GIHE | Griffith Institute for
Higher Education

Good Practice Guide

Developing Effective Assessment
Strategies for success

<div style="background:#c8102e">Context and key issues</div>

Assessment has a powerful effect on student learning. Assessment methods should be selected on the basis of their impact on desired student learning behaviours and outcomes, their feasibility, validity and reliability. Developing effective assessment for your course or program involves several steps, including planning how to assess, writing good quality items, using sound marking practices, and reviewing the assessment data. Following are key concepts and terms related to the strategies discussed below.

Summative assessment means assessment that counts towards a student's grade. The results of summative assessment are therefore used to form a judgement about the performance of the student. Usually this takes the form of a mark or a grade.

Formative assessment means assessment that informs students about the progress they are making toward the desired learning outcomes, together with guidance to help the students to understand areas of weakness, strength and ways to improve. It does not count towards a grade or a progression decision. So far as possible, formative tasks should reflect the summative tasks in style and level of difficulty.

Blueprinting assessment can be done at different levels: mapping out what the assessment tasks will be and how these align with desired learning outcomes; or mapping out the content of an examination against the course content.

Validity of assessment refers to what the assessment is actually testing. There are different types of validity, including content validity (does the assessment align with the curriculum and is it likely to provide sound evidence of achievement?).

Reliability of assessment refers to the consistency of the assessment. Assessments need to be reliable if the decisions based on the results are to be defensible.

Strategies for developing effective assessment for your course

1. Remember the effect of assessment on student learning behaviours and outcomes
   - Use assessment to drive student learning behaviours in ways that correlate with the desired learning outcomes. For example, if you want the students to develop critical analysis skills, this must be reflected in the nature of the assessment tasks they are asked to undertake.

2. Align the course assessment with the learning outcomes and curriculum
   - The assessment should align firstly with the overall desired learning outcomes and secondly with the more detailed content of the course. Many people find it helpful to use a simple matrix to select appropriate assessment methods to align with desired learning outcomes, and then another to check course content against assessment task, or exam content. This strategy will identify any gaps in your assessment plan.
   - Be clear about what you are trying to assess. This will make writing assessment tasks or questions and answer guides much easier. Most courses will need a range of assessment methods to adequately assess the content and desired learning outcomes.
   - Pay attention to the cognitive level of the assessment task or question. There are various taxonomies to describe

the different cognitive level of tasks, including Bloom's taxonomy. Some tasks operate at the low level of factual recall, while others ask students to analyse, synthesise or evaluate information. The cognitive level of the task or question should match your goals in the desired learning outcomes or curriculum plan. At a program level, pay attention to how the cognitive level of assessment tasks progresses over the years of the program.

3. Prepare students for assessment by providing formative tasks and explaining the structure of the assessment for their course
    - Orientate students to the assessment plan for the course/program, including how their style of learning can assist in their preparation. (e.g. Rote learning is poor preparation for an exam designed to test applied knowledge.) You may need to reinforce this as the semester progresses.
    - Plan to include some formative assessment early in the course so the students can judge how they are going and become accustomed to the style of assessment used.
    - Explain how to use the feedback provided most effectively.
    - Clear orientation, regular formative assessment and feedback may take time initially, but can save time interviewing unhappy students later in the semester, and encourage students to produce higher quality work.

4. Design quality assessment tasks and items
    - Become aware of common item flaws in questions such as:
      - Multiple choice questions: e.g. grammatical cues, logical cues, use of absolute terms ('never', always') or imprecise terms ('many', 'seldom'), a long correct answer may be a cue. (Case and Swanson, 2002)
      - Short answer questions: e.g. answer expected does not match the question in level of detail required, ambiguous wording.
    - Review the wording of your assignments or exams with colleagues.
      - What may seem very clear to you may well have considerable ambiguities. Have a colleague/s read your exam questions with answer guides and ask for feedback. Colleagues from a different area may pick up the ambiguities that students will see in a question, or a mismatch between the question and what is indicated in the answer guide.

5. Review Assessment Data
    - Ensure data entered by hand are checked by someone other than the person who made the original entry.
    - Scrutinise the final results and look for any questions in examinations where a large proportion of the cohort has done very poorly. Check that the question matches the curriculum, that the answer guide matches the question marked, that the marking has been fair and consistent, and that the data entry was correct.
    - Review data on student performance from the assessment and use this information in planning future assessments and in your teaching to address any evident misconceptions.

6. Understand how to set standards and grade cut-offs
    - Standards need to be set for each assessment task and for the course overall. Further assistance is available through GIHE to assist you in developing sound standards for your course assessment.
    - While the University provides guidelines on grade cut-offs, there is room for variation within the range recommended, so a pass doesn't always have to equal 50%.

7. Give feedback to students
    Timely feedback is essential if students are to learn from their experience. Feedback can take many forms and can be adjusted to account for the cohort size. The different types include:
    - written feedback on assignments or examinations
    - provision of written comments on criteria sheets
    - general feedback on an assignment or exam to the whole cohort via Learning @ Griffith
    - face to face discussions with students, particularly if they have done poorly or failed
    - utilising self-assessment and peer feedback in formative assessment