



Scientia Education Academy and Digital Assessment CoP

The future of assessment at UNSW: A call to action

Introduction

“Assessment is a central feature of teaching and the curriculum. It powerfully frames how students learn and what students achieve. *It is one of the most significant influences on students’ experience of higher education and all that they gain from it.* The reason for an explicit focus on improving assessment practice is the huge impact it has on the quality of learning.” (Boud, 2010)

This is the crux of the matter – for most students, assessment defines the curriculum (Ramsden, 2003) and has a major influence on their overall learning experience. The UNSW [Assessment Policy](#) (2017), states that assessment is “a systematic process for facilitating and evaluating student learning. The process includes the design, development and implementation of assessment tasks, and the judgement and reporting of student performance.” The policy goes on to state worthy principles underpinning assessment:

- Assessment is designed to guide and enhance student learning
- Student learning is assessed against learning outcomes and expected standards of performance
- Assessment provides credible information on student achievement
- Assessment is fair and provides all students an impartial opportunity to demonstrate their learning
- Assessment develops students’ abilities to evaluate their own and peer’s work

Despite implementation of the assessment policy, together with assessment design and delivery procedures, it is of great concern that *the most prevalent negative comments in myExperience course surveys continue to relate to assessment and feedback.* Common complaints about assessments at UNSW are that they:

- Result in an excessive burden on staff and students, causing undue anxiety and stress
- Are weighted too heavily toward summative assessments
- Often lack timely, actionable feedback
- Tend to be atomistic and cross-sectional, rather than integrated and longitudinal
- Sometimes interfere with students’ learning, rather than supporting it.

If UNSW is to improve its performance in QILT surveys, we need to address students’ experience of assessment as a matter of urgency.

The UNSW assessment policy and associated documents focus on governance. A recent review of assessment at UNSW by the Academic Board made a number of recommendations for changes in

assessment policy, design and procedures. Those recommendations focused on rules, regulations and quality assurance, rather than a change in approach to assessment.

However, a fundamental change in approach to assessment is precisely what UNSW needs. Specifically, we need to change the culture of assessment, with students' growth as learners, professionals and future leaders being the central concern. In that context, this paper proposes a shared vision for the future of assessment at UNSW, as well as a call to enact strategies to realise that vision.

Vision for the future of assessment

Assessment at UNSW will be central to course and (especially) program design. It will focus on engaging students in meaningful learning that leads to development of graduate capabilities, supported by usable feedback. Students will be partners in the assessment process, progressively developing the capability to evaluate their own work and that of others.

Enablers of the vision

- Assessments will be organised holistically within programs, including complementary, integrated tasks to promote the development of graduate capabilities as the student progresses through the program.
- University systems will facilitate programmatic assessment methods, e.g. student portfolios, dashboards, micro-credentials.
- Assessment tasks will be authentic, contemporary and where relevant interdisciplinary, focusing on real world issues or case studies.
- Students will be supported to understand the benefits of assessment – the rationale for assessment tasks will be made explicit and discussed with students.
- To enhance intrinsic motivation, students will be empowered to make choices in assessment tasks where appropriate.
- The overall burden of assessment will be reduced, with fewer high-stakes summative assessment tasks per course and an increased emphasis on formative assessment, scaffolded peer and self-assessment, together with timely, supportive and actionable feedback.
- Digital assessment platforms will be utilised to enhance efficiency and flexibility, as well as enabling rapid provision of feedback for large cohorts of students.
- Institutional support for staff will be provided to develop assessment and feedback literacy, and to reward innovations and best practice.
- Assessments will be reviewed regularly to incorporate graduate and employer perceptions of graduates' preparedness.

References

Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable Assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22:2, 151-167, DOI: 10.1080/71369572

Boud, D. and Associates (2010). *Assessment 2020: Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education*. Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203507711>

Appendix

Exemplars of good practice

- **Engineering:**
 - Vertically Integrated Projects – assessments are designed around individual projects, which tackle real-world issues; hence the content may change to achieve specific project learning outcomes as well as the graduate attributes required from year two to four. As generic assessment tasks, they are grouped into four categories. (1) Communication (15%): Students will present their project work as written and/or oral format as determined with their project coordinator. (2) Notebook (10%): Students regularly record their meetings, design work, graphs, drawings, etc. in their notebook to document their project. (3) Self-reflection and team evaluation (15%) Students will complete a self-reflection in the form of a SWOT analysis in order to give self-feedback on how students can improve their work. Students will complete a team evaluation each term to understand how they are working with their peers. This assessment can also act as an impetus for reflecting on where students can improve their teamwork. (4) Technical (60%) Students will complete their major project deliverable/s as defined within the project.

- **Medicine:**
 - Programmatic portfolio assessment - As junior professionals, medical graduates are required to contribute effectively to a range of professional teams and to sustain lifelong learning. In addition, a person-centred approach to healthcare requires a greater emphasis on communication skills and ethical practice. Reflection is also seen as an important learning tool for both medical students and practitioners, but there is also recognition that reflection needs to be taught, and that students need to be given the opportunity to practice and refine this capability. Medical schools in general are adept at producing broad competencies and mission statements for their Medicine programs. However, creating an integrated assessment program that effectively guides the activities of students and teachers is more challenging. We developed a longitudinal program-based ePortfolio assessment which closely aligns with students' learning and reflection on the development of eight graduate capabilities, each of equal importance and weight, which underpin the six-year undergraduate Medicine program at the University of New South Wales.

 - The Online Simulated Patient Interaction and Assessment (OSPPIA) platform is incorporated into the UNSW Medicine undergraduate program; currently used by students in Years 1 and 2 (Phase 1) of the 6-year program. The online platform facilitates video-telephony interactions between two participants, as well as providing training and other materials related to preparation for the interaction. Medicine students interact with a simulated patient (SP) to practice generic communication skills in the context of eliciting a medical history from the SP. The SP can provide feedback which is time-stamped to the video file which the student accesses after the interaction. In addition, the SP assesses the student using assessment document which is also common to campus and in hospital sessions. Assessment outcomes automatically add to the student's portfolio depending on whether the student elects for the assessment to be formative only, or for

developmental summative use. Post-interview, computer vision algorithms ‘read the screen’ to provide feedback on non-verbal communication. There is functionality for a ‘tutor view’ which allows asynchronous review of any SP-student interaction, complete with the ability to view and add to existing feedback, both in terms of additional time-stamped written feedback, but also a new and additional assessment form. All feedback created is available to the student after the interview is completed.

- **Science:**

- Large 1st year Chemistry courses are transitioning to a new assessment format called “Threshold / Mastery”. In this format, the syllabus for each week is divided 50:50 into “threshold” and “mastery” concepts. The “threshold” concepts are assessed continuously, and they define the minimum requirements for a passing grade; the “mastery” concepts are assessed in the (optional) final exam, for merit grades. The assessment of the “threshold” concepts is like a driving licence test: students must earn full marks in a series of multi-choice tests, and they get multiple opportunities to reach the required standard in each test. The “threshold” concepts have been carefully selected to represent the most essential knowledge for progression to higher-year studies in chemistry or elsewhere. We can now guarantee, for the first time, that all passing students possess all of this essential knowledge. This assessment format gives students extremely clear feedback on their progress during term, and students also appreciate knowing that they’ve passed the course before attending the final exam.

- **Business:**

- Rolling action learning assessment tasks with latter submissions having a higher weighting. Several days before final presentations, students are required to submit a videorecorded rehearsal of their final presentation, together with their self-assessment using grading criteria and plans for improvement.
- Use of REVIEW: An online assessment system that supports standards-based assessment, longitudinal reporting of student achievement against Program Goals and student engagement in assessment through self and peer assessment. The system has ten years continuous use in Faculties of Art and Design and UNSW Business School. System usage to date (2/07) in 2020 is 324 courses, 845 staff, 22,418 students. Most courses conduct two or three assessment tasks on REVIEW and in the A&D nearly all courses typically record or conduct 100% of assessment on REVIEW. Business uses REVIEW extensively for student peer – peer feedback activity and in 2020 65 courses have run 210 student peer feedback surveys.
- There are many course and School-based approaches to assessment that occur outside of University and Faculty supported platforms. The diversity of and reason for these choices in assessment and feedback provision should be noted. Typically the reasons include the inability of supported platforms to easily provision a service (e.g. coding or marking and feedback), interaction with discipline-specific software or datasets and bespoke solutions that offer design flexibility and / or superior student experience and feedback. Some examples include: Up to 10 courses using Ed Platform for coding, Playconomics gamified learning (personalised feedback and efficient marking in large courses), early adoption of group-based assessment on

MS Teams, users of the Faculty Bus Finance Lab, several courses using Publisher Platforms (e.g. McGraw Hill etc), use of contemporary or authentic discipline specific sources and databases, assessment associated with the use of university-based virtual software through MyApps and bespoke course assessments conducted 'off-systems'.

- **Arts and Social Science:**

- In the Humanities and Creative Arts, the development of critical thinking, analysis, research and communication skills are paramount. In Film Studies, which sits between the Humanities and Creative Arts, the development of audio-visual literacy skills is essential to both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the discipline. One key assessment task that can be developed iteratively across courses at different levels is the Sequence Analysis. At level one, students are assigned a short sequence from a film and asked to undertake a shot by shot analysis. This helps to develop close viewing and listening skills and enables students to acquire and utilise the specialist vocabulary used in film studies both as an analytical method a practical tool. Framing this task as a form of 'reverse engineering' helps to allow practice-oriented students to understand the relevance to their ambitions as filmmakers as it helps them develop a shared vocabulary with various members of a filmmaking team. In more advanced courses, students are challenged to apply conceptual and critical frameworks and undertake contextual research to develop more complex and sophisticated analyses and interpretations of a film sequence. In practical courses, the sequence analysis can be flipped into an exercise in which students are asked to re-make a sequence from a well-known film, thus putting into practice the analytical skills developed in theory-based courses.
- In Education, preservice teachers in all disciplines of study, primary and secondary must master ways to create positive learning environments and manage their classrooms. The final assessment in the classroom management courses (PG and UG) is a personalised classroom management plan. This document is meant to be organic and used beyond the course, as the students build their professional practice. The assessment has three parts, which all are built on information and knowledge from the courses they have taken during their preservice studies. The first part is a statement of their personal classroom management and teaching philosophy, followed by an explanation of the theories that underpin their philosophy practice. The final section describes their practice, including preventative and reactive evidence-based interventions and practices. The practice section is meant to be well aligned with their philosophy and theoretical framework. This plan can then be used during their professional experience courses to guide their practical classroom experiences and revised as a result of their experiences. The classroom management plan is therefore a personal working document that students can revise and utilise throughout their professional careers.

- **Art and Design:**

- Almost all design professions require potential employees to submit a portfolio of work or showreel when applying for positions, with far greater emphasis placed on this body of work than their CV or the graduate's final grades. A portfolio of project

work not only reflects a designer's skills, knowledge and ability to problem solve, but also their ethics and where they position themselves within the greater context of design practice and the world around them. The portfolio assessment task situated in each of the six core studios of the Bachelor of Design program build upon one another holistically and offer students opportunities to continually practise, evolve and curate their design capabilities. The tasks require students to contextualise what they have learnt in other disciplinary and theory courses, as well as any external influences such as exhibitions and events, and create self-directed works which demonstrate and reflect their emerging design practice. The parameters of each of these portfolio assessments increase in complexity to provide opportunities for students to engage in analogue, digital, outward and/or industry facing, interdisciplinary, etc portfolios as they progress through their studies. Further opportunities to situate their practice in the real world are afforded through industry exhibitions such as [Bright Start](#) and [Designing Bright Futures](#) in collaboration with the Australian Design Centre where selected first and final year students are exposed to the realities of submitting applications; preparing, packaging and transporting their work; liaising with gallery staff; showcasing their work as a collective; engaging with social media campaigns and conducting floor talks with the general public.

- **Law:**

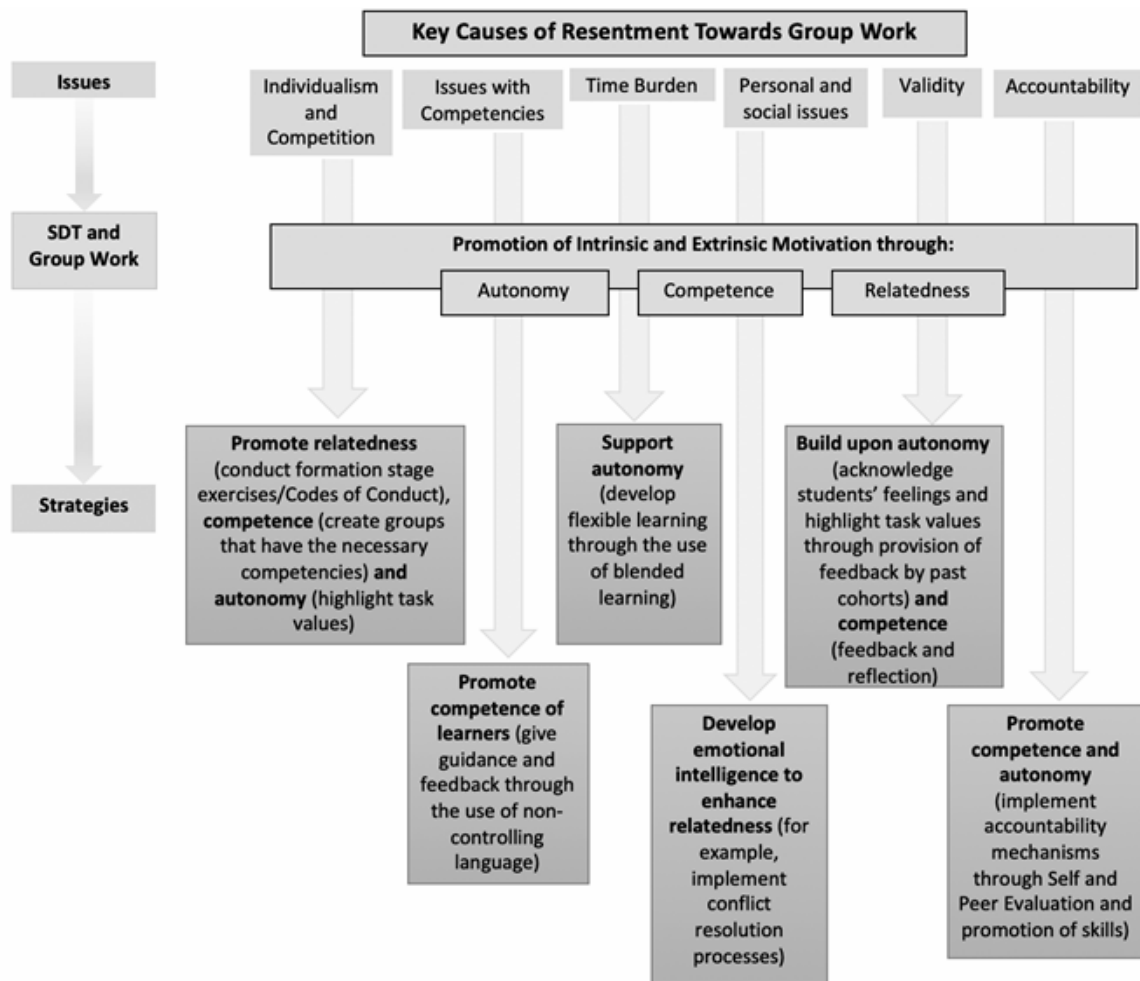
Law has a variety of assessments that ensure students are equipped with the necessary tools to enter the legal profession. Below is a small vignette:

- **Demystifying The Statutory Interpretation Exam – Making it accessible and relevant:** In *Introducing Law and Justice*, our foundational course, first year LLB students must learn both content and skills in order to properly understand the legal system. One of the most difficult for them is the combined skills of research and interpretation that are required in order to read a statute. In the past students resisted this and assessment of statutory interpretation was done badly by students. To change that we decided to create an assessment that encouraged students to use their research skills and their interpretation skills in one thing. Two weeks before the final open book exam we notify students that their statutory interpretation question would be on a particular statutory provision (e.g. s 63 Education Act 1993 (NSW)). Students are then expected to use the two weeks to do the necessary research for an unseen interpretation question. This included finding the statute, finding the Second Reading speech in Parliament in Hansard (sometimes if there have been amendments there would be multiple such speeches); find the cases which have already interpreted that section and what they said it meant, and find the definition section of the Act and read the definitions in the section mentioned. In the exam the students are given a fact scenario where they are asked to advise a client about the likely outcome if they wished to bring a certain action. This means they have to argue how the statute should be interpreted for the client and how likely that interpretation is to be accepted by a court. The fact the learners have access to the statutory provision in advance to the exam has helped in enhancing their understanding of the way statutory interpretation applies and has resulted in better responses in the exam.

- **Promoting Essential practical skills:** In *Succession*, a final year subject concerning inheritance law including wills and estates, the final assignment consists of drafting a will and a justification of that will. The students are given a notional client's circumstances and wishes, and are told that if there is any ambiguity they must notionally reinterview the client and resolve the ambiguity. They are then to draft a will according to those instructions (including the extra notional interview instructions). They are allowed to use a precedent book to help prepare the will. They must produce a fully engrossed will – is they must draft a will that is totally ready to be signed and witnessed. There is no word limit for the will. The second part of the assignment requires them to write a clause by clause justification of why they drafted the will as they did. What mischief does the clause fix? What is the legal effect of the clause? How did they advise their client in relation to each issue? Students have to see what the issues are, understand the problems arising from the instructions and draft to resolve them and their justification has to explain what legal work that form of words does. This part of the assignment has a word limit of 2500 words. This assessment makes sure that students have the necessary skills employers look at regarding drafting legal documents.
- **The Land Law mid-semester assignment – Developing critical skills through problem solving.** Hypothetical problem questions are a traditional form of assessment in law. However, because fact scenarios are made up by academics, (sometimes with 'amusing' character names), students can fail to appreciate that the law they are learning is real law, regulating the world around them. The mid-semester assignment for the compulsory course, Land Law, focuses students' attention on the real world of law by requiring students to read and apply real legal documents. Real easements, leases or strata by-laws are downloaded from the Torrens register, and students must use them to answer the kinds of questions that arise in legal practice. Students experience first-hand how legal documents might be well or badly drafted, and how they intersect with legislation and cases. Students must write advice exactly as they would in legal practice. The assignment challenges many students who increasingly see assessment as a hoop they have to jump through to get a mark on a transcript, as opposed to an opportunity to practise skills they will be using in the profession in a year's time. It also ensures that our students have completed authentic assessments that provide them with the necessary skills that employers are looking for in our graduates.
- **Innovative Formative Assessments:** environmental education through interaction with the environment (Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect*, 2004):
 - *Biannual Law Faculty Herb and Vegetable Garden replant:* This exercise was introduced to address students' limited or completely absent understanding of how food grows, which compromises understanding of food systems, as well as the law relating to food and plants. By way of example, it is impossible to understand how Monsanto and other seed companies make money from seeds without an understanding of seed reproduction. Similarly, an understanding of plant breeders' rights requires a basic appreciation of vegetal reproduction, and that cloning plants has none of the moral implications of cloning animals or humans. When we replant the Law Faculty garden or the UNSW Teaching and Research Garden, students in the electives Food Law and People, Land and Community learn these things, as

well as soil preparation, plant selection and irrigation. This stimulates critical discussion of the environmental implications of food growing, as well as the choices that are made for us in food systems, long before we enter a supermarket. Students also learn practical food growing skills that they can implement in their communities, at work or at home, throughout their lives, for the benefit of people, our cities and the environment.

- *Sunday lunch*: students in Food Law and People, Land and Community are asked to prepare a dish and discuss its social, political, cultural and/or historical significance. This teaches students to think critically about food, the land and culture that has produced it, food's connection to cultural and ethnic identity and the political tensions that this produces. The task encourages students to think about the political, social, health and gender implications of cooking skills, particularly those of their mothers and grandmothers, who have often contributed to the dishes. The task culminates in a long Sunday lunch, with students participating in the age old practice of civil, communal discussion around shared food. Not surprisingly, students actively engage in the task and report that lunch was their favourite part of the course.
- **Group Work Assessments: Changing perceptions and Enhancing Students' Experiences of Group Work – Lawyers, Ethics and Justice course**: Students' dislike of group work is well documented, especially law students. This aversion can be attributed to a range of factors (represented in diagram below). Each of these negatively impacts student motivation, or one of the fundamental requirements of engaged learning: autonomy, competence, relatedness, and a sense that the learning is enjoyable and/or useful. Accordingly, Lawyers, Ethics and Justice Course has built on this to enhance the group work experience. Pointers to enhance student motivation are represented in the diagram and include:
 - Clarify to students the importance of group work and the benefits that they will gain from it, using evidence-based scholarship (and videos of students from previous cohorts);
 - Support student autonomy by giving them choice over some aspects of group-formation and/or group work exercises and assessment topic;
 - Foster relatedness among the group through a range of formation exercises, including their production of group codes of conduct and accountability processes; and
 - Enhance learners' competence or mastery by ensuring that groups are formed with the necessary range of skills to complete any group tasks (primarily the assessment, we use TeamBuilder, for example), and by providing feedback to students on group participation and a set of reflection exercises.



For in-depth analysis of group learning motivation and examples - including evidence-based rationales for group work to share with students, and group formation and reflection exercises - see Justine Rogers and Marina Nehme, 'Motivated to Collaborate: A Self-determination Framework to Improve Group-Based Learning' (2020) 29 (1) *Legal Education Review* <https://ler.scholasticahq.com/article/12559-motivated-to-collaborate-a-self-determination-framework-to-improve-group-based-learning>.

• **Built Environment:**

- BLDG2011: Uses non-assessable weekly practice quizzes and a practice exam. While a quiz assessment task is relatively standard (multiple choice questions), the approach is innovative in both preparing students for the end of term exam and by gathering insight to students' challenges for the academic to address. Each practice quiz has the last question as: "What's the one question you have about the reading?" The answers inform the lessons that follow.
- BENV7712 : Creative assessments that draw on the individual experiences of students, including 'My day on a plate' recording and reflecting on one's typical day's eating, 'Open space project', a reflective and experiential exercise in a green open space, and a mixed disciplinary group presentation.
- BEIL0007: Assessments are well integrated into design thinking phases using a variety of formats, including learning reflections in short videos. The course is used as a case study in the FULT program.