Best Practice for the Assessment of Student Performance

Introduction

Assessment of student work serves a number of different purposes including structuring, guiding and enhancing student learning, certifying student achievement and admitting students to subsequent learning opportunities.

The Guidelines for the Assessment of Student Performance embody the University's current view of appropriate or best practice in both internal assessment and examinations. It is expected that they will normally be complied with, and any departure from them will need to be justifiable.

Assessment practices in all University of Otago papers are expected to conform to four principles:

a) Assessments will centre on essential knowledge and skills.

b) Assessment will be criterion-referenced; each student's work will be judged on its own merits with grades awarded on the basis of demonstrated achievement against established learning outcomes and standards.

c) All internal assessment will have a formative component and inform learning.

d) The workload associated with assessment requirements will be reasonable, and the tasks will be fully described early enough to give students time to fit them in alongside their other commitments.

This document supports and provides additional advice on the Guidelines, addressing the following key areas:

1. Principles

2. Assessment Arrangements

3. Emphasis Given to the University Graduate Profile

4. Relative Weights Given to Internal Assessments and Final Examinations

5. The Use of Terms as Mandatory Paper Requirements

6. Feedback on Student Work

7. Summative Assessment of Group Work

8. Oral Assessment

9. Student Workload

10. Monitoring and Moderation Procedures

11. Academic Staff Development

1.   Principles

Assessment of student performance at the University of Otago follows four principles:

a) **Assessments will centre on essential knowledge and skills.**

An important part of planning and approval processes should be to clarify what students taking each paper are supposed to achieve, and how specific learning outcomes will be assessed. Planning should also take into account longer term, cross-curricular goals, such as the development of oral and written communication skills, study skills and research skills, as well as the important learning outcomes specific to the paper. Assessment should take into account the University's Teaching and Learning Plan which includes the expected Graduate Profile.

b) **Assessment will be criterion-referenced; each student's work will be judged on its own merits with grades awarded on the basis of demonstrated achievement against established learning outcomes and standards.**

Work should be assessed against pre-established standards and objectives – marks should not be awarded on the basis of performance compared to one's peers or one's performance in earlier assessments. The use of criterion-referenced assessment does not preclude consideration of grade distributions in moderation procedures (see 'Monitoring and Moderation Procedures' below), but marks should not be fitted to pre-established grade distributions or pass rates.

c) **All internal assessment will have a formative component and inform learning.**

Internal assessment should not solely focus on measuring performance, but should inform student learning, for example through the provision of good quality, timely feedback. Good feedback occurs soon after the task is completed by the student, provides clear indications of the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work, gives clear guidance on how to perform better on future tasks of a similar nature, and helps to motivate the student to put further effort into learning.

d) **The workload associated with assessment requirements will be reasonable and the tasks will be fully described early enough to give students time to fit them in alongside their other commitments.**

Students may be working on up to eight papers in a year. Too many internal assessments, or too high or too concentrated a workload can result in harm to learning. The number of internal assessment should be kept to a minimum and should try to take into account assessments done in other papers with respect to number and timing. However, students need opportunities to receive feedback on their work to help them improve – this may be achieved through formative, ungraded assessment tasks.

To assist with workload planning, students should have access to information about assessment tasks and marking criteria before they start a paper.

2.   Assessment Arrangements

It is important to define what is expected of students for given marks or grades. Descriptions should provide clear student performance objectives, grading criteria and decision rules, with careful matching of assessment tasks to objectives and criteria. Assessment tasks and expectations should also be aligned with the level of the paper.

Normally a paper will include a judicious combination of summative and formative internal assessment and final examination components. It may not be possible to assess some important areas of knowledge and skills in a final examination, for example:

- Laboratory, clinical and fieldwork tasks

- Essays, projects and dissertations requiring substantial time investment and usually some independent research

- Collaborative exercises involving teamwork with staff and other students

In such cases summative internal assessment will be essential in determining the final grade for a paper. Where a paper is solely concerned with such knowledge and skills, a final examination may not be appropriate.

When planning the combination of summative and formative internal assessment and examination components, careful consideration needs to be given to the content, form and style of each assessment task. Content, form and style will vary according to whether the paper and/or the specific assessment task is distance, online or campus based. Campus-based examinations and other assessment tasks do not necessarily remove the risk that the work a student produces is their own. However, the strict invigilation processes of the typical in-person final examination setting, and careful monitoring of project/research work in an on-campus setting can reduce the likelihood of cheating.

In distance and online settings in particular, consider setting assessment tasks that:

- Include questions and tasks that do not have single, universal answers or solutions

- Demand higher level thinking and critique, application, and the making of judgements

- Assume that students will make active use of resources or materials available on the internet, journal articles and other materials, though not in assessment modalities where such resources are not permitted (e.g. no resource tests or exams)

- Vary aspects of form, use of technologies, submission, timing, etc.

When scheduling assessment tasks, care should be taken to consider their timing. Bear in mind factors such as the mid-semester break and the date for withdrawal from papers.

Students need information on assessment arrangements before they start their paper, and this must be available in the paper outline, on the learning management site and/or in other documents.

3. Penalties for Late Submitted Assignments

Most universities have a late assignment submission penalty policy, though these range in complexity and severity. Submission deadlines are important as they provide an element of fairness between students. Fairness is a key feature of ethical assessment practice. Not all assessment modalities are suited for using late submission penalties. For example, research theses, dissertations, presentations, or assessments that involve peer feedback, may not be suitable for late penalties.

Using late submission penalties is at the discretion of the paper convenor/marker. Where they are used, the following best practice is recommended:

- Clearly specify the approach taken to extensions/deadlines/late penalties in the course outline, in accordance with the description of this in the Guidelines for the Assessment of Student Performance. Ensure this is specified in official paper materials provided to students, and consider additional ways to communicate this prior to the submission deadline (as is expected in the Provision of Course and Study Information to Enrolled Students Policy www.otago.ac.nz/administration/policies/otago601527.html).

- Submission deadlines should specify the day/date and time, clarifying that this is New Zealand time zone. Take into account any upload times if submitted online and show common sense flexibility around uploaded assignments timestamped as arriving immediately after the time deadline.

- Students should be advised who to contact if they experience problems making an electronic submission. Students will require reasonable proof of a technical malfunction in order to present this to challenge any late penalty being applied.

- Extra consideration should be given to setting the submission deadlines. For example, avoid setting deadlines on the cusp of weekends ("5pm Friday") or holiday periods ("5pm 24th April") where staff are required but may not be readily available. Consider setting morning deadlines ("8am Friday") to avoid competition between assignment completion and lecture attendance. To the extent possible, consider and avoid due-date clashes that may be created across papers when extensions are granted.

- Paper convenors/markers should use discretion when requiring supporting documents related to extension requests. If granting an extension, be specific and limit it to a specific amount of time. Also, take into account whether offering an extension may impact on another assessment deadline.

- Give students guidance on when marking is likely to be completed and assignments returned. This is especially important if marking is likely to be returned within seven days, since anything submitted after that return date will not be marked. (see clause d in the Late Submission Penalty Guidelines)

- Convenors/markers should keep a record of applying a penalty. The mark recorded/entered should be with the penalty applied.

- In the assessment/grade feedback, students should be advised when a penalty has been applied.

4. Emphasis Given to the University Graduate Profile

The goals of the paper should be clearly expressed as a set of aims and learning objectives. Teachers need to be clear about what they are assessing and why they are doing this in relation to the relative importance of different paper goals. Some goals may be short-term and others developed over a much longer period, that is, across the whole paper. However, there should always be a focus on the distinctive qualities that make up a university education in the respective discipline. See also the University's Teaching and Learning Plan and Guidelines for Teaching at Otago.

At the start of the paper, students should be informed of the paper aims and learning outcomes, and how and when these will be assessed during the paper. A summary of assessment tasks should be available in the paper supplementary information on the University website as well, so students can make an informed choice before electing to take the paper.

Clarity about expectations is important for all students but is critical for distance students who have fewer, easily accessible, information-source options than have campus-based students.

5.   Relative Weights Give to Summative Internal Assessments and Final Examinations

In most papers, optimal validity of the final grade requires some weight given to summative internal assessment because some paper objectives cannot be satisfactorily assessed under the constraints of written final examinations. Choosing the optimal combination of summative internal assessment and final examination requires careful consideration of the following points:

- Final examinations which count heavily in the final grade may cause severe anxiety in some students, resulting in impaired performance

- There is often a greater risk that summative internal assessment tasks are not all the student's own work, reducing confidence in marks and therefore threatening overall validity

- The final balance between summative internal assessment and final examination should fit sensibly with the relative importance of the information gathered through these two categories of assessment

- Depending on the knowledge and skills to be assessed, and taking into account the considerations above, it may be appropriate to base summative assessment solely on a final examination or solely on internal assessment

Careful thought needs to go into how many internal assessments are used if these are summative and carry a grade that counts towards the award of a degree. With the University's modular educational system, it is possible that students find themselves undertaking summative grading so often that it excludes other possible learning experiences. Students in these situations come to see their degree as the long-term accumulation of small marks that will eventually provide a grade-point average at the end of three years.

Frequent graded internal assessment also tends to break down learning into chunks, so semester-long papers are effectively converted into many smaller modules lasting days or weeks. This type of assessment regime compartmentalises knowledge and can work against the Graduate Profile and longer-term learning goals that the University seeks. Furthermore, assessment with a primary purpose of controlling student behaviour to ensure compliance and study habits may be inappropriate for achieving the goal of educating independent autonomous learners.

It is difficult to find general principles regarding the amount of summative internal assessment relevant to all disciplines and all subject areas. However, as a general rule, it is recommended that summative internal assessment be kept to a minimum to achieve the desired learning outcomes and that it is better to have fewer, larger and more meaningful graded assessments rather than more frequent small ones.

These concerns about frequency and the possible negative impacts of graded internal assessment on learning and student experiences do not apply to formative internal assessment that is given an indicative grade only and primarily done for feedback purposes to support learning.

6. The Use of Terms as Mandatory Paper Requirements

University regulations allow departments/schools to require that students 'keep terms' in a paper in order to be allowed to pass or sit the final examination in that paper. Terms are mandatory paper requirements that can also be part of graded assessments. Examples include:

- Students engaged in clinical work or teacher education can justifiably be expected to have a certain minimum number of hours of relevant practical experience before they are awarded passes in particular papers or their degree as a whole

- Students in subjects that require field-work, such as ecology and geography may be expected to attend a field course in order to complete the paper

- Students attending laboratory classes.

Where terms requirements are used it is important to ensure that there are strong pedagogical grounds for the requirement. Time-serving is not justified without it being clearly demonstrated to be a legal requirement or crucial to the student's education. Any terms requirements must be clearly communicated to students in paper documents and in the first class, preferably with a justification for the requirements.

7. Feedback on Student Work

If students are to gain maximum benefit from assessment tasks, they need high quality feedback. Feedback should meet four criteria:

a) Students participate in the feedback process while they still remember the nature of the task and their response to it, and early enough to use the information effectively to deepen their learning and to improve their performance on subsequent tasks.

b) The feedback process allows for two-way communication between students and teachers.

c) The feedback process provides clear indications of the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work, and guidance on how to perform better on similar future tasks.

d) The feedback process helps motivate the student to put further effort into learning.

In short, good feedback generates information that is timely, sufficiently detailed, and contributes to constructive communication between student and teacher. For feedback purposes, students will often benefit from an opportunity to resubmit a formative assessment.

Feedback can be provided in a variety of ways, to best suit the nature of the assessment task and to facilitate communication and interpretation by the student. Consideration of whether students are campus-based or distance needs to be taken into account when deciding upon the best ways to provide feedback and the forms that feedback should take.

Staff should adopt feedback approaches that are both effective and efficient. Care is needed to:

- Make use of communication approaches that suit the nature of the assessment task and the needs of the student. The aim is to use methods of communication that will be manageable for the teacher but also facilitate active student engagement with the feedback.

- Change teaching and assessment arrangements so that time previously allocated to other tasks can be freed for undertaking quality feedback. Change may include setting fewer summative internal assessment tasks, and allowing for more purely formative assessment.

- If peer-review is part of the feedback process, establish procedures for students to systematically review and comment on their own, and on each other's work.

Other strategies include:

- Attach a cover sheet to each student's assignment, listing important factors considered in grading and with rating scales to indicate how each student has been judged on each factor. This information gives students an easily interpreted profile of their strengths and weaknesses, while saving time so that teachers can make specific comments and suggestions.

- Create cover sheets that require students to specify which elements of their work they would like comments on. These can also require students to reflect on their own work and self-assess their performance against set criteria.

- Give oral or written comments to the whole class on strengths or weaknesses for many or most students. This approach may save time writing similar comments on all assignments.

- In some circumstances 'feed forward' comments to the class, identifying common strengths and weaknesses in advance of an assessment activity, can also be appropriate and effective.

- Audio recordings of feedback directed to individuals or to the whole class can increase student engagement with feedback by helping nurture personal connections between teachers and students; the teacher as a real 'person' can come through more easily, and can provide an easier opportunity for the inclusion of encouraging and motivational comments to be shared than written comments can. This approach can be particularly effective for distance students who often feel isolated. It can even help teachers reduce the time required to provide good quality feedback.

8. Summative Assessment of Group Work

Collaborative learning promotes the development of communication skills, thinking skills, social skills, values and attitudes. Furthermore, much of the work university graduates are engaged in involves collaboration with others, so the development of collaborative skills is important in its own right. When grades are awarded for collaborative work, this can be a major challenge. The University guidelines require that final grades reflect the work of each individual student. One response to this dilemma is to try to get students to engage in collaborative exercises for their learning value, but to assess each student on individual tasks after the learning has occurred. This preserves the individual character of final grades, but tends to undermine motivation for collaboration. Students who believe they are among the more capable in the paper may perceive collaboration as undermining their advantage on the subsequent individual assessments, especially if they believe grading is competitive.

A second response is that students are required or permitted to work collaboratively on a task, and to submit a team product. However, before each member of the team is awarded a grade, the teacher makes further enquiries into the learning and contribution of each team member.

Students may be asked to respond to oral questions individually, to write a brief account of their contribution, or to assess the contributions of each member of their group. This additional information is then used to fine-tune the mark awarded to each student.

Assessment of group work can create difficulties in cases of group conflict. Processes for resolving disputes and assigning marks in cases of group conflict are likely to vary depending on the assessment task, but should be given consideration in advance. Where possible, students should be informed of group work dispute resolution process in the paper outline and/or in other documents about the paper.

If group work is used, then efforts must be put into careful planning and managing of the group work process. As well as being a mechanism to facilitate active engagement, group work processes and student/teacher roles and responsibilities should be made explicit and taught and practiced during the course of a paper. That way, at assessment time, achieving the goal of the assessment task for an individual or group is not impeded by dysfunctional group work processes.

In an online and distance setting, careful planning and management of group work is of particular importance because distance students have fewer, easily accessible, information-source and inter-personal options that they can be involved in than campus-based students have.

Oral assessment approaches enable students to demonstrate particular kinds of learning outcomes. Oral assessments are used in deciding on the award of most doctorates, they are widely used in examining performance on clinical tasks, and they are used to make final pass-fail decisions for borderline candidates in some health science papers. After graduation, many students will find themselves working in environments that require presenting and justifying information and ideas orally, skills similar to those required by oral assessments.

9.   Oral Assessment

Oral assessments often provide valuable information quickly and are very flexible, allowing areas of strength and weakness to be probed quite efficiently. However, their flexibility is also one of their greatest weaknesses and it is hard to get a good overall picture of what was assessed. The other main dangers associated with oral assessments are the stress they cause for some students, and the inexperience of students in handling this form of assessment. Therefore, students should be provided with adequate information about the requirements of any oral assessment prior to the start of semester and be provided with adequate time and support to practice prior to their assessment.

10. Student Workload

If student workload is too high or unevenly distributed, there are risks to the quality of learning. Factors associated with assessment which influence work pressure on students include the number and percentage weights of graded assessment tasks, the temporal spacing of assessed tasks (in each paper and across a student's overall programme), the relative weights given to summative internal assessments and final examinations, and the adequacy and timing of information given to students about forthcoming assessment tasks.

If students are faced with large numbers of graded summative assessment tasks in all of their papers it places them on a treadmill, making it very hard for them to find time for achieving high quality learning outcomes or independent study, let alone to keep up with the class attendance/participation and associated study that a programme requires.

Even if the number of graded tasks appears reasonable, if they are submitted close together (often just before the end of the paper or just before vacation periods), this can cause stress and sub-optimal performance. Because many students are doing widely divergent collections of papers, clashes between requirements of different papers are difficult to avoid.

It is important for paper coordinators to:

a) Keep internal graded assessments to the lowest number possible while ensuring the learning outcomes of the paper are addressed.

b) Communicate across papers and programmes and share information about total assessment loads and timing, at least in the more common combinations of papers.

c) Consider formative assessment options that allow students to receive and engage with feedback, but which do not carry a grade.

11. Monitoring and Moderation Procedures

Many types of assessment rely on teacher professional judgement but different teachers can have different expectations of the quality of work required for a mark. To increase the extent to which assessment processes are fair and valid, monitoring and moderation procedures are needed.

The simplest form of monitoring and moderation is to involve more than one staff member in assessment. Two or more staff discuss the instructions for the task and their expectations, before and during marking. All assignments, or a purposefully-selected sample (e.g. one high grade, one low grade and a couple of borderline essays), can be double marked. In addition, where there is any doubt about the appropriate results for an individual student, a second independent opinion can reduce the likelihood of inequity.

It can also be useful to consult with peers when designing assessment tasks and matching these with stated learning objectives, while peer-review of teaching provides a further avenue for feedback on the appropriateness of assessment tasks.

In papers that have multiple tutors or demonstrators, paper coordinators should ensure that quality assurance procedures are in place. All tutors should receive detailed guidance about marking standards and about what they are to look for in marking particular tasks. Tutors should pass all marks to the paper coordinator before the marks are returned to students. Similar considerations apply where two or more academic staff members divide up the task of marking. Any discrepancies between distributions from different academics should be reviewed by the paper coordinator and discussed by the team of markers. Where there are substantial discrepancies, decisions will need to be made about the desirability of remarking some work.

Departments should put in place processes to ensure that assessment in their papers is appropriate to each paper's level and learning outcomes, and that assessment is well-integrated across papers, both in terms of student workload and expected graduate attributes. These processes might include mechanisms to support peer review of proposed assessment tasks, particularly for new staff members, and team meetings to discuss final examination papers and questions prior to finalisation.

Within departments, grade distributions for all papers at each level, and for examination questions and internal summative assessments should be reviewed by appropriate members of staff, ideally in a meeting of the internal examiners, before marks are submitted, and in consultation with an external moderator for papers at 400-level and above (including research projects and dissertations). Substantial differences in distribution may be entirely legitimate, given variation in the abilities and motivation of students, but deserve careful consideration.

Wider comparisons are also possible, but become quite difficult because papers vary so much in nature and intake. One approach is to examine consistency between papers, by using the grades for other papers taken by the same student.

A periodic external check on assessment procedures and marking standards can also be conducted when reviews of University departments (or schools) and programmes take place.

External moderation is required for papers at 400-level and above (including research projects and dissertations). The main responsibility of external moderators should be to check the standards applied in grading students, particularly at the pass-fail and B+/A- boundaries. Each moderator's report is sent, via the Head of Department or Programme Director, to the appropriate Pro-Vice-Chancellor. The Pro-Vice-Chancellors also report annually to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) on the external moderation exercise and, in particular, on the outcome of any recommendations of a general nature made by external moderators. A summary of these reports, using a template form, are forwarded from the Divisional Academic Board to the Board of Graduate Studies for information.

12. Academic Staff Development

Support is available to help staff develop their skills in assessment and thoroughly understand University expectations of their work in this area. Colleagues in an academic's own departments will often be very experienced in assessment techniques and expertise and training and advice is also available through the Higher Education Development Centre.