

## Excellence in University Assessment: An impossible mission? (0019)

David Carless

University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Assessment has long been recognized as a central influence on teaching and learning. Students adjust their study behaviours to their perceptions of the assessment tasks that they are undertaking. The right kinds of summative assessment might propel student learning processes in productive directions. The main aim of the paper is to discuss what 'good' summative assessment might look like and relate these ideas to the main facilitating and inhibiting factors for productive assessment processes.

There are often limited incentives for academics to devote to innovation in assessment (Norton et al., 2013) and furthermore many teachers in higher education feel constrained by contextual circumstances which reduce their autonomy (James, 2014). In the midst of such barriers and constraints, does excellence in summative assessment become an impossible mission (cf. Barnett, 2007)?

The framing of the paper is through the notion of learning-oriented assessment. This way of thinking synthesizes relevant literature to propose three key inter-related elements of assessment in the service of learning. First, assessment tasks which stimulate productive learning processes; second, student engagement with the nature of quality work; and third student active involvement in feedback processes.

The evidence base for the paper comes from qualitative case studies of five teachers in different disciplines who had been recipients of internal or external awards for teaching excellence. The five subjects analysed were Architecture, Business, Geology, History and Law. Research methods involved classroom observations, interviews with teachers and interviews with students. These research processes facilitated an understanding of assessment task design in context across multiple disciplines. The main aim of the research was to analyze key elements of learning-oriented assessment practice.

The findings in this presentation are based on teachers' and students' perspectives on positive features of assessment task design. Students often find assessment engaging when it relates to what is done in future workplaces. Whenever feasible, assessments should mirror real-life uses of the discipline, what is sometimes called authentic assessment. Students then have

opportunities to come to terms with particular forms of discourse, values or ways of thinking which are part of mastering a specific discipline in context.

Students usually engage with tasks more deeply if there is some element of choice and flexibility. Permitting choice can allow students to develop some ownership and agency in relation to academic work. When students have this agency, they are less likely to produce perfunctory work or plagiarize.

Good assessment encourages students to spend time on task consistently across the duration of a course. In this way, students are intellectually engaged across topics and over time. Accordingly, two or three relatively small cumulative and integrated tasks are often preferable to one big one at the end.

The thorny issue of feedback also merits consideration in relation to how assessment is organized. Feedback processes are facilitated when their implementation is explicitly addressed through assessment task design so that feedback is built into ongoing course progress rather than being end-loaded. Peer feedback, technology-enhanced interaction and student self-evaluative activities play an important role in students seeking, generating and acting on feedback.

Feedback processes are enhanced when there are related activities which support students in understanding the nature of quality academic performance. Dialogue around exemplars of student work can enable students to develop a 'nose for quality' and calibrate their own judgments against those of others.

The significance of the paper lies in exploring both potentials and constraints in assessment practice in the context of different disciplines. Rather than presenting decontextualized recipes for good practice, the paper illustrates some of the possibilities and tensions in developing effective assessment processes.

Complexity arises from the competing priorities which assessment serves. For example, assessment needs to provide robust grades for certification and satisfy the requirements of quality assurance. These might act as barriers for more innovative forms of learning-oriented assessment and suggest a reliance on tried-and-tested forms of assessment, such as examinations and essays.

A positive finding from the research was that the teachers in the study exhibited willpower and determination to overcome constraints and strive to provide a rich learning experience for students. They would do what they considered likely to enhance student learning even if it was unconventional or different to the practices of colleagues. Their status as award-winners seemed to facilitate such processes. They were trusted by their institution. In turn, they

invested faith in their students to involve themselves productively in various learning and assessment tasks.

The paper concludes by discussing a set of issues framed by the analysis. What are the main incentives for good assessment practice and how might these be enhanced? How are competing priorities in assessment managed? Is excellence in university assessment an impossible mission? Is a pragmatic goal of efficient and effective assessment more realistic?

Some future research directions are also sketched. The design of sequences of worthwhile assessment tasks across courses and across programs merits renewed attention. The interplay between assessment task design and the development of effective feedback processes is also worth additional scrutiny. Finally, aspects of trust and distrust in relation to assessment are highlighted as issues requiring further exploration.

#### References

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