lead to little lasting change. A planned approach will ensure that there is immediate follow-up involving the dissemination of the findings, the preparation of a second stage plan of action at the institutional level, and direct input into the major policy making bodies.

4. Promote change on multiple fronts

The University of Tasmania example cited above illustrates how, having raised the issues, actions might be proposed for attention at the institutional level. These included diverse activities such as:

- Conducting workshops and facilitating regular conversations on assessment;
- Developing a manual of good practice;
- Showcasing exemplars of good practice from within the university;
- Collecting information on assessment practice and standards and developing resources;
- Promoting the value and importance of good assessment practice and rewarding it.

Ensuring these multiple activities take place in a co-ordinated fashion is a major challenge. While formal committees of the university or faculty clearly have responsibility for initiating and implementing change, ad hoc working groups are often the most effective means of responding to new and emerging issues.

The credibility of an assessment policy review working party will rest on the extent to which it involves connections to all levels of decision making concerned with the quality of teaching and learning. It is therefore important in a planned approach to review leadership roles of individuals and groups responsible for assessment policy.

The notion of 'idea champions' has been widely-used in higher education innovations and involves identifying and supporting academics at the faculty and department level who take responsibility for local initiatives. This is particularly effective when some funding is available to provide time release.

5. Provide expertise and support

Staff development is the most common form of support to assist the implementation of change. It needs to be needs-based and to have a strong element of ownership by the participants in both its design and delivery. The Queensland University of Technology case study illustrates the level of commitment required to produce long-term, sustained changes in practice with skills development and related auditing arrangements. That project also included the deployment of an internal expert consultant to assist the implementation process.

6. Connect to accountability and reward systems

None of the suggestions outlined above will be effective unless there is some impact on the accountability and reward systems of the university, faculty and department. In a time-deprived environment academics, like everyone, will make rational decisions as to how they distribute their energies. Making the responsibilities of all stakeholders clear and transparent and connecting the outcomes to the reward processes of the university is essential. At all levels of administration and teaching, those with a part to play in improving assessment practices need to feel that their efforts are properly recognised.

Standards and quality assurance

Australia benefits greatly from a national and international reputation for high academic standards and high quality universities, courses and graduates. When questions are raised about academic standards they are often associated with assessment practices, in particular student grading. Of course, the assurance of academic standards embraces a wide range of university activities beyond the assessment of student learning. However, assessment and grading practices are perhaps the most important safeguard. The role of assessment in assuring academic standards is likely to be further highlighted as university entry pathways and the modes of student participation and engagement with learning resources diversify: the maintenance of standards through entry pre-requisites and ‘time spent on task’ are far less relevant mechanisms for ensuring standards than they once were. The measurement and reporting of student outcomes — their knowledge, skills, achievement or performance — is now a major reference point for academic standards.

Australian universities have considerable independence in exercising their responsibility for academic standards. As self-accrediting institutions, they have autonomy over course content, course delivery, assessment, grading and the graduation of students. Unlike international higher education systems, there are seldom external assessment requirements, and curricula are rarely determined externally. In these circumstances, it is essential for universities to have robust internal quality assurance for assessment and grading.

The experience of academic staff directly involved in teaching and assessing student learning is also central to determining and monitoring standards. Ultimately, individual academic staff and their academic judgement define and protect standards through the ways in which they assess and grade the students they teach.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUAL ACADEMICS DO ABOUT STANDARDS?

Ensure ...

... there are explicit learning outcomes, clear criteria and, where possible, statements of the various levels of achievement.

... a close match between the assessment tasks — in particular, the knowledge and skills these tasks are capable of determining — and the intended learning outcomes.

... the grades awarded (and other information provided to students on their achievement) make a direct link between the intended learning outcomes and students' actual performance on assessment tasks.

... assessment tasks are capable of detecting the higher-order learning outcomes that characterise higher education.

... there is ongoing dialogue on learning outcomes, assessment and grading with people teaching in the same discipline area in other universities.

With the objective of ...

Students and staff both being aware of what is expected, what is valued, and what will be rewarded.

Creating assessment tasks that validly and reliably determine the valued learning outcomes.

Awarding grades that are meaningful representations of the level of learning.

Developing higher education assessment that determines and reports the highest intellectual skills and accomplishments.

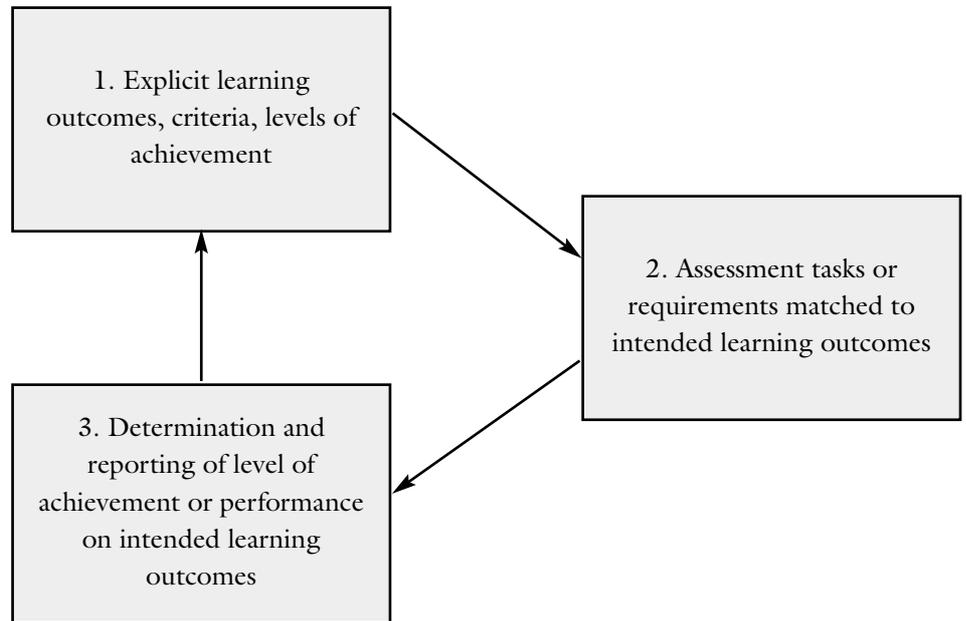
Using assessment and grading practices that are informed by the norms and values of the discipline community.

Explicit criteria for learning outcomes and explicit levels of achievement are fundamental starting points. Without these it is not possible to talk meaningfully about standards. Australian universities generally have well-developed statements of expected learning outcomes. Arguably, expected levels of achievement are less well articulated. As a consequence, grading is often strongly ‘norm-referenced’ — students are graded according to the ranking of their performance among peers.

Generally, it is best to try to minimise the subjectivity (and thus the opaqueness from the student perspective) in assessment and grading. Having said this, it is wise to be wary of excessive claims of objectivity in higher education assessment. The higher order intellectual skills of higher education do not easily lend themselves to tick-the-box checklists. A degree of subjectivity is inevitable. But this subjectivity must be informed by experienced professional judgement and communicated to students with transparency.

Sound processes for defining and monitoring academic standards will directly support the quality of teaching and learning by making the goals and standards clearer — students who understand goals and standards and who are encouraged to study towards them are likely to have better learning outcomes. Any steps that might be taken to make the expected learning outcomes more explicit will support and enhance procedures for credit transfer and the recognition of student learning across courses, while also underpinning greater student independence within flexible and self-paced learning environments.

ENSURING STANDARDS: THE GRADING LOOP



Five assessment issues...

- **On-line assessment**
- **Assessing large classes**
- **Minimising plagiarism**
- **Assessing group work**
- **Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education**

On-line assessment

If lower-order learning is an unintended educational consequence of on-line assessment, then any perceived or real gains made in efficiency, staff workload reduction and/or cost savings are at a questionable price.

WHY CONSIDER ON-LINE ASSESSMENT?

A good deal of investigation and development is underway in Australian universities into the possibilities for effective and efficient on-line and computer-based assessment. The current commercial Learning Management Systems, or ‘virtual learning environments’, which integrate various curriculum elements at subject level into a single software portal, usually offer various built-in options for student assessment. As well, many on-line assessment initiatives are being locally developed to suit specific curriculum needs.

There are many reasons why on-line assessment is being adopted by Australian universities. There is a desire to diversify assessment tasks, broaden the range of skills assessed and provide students with more timely and informative feedback on their progress. Some universities are wishing to meet student expectations for more flexible delivery and to generate efficiencies in assessment that can ease academic staff workloads. Staff involved in such initiatives are discovering they face a large number of technical and educational decisions.

In a climate of increasing academic workloads, the adoption of on-line assessment may help to manage large volumes of marking and assessment-related administration efficiently. The automation of routine on-line tasks, in particular, may have the potential in the long-term to provide time/cost-efficient student assessment, though the present evidence suggests that on-line assessment, at least in the early stages, can add significantly both to staff workload and to overall expenses.

REALISING THE EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF ON-LINE ASSESSMENT

On-line learning can challenge students to learn new skills and new ways of studying and learning:

"[On-line assessment]...definitely teaches skills not possible to learn from doing a normal essay"

"It assesses personal initiative well. You have to be able to work through things by yourself"

On-line assessment is but one of many modes that may be used to indicate to students which aspects of their learning are valued and will be rewarded. The use of on-line tools to assess learner progress toward subject objectives can take many forms including:

- Electronic submission of written assignments
- Parallel print and on-line assessment options where students are given the choice of whether and how they use on-line tools in assessment tasks
- Labelling of on-line diagrams
- Manipulation of on-line graphs
- Completion of on-line quizzes
- Completion of short-answer and multiple choice questions
- On-line exams with monitored and controlled start and stop times
- Any formative or summative task carried out in a web-based environment.

There is a range of perceptions among academic staff about the worth of on-line learning:

"I have much hope for on-line teaching and learning. It has the ability to inform existing teaching and learning

processes and to identify or reveal new possibilities or opportunities that we can't see at present."

"There is plenty of student feedback that shows the advantages of personal contact ...can't be replaced by on-line learning."

The broad choice of types of on-line assessment available generate a wide range of reactions from students:

"It's great, you can do it whenever you want"

"I was dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century through having to do this...In the end this was good for me."

"On-line assessment is annoying"

One question asked frequently by students in relation to on-line assessment is, beyond flexibility, 'what is the point?' But if for the students there is little difference between, for example, taking an exam in paper-and-pencil format and taking it on-line, it may be difficult for them to see the value of on-line examinations.

In the case of on-line examinations, the point, from a staff perspective might be to save time and effort. However, the experience of staff working in this area indicates that the design of on-line examinations can rapidly become far more complex and time-consuming than preparing conventional paper and pen examinations. This is in part because computers offer the potential to present students with more complex scenarios through the use of interactive resources (images, sound, simulation) than does print.

A comprehensive three-part planning framework for developing effective on-line assessment

ACCESS AND USAGE CHECKLIST

- Has any inherent unfairness for students less familiar with computer use than others (for example, some international students and some older students) been avoided?
- While most students have access to computers at home, some do not – does the design of the task ensure that this latter group is not disadvantaged?
- Is student access to assessment tasks and related material assured?
- Has the potential issue of using the on-line medium as the principal or sole vehicle for assessment, thereby disadvantaging or excluding some learners, (Morgan and Reilly, 1999) been avoided?
- Has the potential issue of significant financial costs associated with external access to university computer networks been addressed?
- Has the potential issue of access to on-campus university computers been addressed?
- Has equity been ensured in relation to the cost of students printing large amounts of material?
- Have appropriate educative resources been made available to address the issue of students' ICT skills?

“The particular assessment required us to look at articles or sites on the web, check their validity and critically analyse them. We learnt not just to accept all things on the web as true and correct but to always question the work of others on the web”

QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING CHECKLIST

- Does the on-line assessment assess anything that can't be assessed equally well (or more effectively) in a traditional format?
- Have greater opportunities been provided for students to practise their knowledge and skills than are available in traditional formats?
- Has the highly valued and expected flexibility of time-of-day access, pace of work and time spent on task been incorporated?
- Have the opportunities for diagnostic, continuous, case-based and/or formative assessment of student learning been taken?
- Is student learning related to subject content knowledge, understanding and skills being assessed rather than, or in addition to, ICT skills?
- If relevant, have opportunities for students to demonstrate creativity in their submissions, which is possible with other forms of assessment, been incorporated?
- Where necessary, is the approach chosen to verify individual student performance/submission reliable?
- Has the opportunity for plagiarism been eliminated or at least minimised?
- Has the tendency, particularly where automated responses are incorporated, to focus on lower level cognitive skills been avoided or at least supplemented with assessment of higher order learning?
- Are mechanisms to enable rapid feedback both to and from the students included?
- Are examples of model assignments/exam answers on the web for student access, consideration and discussion?

For on-line examinations in particular:

- Have practice on-line exams in the same format as the actual exam been provided so students can prepare adequately?
- Are all answers able to be changed by the student up until the point where the test is submitted?
- Have question banks and random selection of items been used, where appropriate?
- Have dynamic on-line test questions that are in themselves learning experiences been provided, incorporating rich information and activities through the use of interactive images, sound and text?

For evaluation in particular:

- Have robust evaluation strategies that produce diagnostic, formative feedback on the success of on-line assessment been integrated into planning and development?
- Has student feedback (including on-line discussion boards) been used for reflection on the content and quality of the discussion, as part of examination of teaching practices?

TECHNICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CHECKLIST

- Has interference to the on-line assessment from scheduled maintenance periods been planned for?
- Has the system been kept as local as possible so that reliance on large (less reliable) networks is minimal?
- Will the difficulties that some students have with passwords, access, usage and related issues be adequately managed by the system?
- Have management systems been put in place (email, discussion boards etc) to deal with student difficulties with matters unrelated to on-line assessment that they will attempt to solve through on-line systems (administrative and personal issues etc)?
- Where a range of computers and software packages are in use among students and staff, has the potential issue of compatibility and readability of files containing assignments that are submitted electronically been planned for?
- Have simple but time consuming matters, such as students forgetting to put their names on electronically submitted assignments, been planned for?

For on-line tests and exams in particular:

- Has adequate technical support during the development and use of on-line exams been ensured? Have emergency backup procedures been put in place?
- Has the server containing the exam questions been isolated from the internet in order to maintain security?
- Is the server reliable?

WHERE TO START WITH ON-LINE ASSESSMENT?

Start with clear educational objectives

Begin by considering how you would like to influence student learning then consider which technologies, if any, are appropriate to influence it in these ways. In particular, it might be useful to consider the following question:

- ‘How will the on-line assessment add to the learning experience for students?’

When making the decision about whether or not, and in which way(s) to use on-line assessment, it is also essential to take into account:

- The subject objectives – what is to be assessed?
- The needs, characteristics and situations of the learners.

Visit www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning for detailed advice on how to match subject objectives and learner characteristics to various modes of on-line assessment.

An excerpt of the advice available...

<i>If the goal or purpose is to:</i>	<i>one might use...</i>	<i>but in addition to learner access to and competence with technology, one may need to consider, for example...</i>
develop/assess... (objective)	(mode)	(learner characteristics)
Understanding of basic concepts	Web-based, self-paced, interactive modules with automated responses and no recorded marks or grades for students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner interest, motivation and engagement with modules/material given absence of marks/grades • Effects on learners of heavy traffic at peak times
A body of knowledge	An on-line exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The likelihood of cheating

START SMALL AND START WHERE SUCCESS IS MOST LIKELY

Initially, aim for quality rather than quantity.

A complete overhaul of the entire curriculum may not be the best place to introduce on-line assessment. A successful beginning with an on-line assessment task may simply involve a relatively minor proportion of the assessment for a subject. That way, any technical, educational or other difficulties that might arise can be resolved without any risk of seriously disadvantaging students.

It might also be useful to start with formative rather than summative on-line assessment. Any efforts made in this area will be useful in providing feedback to students and therefore assisting learning, as well as in providing a 'trial run' for the more ambitious objective of putting summative assessment on-line at a later stage.

Assessing large classes

Larger class sizes pose significant teaching challenges, not least in the assessment of student learning. In response to the pressures and challenges of assessing larger groups of students, academic staff are responding through:

- greater attention to the communication of clear assessment criteria;
- the development and use of marking guides to be used by teaching and assessing teams;
- the increasing use of exemplars to guide student efforts — as well as to guide grading — including the modelling of discipline-based thinking, writing and performance;
- and
- the continuous refinement and dissemination of assessment policy and practice in relation to large student groups.

The issue of workload is central in decisions about assessment of large classes for it is a serious one for students and staff alike. Staff teaching large student groups invariably undertake an informal, qualitative weighing-up of the efficiency of assessment tasks vis-à-vis their educational effectiveness.

There is little doubt that establishing an effective assessment program — developing criteria, guides, exemplars and models; discussing and refining them and communicating them to students and other staff — will have an initial impact on workload for staff with coordinating responsibilities. However, this preparatory work is likely to lead to three gains. The first is a reduction in the time required for marking due to a higher quality of student submission. The second is a resolution of some of the potential issues likely when

many staff are involved in marking and grading, through a streamlining of marking and grading practices. Finally, the availability of clear criteria and examples of work will contribute positively to the overall quality of teaching and learning.

FIVE ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES CREATED BY LARGE CLASSES

The assessment of large student cohorts presents five distinct though interrelated challenges:

1. Avoiding assessment that encourages shallow learning
2. Providing high quality, individual feedback
3. Fairly assessing a diverse mix of students
4. Managing the volume of marking and coordinating the staff involved in marking
5. Avoiding plagiarism

In an effort to manage these challenges, academic staff have increasingly turned to group and on-line assessment. Carefully planned and managed group work does appear to help address many of the assessment challenges listed above.

Similarly, the use of appropriate on-line assessment can also help address some of the challenges of assessing large classes (for example, multiple-choice and/or short answer questions which can be automatically marked can provide feedback to students that is otherwise not possible). On-line assessment is also likely to assist, to

some extent, in managing a diverse mix of students and reducing the time required for marking. However, on-line assessment may not necessarily avoid the problems of low-level learning or plagiarism.

Ultimately, however, while group and on-line assessment have much to offer in dealing with the challenges of assessing large classes, neither is a panacea for the many issues inherent in assessing large classes.

CHALLENGE 1: ASSESSING LARGE CLASSES – AVOIDING ASSESSMENT THAT ENCOURAGES SHALLOW LEARNING

There is little doubt that growing class sizes encourage academic staff to focus on time-efficient assessment techniques. One unwelcome consequence of a focus on efficiency would be any tendency toward assessing learning at lower levels of intellectual complexity; that is, assessment tasks that merely reward superficial, shallow or reproductive approaches to learning and that fail to direct students into the type of study that leads to the higher-order learning objectives of university education. Assessment methods demanding less complex analysis and synthesis than in the past, or demanding less rich forms of student response, may significantly diminish the quality of learning in higher education.

Attempts to assess large numbers of students in time-efficient ways can result in approaches to assessment that might not be educationally desirable. For example, in some disciplines there appears to be a growing reliance on exam-based assessment with large classes, with an increased use of multiple-choice and short-answer or “tick-a-box” questions.

Of course, well-developed written examinations can provide a high level of validity and reliability in measurement of some types of learning. However, academic staff need to judge the appropriate proportion of assessment that should be conducted through this method alone. The efficiencies of assessing learning through exams, particularly if the marking is routine or automated, are counterbalanced by the limitations of a single method of assessment, particularly one that might not encourage the development of the full range of higher-order cognitive skills. Even at their best, many students find examinations as a sole assessment method impersonal, particularly in first year.

As with many complex issues, there are no simple answers to these and other challenges in assessing large classes. Awareness of the limitations — and possible negative consequences for the quality of student learning — of particular approaches to assessment is crucial, as this is likely to guide assessment-related decisions toward compromises that appropriately reflect both efficiency and considerations related to educational effectiveness.

CHALLENGE 2: ASSESSING LARGE CLASSES – PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY, INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK THAT GUIDES STUDENT LEARNING

Timely, individual feedback is central to guiding learning. Providing such feedback to hundreds of students simultaneously within a timeframe that ensures such feedback can be incorporated into student learning is a daunting prospect.

Students appreciate detail in the feedback they receive to identify weaknesses and to understand how

they might improve future efforts. The structure of the overall assessment regime is therefore critical. If feedback is given on an early assessment task but later assessment tasks within the same subject offer little or no opportunity to incorporate learning from this feedback, students are likely to feel disadvantaged. Timing of feedback is also important. There is little point, from a student point of view, in receiving feedback at the end of a subject when there may be no opportunity to apply the improved understanding.

One approach to providing feedback for large student groups is to use on-line assessment item banks with marking provided either automatically or by a graduate assistant or tutor. While this might be a time and resource efficient method and appropriate in some circumstances, there is one significant limitation in terms of feedback: under such an arrangement teaching staff will receive little if any direct feedback themselves about students' levels of understanding. In addition, students often find automated or anonymous marking impersonal and prefer more personal interaction with their teachers, even if this interaction is limited to written communication in the form of comments and grades.

Some suggestions for providing feedback:

- Assess early in the semester — this gives time for feedback and possible improvement
 - Provide students with marking criteria prior to their undertaking assignments to guide progress and help develop independent learning skills
 - Prepare a list of the most common or typical problems in assignment submissions and/or exam responses, along with explanations or model answers
- Use a standardised feedback sheet that incorporates the stated criteria
 - Where possible and appropriate, use on-line tutors
 - Use on-line discussion boards with a framework and initial model for discussion so students can assist each other with assignments – be clear about how collaboration, collusion and copying differ
 - Use on-line products that provide hints and feedback on student attempts at problem-solving, answering quiz questions and other assignment tasks
 - Use a website/subject homepage to provide basic information, FAQs and answers related to assessment
 - After using and marking multiple-choice tests, provide students with a written rationale and explanation for correct or high scoring answers and resources for further reading.

CHALLENGE 3: ASSESSING LARGE CLASSES – FAIRLY ASSESSING A DIVERSE MIX OF STUDENTS

Generally speaking, larger classes mean a more diverse and complex student mix. Diversity in educational background and ability is particularly significant in larger classes partly because of the critical mass of differences. The issues of varying levels of student ability or readiness and of marking workload in large classes are closely related.

Sometimes large classes are used to teach 'service' or compulsory subjects to students from a wide range of courses and discipline areas. In these situations, student diversity in backgrounds, pre-requisite knowledge, expectations and level of interest in the subject matter can be profound.

Some suggestions:

- Require first year students to undertake a foundation unit — already compulsory in some universities — to develop the necessary academic and study skills to successfully undertake assessment tasks
- Early in the semester, briefly survey students about their prior knowledge and expectations to identify possible issues that may adversely affect assessment
- Set an early ‘hurdle task’ where students at risk of failing written assessments are identified and offered assistance from the university learning support centre
- Organise the provision of ‘support’ tutorials – supplementary workshops for essay writing or other necessary assessment-related skills from the appropriate university service
- Ensure the provision of English-language assistance from the appropriate university service for students who need such help
- Where possible in assessment tasks (assignments or exams), ask students to consider how concepts relate to their discipline or vocational area
- Assign students to tutorials on the basis of their discipline or course, rather than randomly — the focus of these smaller classes are then more likely to be aligned with their interests
- Ensure that tutorials follow lectures (rather than vice versa) and that assessment-related issues are discussed and addressed in detail in these smaller groups
- Develop variations in the assessment tasks that target the discipline background of the different sub-groups of students.

CHALLENGE 4: ASSESSING LARGE CLASSES – MANAGING THE VOLUME OF MARKING AND CO-ORDINATING THE STAFF INVOLVED IN MARKING

The time required for the sheer volume of marking for large student groups can be significant. However, some steps can be taken to optimise the use of staff time.

As it is for coping with the complexity of the student mix, developing student skills and understanding related to the assessment requirements prior to their undertaking assessment tasks can be useful. Here, specifically, doing so is likely to lessen the marking workload associated with poor quality submissions.

Other strategies likely to be helpful include:

- providing clear marking criteria to students
- making past exam papers and model answers readily available
- providing exemplars of various levels of work (‘Below acceptable’ through to ‘High Distinction’ or equivalent)
- For written assessment (assignments or essay-based exams): modelling in, for example, critical analysis, essay writing and use of appropriate styles and formats
- Directing all students to resources and support for academic or study skills (including printed and on-line resources, workshops and individual tuition) and making clear the expectation that they will be used by students.

Other strategies that might be helpful in optimising the task of marking include:

- On-line, computer-based or web-based exams or tests
- Developing joint assessment with another subject in the course – this may help to link concepts and develop coherence as well as lessen the load.

A common response to larger class sizes is the employment of sessional staff to assist with teaching and assessment. While at one level this trend might appear to resolve the issue of marking for academic staff with the overall responsibility for subjects, it also brings a new set of issues associated with the coordination, training and support of a subject team.

There are well-known problems associated with the use of teams of sessional staff, especially if they are inexperienced teachers, including disparate understandings of assessment requirements, differences in the level of experience of marking, and a lack of consistency in methods of marking and grading practices. Some of these problems can be reduced or eliminated through the following suggestions:

- Provide paid initial training in assessment for new sessional staff
- Provide professional development in the area of assessment for all staff
- Provide consistent criteria to all staff involved in marking
- Ensure the marking criteria are understood by all staff
- Provide model answers, including examples of very good, moderate and poor assignments or exam answers
- Provide marking guides
- Ask all staff to use a standardised feedback sheet incorporating stated criteria

- Ensure avenues of clear communication between staff are in place
- Provide assessment mentoring for inexperienced markers
- Hold weekly paid meetings for sessional staff to discuss assessment-related issues
- Make participation in assessment training, professional development and staff meetings a condition of employment for sessional staff and pay them to attend
- Require sessional staff to attend 10-15 minutes of a lecture in which assignment requirements are discussed so everyone hears the same information
- Use moderation if necessary

CHALLENGE 5: ASSESSING LARGE CLASSES – AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

There is a general perception that the likelihood of plagiarism is exacerbated by large classes. If this is the case, one reason students may deliberately cheat in a large class is because they may feel somewhat anonymous and “lost in the crowd” and therefore believe they are less likely to be caught. Alternatively, if students in large classes plagiarise unintentionally this might be as a result of having limited or no opportunity to check referencing and/or collaboration conventions with a lecturer or tutor. The key to minimising plagiarism in large classes is the design of assessment tasks, as is discussed in detail in the next section.

Minimising Plagiarism

Universities throughout the world have become concerned with the question of how to minimise and respond appropriately to student plagiarism and other forms of cheating. Australian universities are highly active in educating students about plagiarism and in detecting breaches of their academic expectations.

A FOUR-PART STRATEGY...

Universities and academic staff are advised to focus on four main strategies, all underpinned by the central principle of ensuring fairness:

1. A collaborative effort to recognise and counter plagiarism at every level from policy, through faculty/division and school/department procedures, to individual staff practices;
2. Thoroughly educating students about the expected conventions for authorship and the appropriate use and acknowledgment of all forms of intellectual material;
3. Designing approaches to assessment that minimise the possibility for students to submit plagiarised material, while not reducing the quality and rigour of assessment requirements;
4. Installing highly visible procedures for monitoring and detecting cheating, including appropriate punishment and re-education measures.

HOW WIDESPREAD IS PLAGIARISM IN AUSTRALIA?

In the absence of trustworthy quantitative data, it is impossible to determine whether plagiarism has risen or is rising in Australian higher education. Plagiarism does seem to be widespread, however, and there is evidence of it occurring across the range of disciplines. There is a perception among some academic staff that increasing student disengagement from university life has led to an increase in plagiarism. Further, there is a perception among both staff and students that there is more plagiarism in some disciplines and subject areas than in others.

There is also evidence that the modes of plagiarism have changed in recent years. Specifically, the advent of the Internet has made plagiarism in written assignments easier for students. Full papers can be downloaded for free or at a relatively small cost and students can easily cut and paste from a range of sources. In addition, the current emphasis in higher education on group work may have inadvertently led to an increase in students plagiarising each other's work. Finally, the increase in class sizes means that at times students may not have ready access to their teachers and sometimes rely on a network of past students who provide "form guides" for assignments for loan or purchase.

DEFINING PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism in higher education can take many forms. Some of the more common forms are listed below, however it should be noted that definitions of plagiarism vary somewhat across the disciplines in accordance with differences in authorship conventions and traditions.

- Submitting, as one's own, an assignment that another person has completed.
- Downloading information, text, computer code, artwork, graphics or other material from the internet and presenting it as one's own without acknowledgment.
- Quoting or paraphrasing material from a source without acknowledgment.
- Preparing a correctly cited and referenced assignment from individual research and then handing part or all of that work in twice for separate subjects/marks.
- Cheating in an exam either by copying from other students or using unauthorised notes or other aids.

There are also forms of plagiarism and cheating that relate directly to student participation in group work.

- Copying from other members while working in a group.
- Contributing less, little or nothing to a group assignment and then claiming an equal contribution and share of the marks.

ALL PLAGIARISM IS NOT EQUAL: THREE CONSIDERATIONS:

Consideration 1: Student *intent* in plagiarism

“If you read something and put it in your own words, is that plagiarism?”

There are many reasons why students plagiarise but one central question is, ‘Did they intend to do so?’

There may be unintentional reasons why students plagiarise, including:

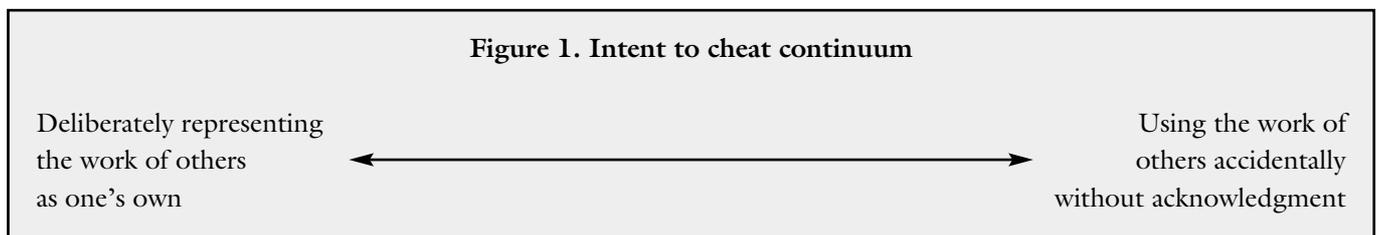
- Their limited or incorrect understanding of what, exactly, plagiarism encompasses
- Their incorrect understanding of citation and referencing conventions
- Their limited skill base in summarising, paraphrasing, critical analysis, argumentation, managing contributions to group work, time management, or workload and stress management.

Some students ‘copy and paste’ and participate in other forms of plagiarism deliberately because they are lazy, sneaky or competitive. Other students deliberately plagiarise in desperation because they are under pressure from their academic workload requirements, or simply run out of time.

But a proportion of the incidence of plagiarism in higher education is also attributable to misunderstanding and ignorance among students about why they should avoid plagiarism and how they can do so.

Consider the following continuum:

*Don't assume
plagiarism is
necessarily intentional*

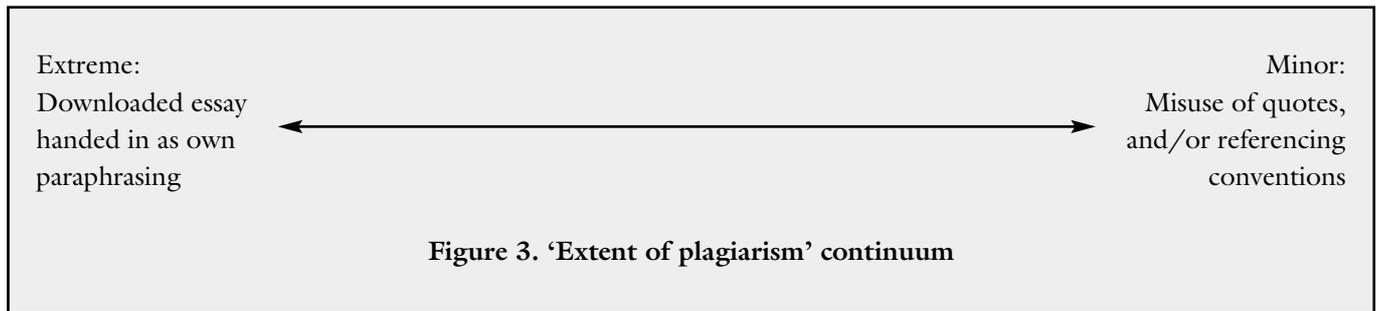


Consideration 2: The extent of plagiarism

What can be considered to be 'serious' plagiarism? Definitions of plagiarism and views on what constitutes minor and extreme examples vary widely so it is not surprising that there is enormous confusion among students on this issue.

And if they don't know what it is, how do they avoid it?

Consider the 'extent of plagiarism' continuum:



Carroll (2000) suggests that students need to work with and closely consider definitions of plagiarism to understand them and evidence gathered from Australian students tends to support such a suggestion.

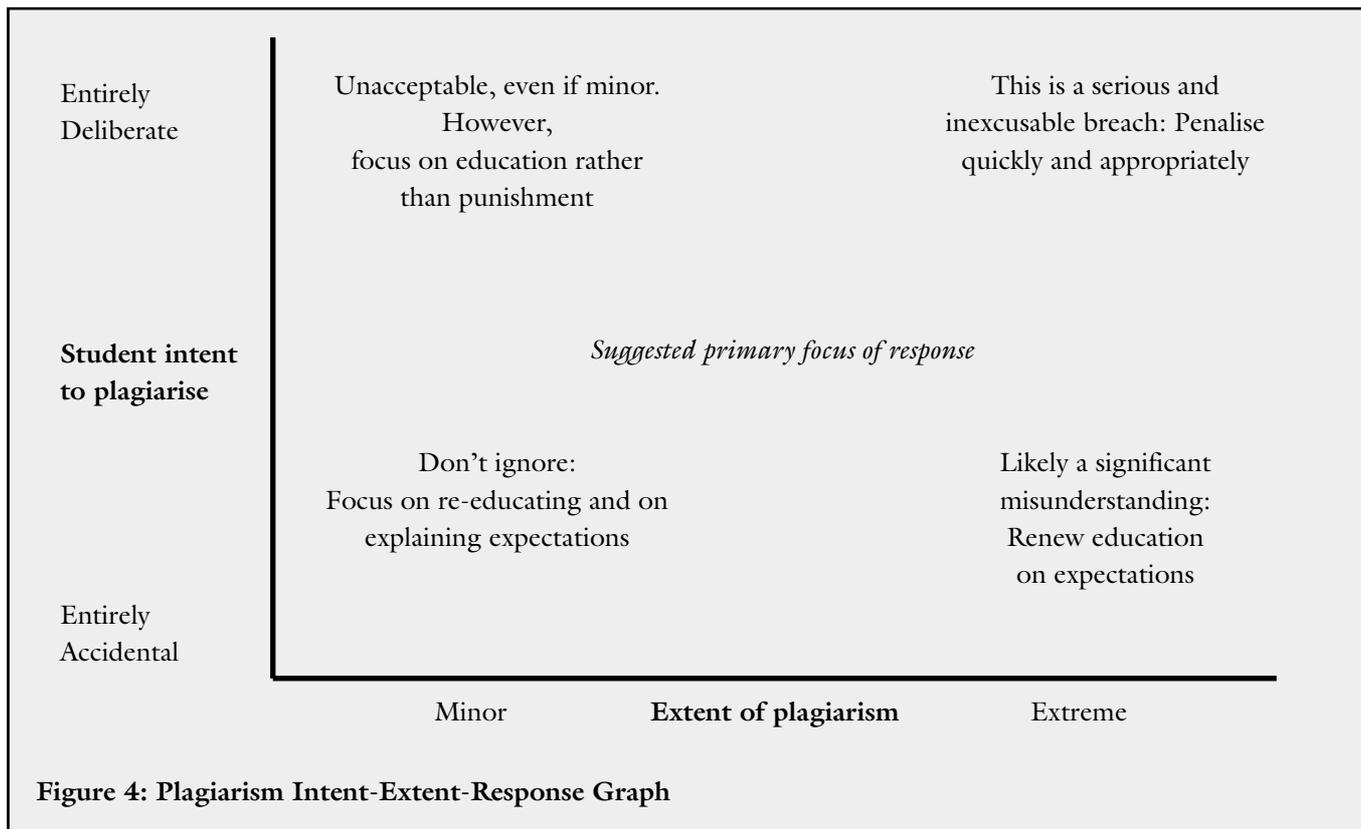
Consideration 3: Possible responses to plagiarism

The possible responses to plagiarism can be divided into two broad categories:

- Renewing educative strategies – for example, teaching (or re-teaching) students the rationale for supporting arguments with evidence and referencing and other necessary, related skills. This approach can also be used pro-actively to deter students from plagiarism.
- and
- Penalising offenders – detecting and punishing students caught breaching expectations.

‘Serious’ incidences of plagiarism are dealt with in a range of ways by Australian universities. Often, when serious plagiarism is suspected, the student and their case are referred to a senior level within the academic structure and dealt with on a case-by-case basis. The issue of student intent is central and extenuating circumstances, extent of the misdemeanour and other factors are also often considered before a response is decided upon.

In the graph opposite, the primary focus of the approach to take to deal with committed plagiarism is suggested, but punitive and educative responses should not be seen as mutually exclusive. It is possible, for example, to penalise a student for extensive plagiarism whilst concurrently offering education in the conventions of citation and referencing.



The assumptions underpinning these suggested responses are that:

- A student who deliberately commits ‘minor’ plagiarism has done so because of time and workload pressures and therefore should initially be offered support to manage these.
- A student who deliberately commits ‘major’ plagiarism may well have the same time/workload pressures but their work constitutes a more serious breach of accepted academic practice and the appropriate first response would need to acknowledge this. Direction to support and advice can be offered concurrently.
- A student who accidentally commits any form of plagiarism needs first and foremost to be educated about why and how to avoid doing so again.

36 STRATEGIES FOR MINIMISING PLAGIARISM

The following strategies have been gathered from a range of sources, including suggestions and advice from the Australian academic community. Together these strategies form a three-point plan: make expectations clear to students; design assessment to minimise opportunities for plagiarism; and visibly monitor, detect and respond to incidences of plagiarism.

*Teach students about authorship conventions
and about how to avoid plagiarism*

1. Create a climate of involvement and interest rather than one merely of detection and punishment (Carroll, 2000).
2. Warn students of the possibility of their files being stolen or copied if left on the hard disks of university computers and teach them how to delete files when they have finished.
3. Teach the skills of summarising and paraphrasing (Carroll, 2000).
4. Teach the skills of critical analysis and building an argument.
5. Teach the skills of referencing and citation.
6. Include in assessment regimes mini-assignments that require students to demonstrate skills in summarising, paraphrasing, critical analysis, building an argument, referencing and/or citation.

*Counter plagiarism through the design
of assessment tasks*

"I think that some of the assignments are just asking for students to plagiarise"

7. 'Design out' the easy cheating options, for example, using the same essay questions year after year (Carroll, 2000).
8. Avoid assignments that ask students to collect, describe and present information as these are more prone to plagiarism than those that ask for analysis or evaluation (Carroll, 2000).
9. Randomise questions and answers for electronic quizzes or assignments.
10. Ensure assessment tasks relate to the specific content and focus of the subject so students are less tempted to simply copy something from the web.
11. Set the assignment specification on a unique or recent event on which there is unlikely to be much material available (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001).
12. Use essay or assignment topics that integrate theory and examples or use personal experience (Carroll, 2000). For example, a field trip report, a task with no correct answers or a personal reflection on a task.
13. Use assignments that integrate classroom dynamics, field learning, assigned reading and classroom learning (Gibelman, Gelman and Fast, 1999).
14. Use alternatives to the standard essay, such as case studies, which present more difficulties in locating suitable material to plagiarise (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001).

15. Assess work produced in class, possibly with preparation allowed beforehand. (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001).
16. A timed open book essay in class is a variation on the above theme (Carroll, 2000). This is possible with large classes as long as the class is in one room at one time or parallel groups have different questions to answer.
17. Where feasible and manageable, briefly assess by viva (i.e. orally examine) a random selection of students in order to check what they have learned and that they are familiar with the ideas in their submissions (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001).
18. Ask students to make brief presentations to the class based on their written assignments (Gibelman, Gelman and Fast, 1999).
19. Require all students or a random sample of students to submit essay outlines or non-final versions of assignments. Ensure that all students are informed that they may be called on to submit such drafts.
20. Avoid an excessive number of assessment tasks – continuous assessment and overassessment contribute to plagiarism. While three pieces of assessment per subject might ease the emphasis on the exam, this number multiplied by four subjects means a student faces the equivalent task of completing a serious piece of work each week of each semester (Langsam, 2001).
21. Ask students to include the library site and call number of each paper source they use and to include the date they accessed each website.
22. Ask students to supply photocopies of any references used as part of an appendix (or to have such an appendix available). This helps to ensure all references are genuine (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001).
23. Collect an annotated bibliography before the submission is due. This can be difficult to construct from a supplied paper and ensures that the students have done some work before the submission date (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001).
24. Insist on evidence for significant claims and let students know that the assignment will not be assessed if this evidence is missing.
25. Return assignments to students to resubmit if requirements for providing evidence of sources are not met. If they are never met, disallow students from using the assignment as part of their assessment for the subject.
26. Evans (2000) suggests using a meta-essay or meta-assignment where students are asked to answer the question “What did you learn from your assignment?” or “What problems did you encounter while undertaking this assignment and how did you overcome them?”

Ask students for evidence that they have not plagiarised

Make positive use of collaborative work

27. Make a virtue of collaborative work in subjects with large student numbers and common assignments. Use group work or syndicates. Ensure that both the criteria for assessing group work and the difference between collaboration and copying are explicit and clearly understood.

28. Ask students to work on a task in groups but to submit individual assignments. Ensure the division between collaboration and collusion is clear – give examples of each. Have a mechanism in place to account for ‘shirkers’.

Become familiar with resources that may be used for plagiarism

29. Educate yourself about the electronic options available and attractive to students in your discipline. Culwin & Lancaster (2001) suggest checking that you are familiar with available resources related to the assignments you set.
30. Use a search engine to help find the sites students are likely to find. Simply choose a phrase that students are likely to use – a history example is “Thomas Samuel Kuhn was born”.
31. Demonstrate to students your awareness of the electronic resources available to them. Evans (2000) suggests downloading examples of the sorts of information students are likely to find in relation to the assignment and distributing it to them – to show you are aware of their existence.

Make use of detection software and other deterrents

32. Require all students to submit essays and assignments electronically, while making students aware of the plagiarism checking software that exists. Limits on document size may be an issue. The threat of using such software, even on a random sample of essays, may be sufficient deterrent.
33. Archive electronic student essays and assignments to enable later crosschecking across students or between pieces of work submitted by an individual student (to establish an authorship index). Issues of expense and IT skills may arise. However, the threat of checking may be sufficient deterrent.
34. Use deterrence penalties. For example, a first offence results in failing the assignment, a second means failing the subject (Langsam, 2001).
35. Request that all work outside of examinations be submitted with a cover sheet defining plagiarism and requiring the student’s signature.

Respond quickly to incidents of plagiarism

36. Do something about blatant examples of plagiarism immediately (Carroll, 2000).

Visit www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning for: a critical analysis of the effectiveness of plagiarism detection software; a comparative analysis of the effectiveness and practicality of the approaches used by various plagiarism detection tools.

Assessing group work

When effective group management processes are employed, clear assessment guidelines developed and communicated, and valid and fair grading processes employed, the likelihood of positive learning outcomes and student satisfaction with group activities is significantly increased. Alternatively, if students cannot see the objective of group work, are unsure of what is expected of them, or believe the assessment methods are invalid or simply unfair, the educational benefits are reduced and tensions can emerge. The conditions under which group work is conducted are crucial to its success.

Group work, under proper conditions, encourages peer learning and peer support and many studies validate the efficacy of peer learning. Under less than ideal conditions, group work can become the vehicle for acrimony, conflict and freeloading. It may also impose a host of unexpected stresses on, for example, students with overcrowded schedules living long distances from the University.
(University of Wollongong assessment policy, 2002)

The design of assessment is central to capturing the benefits of group work and avoiding its pitfalls. Assessment defines the character and quality of group work. In fact, the way in which students approach group work is largely determined by the way in which they are to be assessed.

*“Having to do group work has changed the way I worked.
I could not do it all the night before.
I had to be more organised and efficient.”*

THREE GOOD REASONS FOR GROUP LEARNING

1. Peer learning can improve the overall quality of student learning

There are sound educational reasons for requiring students to participate in group activities. Group work enhances student understanding. Students learn from each other and benefit from activities that require them to articulate and test their knowledge among their peers.

Working with a group and for the benefit of the group also motivates some students. Group assessment helps some students develop a sense of responsibility: ‘I felt that because one is working in a group, it is not possible to slack off or to put things off. I have to keep working otherwise I would be letting other people down.’

2. Group work can help develop specific generic skills sought by employers

Group work can facilitate the development of generic skills which include:

- teamwork skills (skills in understanding team dynamics; leadership skills);
- analytical and cognitive skills (analysing task requirements; questioning; critically interpreting material; evaluating the work of others);
- collaborative skills (conflict management and resolution; accepting intellectual criticism; flexibility; negotiation and compromise); and
- organisational and time management skills.

3. Group work may reduce the workload involved in assessing, grading and providing feedback.

Group work, and group assessment in particular, is sometimes implemented in the hope of streamlining assessment and grading tasks. In simple terms, if students submit group assignments then the number of pieces of work to be assessed can be vastly reduced. This prospect might be particularly attractive for staff teaching large first year classes.

But the assessment of a group ‘product’ is rarely the only assessment taking place in group activities. The process of group work is increasingly recognised as an important element in the assessment of group work. And where group work is marked solely on the basis of product, and not process, there can be inequities in individual grading that are unfair and unacceptable.

Once a workable model of group work is in place and the necessary planning has occurred, group assessment may reduce some of the task of assessment and grading — provided that assessing individual contributions to the product or process is limited. Without careful preparation and these limitations, however, group assessment can add to staff workloads.

COMMON ISSUES AND CONCERNS WITH GROUP WORK

Lack of perceived relevance, lack of clear objectives

While some students consider the group assessment they participate in as effective preparation for employment ('it's just how teams work in the media industry'), others are yet to be convinced. There is an alternative view that employers focus on employing an individual, not a team, and that the way group work is carried out and assessed in universities is rarely the way it is carried out or evaluated in 'the real world'.

Students are sometimes not clear about the benefits of group work and group assessment and are sometimes ill-equipped or under-skilled for such work. Many students enter higher education having developed independent study habits and are strongly oriented towards their own personal achievement. These students may perceive little value for their own learning in group activities, or may be frustrated by the need to negotiate. Students can also perceive group work as a tool used by academic staff primarily to reduce their workload and of little benefit to students.

Inequity of contribution

One of the strongest concerns that students have about group work is the possibility that group assessment practices may not fairly assess individual contributions. Students are keen that grading practices are established so that grades reflect the levels of performance of each student. Such arrangements can address the issue of the would-be 'shirkers' and encourage all to contribute equitably. They can also reward individual group members who carry a proportionally heavier load or who make a more significant contribution than their group colleagues.

Overuse

Careful co-ordination of the scheduling of assessment can help avoid the student workload issue that is likely to arise from a number of group assessment tasks across different subjects. Monitoring and regulation of the extent and timing of group work is therefore desirable. But with the challenges posed by more flexible study options and a wider range of student choices, the co-ordinated scheduling of assessment is often difficult. Some consideration of the needs of particular students may be possible. For example, if students are allowed to put a case explaining the extent of concurrent group assessment they are experiencing, it might be possible for staff to provide alternative assessment in one or more of the subjects in which a student is enrolled.

"It's different, therefore interesting and enjoyable, but I wouldn't want every piece of assessment to be like this"

DESIGNING EFFECTIVE GROUP ACTIVITIES

Is there a best model for group work?

Probably not, for the ‘best’ model depends much on the context. One view is that imposing one or other model may impede learning and prevent effective co-operation. On the other hand, some students may prefer to be guided by a clear model. There are many approaches that are possible. Some groups, for example, might prefer to meet within a formal structure with agendas, resolutions and minutes; others may prefer a series of informal discussions.

Well organised and supported group work may build confidence in first year students. An initial contract, where students commit themselves to the services and tasks they will complete for the group, may be effective in some situations although many staff find such approaches cumbersome. Such contracts do, however, make it easier to measure performance later and to identify ‘shirkers’.

In any case, explicit and transparent procedures should be made available and explained to students undertaking group work. In addition, as many universities recognise, academic staff supervising group work should make advance plans for students whose groups disband.

The ‘best’ selection of group members, the ‘optimal’ roles and responsibilities that should be adopted and the ‘ideal’ conduct of group meetings will all depend on the purpose and function of the group.

Weighing up the options for group assessment

Decisions about the structure of the assessment of group work need to be focussed around four factors:

1. whether what is to be assessed is 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 this 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)

1. Product, process or both?

Many staff believe there is a need to assess the processes within groups as well as the products or outcomes. But what ‘process’ is interpreted to be must be explicit and transparent for students. For example, if a staff member wishes to assess ‘the level of interaction’, how might a student ensure they reach ‘an outstanding’ level? What is ‘an outstanding’ level?

This example raises the question of how staff can confidently know the level of interaction that has taken place. Staff would either have to involve themselves intimately in the workings of each group or rely on student self- or peer-assessment.

*Visit www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning
for assistance with making decisions about the design of group work.*

Less often, assessment is focused solely on the product of group work: 'I don't care what they do in their groups – they're adults. All I'm interested in is the final product – how they arrive at it is their business'.

Most commonly, there is an interest in both the process and product of group work and the decision becomes 'What proportion of assessment will focus on each?'

2. What criteria and who determines these?

Criteria for the assessment of group work can be determined by staff, students or through consultation between the two. Groups are most successful when students are involved in establishing their own criteria for assessment through consultation with teaching staff.

A clear understanding of the intended learning outcomes of the subject in which the group work occurs is a useful starting point for determining criteria for assessment of the group work itself. Once these broader learning requirements are understood, a consideration of how the group tasks, and criteria for assessment of those tasks, fit into those broad requirements can then follow.

It is easier to establish criteria separately for the process and product of group work than to attempt to do both at once. The generation of criteria for the assessment of products of group work is relatively straightforward given the similarity between these and individual assessment submissions (products) in other contexts. Criteria for process, as appropriate to the subject and group work objectives, may include, for example:

- regular meeting attendance
- equity of contribution
- evidence of co-operative behaviour
- appropriate time and task management

- application of creative problem solving
- use of a range of working methods
- appropriate level of engagement with task
- development of professional competencies
- evidence of capacity to listen
- responsiveness to feedback or criticism.

3. Who is the assessor – lecturer, student or both?

and

4. Who gets the marks – individuals or the group?

Assessment and grading practices have a central role in optimising the quality of group interaction and more generally in directing student learning in group work. During a wide ranging interview about group assessment, students were asked if they could change one thing about this experience, what it would be. One 3rd year student said 'I would get the lecturers to clearly outline their expectations so that we know what amount of work and effort will get what mark?' Another said, 'I would make the marking of group work consistent?'

Visit www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning for a detailed analysis of the various options for group work. Four tables are provided:

- *Options for lecturer/tutor assessment of group work product*
 - *Options for student assessment of group work product*
- *Options for lecturer/tutor assessment of group work process*
 - *Options for student assessment of group work process*

The assessment options and some of their likely advantages and disadvantages are outlined in the tables.

Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education

HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ASSESSMENT EXPECTATIONS

Australian higher education has assessment practices that are quite different from assessment practices in some other international settings. The following suggestions will particularly benefit international students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian universities and may also assist local students to adjust to higher education's new expectations.

Visit www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning for a companion resource that examines these issues from the student perspective, 'Advice for students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education', available for free reproduction and distribution to students.

- **Step 1: an 'assessment briefing' to communicate requirements**

The first lecture is the appropriate time to incorporate a short, verbal briefing on the basic assessment requirements. Ideally, all tutors and casual marking staff should be present for this session. Here, a general orientation to the regime in place for the subject would be provided, the objectives of each task made clear, the broad assessment-related expectations of students outlined and the criteria on which students will be marked communicated. Accompanying written guidelines should contain explicit, unambiguous instructions and exemplars that model the appropriate discipline-based thinking, writing or performance to guide student efforts in completing assignments and studying for exams.

The department policy and practice on extensions and special consideration should also be outlined and the relevant resources and support defined. As well as advising students of when staff are available for one-to-one consultations, students should all be encouraged to make use of the language and learning support services available on campus and through the university website as soon as possible.

“The process for arriving at a grade is a mystery for many international students”

The demystification of grading nomenclature in the briefing will be of particular value to international students. Many international (and local) students find the grades given for pieces of work and for whole subjects different to those they may have experienced elsewhere. Specifically, the names of the grades (‘A’, ‘B’ or ‘High Distinction’, ‘Distinction’ and so on) are often different to those to which they are accustomed. It is therefore helpful to provide students with the university policy that outlines grade nomenclature and the criteria for deriving grades, either through inclusion in handbooks or the provision of the website location. Once this is done, an overview of the process of attributing proportional marks to particular tasks and then combining or averaging marks to arrive at particular grades will be helpful for students, particularly those newly arrived in Australia. This information on what will be rewarded in assessment can directly improve student learning by helping students to focus their study habits.

The issue of plagiarism should also be mentioned in this briefing. This is a highly complex concept, particularly for students from educational settings where the practices for using the work or words of a master or expert in a field can be quite different from those used in Australia. This issue of unintentional cheating is discussed later, and is also covered in the accompanying student guide.

At the end of the assessment briefing, ask students, in their own time, to consider what they have learnt

from the briefing, to examine the written guidelines closely and to then formulate any related questions and concerns and bring these to the assessment debriefing session to follow.

- **Step 2: an ‘assessment debriefing’ to clarify requirements**

This session is best held in a lecture about one week after the briefing session, when students have had time to consider the requirements and at least some may have commenced work on the assignment or study for the exam. Once again, the presence of all teaching and assessment staff will be beneficial. This session should be structured so that student questions and concerns are directly addressed. It may be helpful to ask students to work very briefly in groups of two or three students to summarise their main questions. Alternatively, you may ask students to write down their questions and to hand them in. Lecturers experienced with these debriefing sessions normally find that the range of questions for a well-designed assessment regime is narrow. The small amount of time spent addressing student queries during a lecture avoids much greater time spent repeating oneself in one-to-one appointments later — and all students at the lecture can benefit from the advice.

In relation to international students, it is helpful to avoid assuming any difficulties these students may have with understanding assessment requirements are necessarily related to language. Many international students have a high level of language proficiency but a low level of cultural knowledge. Having said that, the use of Australian jargon in instructions can affect international students’ understanding of the task.

It is therefore advisable to avoid the use of jargon and Australian idioms as much as possible.

International students (like local students) can become disheartened if they do not do as well as they thought they might have in assignments or exams. Often it is helpful to gently alert students that it may take time to adjust to the requirements of assessment in universities in Australia and that many students do not receive very high marks for assignments and exams, even if they have done so prior to entering university. Reminding students of the importance of continuing to improve their work as they learn more about assessment practices and about the course material may also be helpful.

- **Step 3: providing feedback**

Feedback is critical to the learning process. When most international students receive their assignments, tests or exams back, they carefully check for marks, comments or other feedback. This is to be encouraged — the provision of as much helpful feedback as possible in writing and redirection to support resources and services as appropriate is likely to greatly assist learning. Consistency between markers is essential and the use of marking guides can help achieve this, as well as provide an outline for students of what is required. For assessment tasks held early in the semester, a brief assessment feedback session where common strengths and weaknesses in student efforts are shared may be appropriate. A summary of these strengths and weaknesses might also be published on the subject homepage.

OVERCOMING SIX ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS UNFAMILIAR WITH ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Challenge 1. Lack of local cultural knowledge

Setting assignments and readings based exclusively on local content or issues or the application of theory or concepts to local situations and scenarios is likely to unfairly disadvantage many international students. International students should have the option to use their knowledge of their own local context in at least some assignments. Including the choice of culturally diverse assignment topics, texts and exemplars will not only help international students demonstrate their understandings of concepts but will also offer the opportunity for local students to broaden their horizons.

Challenge 2. Unintentional cheating

One of the most common issues for international students (and domestic students as well) is unintentional plagiarism. In some educational settings outside Australian higher education, the more closely a student can replicate the work or words of an expert, the greater the student's learning or mastery of the subject is considered to be. Some students are unaware that this is not usually the case in Australian higher education and that, in sharp contrast to their previous experience, they may be penalised for such replication.

It is advisable to explain to students that learning to correctly use the words and ideas of others is, in most courses, essential for their success as a student in Australian higher education. Of course, it is equally

advisable to provide the necessary resources and support so that students can develop the requisite skills. Pointing students to language, learning and library resources and programs will be helpful, as will the accompanying student guide provided on the Assessing Learning website.

Challenge 3. Tutorial participation

Often, a proportion of assessment is made up of a 'participation' requirement. Even if this proportion is very small, it is appropriate that all students have an equal opportunity to participate. It is often assumed that the apparent reluctance of some international students to participate in tutorials is caused by a lack of confidence, language skills or shyness. While these may be contributing factors in some instances, there is at least one other over-riding factor for many international students: being unsure of the implicit social conventions for turn-taking in group discussions and feeling hesitant to 'interrupt' another speaker and causing offence or embarrassment.

Teaching all students how to signal that they wish to make a comment (making eye contact with tutor, raising eyebrows, raising a finger, raising a hand, taking an audible breath) is likely to be useful for students unaccustomed to the conventions for group discussions between students and teachers. Alerting students to these simple devices will provide them with a socially acceptable mechanism for politely interrupting. Breaking students into smaller discussion groups within tutorials provides opportunities to practise such strategies in the relative informality a small group allows.

Keep in mind that for many international students, being asked to formulate and articulate their opinions,

especially if these are required to be analytical or critical, is a challenging experience. Doing so in front of others, including a highly respected teacher, while unaware of and unaccustomed to the conventions of group discussion and while using a non-native language can make this an uncomfortable and unsettling experience. The more international students can be supported in their attempts to participate, the more likely they are to do so.

Challenge 4. Group work

Of particular relevance to international students is securing appropriate group membership. Where international students are left to their own devices in gaining membership of a group, there is a risk that they may have difficulty negotiating the subtleties in approaching and integrating into a group. Many international students find themselves excluded from the often mysterious processes Australian students use to select fellow group members. International students may end up in groups with no local students, with the result that no-one in the group has experience of group work or assessment and the group as a whole is puzzled about what to do.

Some international and local students may prefer to work with others from the same educational background, but all students should be offered the opportunity to benefit from working with students whose backgrounds differ from their own.

Challenge 5. English language skills

Some international students find that even with high scores on IELTS or TOEFL or other English language tests, they have some difficulty understanding spoken

and written language when they get to Australia. It may take some time to adjust to the Australian accent and use of English. To assist students to develop their listening and reading skills, it is useful to encourage them to read as much as they can in English, including newspapers and magazines as well as academic texts. Suggest they listen to the radio or television and to conversations around campus or home to familiarise themselves with the way English is used in Australia. In the classroom, staff should use an appropriate pace in their speech and avoid colloquialisms and idioms as much as possible.

Many international students have little experience of writing essays or assignments in the particular way Australian university assessment demands they be written. Their early attempts to incorporate the appropriate conventions for written, compared with the sometimes more familiar oral, style and format, argument and genre in a non-native language, are accomplished in a very brief time span and often with little or no guidance or support. It may be helpful to encourage students to ask for help with their written language from the appropriate university service. It may also be helpful to assure international students that many local students from English speaking backgrounds need and seek help to develop and improve their written language skills as well.

The provision of exemplars, such as model reports, products or performances, illustrations of genres and worked solutions to problems are highly valued by all students, but particularly by international students who may never have seen anything similar. As one staff member expressed it, “Without these, it’s the equivalent

of trying to write a PhD without ever having seen one”.

Paying careful attention to the wording of exam papers will be of great benefit to international students, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds. What may seem quite clear to a native speaker can be highly ambiguous to a non-native speaker. Some universities offer services where staff expert in this field read draft exam papers to check for such ambiguity. A critical colleague (preferably from another discipline so that content is not the focus) may also be able to assist in this type of review.

Challenge 6. Oral presentations

Many international students find oral presentations a very difficult undertaking for many of the reasons outlined in the section on tutorial participation.

International and local students will be greatly assisted by the provision of as much information as possible on:

- what staff require in the content of the presentation (for example, the scope, the amount of detail);
- what staff require in the format of the presentation (for example, how long the presentation should be, whether or not students are required to use aids or props, and whether or not students are expected to prepare questions for the class);
and
- how the presentation will be graded (for example, the criteria for a good presentation, how much each criterion is worth).

It is most important to emphasise the need for careful and thorough preparation of a presentation, in particular the need for rehearsal. The accompanying student guide offers advice to students on this.

THE DEBATE ON GRADING FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

There is little doubt that the development of the complex skills necessary to undertake a typical assessment task can take a substantial amount of time to master, despite the best intentions and commitment of an international student unfamiliar with both conventions and the language. The inherent disadvantage of international students in demonstrating their knowledge creates dilemmas for staff in designing fair assessment and fair ways of acknowledging academic achievement. Often the main challenge is in finding alternative ways to acknowledge the capabilities and knowledge of international students.

There is much debate about the pros and cons of compensatory assessment practices for international students. In short, there are two quite contrasting points of view. On the one hand, lack of familiarity with language is the basis of an argument for grading the work of international students whose first language is not English using special criteria or levels of performance that take into account their lower proficiency with the language. The key assumption of this argument is that it is possible in assessing student learning to separate language from analytical skills, argument and underlying knowledge. If this assumption is accepted, it may be appropriate and reasonable to use grading mechanisms that compensate for the poorer language skills of some NESB students. For example, while marks might not be removed for errors in language use, students' work might be graded only

in terms of a pass/fail distinction. Proponents of a compensatory approach such as this argue that the crucial intellectual development to be facilitated in university students is in the area of thinking and ideas, not in grammar and spelling.

An alternative argument is that a poor grasp of English inevitably leads, through the inability to express thoughts coherently, to poor argument or analysis: in this way of thinking, language and knowledge are inseparable. From this point of view, one way in which to manage the diversity of skills in a student body is to use a range of assessment tasks beyond the written essay or report. Such a range may be appropriate not only for international students, but also local non-native speakers, students with disabilities and students with a range of learning styles and preferences. Portfolio assessment (see next page) provides one method for implementing a range of assessment tasks that allow both students and staff to monitor student progress. Alternatively, a progressive approach to the traditional essay or report might be appropriate. This is where, for example, the accuracy of content and format and the volume of research in the first essay or report receives proportionally more marks than expression, but that this balance shifts for later pieces of work when expression is expected to have improved.

Universities, faculties and departments may have policies that specify particular rules and regulations for the assessment and grading of international students in order to maintain academic rigour and appropriate standards.

ASSISTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THROUGH PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: ONE METHOD FOR MAPPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS

One way in which both a range of tasks and a development of skills might be explicitly monitored is through portfolio assessment. The potential for evidence-based assessment of international (and local) student work via a portfolio may be worth investigating in particular contexts. In principle, portfolios are useful in two major ways. The first is that they can demonstrate the student's knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes relevant to the area of study. Secondly, they are likely to be learning experiences in themselves because the student learns from the construction of the portfolio.

A portfolio should include both agreed criteria that are aligned with the requirements of the subject and examples of work that demonstrate knowledge and understanding of that criteria. The lecturer judges student merit via portfolio components or the portfolio as a whole. Components might include, for example:

- a learning log or journal
- review(s)
- annotated bibliography
- posters
- visual art
- video or audio taped reflections
- written assignment(s)
- any evidence of the achievement of the set criteria.

The likely benefits for international students is that they can demonstrate their learning without principal reliance on the written word. However, assessing and grading portfolios can be time-consuming for staff, particularly with large student groups. The information provided by students is subjective and therefore may compromise reliability. However, assessment regimes that contain a portfolio component as well as other more traditional text based tasks might provide a workable balance in some contexts.

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- *advice on reviewing assessment policies*
- *a model of best practice in formative assessment*
- *a comparison of plagiarism detection software*
- *advice for staff new to university teaching*
- *advice for international students on assessment in Australian higher education*