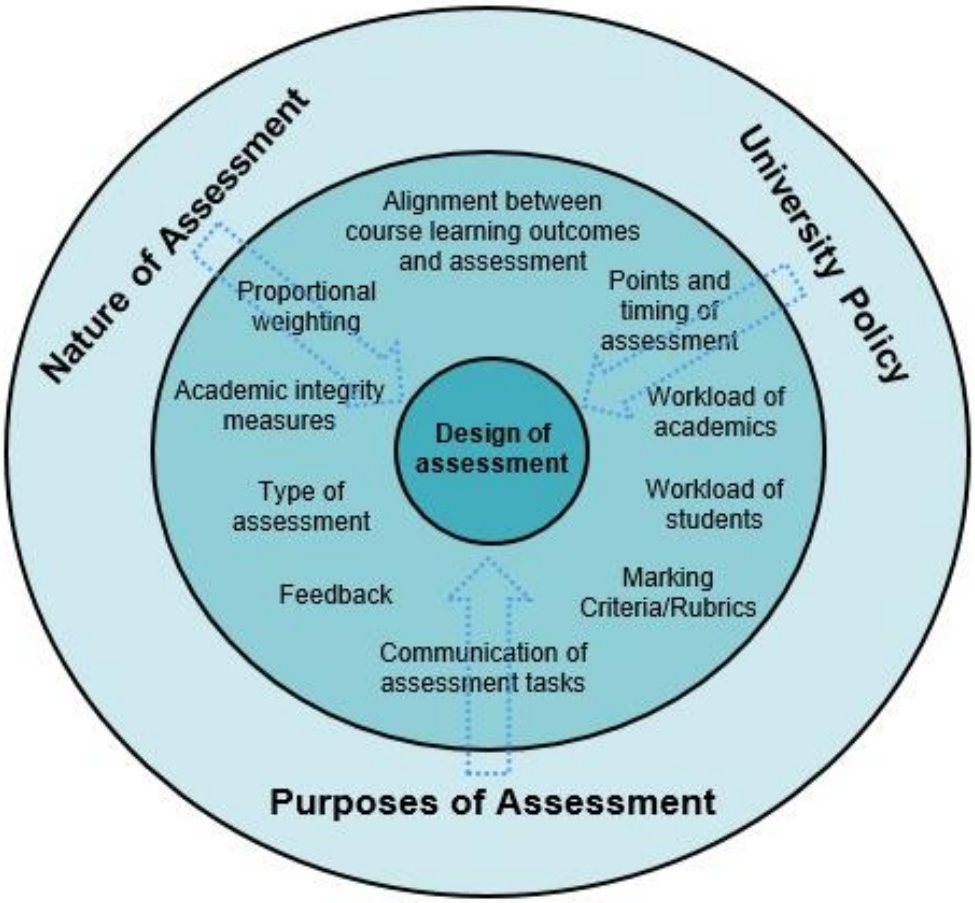
THE UNIVERSITY of ADELAIDE

ADEPT

Adelaide Development Program for Educators and Professionals who Teach

KEY IDEAS FOR DESIGNING ASSESSMENT

Factors in Designing Assessment



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1. Understand the purpose & nature of assessment

- The central focus for students in undertaking a course is the assessment. In fact, assessment is sometimes called the 'de facto curriculum' because whatever the stated curriculum, student engagement is largely determined by the assessment where there is a direct return for effort. The way to focus student engagement and shape specific learning is through carefully designed assessment.
- Assessment is often identified as either 'formative' or 'summative'. The focus of formative assessment is on the learning process, the development and improvement of knowledge and skills and their application in a range of contexts. It allows students to test out ideas and to take risks without there being consequences for their final grade, and so it relates to a preliminary activity which leads eventually to a summative assessment. Summative assessment is focussed on making judgments about what learning has occurred and so it contributes to the final grade a student receives. However, summative assessment, particularly early in the study period, has a formative dimension through feedback. It can also be integral to the assessment through the design of 'nested' or 'cascading' assessment tasks which progressively build on each other. In general, assessment which contributes to a final grade is designated as summative. This information is focussed on summative assessment.
- Assessment has three major functions. First, it is the means by which student learning is fostered. Because student effort is understandably centred on assessment, the way to promote learning that is critical to the course is to make it the focus of assessment.
  Second, assessment is the way academics make judgements about the extent to which students have achieved the course learning outcomes. To make this possible, assessment must be aligned with the course learning outcomes in a transparent and explicit way. If the assessment is measuring something other than the course learning outcomes, however valuable those things are in themselves, the course has a major issue with validity. That is, student success in the assessment is not an indicator of achievement of the course learning outcomes.
  Third, assessment provides diagnostic feedback to both students and staff. That is, performance in assessment is a powerful indicator of how well students are grasping the substance of the course and, by implication, the effectiveness of teaching.
- University assessment policy encodes many of the accepted assessment practices and is the context in which individual assessment practices operate.

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2. Put in place processes to ensure academic integrity

- One of the greatest challenges for universities is maintaining academic integrity. The credentialing role vested in universities requires that graduates have personally attained the learning outcomes specified in the award. Failure of the University to provide this assurance has potentially serious consequences because graduates who cannot perform to expectations put at risk the University's reputation and academic standing.
- Plagiarism is a particular issue. The way to address this is by a systematic, multi- dimensional, institutional approach. The first dimension is education: as part of their first year experience, students need to have a systematic and comprehensive introduction to academic conventions in writing, University policy and the consequences of plagiarism. The second dimension is assessment design: strategies such as changing assessment from year to year, using very current issues or requiring a staged approach will discourage inappropriate use of others' work. The third dimension is detection: if students or their friends evade detection they will be encouraged to continue the practice. It is critical, therefore, that there is a rigorous approach to detection across the University using Turnitin software or other approaches. In suspected cases of plagiarism, adherence to the University policy and procedures is essential. Further helpful information can be found in the publication Plagiarism, by Jude Carroll and Jon Appleton.

3. Focus on designing valid assessment

- Assessment is only valid if it gives an accurate indication of the extent to which students have achieved the full range of intended learning outcomes. One way to ensure this alignment occurs is to develop the course learning outcomes and the assessment at the same time.
- Assessment types (essay, exam, report, creative work, etc.) need to correspond to the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes can only be effectively assessed through appropriate forms of assessment. See Summative assessment tasks and graduate attributes for assessment tasks associated with the Graduate Attributes. Exams assess a very limited range of outcomes and so courses where exams are a large component of the assessment will have difficulty in making valid judgments where the course learning outcomes cover a broad range of expectations. Exams are valid forms of assessment if they are linked to judging specific kinds of outcomes, particularly recalling content as in language learning, and integrating common threads and ideas across the course. It is not necessary to examine aspects of a course already assessed in other ways.
- The weighting of any piece of assessment in relation to the total course assessment should reflect its relative contribution to the course. For example, it would not be appropriate for an assessment worth 40% to be due very early in the study period, before that proportion of the course had been taught. Similarly, an assignment worth 50% needs to be related to a similar proportion of the whole course, wherever it falls in the study period.

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4. Identify appropriate points of assessment

- Consider how many points of assessment you need to adequately cover the course. Between two and four (not including participation) assessment tasks is generally sufficient. Competency-based courses such as learning a language generally need more. Not every part of your course needs to be assessed in a summative way. Some aspects will be cumulative and so assessing the end point is effectively assessing the earlier components.
- Spreading the assessment across the study period assists students with managing their workload.
- Ensure the due dates of assignments are planned in relation to the teaching and learning activity relevant to the assessment. Teaching and learning activities should directly support assessment.
- A small and, therefore, redeemable assessment at week 3 or 4 (before the HECS census date) is a good way of helping students engage with the course. If they make an investment of time and effort they are less likely to withdraw.
- Avoid having a large complex assignment due at the same time as an exam in the course. Apart from the obvious issue of overload, assignments and exams require different kinds of learning and this timing may interfere with both processes.
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5. Take into account workloads of students and staff

- The performance of students is affected by the total assessment demands. If a fulltime student does four courses and each has 4 points of assessment that means 16 pieces in a 12 week study period. Many of these will fall due at a similar time, reducing the capacity for students to invest adequately in all of the assessments. Coordination of assessment deadlines across courses in a program provides a more even distribution of workload.
- Over-assessment will result in superficial 'surface' learning. Research shows this demotivates learners and dissipates effort rather than stimulates students into action.
- Over-assessment in one course will have negative impacts on other courses. Extraordinary amounts of time spent satisfying assessment requirements for one course will compromise engagement with others. This is a quality issue for the program or major.
- Not all assessment needs to be marked by an academic or be in a written form. In- class assessment can be used for presentations, posters or group work.
- You may want to consider the due dates of assignments across all the courses you teach in relation to the distribution of your own workload. A more even distribution of marking across the study period may be helpful in giving timely and constructive feedback.

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6. Communicate the assessment requirements using plain language

- Instructions about assessment should be clear and unambiguous. Where students struggle to understand the assessment task, the validity of the assessment is compromised. This is certainly an issue for students from a non-English speaking background; but all students will benefit if they can focus on the task itself rather than first having to decipher the expectations of the task.
- Students should be clear about the expectations of assessment, including limits and boundaries. For example, if it is a presentation, the expectations about length, topic, resources, use of graphics, and technologies such as MyUni, Turnitin, online submission, etc. need to be specified.
- For first year students in particular, assessment requirements need to include detail about academic literacies. For students in later years this is not as necessary although easy access to these kinds of resources will be useful to students at all levels.
- Marking rubrics/criteria should be created as an integral part of developing the assessment and provided to students with the assessment tasks. These are a basic point of reference for students which they have a right to know. The more specific the rubrics are to an assessment the more useful they are as student feedback.
- Marking criteria must reflect the emphases stated in the course documentation. You can choose to weight your assessment in particular ways so that it reflects the needs of the program/major for particular kinds of assessment or because you want to emphasise particular aspects. For example, you may choose to give significant weighting to the structure of an essay and less on the content for a Level 1 course, but the reverse for a Level 2 course. Marking criteria and their weighting indicate to students the relative importance of various aspects of the assessment and will affect the way they approach the assessment task.

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7. Provide timely and constructive feedback

- Feedback should be considered a specific kind of teaching. Its value is in the individualised nature of the response to a student's work. Students also value knowing how their own achievement relates to the achievement of others, so there is a group dimension as well.
- Providing useful feedback takes time and so the workload associated with it is a major consideration in the overall design of assessment. Assessment requiring feedback that generates an unmanageable workload is self-defeating and unsustainable. Turnitin incorporates electronic tools which can assist with providing comprehensive feedback efficiently.
- The approach to providing both individual and group feedback depends on many factors including the nature of the assessment task, the size of the student group, whether there are other markers, the use of marking software and electronic forms of individual and group communication. Tailoring the method of feedback to your specific cohort of students is a key aspect of planning assessment.
- Analysing the feedback you provide across the student group may give you an insight into your teaching or to the characteristics of the student group. If you find many students have similar misunderstandings or make the same mistakes there may be an issue that needs to be addressed across the group or in the organisation of the course.
- Space your assignments throughout the study period so that there is enough time for you to provide feedback and for students to incorporate that feedback into their next submission.

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