

# ROUNDTABLE: THE CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## *Roundtable Summary*

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The Distributive Leadership project aims to influence the values; practices; beliefs; cultures; and behaviours of teaching and learning through the distribution of power via collegiality - the sharing of knowledge, practice and experiences. I was invited to attend this roundtable event by Dr Geraldine Lefoe, Senior Lecturer / Project Leader, Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources, University of Wollongong. The aim of the roundtable was to stimulate discussion on a range of issues to do with assessment of learning within universities, including:

- alignment between assessment and learning outcomes: definition and recognition;
- alignment in practice: effecting change;
- sustainable assessment: designing assessment that meets the needs of the present and also prepares students to meet their own future learning needs.

The existence and timing of this event was fortuitous for the CALD/ALTC Discipline Based Initiative in Law, both in regard to that project's emphasis upon graduate attributes, learning outcomes and aligned assessment as being crucial to the development of effective legal education and in regard to the "Let's Do Assessment" Workshop that the project is undertaking at Bond University Law School in November 2008.

1. The initial session permitted discussion of what makes for effective assessment. The following key points emerged:

- Emphasis on "authenticity" of assessment is fundamental;
- There needs to be a clear understanding of the meaning of "authenticity" (assessment tasks are "authentic" when they resemble tasks that students would have to do in work or life situations) and other concepts;

- Assessment ought to be coordinated across a whole of course to ensure adequate coverage and avoidance of gaps and repetition;
- Avoid the temptation, especially in tenure and promotion processes, to see student evaluations as the sole or primary evidence of teaching and learning achievements;
- Expectations of and cultures surrounding assessment need to be changed, among academics, students and other stakeholders, including employers;
- Assessment should be seen within the bigger context of teaching and learning, and how it can and ought to support that – one should realise that there are, broadly, dual roles for assessment:
  - assessment of learning; and
  - (more importantly but often unperceived) assessment for learning;
- Good institutional practices are needed to reinforce assessment that is effective for teaching and learning;
- Excellence should be encouraged and rewarded, but there must also be recognition in tangible ways of good, competent practice (ie provide equivalent in teaching area of the “solid”, but not outstanding, publication that counts in the research domain)
- Better dissemination mechanisms are required that will allow good practices and exemplars to be showcased;
- The diversity of assessment needs to be protected, so that flexibility and transparency can be maximised;
- One must guard against the pressure of innovation interfering with the fundamentals of good assessment;
- In designing assessment, there should be a balance struck between idealism and pragmatism.

2. The Faculty Scholar projects (see attached) dealing with “sustainable assessment” were outlined and discussed. The focus was on assessment that would assist students to develop capacities to make increasingly sophisticated judgments in the future about the quality of their own and others’ work. The literature suggests this can be accomplished through use of peer- and self-assessment tasks, sometimes (but not necessarily) accompanied by group work tasks. Some of the comments emphasised:

- The need for good grievance processes to be in place;
- The need to convince institutional management; colleagues; and students of the intrinsic value of this type of assessment and alleviate scepticism that it is merely a work-saving device for busy academics;

- It is a benefit for students to become involved in a dialogue about assessment, thereby developing a deeper understanding of how complex the process is and how important it is that they understand more about their own learning;
- The labels “self” and “peer” assessment can be problematic, lead to unwarranted assumptions about their purpose and can interfere with learning – focus should instead be placed on the objective, which is to develop student capacities to reflect, evaluate, make judgments, give effective feedback, etc;
- This type of assessment should be used to achieve the legitimate objectives referred to above and, like all assessment, as part of an overall assessment strategy in a course – in other words, it should be integrated into the broader whole, and this should be made transparent, including making it clear what it adds to the overall objective;
- It is important, when trying to “sell” this (as with many innovations), to find ways to give students useful, tangible and immediate recognition of the things they have learned – eg, if they have learned to make constructive comments on their own work, then credit should be given for that achievement – it is not enough to tell students that what they are learning is intrinsically valuable and will be recognised by them at some point in the future - the use of e-portfolios was suggested as a possible means of demonstrating what has been learned and allowing students to build in their own reflections on the process.

3. The Faculty Scholar projects (see attached) dealing with achieving alignment in practice between assessment and outcomes were outlined and discussed. Key points included:

- Care must be taken to state learning outcomes with clarity, and they must be “outcomes”, not tasks or activities;
- When stating outcomes, there should be clarity in the terminology used, and avoidance of vague language such as “understanding” or “well-presented” – the evidence of achievement is what is fundamental, and it should be made explicit;
- All stated outcomes should be explicitly assessed in some way, and their assessment should be appropriately weighted.

4. The Faculty Scholar projects (see attached) dealing with the structural and attitudinal influences on assessment, in particular how we define and recognise good, aligned assessment, were considered via role-play exercises on how to develop a more positive culture around assessment and how to achieve transparency. Key points included:

- A consistent message must be conveyed through use of key performance indicators;
- Consultation with all stakeholders should feed into that process;

- Incentives to adopt change that represents better practices should be provided;
- Means to develop professionalism and commitment to best practice should be provided;
- Local mechanisms for sharing good practices, informally among individuals and more routinely and generally among colleagues, should be encouraged.

5. One of the Faculty Scholars, Prof Elizabeth Handsley of Flinders University, was charged with the task of summing up the themes that emerged from the day. She brought these together into 5 categories of factors that affect the culture of assessment, providing ideas on how to influence that culture for the better.

(a) University policies and practices

- know how the institution expects its academics to conduct assessment;
- know how academics actually carry out assessment;
- know how the institution checks what academics are doing in relation to assessment;
- work to ensure effective succession planning so that good ideas carry on and institutional memory and knowledge are maintained.

(b) Values and beliefs

- harness the passion of academics like those participating in the roundtable;
- work to ensure that these conversations about assessment are brought into the mainstream rather than left as optional add-ons for those who are interested or care enough;
- ensure there is student-centricity to assessment – communicate openly and effectively, and establish fair standards and criteria;
- avoid developing jaded or cynical attitudes;
- be positive, not complaining, in outlook and expression, and forge relationships outside own discipline or unit. if necessary to obtain the support to do this.

(c) Valuing teaching generally and good teaching practice in particular

- embrace challenge and change, finding ways to work as effectively and imaginatively as possible with what's available;
- provision and use of resources and support in all its manifestations, including academic development units, literature, etc;
- provision of tangible recognition, including awards, citations, commendations (but with care not to debase the currency), promotion.

(d) Integration

- this is especially important in the graduate attributes universe;
- rationalise assessment for specific tasks, and build towards a coherent overall plan for assessment - avoid over-assessing;
- encourage close and effective cooperation among colleagues;
- rely upon practices that have been developed elsewhere and shown to be effective – there is no need to “reinvent the wheel”;
- ensure assessment becomes a part of, not the end stage of, student learning.

(e) What makes for good assessment practice

- assessment is designed and implemented around all those things that students need to learn;
- transparency in what is being assessed, how it is being assessed, and in expectations and standards;
- authenticity underlies the assessment tasks;
- assessment is aligned with intended outcomes, so that we can know whether, and to what extent, students have learned what we intended them to learn.

6. At one point in the roundtable discussions, the notion was raised that there is a fundamental core of a good assessment culture. The challenge is to articulate and internalise that. A “Ten Commandments” metaphor was suggested. In her concluding remarks, Prof Handsley climbed Mount Sinai:

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### **THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF ASSESSMENT**

1. Thou shalt consult with colleagues.
2. Thou shalt use the resources available to inform thy practice.
3. Thou shalt be transparent.
4. Thou shalt reflect on thy institution’s policies and preferred practices.
5. Thou shalt have authentic assessment aligned with thy expected learning outcomes.
6. Thou shalt innovate, but not for innovation’s sake.
7. Thou shalt not over-assess.
8. Thou shalt have reasonable standards given students’ capacities.
9. Thou shalt encourage junior colleagues and listen to them as well.

10. When discouraged, thou shalt review these commandments and remind thyself thou art on the right track.