AAGLO Summary 6: Assessment policy issues in the effective assessment and assurance of GLOs

The AAGLO project and assessment policy

The focus of the AAGLO - Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes project is the investigation of two key questions:

- What types of assessment tasks are most likely to provide convincing evidence of student achievement of or progress towards graduate learning outcomes (GLOs)? and,
- What processes best assure the quality of assessment of graduate learning outcomes?

The project drew on literature reviews, institutional visits, interaction with teams working on related projects, and interviews with 48 academics from seven disciplines across a range of Australian universities. A number of issues concerning universities’ assessment policy emerged from the data analysis. Broader analysis of Australian university assessment policy has been undertaken elsewhere (Duck and Hamilton, 2008; Orrell and Parry 2007) however the policy issues particularly relevant to GLOs are noted in this paper.

Influence of Policy

Policy had the potential to both facilitate and limit the effectiveness of GLO assessment. Facilitation of effective practice was through specification of task design features such as alignment of assessment with learning objectives; the requirement for assurance processes relating to approval of tasks prior to finalisation of course plans; requirements for moderation of judgements to ensure consistency of standards; mandatory conduct of formative assessment and provision of feedback; and guidelines for ensuring comparability of reward for comparable tasks (see also AAGLO Summary 5).

However there were examples where well-intentioned efforts to prevent poor practice had resulted in the development of assessment policy with negative, unintended, consequences. There were also instances where laudable assessment policy was not implemented either because of incompatibility with other institutional policies or the absence of relevant implementation requirements, monitoring or infrastructure.

The risks to successful GLO implementation associated with addressing the issue in isolation from other relevant factors have been reported in earlier projects (e.g. The National GAP: Barrie, Hughes and Smith 2009).

The following overview further illustrates the limiting impact of unforeseen policy shortcomings and the failure to establish productive relationships between assessment policy and complementary policies and procedures.

Key policy issues related to the assessment and assurance of GLOs

Eight key policy issues were identified:

1. Fragmented program assessment design
2. Policy gaps and inconsistencies
3. Specification of standard grade cut-offs
4. Norm-referenced moderation
5. Mandatory provision of detailed criteria and standards for assessment judgements
6. Mandatory variety in assessment tasks
7. Specification of number of assessment tasks
8. Tacit approval or requirement for inclusion of non-achievement factors in grade calculations.

Table 1 (overleaf) illustrates each issue, identifies its significance and suggests ways for achieving a positive policy influence to better assure the assessment of GLOs.

Conclusion

As the Australian higher education sector enters a new regulatory era, institutions will need to review and revise the quality of their arrangements for collecting convincing evidence of student learning outcomes. A key aspect of this will be a consideration of the policies surrounding assessment. There will be a need to clearly articulate the principles shaping assessment as institutional policy and ensure that local guidelines or procedures are neither overly prescriptive nor inconsistent with these principles. Assessment policies that underpin institutional quality arrangements should not only promote effective practice but also minimise the risk of unanticipated negative outcomes and be supported through appropriate implementation structures and mechanisms. Fundamental to the achievement of this are systematic and cohesive arrangements for institutional quality assurance and whole-of-program assessment.

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1Course: A subject or unit, generally semester-long
Programme: A set of courses taken over several years
Table 1: Key policy issues in the assessment and assurance of graduate learning outcomes

<table>
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<th>Issue</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Why this is an issue</th>
<th>How the issue can be addressed</th>
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<td>1. Fragmented program assessment design</td>
<td>Autonomy in course and assessment design has been a traditional feature of academic life</td>
<td>Unlikely to provide a coherent program experience for students or support the collection of convincing evidence that students have achieved minimum learning outcomes by the time of graduation (ALTC 2009; Gibbs 2009; Graff 2009).</td>
<td>Whole-of-program planning for curriculum and assessment. Formal and typically multi-level processes for the approval of assessment plans and subsequent modifications.</td>
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<td>2. Policy gaps and inconsistencies</td>
<td>Lack of coordination for policies and guidelines when developed in different institutional sections</td>
<td>Contradictory policies and local assessment practices which do not support GLO assessment widely reported. Limited evidence of effective monitoring of local implementation of policy or enforcement of assurance of assessment quality strategies. Implication that assessment is relatively unimportant if not explicit and enforced in quality assurance policies and guidelines</td>
<td>Assessment monitored and regulated through supportive quality assurance arrangements, e.g. requirement for non-ritualistic (Brennan 2012) action at the local school or faculty level in response to analysis and interpretation of institutional evaluative data.</td>
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<td>3. Specification of standard grade cut-offs</td>
<td>Prevention of unjustifiably low “Pass” marks and/or inexplicable variations in grade cut-offs in the same program or school</td>
<td>Inadequacy of overall 50% “Pass” grades to provide a credible basis for assurance of multiple graduate learning outcomes. “Pass” cut-offs of 50% allow students to avoid completion of some course assessment components if their 50% has already been achieved through earlier tasks – a further challenge to the confidence with which program assessment assures the achievement of GLOs.</td>
<td>Agreement on standards or levels of achievement relating to GLOs. Decisions reached through a consideration of student work in relation to these standards rather than marks or percentages only</td>
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<td>4. Norm-referenced moderation</td>
<td>Mechanism for achieving comparability of assessment judgements within or across courses based on achieving a ‘normal’ grade distributions</td>
<td>Achievement of a normal distribution of grades is inconsistent with standards based assessment. Standards are the underlying mechanism for effective assessment of GLOs. Inconsistent with the goal of aligning teaching, assessment and learning objectives: university teaching should be concerned with improving overall student performance rather the ranking of students (Biggs 1999). Incorporation of ‘efficiencies’ such as statistical comparisons and rescaling of scores that bypass the need for argument, justification and other interactive processes that interviewees cited as effective change initiatives.</td>
<td>Explicit, standards-based assessment policy. Professional development activities undertaken in preparation for assessment judgements such as workshops involving judgement and discussion of exemplars (calibration) or discussion-based moderation activity integrated into the judgement process (Sadler 2012).</td>
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<td>5. Mandatory provision of detailed criteria and standards for assessment judgements</td>
<td>Assurance of transparent and consistent assessment judgements</td>
<td>The provision of criteria and standards have a role in developing student capacity for self assessment and for supporting the assessment transparency missing from opaque, connoisseurship approaches (Ecclestone 2001). Drawbacks have been associated with an over-reliance on detailed criteria and standards (Price and Rust 1999) and arguments made for the appropriateness of more holistic approaches (Sadler 2009).</td>
<td>Supplementing criteria and standards with additional activities such as peer-assessment and dialogue, sometimes based on exemplars of work at different standards. Use of holistic approaches with detailed feedback.</td>
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<td>6. Mandatory variety in assessment tasks</td>
<td>Assured exposure to the range of task types characteristic of the discipline Relief from monotony of repetition of a small number of task types</td>
<td>A variety of assessment tasks is needed to assure the achievement of the diversity of GLOs. However many disciplines employ only a relatively narrow range of tasks. Conversely, too great a variety of tasks reduces scope for students to make repeated attempts at a single type with opportunities for the application of feedback to inform improvements in subsequent performance (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Price and O’Donovan 2006, Taras 2006).</td>
<td>A whole-of-program approach to assessment that provides systematic development of task types characteristic of the discipline, including opportunities for repeated attempts and feedback provided to achieve competent or expert performance.</td>
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<td>7. Specification of number of assessment tasks</td>
<td>Prevention of over-assessment Provision of adequate opportunities for timely feedback</td>
<td>Gathering sufficient evidence on which to base a judgement of achievement of a GLO may require more than one task. Ambiguity in ‘task’ definition: Research proposal comprising a series of components – literature review, poster, final submission with commentary on poster feedback – interpreted as a (compliant) single task or as three distinct (non-compliant) tasks. Over-assessment is a meaningless term when formative and summative assessments are balanced (ASKe 2007).</td>
<td>Rather than specify number of tasks emphasise achieving ‘confidence’ of judgement. Approval processes that draw on appropriate expertise in evaluating the quality of course assessment intentions and the flexibility to make appropriate approval decisions.</td>
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<td>8. Tacit approval or requirement for inclusion of non-achievement factors in grade calculations</td>
<td>Grade component used to encourage tutorial attendance and participation Limits on grades for resubmitted work as penalty for academic integrity breaches</td>
<td>Trustworthy grades represent a student’s level of academic achievement. However, ‘many elements that are technically non-achievements are routinely incorporated into grades and thereby act as contaminants’ (Sadler 2010, 727).Common ‘contaminants’ can be informal such as subconscious boosts or reductions of marks to reward or penalise tutorial attendance or effort; or formal inclusions in grade calculation through the allocation of specific marks for tutorial participation.</td>
<td>Identification of alternative ways to reward or penalise attendance or participation and of ways of dealing with breaches of academic integrity that still allow for the award of grades that provide an accurate reflection of achievement.</td>
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Contribute to the AAGLO Project

You are invited to contact the project manager if you would like to contribute information or opinion on policy or guidelines issues or to register your interest in being included in planned project consultation activities.
References


