An Investigation of Assessment Policy and Practice in New Zealand Higher Education Institutions

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Background

- The research is part of a 3 year project to investigate *Valid and Practical Tertiary Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, 2006-2008*, supported by the Teaching & Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) fund managed by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER).

- Our research project is a collaboration across four public tertiary institutions (TEIs) including *Victoria University* (Professor Luanna Meyer, Project Director); *Massey University* (Dr Richard Fletcher & Malcolm Rees, Co-Directors); *Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi* (Professor Trish Johnston, Co-Director); and *Manukau Institute of Technology* (Dr Helen Anderson, Co-Director).
Data Sources for the Research

1. Staff and student surveys about attitudes towards and uses of assessment
2. Documents analysis—institutional policy and practice
3. Interviews with key policy leaders and decision-makers—at institutional and faculty levels
Survey Data from Academic Staff

Staff survey about assessment

- Full-time and part-time academic staff from 4 TEIs (N=879) across disciplines
- 2 universities, 1 polytechnic, 1 wānanga
- Likert-ratings of questions about assessment policy, purpose and practices
- Responses to open-ended question on the survey “Are there any other issues about assessment practices you would like to share with us?” (N=159)
Documents Analysis

Focused on comprehensive review of all documents related to assessment policy and practice from the 4 TEIs in Study 1 (2 universities, 1 polytechnic, 1 wānanga).

Documents sourced from key staff at central, faculty and department levels and comprised both print and web publications.
Interview Data

Data Sources:

- 2 key academic managers from each of an expanded group of seven TEIs (4 project TEIs plus 3 additional), including in total 3 universities, 2 polytechnics and 2 wānanga (interviewee N=14)

- Interview content informed by results from the survey and documents analyses

- Question focus: aspects of managing existing policy; processes for policy & practice development; professional development; national context; grading practices; student outcomes; feedback policy & practices
Findings

Multiple purposes of assessment
- Assessment *of* versus *for* learning

Consequences of focus on procedures

Other important considerations
- Students
- Cultural appropriateness/responsiveness
- ESOL and other language issues
- Disability adaptations
- Shifts in assessment policy and practices
Purposes of assessment

Assessment of learning
Measuring what/how much students have learned (knowledge, skills, etc.) with respect to learning outcomes and/or graduate profile

Assessment for learning
“...using evidence and feedback to identify where pupils are in their learning, what they need to do next and how best to get achieve this.”

1 http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/five/afl/
“The primary point of classroom-based assessment techniques is to get the students to identify their existing knowledge and opinions and to provide some degree of critical thinking skills. The greatest danger we face at university level…is assessment that focuses on REPETITION and MEMORY rather than the ability to think.”
Consequences of a focus on procedures

- Constraints: types, time and workload, feedback to students, external regulators
- Tensions about policies and requirements: time, workload expectations, scaling,
- “Dumbing down” courses to pass students
- Lack of knowledge about pedagogically sound assessment practices
“Types of assessment are often chosen because of their outcome or applied values – e.g. easy to mark (exams, tests), easy to prepare (essay questions), prevention of plagiarism, etc. – rather than their value as a learning tool.”
“That student grades are redistributed to conform to a standard distribution curve is unethical. If we mark to criteria and the student achieves those criteria the university has no right to then rank those students against each other...”
Students

- Want/expect easier material, easier assessments
- Lower ability and/or less preparation for tertiary level
- Feelings of entitlement because they are paying
- Willing to challenge teachers by taking complaints to academic management
- Staff and managers’ concern for student learning, future careers
Cultural appropriateness/responsiveness

- Mostly wānanga participants
- Maori cultural needs and viewpoints, not just in assessment but entire teaching and learning process
- E.g. peer teaching/assessing, “ako” concept, group learning
- Authentic assessments, e.g. traditional protocols
Other issues

- ESOL and other language issues
- Disability adaptations
Shifts in assessment

- From mostly/fully external to more internal
- Increasing emphasis on learning outcomes in the graduate profile *versus* grading on a curve
- Managing plagiarism and cheating
Different foci for different groups

- Institution type
  - Wānanga: focus on culturally appropriate assessment
  - External vs internal regulation (wananga/polytechs vs universities)
  - Grading systems all different across TEIs

- Staff
  - Focus on constraints, purposes and practices of assessment

- Managers
  - Focus on regulations
Discussion

- Consequences of focus on procedures
- Student expectations
- Cultural appropriateness/responsiveness
- ESOL and other language issues
- International assessment policy context
Consequences of a focus on procedures and requirements

Assessment of learning reflects need for validity, reliability, utility, consistency and equity in grading and marking, but An exclusive or even primary focus on these issues as the major TEI level drivers can constrain creativity in assessment practices, appropriate disciplinary variations in assessment, and feedback and feed-forward processes to guide student learning and improve learning outcomes
Context: Student expectations

- Completing qualifications in a fees-paying, student loan environment
- Emphasis on fairness, culture, equity and expectations about success vs. Failure
- Previous assessment experiences: School leavers enter NZ TEIs with the NCEA that has exposed them to a mix of internal and external assessment; feedback/feed-forward on their work; opportunities to re-sit and resubmit; choices in assessment participation. More sophisticated, practiced and accountability-focused than the previous “bursary” generation.
Culturally appropriate and culturally responsive assessment

Ensuring that assessment is culturally responsive & appropriate does not entail different outcome criteria, but instead requires quality of outcome. Assessment context and processes (including underlying policy & practices) should, when appropriate, be varied to reflect cultural values and practice.

Examples: Inclusion of group assessment tasks with collective participation and shared marks/grades; oral as well as written assignments; storytelling assessments, and so on.
ESOL and other language issues

Examination of practices that advantage and disadvantage students by assessment that are not solely influenced by mastery of learning outcomes but also (heavily) influenced by linguistic ability

Issues:

- When/how does the graduate profile and/or professional registration require English language proficiency as well as disciplinary mastery?
- When/how do particular assessments unfairly disadvantage students who are processing multiple language proficiencies? (for example, timed examinations and/or time-constrained essays)
International assessment policy context

- Institutional accountability: prove what and how much students are learning
- Institutional comparability on student learning
- Problem of academic staffs’ lack of assessment training
- Assessment for versus of learning
Summary

Tertiary sector assessment policies: where to from here?