

Designing Assessment to Develop and Assure Student Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Quality in teaching and learning is a key issue in Higher Education in Australia. Therefore it is important for institutions to be able to make the expectations they have for their students explicit and then assure that these expectations have been achieved, using this process to inform continuous improvement. The question is how we ensure that these attributes are developed during degree programs, with the answer lying in the strong influence of assessment design on student learning. It is well acknowledged that assessment methods have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor and so it is crucial that they are developed to foster learning of desired outcomes rather than to purely grade student achievement. This presentation derives from an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching National Fellowship into Curriculum design for assuring learning in business education - leading the way. The fellowship focuses on effective principles to design assessments that not only assure learning but also encourage development of learning outcomes.

The quality of business education standards in higher education has been a matter of much recent discontent and debate. Martell and Calderon (2009) cite growing public dissatisfaction with the quality of higher education in the US, and the U.K. Government White Paper, 'Students at the Heart of the System' (2011), set out the quality challenges of a changing higher education environment, recognising the need to strengthen the processes and to adapt and reinforce systems to improve practice. Assurance of learning¹ (AoL) is therefore a process that is of high importance in educational settings for both individual institutional developments, as well as to provide valid evidence to external constituents to demonstrate that the organisation is meeting its goals and has built-in strategies for improvement.

However, assuring learning against standards is a complex task for academics and program administrators. Indeed, Coates (2010) not only acknowledges the complexity of assessing, monitoring and enhancing academic standards, but also stresses the need for cultural change in order to better facilitate the process. Taylor et al. (2009) noted that while all Australian universities make claims in policy and curriculum documentation about developing graduate attributes, the effective integration into programs has been somewhat intangible, resulting in students not fully engaging with the expectations of degree programs. In addition the B Factor Project (De la Harpe, 2009) found that academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes and their low levels of confidence and willingness to teach and assess them must be acknowledged if universities are to progress in ensuring that graduates are equipped for the world of work. In light of this Oliver (2010) has concluded that there is an urgent need for "new, efficient and effective ways of judging and warranting" graduate attributes (p.3).

Progressing from an earlier OLT funded project: Hunters & Gatherers: Strategies for Curriculum Mapping and Data Collection for Assurance of Learning (Lawson et al, 2012), this work concentrates on developing assessments that are conducive to developing graduate attributes and assuring learning. The support for curriculum design stems from a constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003), whole of program approach (Lawson, Freeman & Thompson, 2012). Based on these approaches this fellowship has developed strategies for enhancing student engagement with AoL. It focuses on the use of authentic scaffolded assessment (ASA) and structured feedback mechanisms (FM) to support the development of student knowledge, skills and application articulated as course level learning outcomes. More specifically, it has addressed the following three questions:

1. Do AoL processes provide opportunities for students to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes for their course of study? Using business schools as a sample, the fellowship has reviewed

¹ Assurance of learning is a phrase used by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business to refer to the assessment and documentation of program level learning outcomes/graduate attributes.

the adequacy of the AoL process in developing students' CLOs, with particular reference to authentic assessment tasks and relevant feedback.

2. Are learning outcomes for courses of study set at an appropriate level and scope? This has entailed a review of business schools' CLOs, standards, and assessment methods as applied to demonstrate students' ability/attainment.
3. Are curriculum content and learning resources adequate for students to achieve the learning outcomes of their course of study? This is through evaluation of course design, specifically its ability to develop the relevant student capabilities through opportunities for practice (summative and formative) with feedback, and in so doing, determine the validity and reliability of AoL data.

References

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Acknowledgement

Support for this project was provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd.