ASSURING THE QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND:
A Report of the Assessment Working Party of the Teaching and Learning Committee of Academic Board

Background:
Doing high quality work is part of the normal day-to-day business of organisations such as universities. Within universities, academic colleagues have played the major role in the development, maintenance and transmission of best practices in areas as disparate as hypersonics and health. The development of knowledge and independent and critical thought that occurs at universities such as the University of Queensland requires the rigour of quality and consistency.

While not doubting that such quality exists, it is nevertheless important for contemporary universities to have clearly articulated quality enhancement, quality assurance and quality control mechanisms (Hand & Clewes, 2000). This is not a new concept in relation to assessment. It was recognised at this University in the 1996 Report of the Task Force on Assessment Policies and Practices. That same year, Biggs (1996; p. 14) wrote: “that each tertiary institution should have a policy and guidelines on assessment, providing a coherent set of principles and procedural knowledge about assessment”.

The University’s assessment policies and practices are underpinned by the Report of the 1996 Task Force, which was approved by the Academic Board (June 1996) and Senate, and implemented on 1 January 1997. The Report made 35 recommendations (see Appendix 1), covering the areas of the purpose of assessment, the definition of assessment, the provision of feedback, the type and amount of assessment, special needs of first year students, the use of criterion referenced assessment, accuracy and equity in assessment, the need for staff development, and the need for the institutionalisation of ongoing improvements in assessment.

The recommendations from the Task Force Report have been translated into explicit assessment policies that have been approved by Senate for publication in the Handbook of University Policies and Procedures (HUPP) (http://www.uq.edu.au/hupp/). The Senate has also has approved Assessment Rules (http://www.uq.edu.au/student/GeneralRules2002/2002AssessmentRules.htm) and a formal appeals process for students concerned about assessment decisions (The Senate Student Appeals Committee and the Student Grievance Resolution Policy (http://www.uq.edu.au/hupp/contents/view.asp?sz1=3&s2=40&s3=10). Academic Staff have access to a range of policies in relation to airing and resolving grievances. They are also protected by a whistleblower’s protection policy.

The University’s assessment policies and rules are under constant review as part of the University’s quality assurance practices. The Teaching and Learning Committee of Academic Board has been engaged in an ongoing examination of the implementation of the 1996 Task Force Report. In 2001 the Committee’s Assessment Working Party (AWP), in its role to ensure that University-wide best practice quality enhancement, quality assurance and quality control processes\(^1\) were being

\(^1\) For the purpose of this paper, **quality assurance** is seen as the mechanism used to ensure assessment criteria and all related assessment materials are designed and publicised in accordance with UQ policies and guidelines. In particular, in accordance with those policies, high quality assessment will contribute to and enhance students’ learning, especially by means of feedback on assessed work. It will also yield grades which validly reflect the extent to which a student has achieved the course or program goals. It also assumes the opportunity for quality enhancement through the continuous review and improvement of assessment practices. **Quality control** is directly related to ensuring that correct procedures have been maintained throughout all stages of assessment.
implemented in the assessment area, chose to examine the quality assurance mechanisms in use within the Faculties and Schools, as per recommendations 6.3 and 9.2 of the Task Force Report:

- Rec. 6.3: that the current recommended distribution of grades be replaced by a grading system developed according to quality assurance mechanisms established at the departmental and faculty levels, and
- Rec. 9.2: that the assessment committee review administrative issues relating to assessment policies and practices arising out of this Report.

The need for transparent quality assurance, quality control and quality enhancement systems is important given the continued pressures within the university sector, e.g., reductions in operating grants, increased pressures for income generation through intake of full-fee paying students, and engagement in other entrepreneurial activities. Doing more with less is the reality of the times. As noted by Pattillo (1984, p.3) (in relation to the accounting profession), “.. the pressures of everyday client demands and other factors make it very easy to let our guard down, and to be satisfied with a lesser quality work than we would otherwise prefer to exhibit”. Smith and his colleagues (2001) have urged the adoption of institutionally specific perspectives on quality assurance and quality enhancement of courses.

**Assessment within the University of Queensland:**

The University of Queensland acknowledges the following principles of assessment:

- Assessment of students’ learning is a fundamental activity within the university.
- Assessment is a considered activity that is integral to sound curriculum design, development and implementation.
- Assessment methods employed should reflect the variety of course and program goals.
- Assessment should function to encourage, direct and reinforce student learning.
- Assessment should function to indicate achievement, maintain standards and provide certification.
- Timely and quality feedback is fundamental to the learning process and some form of feedback should be offered on every item of assessment.
- Assessment methods should utilize mixed modes and should be spread across the semester.
- Assessment requirements for courses need to be provided, in writing, to students in the first week of class each semester as part of the course profile, except in those cases where student input into assessment requirements is standard procedure.
- Each piece of assessment is to be accompanied by clear written assessment criteria.
- Details of assessment will be reviewed for adequacy and educational soundness as part of the course profile review at the annual curriculum review.
- Student performance in assessment should be viewed by staff as feedback on their teaching. Assessment is a means of learning about students’ misunderstandings so teaching can be modified accordingly.

**Survey of Current Assessment Practices at UQ (2001):**

On 20 April 2001, the Chair of the Assessment Working Party circulated a memo to Executive Deans, Directors of Studies and Heads of School to ascertain the quality assurance and control mechanisms in use with regard to assessment. The questions asked were:

1. How does the Faculty/School ensure that the assessment practices implemented for each course match that documented in the distributed course profile?
2. How does the Faculty/School deal with situations where problems have arisen with course assessment?
3. How and under what circumstances can changes be made to students’ grades prior to publication of the grades to the student, and by whom?

and that students' assessment outcomes have been managed in accordance with published assessment plans, UQ policies and assessment guidelines.
Responses were received from six faculties and two Schools. The key findings from this 2001 survey were:

- All Schools in the respondent Faculties provide written course profiles in week 1 of the semester that, *inter alia*, provide students with an outline of the assessment requirements for that course, and general information about the criteria to be used, as is the University policy.

- There is variability in who checks these course profiles and assessment procedures prior to distribution to students: it may be the Chair of the School Teaching and Learning Committee; or the Head of School; or the individual Course Coordinators; or the Undergraduate Coordinator. In some Schools such checks are made ‘from time to time’ by the Head of School, but not routinely. One Faculty observed that while course profiles contained the required information, “perusal of course profiles indicate that many still do not specify assessment criteria and standards in detail that would be useful to a student”.

- One Faculty reported conducting a Faculty-wide audit in 2000 of all course profiles and assessment practices. This occurred in conjunction with the Faculty administration of the University’s Teaching Quality Appraisal (TQA). A number of deficits were identified in this audit (such as the absence of learning objectives in course profiles), and were rectified for the start of the 2001 academic year.

- In some Schools, staff are given comprehensive assistance in preparation of criterion-based assessment. An exemplar from the School of Education is provided in Appendix 2.

- There is considerable variability in the way Schools and Faculties ensure that assessment practices implemented for each course matched those documented in the course profile. In some Schools, formal Examiners Committees were held at the end of each semester to consider grades recommended by Course Coordinators, with explicit reference to the course assessment profiles given to students on the commencement of the course that semester. In other Schools, formal Examiners Meetings were convened, but, in making grade determinations, the Meetings did not refer to assessment details in course profiles. In other Schools, Course Coordinators allocated grades at the end of semester and uploaded these results. Several submissions pointed out that the presence of student representatives on the School Teaching and Learning Committee provided a mechanism by which any deviation from the course profiles would be highlighted for report back to the School for remediation.

- In terms of mechanisms and processes to deal with situations where problems arise with assessment, in a number of Faculties, the Director of Studies deals with the individual cases, whereas in another Faculty this function is performed by the Heads of Schools. One Faculty observed that it “should only become aware of deviations from assessment policy when a student, after following the University’s grievance procedure, submits a complaint to the Faculty Office”. Some Schools include in the course profile the disputed grades policy or remarking policy.

- The responsibility for approving changes to grades *prior* to publication to the student rested variously with the Head of School, the Course Coordinator, the Examiners Meeting when ratified by the Chief Examiner and Head of School, or the Faculty’s Director of Studies. Some faculties did not allow such changes to be made.

### A Model of Quality Assurance and Quality Control in Assessment Practices:

Continuous Curriculum Review (CCR) has been proposed as a strategy to address quality assurance and quality enhancement issues within the University (Smith et al, 2001). The CCR approach was piloted at this University (see Smith et al, 2001).
The University’s policy on Curriculum Review (HUPP 3.20.8) identifies a 3 stage process comprising annual program/sequence of study monitoring, triennial program/sequence of study assessment, and septennial school and discipline review. It is recommended that the University consider adopting a parallel model for ensuring quality assurance and quality control in assessment. (Refer footnote 1).

Quality Assurance should be of the same standard across the Faculties, while the Quality Control mechanisms across the Faculties may need to be varied to account for differences in programs.

Key Features of the model are:

- A course profile is to be developed and published for every course in accordance with HUPP policy 3.20.9.

- Prior to publication of the course profile, the School Teaching and Learning Committee should check the assessment details contained therein–
  - to ensure that assessment is directed to achieving the goals of the course, and
  - to assure the quality of the criteria to be used for grading the students’ work.

- The University will –
  (i) continue to provide training and support to academic staff on –
    - good practices in teaching and learning,
    - how to develop curricula and courses,
    - how to assess best, and
    - how to develop good criterion-referenced assessment and standards.
  (ii) ensure that its staff are aware of the rules and policies guiding assessment.

The development of staff skills in developing good assessment should occur at the School level, utilising the assistance of organisations such as the Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI).

- Faculties and Schools will have procedures and mechanisms to identify, and then to deal with, any problems in implementation of assessment requirements such as deviation from written guidelines.

- Faculties and Schools, through their Teaching and Learning Committees, will have documented the grounds on which amendments to grades can be made. Appropriate grounds might include: errors were made in the aggregation of marks; pieces of assessment were misplaced; the assessment criteria and standards were not properly applied; the student’s work was not properly marked.

- Students will be represented in the membership of Teaching and Learning Committees at every level, ie Discipline, School, Faculty and Academic Board.
The Model:

1. Clear, comprehensive, and transparent analysis and reporting of assessment practices within Schools and Faculties is to occur.

   Action: Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Committees

Activities at the School/Discipline ('major stream') Level will include:

- Training of staff to develop assessment linked to course goals – with help from TEDI – and to prepare course profiles.

- Regular scrutiny of all course profiles, with respect to allocation of weightings/marks for assessment items within courses, balance of individual vs. group work, and amount, mode and spread of assessment to be used in courses.

   Where problems arise, the Head of School or nominee will provide guidance to the Course Coordinator to modify the assessment procedures.

- Checking, for a sample of courses each year, that feedback is available on all items of assessment, and is provided for all within-semester assessment. During semester, reviewing the quality of a sample of this feedback.

   Where feedback is absent, the Head of School or nominee should first approach the staff member concerned to provide the feedback. Where the quality of the feedback seems inadequate, the Head of School or nominee should either counsel the Course Coordinator or delegate this task to a senior staff member known to be an excellent teacher. The staff of TEDI may also be able to assist at this stage.

- Development and documentation of procedures to ensure that, at the end of semester when grades are being allocated, the assessment regime detailed in the course profile is adhered to. For example, a School may choose to establish an Assessment Sub-Committee to fulfil this function. (Minutes of meetings will be recorded.) Such a committee was recommended by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Code of Practice in May 2000.

   When problems are found, such as a deviation from the published assessment regime, the Head of School must arrange for all students’ work to be regraded using the published assessment regime.

- Specification of the grounds on which amendments to grades will be made prior to publication of those grades.

- Monitoring students’ perceptions of the quality of their assessment, and developing remedial action where assessment quality is found to be lacking.

- Reporting annually, as part of the Annual Program/Sequence of Study Monitoring process, on a sample of courses, with all courses being covered over the 3 year Triennial Program Assessment cycle. This report will identify:

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2 The primary vehicle is to be the School Teaching and Learning Committee where most assessment development and management occurs. Such an emphasis on the School Teaching and Learning Committee recognises the collegial nature of curriculum development, implementation and monitoring. In large Schools, it may be desirable for a School Assessment Sub-Committee, or Discipline Teaching and Learning Sub-Committee, to undertake this function.
the Chief Examiner for this program of study (if applicable);
any incidents which occurred in that year where the normal quality assurance procedures associated with assessment were not successfully followed;
how such incidents were managed;
checks that have been put in place to ensure the actual assessment outcomes for students are in accordance with the published assessment criteria for the respective courses;
checks that have been put in place to ensure that timely and quality feedback is provided to students on each item of assessment; and
steps that are planned for implementation to enhance the quality of assessment practices and outcomes when the courses are next offered.

This report will be signed off by the Head of School.

- Reporting to the Faculty on any areas where major problems were detected which may require Faculty attention, such as environmental factors.

2. **Each Faculty will develop its own Quality Assessment Procedures and Plans, which will be provided to the central Teaching and Learning Committee.**

   **Action:** Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee.

Activities at the **Faculty Level** will make explicit the link to curriculum review, and will include:

- Reviewing, in detail, assessment practices across the Schools in the Faculty, and auditing a sample of reports from the constituent Schools.

  The Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee will provide a written report to the Executive Dean and the Director of Studies.

- Monitoring students’ perceptions of the quality of their assessment, and developing remedial action where assessment quality is found to be lacking.

- Identification within and circulation of examples of good assessment practices to Schools across the Faculty as part of the Faculty’s ongoing quality enhancement program.

- Reporting, on request, through the Executive Dean to the Academic Board (through Teaching and Learning Committee), on Faculty quality assurance and quality control processes as they relate to assessment. The report may refer to policy issues, patterns of problems that have arisen, mechanisms for solving problems, and areas of excellence. It is anticipated this will occur at least triennially to coincide with Australian Universities Quality Agency audits.

3. **The Academic Board Teaching and Learning Committee will monitor Faculty and School QA processes, consider ways to enhance assessment quality and recommend changes to policies as required.**

   **Action:** Central Teaching and Learning Committee
Activities at the Academic Board Level (via Teaching and Learning Committee) will include:

- Maintaining clear policies, detailing what is required and what is desirable in the area of assessment.
- Scrutiny of Faculty QA Procedures and Plans and their periodic (triennial) reports on reviews of assessment practices within their Schools.
- Monitoring the operational effectiveness of current assessment policies and recommending, as necessary, ways to enhance assessment quality, including the provision of further training and support to academic staff. Reports from Faculties will comprise the major input into this process.
- Identification and promulgation of examples of good practice in assessment.

**Summary:**
This paper has suggested that the University consider, develop and implement an explicit model for quality enhancement, quality assurance and quality control with regard to student assessment.

It is recommended that:
- the Teaching and Learning Committee of Academic Board endorse the proposal in this paper; and
- the approved model be implemented from semester 1, 2003.

It is further recommended that:
- a review be undertaken at the beginning of 2005, through consultation with the Faculties and student representatives, regarding the impact of the policies on assessment practices; and
- the need for ongoing commitment to quality enhancement in assessment be recognised through particular emphasis in the review of the University’s Teaching & Learning Enhancement Plan.

**References:**


http://www/qaa.ac.uk/public/cop/copaosfinal/genprin.htm
Appendix 1

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS


Purposes of Assessment
1.1 That the primary focus of assessment be to encourage, direct and reinforce learning.
1.2 That assessment should continue to indicate achievement, maintain standards and provide certification.
1.3 That in making judgements about the assessment approach to adopt (including method, marking and feedback), emphasis should be placed on encouraging high quality learning.

Definition of Assessment
2.1 That the University adopt the following definition of assessment:

*Work (examination, assignment, practical, performance etc.) which a student is required to complete for any one or a combination of the following reasons: the fulfilment of educational purposes (for example, to motivate learning, to provide feedback); to provide a basis for an official record of achievement or certification of competence; or to permit grading of the student.*

Feedback
3.1 That feedback be recognised as fundamental to the learning process.
3.2 That timely feedback be given on all items of progressive assessment.
3.3 That the current policy on student access to examination scripts be affirmed.
3.4 That students have access to examination question papers, after the corresponding special and supplementary examination periods, unless determined otherwise by the Examinations Committee in exceptional circumstances.

Type and Amount of Assessment
4.1 That the quantity of assessment which contributes toward a final result be the minimum amount necessary to ensure a valid result.
4.2 That faculties and departments investigate the practicability of basing assessment upon a curriculum or course of study rather than individual subjects.
4.3 That the Examinations Committee establish guidelines on the appropriate amount, mode and spread of assessment.

First Year Students
5.1 That departments recognise the particular needs of first year students in relation to progressive assessment, feedback and orientation to university assessment methods and standards.

Basis of Assessment
6.1 That marks and grades be awarded by reference to predetermined standards rather than by reference to the performance of other students in the subject.
6.2 That each piece of assessment be accompanied by clear assessment criteria which are effectively communicated to students and markers.
6.3 That the current recommended distribution of grades be replaced by a grading system developed according to quality assurance mechanisms established at the departmental and faculty levels.
6.4 That revised guidelines for the award of University Medals be developed by the Education Committee.
6.5 That the faculties determine the award of Medals according to procedures established within the guidelines, with monitoring by the Education Committee.
6.6 That the Postgraduate Research Studies Committee consider the effects on the award of scholarships of abandoning the recommended distribution of grades.

Accuracy and Equity

7.1 That the University accept the principle of reducing opportunities for bias in assessment.
7.2 That the Examinations Committee reconsider the issue of anonymous marking in two years time.
7.3 That the University's existing policy relating to the compulsory provision (at the beginning of each semester) of a written statement on the purposes or goals of the subject and the nature of assessment, be affirmed.
7.4 That such subject outlines/profiles also detail the way in which nonconformity with assessment requirements will be handled.
7.5 That special consideration be abandoned.
7.6 That faculties consider making greater use of special examinations.
7.7 That the Education Committee and the Deans consider liberalising current practice in relation to withdrawal without penalty.
7.8 That departments develop and implement quality assurance methods to ensure marker consistency.
7.9 That subject coordinators consider carefully the way in which marks or grades are aggregated within a subject, with a view to ensuring that the validity of the final grade is not inadvertently compromised.

Staff Development

8.1 That the University affirm its commitment to Objective 3.4 of the Strategic Plan, namely to 'include teaching competence among the basic requirements for holding academic positions and recognise success as a teacher as a significant element in determining career progression'.
8.2 That the University encourage and make provision for all staff involved in teaching to undertake professional development in teaching, including assessment.
8.3 That the Teaching and Learning Committee advise the Staff Development Committee of the form that such professional development should take.

Initial Implementation and the Institutionalisation of Ongoing Improvement

9.1 That the Examinations Committee be renamed the Assessment Committee and its terms of reference be reformulated in light of this Report.
9.2 That the Assessment Committee review administrative issues relating to assessment policies and practices arising out of this Report.
9.3 That the Assessment Committee oversee the compilation of the University's assessment policies and recommended practices (including the Guide to Examiners) into a single document, Policy and Guidelines on Assessment, to be widely disseminated.
9.4 That the Assessment Committee develop a list of student assessment expectations as part of the Policy and Guidelines on Assessment document.
9.5 That the Academic Board evaluate the implementation of this Report within three years of its adoption.
Appendix 2: Exemplar

School of Education
The University of Queensland

Criteria and Standards Based Assessment Workshop

➢ Overview
  • Setting a context
  • Essential vocabulary
  • Issues for staff

➢ Undertaking task analyses

➢ Developing task specific criteria

➢ Writing standards

➢ Assigning final grades

➢ Where next?