

SOS: a tool to support assessment practice across degree courses

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Reviews of degree programs often reveal a lack of a suitable structure to ensure the appropriate distribution and weighting of students' assessment experiences across the program. In an attempt to address this issue, the Subject Overview Spreadsheet (SOS) was developed to support staff in designing their assessments and monitoring practice across each year of a degree program. The tool is designed to be used initially by subject coordinators designing their modules, to ensure that all assessment aligns with learning objectives and meets faculty and university policies. SOS then collates information for related sets of subjects – for example, all first-year core subjects within a degree program or all compulsory subjects within a major – and produces a series of tables so that teaching teams across subjects can view the types, weightings and distributions of the assessments. These tables can be used to identify gaps or overloading in the subject assessment design, so that modifications can be made to provide a suitable balance for students. This process has proven very effective with large programs with multiple majors. Data is then forwarded to the accreditation committee to monitor assessment and assurance of learning across the program. It also facilitates reviews of the impact of any proposed changes in subject assessment design.

Keywords: development; distribution; monitoring; staff support; weighting

Theme: sustainable assessment practices and standards

Introduction

The development of the Subject Overview Spreadsheet (SOS) tool was prompted by a review of the business programs in the Faculty of Business at the University of Technology Sydney. It was found that, due to large enrolment numbers in individual courses (up to 1500 students), multiple-choice questions in formal examination format were being used as the predominant assessment method. This meant that students did not always experience a range of assessment types and that the timing of their assessments was often heavily concentrated around the mid-semester and end-of-semester exam periods. The review process also identified a set of graduate attributes that included competencies such as written communication, critical thinking and interpersonal skills, and recognised that multiple-choice examinations did not provide sufficient opportunity for students to develop these attributes. The findings of this review were problematic, as we know that learners need to be immersed in learning situations that engage them in actions that are authentic, reflective and collaborative – elements that are rarely portrayed in multiple-choice

questions (Scott, 2005). Lack of variety in assessment also does not allow for variation in practice, a process that develops more adaptive experts (Marton & Fazez, 2002). Further, Gibbs and Simpson (2004), in their paper outlining the conditions of assessment that support student learning, stress the importance of distribution of effort, which does not occur when assessment is heavily concentrated around examination periods. It was clearly evident that it was necessary to develop a process of auditing current assessment practice across degree programs, providing support for assessment design in all units of study and monitoring assessment throughout a degree.

This paper discusses the tool that was developed to tackle the issue of assessment weighting and distribution over degree programs, and informs educators interested in sustainable assessment practices and standards by providing a mechanism to review, develop and monitor assessment practice across degrees.

Methodology

In order to address the problem as identified above, a spreadsheet tool called the Subject Overview Spreadsheet, or SOS, was developed to capture data for each individual unit of study, and then summarise this data. This meant that, for example, the core first-year subjects could be reviewed collectively and compared against the faculty assessment guidelines.

The tool allows each subject coordinator to input information about their unit of study including: learning objectives (and how these address the graduate attributes); types of assessment; the weighting of each assessment; the timing of both assessment due dates and tutor feedback to students; and which learning objectives are included in each assessment task. Additionally, the tool has warning systems in place to alert the unit coordinator should the assessment design contravene university assessment policy. For example, should a tutor set more than 30 per cent group work in one subject, the summary table will alert the tutor to this problem by turning the associated cell red. Should one of the learning objectives not be included in any of the assessment tasks, the tutor will also be alerted. Similarly, if feedback is scheduled to be given to students more than two teaching weeks again the tutor will be alerted. These mechanisms therefore allow the tutor to immediately review and correct their current assessment program, as well as providing clear guidance when designing new assessment schemes.

The data from each subject is then fed into a summary page. This page provides an overview of all elements of a set of subjects – for example, the core, a major or the degree as a whole.

The various tables depict the:

- distribution of types of assessment (including the weighting for each type of assessment across the degree), making it easy to see where one method may be overused
- timing of assessment tasks across the degree, so that it can quickly be identified when student workload is high across the semester, as well as highlighting those subjects in which students are not provided with sufficient opportunity for early assessment and feedback
- distribution of learning objectives addressing each of the graduate attributes, to ensure that students have the opportunity to develop each of these competencies; the tool also identifies

where there may be gaps in ensuring that these learning goals meet external bodies accreditation requirements.

These summary pages are used to prompt improvement of the program. By sharing this information with the teaching teams responsible for each element of the program, they can more fully understand the use of assessment in relation to graduate attributes; and thereby take ownership of the assessment design across the program in order to ensure even variation, weighting and timing of assessments in future offerings. The tool also allows accreditation committees to monitor majors and programs.

Conclusion

This tool has been piloted in the faculty, with staff feedback indicating their appreciation of the summary information across the degree and of the opportunity to work collaboratively to develop assessment practices that provide variety and enrichment of the student experience. The tool will continue to be piloted and further developed to aid academics and administrators in developing sound assessment methods that promote student learning.

References

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