Best Practice in Assessment of Student Performance

Introduction

According to the Guidelines for the Assessment of Student Performance, 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 embody the University’s current view of appropriate or best practice. It is expected that they will normally be complied with, and any departure from them will need to be explained or justified.

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

1. All internal assessment should inform learning
2. Assessments will centre on essential knowledge and skills.
3. Both internal assessment(s) and final examinations will usually be necessary
4. 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

There are 11 key areas discussed:

1. Assessment Arrangements
2. Relative Weights Given to Different Paper Goals
3. Relative Weights Given to Internal Assessments and Final Examinations
4. The Use of Terms as Mandatory Course Requirements
5. Feedback on Student Work
6. Assessment of Group Work
7. Oral Examinations
8. Student Workload
9. Monitoring and Moderation Procedures
10. Academic Staff Development
11. Procedures for Student Assessment in Te Reo Māori
**Principles**

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

1. **All internal assessment should inform learning**

   The value of an assessment task is greatly influenced by the quality and timing of the feedback given to students. 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.

2. **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. The 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 goals specific to the paper. Assessment should take into account the University’s Teaching and Learning Plan and expected Graduate Profile.

3. **Both internal assessment(s) and final examinations will usually be necessary**

   Final grades should indicate students' capabilities at the completion of the paper for which the grade is being awarded. A judicious combination of summative and formative internal assessment and final examination components is usually needed. It may not be possible to assess some important areas of knowledge and skills in a final examination. In these cases internal tasks become vital components of the grade in the paper. Such areas include:
   - 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.

   For feedback purposes, students will often benefit from an opportunity to resubmit a formative internal assessment.

4. **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, too high or too concentrated a workload can result in harm to learning. 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. Students should have access to information about assessment tasks and marking criteria before they start a paper.
1. 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.

Students need information on assessment arrangements before they start their course and this can be available on the course website and in course documents.

2. Relative Weights Given to Different Paper Goals

The goals of the paper should be clearly expressed as a set of aims and 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 of these may be short-term and others developed over a much longer period. However, there should always be a focus on the distinctive qualities that make up a university education in the respective discipline. These will fall within the Teaching and Learning Plan and the expected Graduate Profile for University of Otago students:


Students should be given the aims, objectives and how these will be assessed at the start of the course and these should be available on the course web site so students can make an informed choice before electing to take the paper.

3 Relative Weights Given 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.

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 being graded summatively 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 tends to break down learning into chunks and so semester long papers are effectively converted into many smaller modules lasting days or weeks. This type of
assessment regime compartmentalizes knowledge and can work against the Graduate Profile and longer-term learning goals that the University seeks. In addition, 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.

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.

4 The Use of Terms as Mandatory Course Requirements

University regulations allow departments 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 course requirements that can also be part of graded assessments. Examples include:

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. Students attending laboratory classes.

Where terms requirements are used it is important to ensure that there are strong 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.

5. Feedback on Student Work

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

1. 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 improve their performance on subsequent tasks;

2. The feedback process allows for two-way communication between students and teachers;

3. 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;

4. 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.
Because student-teacher ratios have increased substantially over the years, many academics struggle to find the time to provide good feedback. Care is needed to adopt approaches that are both effective and efficient:

- 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;
- Establish procedures for students to systematically review and comment on their own, and on each other's work.

Other strategies include:

- A cover sheet can be attached 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;
- Giving 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.

6. 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 inquiries 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.
7. Oral Examinations

Oral examinations are not common at undergraduate level. Where they are used, however, they often play an important role in major decisions about students’ achievement and progression. They are used in deciding on the award of 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 examinations.

Oral examinations often provide valuable information quickly and are very flexible, allowing areas of strength and weakness to be probed quite efficiently. Their flexibility is, however, 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 examinations are the stress they cause for some students, and the inexperience of students in handling this form of examination.

8. 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 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 each semester 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 and associated study that a programme requires.

Even if the number of 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.

If a paper has no examination and all summative graded assessment is internal, then it may be reasonable to hand in the final assessment one week before the examination period.

It is important for paper coordinators to:

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

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

3. Consider formative internal assessment options that do not carry a grade.
9. Monitoring and Moderation Procedures

Many types of assessment rely on teacher professional judgment 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 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 opinion can reduce the likelihood of inequity.

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.

Within departments, grade distributions for all papers at each level, exam questions and internal summative assessments should be reviewed by appropriate members of staff, perhaps in consultation with an external examiner or assessor for 400-level and above, before the marks are submitted. 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 the other papers taken by the same student. A Head of Department may request grades comparison data from the Higher Education Development Centre.

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 Assessment guidelines are approved by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and reported to the Divisional Board following the Guidelines for the Role of Appointment of External Assessors: http://www.otago.ac.nz/administration/policies/assessmentpolicy/otago006175.html

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor reports annually to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic & International) on the systems in place to confirm that standards are being maintained. The main responsibility of external assessors should be to check the standards applied in grading students, particularly at the pass-fail and B+/A- boundaries. Each assessor’s report is sent, via the Head of Department or Programme Director, to the appropriate Pro-Vice-Chancellor, who will discuss any issues or recommendations with the Head of Department concerned. The Pro-Vice-Chancellors also report annually to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic & International) on the external assessing exercise and, in particular, on the outcome of any recommendations of a general nature made by external assessors. These reports are forwarded to the Board of Graduate Studies for information.
10. 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 is also available through the Higher Education Development Centre. HEDC maintains assessment case studies that provide examples of good practice, at http://hedc.otago.ac.nz/hedc/teaching/teaching-awards/socrates-case-studies/

11 Procedures for Student Assessment in Te Reo Māori

For information on the assessment of students in te reo Māori, please consult the Māori Language Policy - Ngā Kaupapa mō te reo Māori.