

A research study into the implementation of assessment criteria and standards, and learning guides

At UWS, students are advised about assessment requirements at the start of semester through the unit's Learning Guide. The Learning guide contains information about what students have to do in each assessment task, including the standard of performance that they're expected to reach in each task to successfully complete the unit. In addition to this written information, assessment requirements are discussed in class at relevant points in the semester.

Learning guides and criteria and standards-based assessment were implemented at UWS for the first time in 2009 (in level 1 and level 4 units), with all remaining coursework units implementing the two new policies in 2010. The Unit Outlines and Learning Guides policy and the Assessment: Criteria and Standards-based Assessment Policy are available through the University's policy database at <http://policies.uws.edu.au/>. To assist staff in implementing the new policies, the Teaching Development Unit (TDU) produced an *Assessment Guide: Implementing Criteria and Standards-based Assessment*, which was distributed to all academic staff in late 2008. The *Assessment Guide* is available at <http://www.uws.edu.au/tdu>. A hard copy can be requested by emailing contact-tdu@uws.edu.au

To investigate how assessment expectations had been communicated to students in 2009, TDU reviewed 159 level 1 Learning guides from Autumn and Spring Sessions 2009. The 159 units comprise 59% of all level 1 units taught in 2009, and represent all sixteen Schools offering units at level 1. The learning guides reviewed in this study are available to all University staff who have 'designer' level access within vUWS, the University's online learning management system (login to vUWS / click on Content Manager tab / Get Files button / Repository / College folder / School folder / Session folder).

Assessment expectations for each task are clearest when:

1. There is alignment between unit learning outcome(s) and the type of assessment task;
2. Assessment briefing instructions are provided;
3. Criteria and standards are provided;
4. Briefing instructions and criteria and standards are clearly consistent with each other;
5. A rationale for doing the task is provided;
6. Exemplar(s) of related student work are provided.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

How many assessment tasks were reviewed in the study?

Number of assessment tasks detailed in 159 Learning Guides: 536

Mean number of assessment tasks per unit: 3.39

What was the length of Learning Guides?

Most frequent length of Learning guides: 6 pages (26%)

Mean length of Learning guides: 21 pages

How many units had observable and measurable learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes describe what students will be able to do on successful completion of the unit. They contain concrete active verbs (eg analyse, explain, classify, evaluate, plan), specify the essential content that students will be working on (eg analyse risk management strategies) and specify the context of performance required (eg analyse risk management strategies for investment and

insurance decisions). Observable and measurable learning outcomes facilitate the selection of an appropriate (valid) assessment method.

69% of the 159 LGs contained observable and measurable unit learning outcomes.

What type of assessment tasks were included in the 159 level 1 Learning guides?

Assessment tasks included exams and tests (40%), analytical/critique tasks (25%), report-writing tasks (6%), reflective learning tasks (8%), in-class assessments (14%), and all other assessments (7%).

Was alignment apparent between learning outcomes and assessment tasks?

When learning outcomes align with the type of assessment task, there is a consistent message to students about what is important to learn in the unit.

Alignment was apparent in 73% of the assessment tasks. Alignment was highest in report-writing tasks (94%) and reflective learning tasks (84%), and lowest in exams and tests (61%).

Were task briefing instructions provided?

Briefing instructions provide students with details of what they have to do in the task.

Instructions were provided for 85% of the assessment tasks. Provision of instructions was highest for reflective learning tasks (95%), report-writing tasks (91%), and lowest for all other assessments (66%).

Were criteria and standards provided? What types?

Criteria and standards tell students what the important components of the task are, and how well they have to perform in these.

Criteria and standards were provided for 67% of the assessment tasks. The types of criteria and standards provided included:

- analytic marking schemes (presented in tabular form, listing standards for each individual criteria) – 25%;
- holistic marking schemes (embed criteria in a global or holistic description of the desired level of performance) – 17%;
- worked examples (illustrating how, for example, a calculation would be done - often annotated) – 3%.

A small number of units had assessment tasks where criteria and standards were to be developed collaboratively in class by students and teacher (meets requirements of the assessment policy and likely to lead to good student understanding of what's required). Some assessment tasks listed only criteria (thus not totally meeting requirements of the assessment policy) and others provided combinations of types of criteria and standards.

Were briefing instructions and criteria and standards consistent?

Task instructions and criteria and standards should give a consistent message about what students have to do. Inconsistency between these elements can lead to confusion on the part of students, and more enquiries for staff to handle.

Where both components were included in the Learning guide, 54% were consistent. Consistency was highest in report-writing tasks (79%) and reflective learning tasks (70%), and lowest in exams and tests (41%).

Were rationales provided for assessment tasks?

A rationale tells students how the assessment task will benefit their learning within the unit, in subsequent units or in their professional futures.

A rationale was provided for 49% of assessment tasks. Rationales were most commonly provided for reflective learning tasks (67%) and report-writing tasks (64%), and least commonly provided for all other assessments (47%).

Were exemplars of related work provided, or referred to in the Learning Guide?

Exemplars enable students to recognise quality performance in assessment, rather than just having quality performance described to them. "Exemplars convey messages that nothing else can" (Sadler, 2002).

Exemplars were provided or referred to (usually as being provided within the unit's vUWS site) in just 14% of assessment tasks. Exemplars were most commonly provided for exams and tests and report-writing tasks, and least commonly provided for reflective learning tasks.

CONCLUSION

The extent to which unit coordinators communicated assessment expectations shows a concerted effort to support student learning and a conscientious implementation of the two new policies. For many staff, it was the first time they had constructed assessment criteria and standards and provided these to students at the start of semester. There is still some way to go in providing a 'full picture' of assessment requirements in learning guides, however as academics become more experienced with assessment criteria and standards and learning guides, it is expected that more learning guides will communicate a full range of assessment information. Continuing support from central and School teams will assist academics in refining criteria and standards and extending the ways in which expectations can be conveyed to students.

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