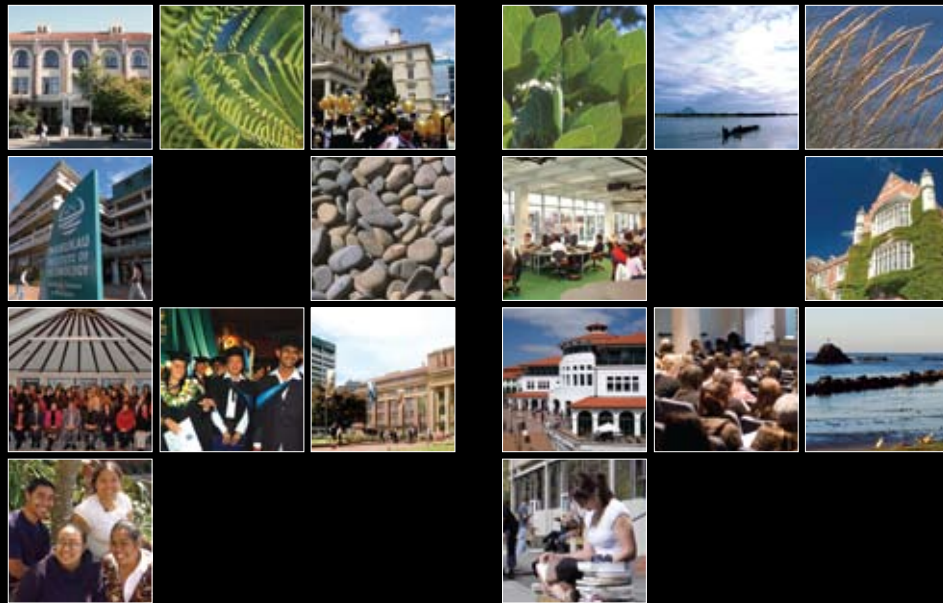


# Tertiary Assessment & Higher Education Student Outcomes:

## POLICY, PRACTICE & RESEARCH



*Summary Document*

- 2 Introduction
- 3 Purposes of assessment
- 4 Cultural Issues
- 6 Equity Issues
- 8 Student expectations
- 10 Support for staff
- 11 Key considerations and questions for TEO Academic Managers
- 12 References

This Symposium and Publication were supported by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, TLRI contract 9233, funded through Vote Education and administered by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER).

The Contract Team:

**Luanna H. Meyer** (Victoria University of Wellington)

**Malcolm Rees** (Massey University)

**Richard B. Fletcher** (Massey University)

**Patricia M. Johnston** (Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangī)

**Helen Anderson** (Manukau Institute of Technology)

Summary Document prepared by:

**Susan Davidson** (Victoria University of Wellington)

**Lynanne McKenzie** (Victoria University of Wellington)

Co-Sponsored and published by **Ako Aotearoa** – The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence.  
[www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz](http://www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz)

Communications regarding this guide should be directed to Luanna Meyer at [luanna.meyer@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:luanna.meyer@vuw.ac.nz)

ISBN 978-0-473-15423-3 (print)  
ISBN 978-0-473-15424-0 (online)

Design and layout FitzBeck Creative

JULY 2009

# Tertiary Assessment & Higher Education Student Outcomes:

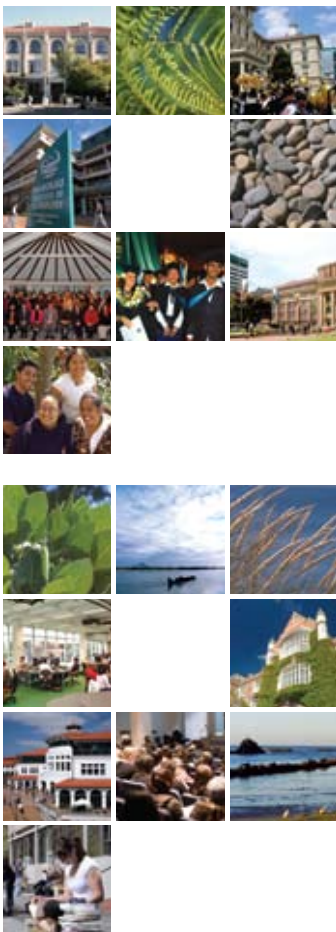
## POLICY, PRACTICE & RESEARCH

AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

### Background

This overview is designed for senior academic managers and academic boards who have responsibility for the development, implementation and quality assurance of assessment policy and practice in their tertiary education institutions and organisations (TEOs).

The overview draws upon findings from the three year research project *Valid and Practical Tertiary Assessment* and studies by educationalists presented at the Symposium on Tertiary Assessment and Higher Education Student Outcomes held at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in November 2008. References cited are papers presented at the symposium.





### CASE STUDIES FROM THE SYMPOSIUM:

Problems in comparing student outcomes across tertiary institutions in New Zealand are one such issue (Shulruf *et al.*), and the challenges created for a national organization charged with quality assurance responsibilities provide food for thought (Ruhnayat).

## Introduction

Findings from our research suggest that tertiary assessment in New Zealand is not generally underpinned by overarching policy but is instead over-reliant on tradition and *ad hoc* responses to emerging challenges such as cheating and plagiarism (Davidson *et al.*).

The establishment of assessment policy at the institutional level is a priority to ensure that practice at all levels is driven by core principles of assessment that include the following:

- 
- Clarity about the purposes of assessment and their relevance to the graduate profile of the qualification
- 
- Ensuring cultural issues are addressed
- 
- Ensuring equity issues are addressed
- 
- Students have clear expectations about the requirements and purpose of assessment
- 
- Appropriate support for teaching staff in developing assessments that meet institutional policy requirements.
- 

Tertiary organisations must go beyond procedural rules and regulations for assessment in developing policy in this area. Policy must reflect an institutional vision for the purposes of assessment, including giving more depth of understanding to assessment of learning while simultaneously valuing and promoting assessment for learning. Assessment should be policy driven based on evidence and internationally recognised good practice.

Assessment strategies must also reflect and reinforce the intended skills, knowledge and attributes of the graduate profile of the qualification concerned.

New Zealand is not the only nation grappling with these tertiary assessment issues. The international higher education literature addresses issues such as institutional accountability (requiring TEOs to demonstrate what and how much students are learning; see Banta, Carless), institutional comparability on student learning (Banta), and problems associated with the lack of assessment training for academic staff who teach (Carless). ■



# The institutional context for assessment

*The functions and purposes of assessment (three key drivers that all need to be acknowledged):*

**Feedback on learning** (students and teachers)

Measuring student learning for **selection and progression** decisions (students, teachers, institutions)

**Quality assurance and accountability issues** (institution-wide responsibilities)

---

*"Policy Aspects" of assessment (which need to address all the three drivers above)*

**Manageability and Utility** – the ‘nuts and bolts’ of assessment, including timing, managing feedback to students, tracking student progress, and so on.

**Validity** – ensuring that assessments are valid and reliable, actually doing what is expected

**Equity** – ensuring students are treated fairly and equitably across mode of instruction, campuses and programmes with appropriate consideration for issues of culture, language, disability and so on.

**Integrity** – preventing and managing cheating; moderation issues

---

*Overarching principles that should run through all of the TEO assessment policy aspects and purposes:*

Ongoing **institutional reflection**,

Teaching **staff development**, and

**Engaging students** in the assessment process.

Note these ideas are expanded in “Development Assessment Policy: a Guide for Tertiary Institutions” developed by the project team and available on the symposium and Ako Aotearoa’s web-site [www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz](http://www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz)

## Assessment of learning and assessment for learning



# 1. Purposes of assessment

There are two distinct purposes of assessment: assessment *of* learning, and assessment *for* learning.

Assessment *of* learning involves measuring what and how much students have learned, tied to specific learning outcomes which are themselves derived from the graduate profile. This kind of assessment answers the question: what exactly do students need to demonstrate that they know and can do as a result of teaching and learning? How confident is the institution that the student has mastered the graduate profile on programme completion? Assessment *of* learning requires attention to the validity, reliability, utility, consistency, and equity of measures, grading and marking.

The following definitions of these dimensions have been adapted from Victoria University's 2009 Assessment Handbook.

- **Validity** – assessment should be 'fit for purpose'. It should sample fairly the objectives and content of the course, be free of ambiguity and have a clear and appropriate marking criteria fit for task and level of students.
- **Reliability** – marking practices should ensure consistent interpretation of assessment criteria by different markers. Students should not be graded on just one piece of work unless student performance can be gauged in stages.
- **Utility** – the 'nuts and bolts' of assessment, including timing, managing feedback to students, tracking student progress and so on
- **Consistency** – the definition of consistency is consistent with that for reliability, that is giving an accurate representation of each student's performance and fairness by using methods which treat all students the same.

Assessment *for* learning is focused on using assessments to help students improve and move forward in their learning. This kind of assessment is equally important in giving students the information they need to guide and promote their own learning



so that they can meet the intended outcomes. Assessment *for* learning requires that academic staff assess in a manner that will allow them to identify what kinds of improvements are needed and communicate this information to students. Is the student being told what to do in order to improve and master the graduate profile?

TEO policy and practice guidelines tend to emphasise assessment *of* learning through attention to procedures around assessments. There is a risk that too much emphasis on rules, regulations, moderation and oversight will result primarily in compliance of staff with procedure at the expense of effectively determining whether or not students are working successfully towards the skills, knowledge and attributes defined in the graduate profile.

An exclusive or even primary focus on consistency, for example, can constrain creativity in assessment, preclude appropriate discipline specific professional variations in assessment practices, and limit the use of feedback and feed-forward processes to inform student learning. Staff and students may conclude that student learning is taking a back seat to quality assurance processes driven by institutional risk management, not quality. ■

How does your institution's assessment support progress of students towards the graduate profile?

#### CASE STUDIES FROM THE SYMPOSIUM:

Two keynote speakers discuss these assessment issues in their papers (Carless; Hattie). Furthermore, the majority of academic staff presenting at the Symposium focused on assessment practices to address their teaching needs. Some highlighted assessment *of* learning, including: analyzing the validity and reliability of various tools (Black); strategies to ensure validity and reliability in essay assessments (Brown); assessing critical thinking (Buckley & Hale); assessing large classes (Emerson *et al.*; Morris); using electronic submissions and computer-assisted marking (Rayner); and assessing affective attributes (Shephard). Others consider peer, group, and self-assessments (Lopez *et al.*; Marais *et*

*al.*; Graham; Tickner; Wright *et al.*), using online tools (Owen & Martin; Emerson & Mackay; Panko), and issues of how to assess learning (Baxter & Dudley; Gallagher; Hoare *et al.*; Maxwell; McPhun; Tweed & Wilkinson).

There were also presentations on using assessments *for* learning, including: different forms of formative assessment (Buckley & Hale; Campbell; Clarke *et al.*; Margrain & Everiss); helping students learn through reflection (Daly & Spinner; Fielden; Jones); supporting critical thinking (Turner); using assessments to improve teaching (Margrain & Everiss; Morris); and other issues (Graham; Lopez *et al.*; Marais *et al.*; Owen & Martin; Stewart *et al.*; Tickner *et al.*; Wright *et al.*).



## 2. Cultural Issues

### Avoiding cultural bias in assessment

Ensuring that assessments are culturally appropriate and responsive is of concern to many students and tertiary teachers, both with respect to Māori and also for other cultural groups including the high proportion of international students studying in New Zealand educational institutions. Indigenous educators note that most standardised measures reflect Western/Anglo/Euro epistemologies that may be invalid for students of non-dominant cultures (Slee & Keenan).

Despite New Zealand's bicultural nature and with the exception of wānanga, tertiary teaching and measures to assess student learning generally draw on the dominant culture for concepts, examples and issues, thus disadvantaging those who do not share and cannot draw on that cultural background and knowledge and privileging those who are from the dominant culture. Similarly, an insistence on assessment of individual work to the exclusion of contributions of group projects to grading marginalises collectivist cultures. This continues to occur despite the fact that in various professions the criterion for mastery involves working well in groups, not by oneself. ■

**CASE STUDIES FROM THE SYMPOSIUM:** The issue of cultural competence in assessment (Afrin), culturally responsive practices in Australia (Slee & Keenan), and Chinese students' perceptions of New Zealand assessment practices (Tait) were presented at the Symposium. Assessment issues were also covered from a wānanga perspective (Faleolo *et al.*; Hoani & Malcolm).



# 3. Equity Issues

Equity issues concerning access for students with impairments and appropriate adaptations to accommodate students whose first language is not English should be addressed in policy. For students with impairments, there are statutory requirements that reasonable accommodations be made such as allowing time variations and/or interpreters (e.g. for students who are hearing impaired). Most tertiary institutions have such policies in place.

Professional development should be available for staff to access providing skills and knowledge to assist in the provision of quality education for students with impairments.

Policy should also be evaluated to examine the extent to which the graduate profile and/or professional registration require English language proficiency at certain levels which students must master. Particular disciplinary requirements should provide justification whenever higher levels are specified.

Speaking a first language other than English may not materially affect the extent to which the student has mastered the content but may require other adaptations to be equitable, such as adjusting the time allowed for examinations and essays. Most tertiary institutions have yet to develop policy regarding different levels of English proficiency expected during a programme (as opposed to requirements on entry). There should be support along the way for both students and staff to ensure that equity is not compromised unfairly without appropriate accommodations. ■

Ensuring students with impairments and students from non-English speaking backgrounds both meet the graduate profile and are treated equitably

**CASE STUDIES FROM THE SYMPOSIUM:** One paper in the Symposium proceedings addresses the issue of English language proficiency, describing how Chinese students are the ones who must accommodate expectations and how they approach learning tasks to do so (Tait).



# 4. Student expectations

Students bring their prior experience and expectations with them into tertiary education, and these can have an influence on how the TEO approaches assessment policy and practices (Davidson *et al.*). A tuition fee environment can result in a “user-pays” attitude that payment should ensure success – which is the responsibility of the TEO. International awareness of equity issues has led to increased expectations that students have an equal chance at success in their study and pursuit of qualifications thus assessment must be fair, transparent and culturally appropriate.

In New Zealand, the impact of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is also just beginning to be felt as school leavers enter TEOs with prior exposure to classroom assessment as well as final examinations. These students may have an expectation that tertiary teachers will give them multiple opportunities to demonstrate their competence and choices in the assessments they complete. As tertiary students, they may be more sophisticated, practiced and accountability-focused than the previous “bursary” generation in New Zealand. ■

## CASE STUDIES FROM THE SYMPOSIUM:

None of the papers explore this issue directly, but the possible implications are discussed in one paper (Clarke *et al.*) and student views of assessment are discussed in another (Anderson *et al.*).

Ensuring a good match between student and organisational expectations

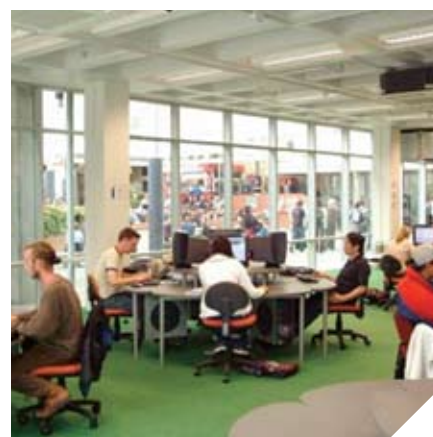


## 5. Support for staff

Tertiary teachers want and need assistance with the practice of assessment: How do TEOs ensure that academic staff use valid and reliable assessment tools? Are assessments being used that provide information to improve student learning? Most TEOs offer professional development workshops to staff, but these may not be sufficient (Hattie). Our research findings reveal that assessment concerns must be addressed at the highest level of policy, with clear statements on overarching purposes of assessment and guidance that help tertiary teachers achieve best practices.

Tertiary teachers need support and advice to practice both assessment *of* and *for* learning. The senior academic managers we interviewed indicated that their TEOs provided staff training in assessment, but the staff themselves indicated they needed more training and support in how to use assessments as tools to promote student learning. They were especially challenged in the design and use of creative and innovative assessments that would be particularly well-suited to diverse disciplines and professional programmes. ■

**CASE STUDIES FROM THE SYMPOSIUM:** One paper in the Symposium addressed how assessment can be configured to support productive student learning and focused on learning-oriented assessment as articulated by the Learning-Oriented Assessment Project (LOAP) at Hong Kong Institute of Education. The paper presented a framework for assessment task design to support student achievement through authentic assessments that are learning tasks aligned to curricular objectives. This paper reconciles formative and summative assessment by posing a set of principles that can be applied to both (Carless).



Professional development for staff on good assessment practice



# *Key considerations and questions for TEO Academic Managers*



Tertiary institutional policy must provide a clear vision of assessment policy that is based on principles reflecting the values of the TEO as well as research-led practices. Policy at the institutional level must be general enough to be applicable to different and diverse disciplines and professional regulatory bodies with oversight for accreditation (accounting, architecture, engineering, law, medicine, psychology, teaching, social work, and so on). Policy makers need to ask a set of fundamental questions:

---

What do we want to achieve with our assessment policy?

---

What do we expect that our assessment practices will enable us to do?

---

How can we assist our academic staff to meet the stated policy objectives around assessment?

---

How can we best assist students to improve their learning, be accountable for that learning, provide feedback to tertiary teachers about their learning, and have appropriate support needed to be successful in pursuing their goals?

---



┌  
A shared vision of  
assessment policy based on  
the values of the organization  
and research-led practice

Internationally, there is considerable research examining specific issues such as efficiency, efficacy, validity, reliability, and learning potential signalled by different forms of assessment. Institutions are challenged to offer sufficient guidance to tertiary teachers to enable them to explore viable alternatives to traditional practices without being too restrictive and prescriptive.

The key is not to develop more rules and regulations at the expense of general principles and guidance on how to use assessment to improve teaching and learning as well as measure these. Tertiary teachers are committed to using assessment towards these ends, and the Symposium challenged us to consider the fundamental issue:

*How can we address practical issues of assessment of learning and for learning in ways practical for tertiary teachers committed to the teaching and learning process? ■*



# References

Referenced papers presented at the Symposium on Tertiary Assessment, 17–19 November, 2008:

Afrin, T. *An overview from different perspectives: Culturally competent assessment in a multicultural environment.*

Anderson, H., Lopez, M., Clarkson, D., Fourie, W., & Faleolo, M. *Purposes, practices and standards in tertiary assessment: The students' view.*

Banta, T.W. *Profiles of good practice in assessing student learning outcomes.*

Baxter, D. & Dudley, D. *Assessing levels of student understanding in teacher education using a SOLO taxonomy.*

Black, M. *Unit standard based assessment involving official statistics: An evaluation of four assessment tools.*

Brown, G. *Assessing with essays: Sources of error and mitigating responses.*

Buckley, H. & Hale, R. *A practical method for assessing critical thinking and communication.*

Campbell, A. *You let them talk in lectures? Student discussion as formative assessment.*

Carless, D. *Learning-oriented assessment: Principles, practice, and a project.*

Clarke, J., Tielemans, W., & Hoong, I. *Do weekly online revision assessments enhance first year student pass rates?*

Daly, N. & Spiller, D. *Reflective moments: Investigating the benefits of reflection assessments in an additional language teacher education programme.*

Davidson, S., Anderson, H., Rees, M., McKenzie, L., Johnston, T., Fletcher, R., & Meyer, L. *An investigation of assessment policy and practice in New Zealand higher education institutions.*

Emerson, L. & MacKay, B. *Online vs paper-based formative assessment in the writing classroom.*

Emerson, L., Stevens, S., & Muirhead, J. *Scaffolding the writing process in a large first year science class.*

Faleolo, M., Clarke, J., & Milne, J. *What is culturally appropriate assessment?*

Fielden, K. *Reflections on postgraduate completions.*

Gallagher, P. *The assessment of practice: A complementary perspective.*

Graham, S. *Utilising conceptual frameworks to map 'naturally occurring' self assessment in tertiary educational contexts.*

Hattie, J. *The black box of tertiary assessment.*

Hoani, S. & Malcolm, A. *Aromatai Wānanga.*

Hoare, K., Gallagher, P., & Bland, M. *The impact of a change to assessment policy on students from a NZ School of Nursing.*



- Jones, L. *Can portfolios promote quality learning?*
- Lopez, M., Clarkson, D., Fourie, W., Lopez, D., & Marais, K. *A learner perspective on self assessment.*
- Marais, K., Clarkson, D., Fourie, W., Lopez, M., & Lopez, D. *A learner perspective on peer assessment.*
- Margrain, V. & Everiss, L. *"Ka pai, well done". Perceptions of assessment feedback purposes and practices from a cohort of distance student teachers.*
- Maxwell, A. *Content-positive humanities assessment.*
- McPhun, H. *Engage, motivate, then assess.*
- Morris, G. *Pedagogy v efficiency: How to effectively assess classes of over 600 students.*
- Owen, H. & Martin, H. *Using online tools to provide relevant, authentic and timely assessment.*
- Panko, M. *Online assessment: Milestones or hurdles?*
- Rayner, G. *Does electronic preparation, submission and assessment of first year biology student practical reports facilitate higher quality learning by students?*
- Ruhnayat, R. *Overseas higher education qualification assessment: Meeting the global trends.*
- Shephard, K. *Assessing hard-to-measure learning: Affective attributes at all levels of tertiary education.*
- Shulruf, B., Hattie, J. & Tumen, S. *Relativity of assessment within a modular assessment system in higher education: the case of New Zealand's NZQA framework.*
- Slee, J. & Keenan, B. *Reviewing culturally inclusive assessment policies relating to indigenous education in the Northern Territory of Australia.*
- Stewart, J., Musgrave, J. & Matheson, R. *Authentic assessment strategies from three New Zealand tertiary organisations: A rich resource.*
- Tait, C. *The impact of perceptions of assessment types on the study habits and motivation of Chinese students.*
- Tickner, S., Hill, D. and Gallagher, G. *Online group and peer assessment in teacher education.*
- Tweed, M. & Wilkinson, T. *Insights gained from considering educational assessment as a diagnostic test.*
- Wright, L., Stephenson, A., Wansbrough, D. & Mortlock, A. *Practising peer assessment: four teacher-educators' experiences.*



Further resources on tertiary assessment are available online at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/education/SYMPOSIUM/index.aspx> including our own reports and others published in the publication of the Symposium on Tertiary Assessment and Higher Education Student Outcomes.



---

AKO AOTEAROA, National Office | c/- Massey University, Wellington Campus, Private Box 756, Wellington, New Zealand

Phone +64 4 801 0808 | Fax +64 4 801 2682 | Email [akoaootearoa@massey.ac.nz](mailto:akoaootearoa@massey.ac.nz) | Web [www.akoaootearoa.ac.nz](http://www.akoaootearoa.ac.nz)

ISBN 978-0-473-15423-3