

Editorial – Research on Tertiary Assessment Policy and Practices

Assessment performs multiple functions in higher education teaching and learning, at institutional, disciplinary and individual levels for academic staff and students. Validity and reliability of information and feedback to students are crucial for individual coursework, where tertiary teachers and students participate in assessment activities intended to measure the attainment of valued learning outcomes relevant to the discipline or profession. Accountability operates at programme level, where academic teaching staff and senior university managers strive to demonstrate student progress towards attainment of the required graduate attributes associated with particular curricula. Peer review and sector accreditation audits document quality assurance so that educational institutions such as universities know that they are achieving stated goals in producing graduates who have mastered current knowledge at a high level and can contribute to the advancement of new knowledge. All of these processes rely on assessment policy and guidelines to ensure quality higher education. Further, tertiary assessment practices are high stakes for persons (whether teacher or student), the credibility of qualifications (including how each is regarded by employers or professional registration bodies) and the academic reputation of the institution. Thus, it is surprising that more attention has not been focused on the measurement of tertiary teaching and learning outcomes, including systematic research on the foundations of practice and linkages between those practices and institutional policy. This special issue addresses aspects of this gap and is intended to stimulate further critical work in the area of tertiary assessment.

The articles in this issue had their origins in the international Symposium on *Tertiary Assessment and Higher Education Student Outcomes: Policy, Practice and Research* that was held in Wellington, New Zealand, in November 2008. Over 200 participants attended the symposium and

more than 40 presentations and four keynote addresses included contributions from Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and the United States. The authors of the seven articles in this issue were invited as representative of highlights emerging from the symposium. Earlier versions of portions of these articles were presented at the symposium but the authors were invited to refocus and elaborate their contributions to concentrate on areas where policy could better address key assessment challenges. Taken together, this collection represents important assessment scholarship as well as raising new issues such as cultural responsiveness and contradictions or ambiguities in policy and practice that have implications for assessment in today's universities working in a global context. This is particularly so at a time when higher education institutions can no longer assume student populations that are complacent about judgements affecting their learning and their future.

Several of the articles are directed towards Western higher education institutions, calling for sharper focus on the accommodation of cultural diversity and reconsideration of long-held, implicit assumptions that existing teaching and learning practices are somehow 'universal' rather than monocultural. Johnston (New Zealand) discusses how 'centric' assessment policy and approaches continue to advantage those students from dominant cultures that match the institution's traditional cultural identities. In contrast, indigenous and ethnic minority students risk finding themselves in mainstream teaching and learning contexts that put them at a disadvantage. Rather than promoting so-called culture-free assessment approaches (which some would consider impossible), Johnston calls for policy and practice that acknowledge cultural knowledge and context. She argues that universities are making a political choice if they fail to take on this challenge of cultural responsiveness, adding further to existing inequities. Instead, higher education institutions are seen to have a responsibility to be proactive in accommodating cultural differences to enhance educational opportunity rather than replicating historical inequities.

Slee (Australia) shows how a mainstream university was able to design and implement culturally responsive assessment procedures consistent with policy standards. The *Growing Our Own* academic programme at Charles Darwin University in Australia was designed specifically to enable indigenous students to build on their cultural strengths as part of university study. This approach is in sharp contrast to deficit approaches that ignore indigenous knowledge, which is crucial for effective professional practice in the indigenous communities where graduates will

work following graduation. Slee critiques recommendations made by a government evaluation of the programme as failing to consider adequately the relevant cultural issues. While her article is based on a particular experience in one national context, she presents the issues in a manner relevant to higher education institutions internationally—wherever there are culturally diverse students and communities. Slee's discussion of universities' expectations of students who speak English as one of two or more languages is further explored in the article by Tait, who investigated the perceptions of Chinese students regarding examination formats experienced during their study in English at a Western university. Her findings challenge traditional assumptions that student use of memorisation for examinations inevitably leads to surface rather than deep learning. Initial survey findings about preferred study approaches were investigated further through interviews in which Chinese students elaborated on how they used memorisation to enhance understanding. These two articles by Slee and Tait provide rich examples of how traditional assessment approaches affect students who are bilingual and bicultural and they suggest ways in which those approaches might need to change rather than assuming that it is only the student who must accommodate in order to learn.

The articles by Brown and Jones address the validity and reliability of assessment processes that are either traditional or relatively innovative, respectively, for universities. Essay examinations are widely used across many disciplines, with a relatively uncritical acceptance of grading decisions made through a process dependent on judgements made by individual tertiary teachers. Brown shows that the validity and reliability of various aspects associated with grading essays are problematic. He suggests two strategies for developing essay approaches that would provide more rigorous assessment of desired learner outcomes: transparency of expected organisational features and the use of content maps to augment or actually replace traditional essay scoring procedures. Jones' article focuses on the professional practice portfolio, a more recent addition to the higher education arsenal of assessment approaches that has been widely touted as ideally suited to clinical-professional and creative/fine arts programmes. Her focus is on the development of student portfolios across all years of an advanced professional programme to prepare educational psychologists, designed to enable documentation and evaluation of mastery of important clinical skills and understandings. The iterative nature of the portfolio process should enable tertiary teachers to track, throughout the programme, the emergence of students' meta-cognitions and reflections towards attainment of important graduate

attributes. This is not, however, a straightforward process and her interviews with colleagues and students participating in portfolio development highlight some of the challenges in the use of an assessment approach that demands higher levels of autonomy of students than more traditional assessments.

Shulruf, Hattie and Tumen examine how tertiary institutions know whether or not they are successful in promoting student learning and assisting students to complete their qualifications. Increasingly, universities and other tertiary institutions are being held accountable for retaining students beyond their initial enrolment year. Student failures are no longer viewed as exclusively the responsibility of the student but as institutional failures as well. National and regional accreditation policies may penalise tertiary institutions that show low retention and completion rates for particular programmes, which will introduce new challenges for open entry without significant support structures to enhance students' academic performance. Using actual achievement and demographic data from a large New Zealand tertiary institution, Shulruf and his colleagues demonstrate the feasibility of a method to evaluate the success value of particular programmes to identify areas where additional student supports are needed.

The final article by Meyer, Davidson, McKenzie, Rees, Anderson, Fletcher and Johnston reports the results of a national study of assessment policy and practices across different tertiary institutions to investigate the relationship between assessment policy and assessment practices. One would expect these to be aligned, yet they found critical contradictions where institutional-level policy and senior academic managers attested to certain principles that were not consistently apparent in practices which lecturers were instructed to use and which students said they experienced. This situation is not unique to New Zealand, as evidenced by calls for urgency in the development of a 'scholarship of assessment' to address the complex and high-stakes assessment responsibilities confronting today's universities (Banta *et al.*, 2002; Rust, 2007). A review of the factors influencing the assessment process based on the international literature provided the framework for this mixed-methods research project, leading to the design of a *Tertiary Assessment Grid* that can enable tertiary institutions to self-evaluate the nature and extent of policy and procedures to address assessment purposes for student learning, make decisions about student selection or progression and provide evidence of quality assurance and accountability. They conclude their article with a challenge: university policy and university researchers should apply the same standard of scholarship to *how* they

teach and assess as they have traditionally applied to *what* they teach and assess.

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References

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