

ASSESSMENT STATEMENTS IN SUBJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Advice to Faculties/Graduate Schools

The purpose of this paper is to give guidance on writing assessment statements for subject descriptions. It is thus deliberately limited in scope, and does not deal with matters such as the purpose of assessment, the range of modes of assessment available, or best practice in assessment. Advice on these and other design matters are available elsewhere, most notably and most conveniently in the excellent booklet produced by Kerri-Lee Harris of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*, available at <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/>.

1. Requirements of Assessment Statements

Subject descriptions, including the assessment statements contained within them, are both information on which students can make choices (or, with compulsory subjects, information that at least allows students to understand what they will be required to study) and a contract between the University and the student that what is set out in the subject description will be provided. Thus it is vital that the information contained in them is accurate and detailed enough for students to be able to make informed choices, and that the terms of the subject “contract” are clearly stated in case disputes arise. This is particularly important in assessment, which is overwhelmingly the area in which there is the largest number of disputes and appeals.

It is required of all subject descriptions that the following information is given for each item of assessment:

- Kind of assessment instrument (essay, project, examination, oral presentation, etc.)
- Length of the item (in terms of words, pages, time, etc)
- Timing of the assessment in relation to the teaching period (e.g. Week 7, mid-semester, during the examination period, between the two intensive delivery periods, three weeks after the intensive delivery period)
- Percentage weighting of the item

In the majority of cases this is perfectly straightforward and unproblematic. Often the required detail is not there in proposals that come forward to UGPC/PCPC and so clarification is sought, but there is no problem in providing the required information. (Timing, in particular, is often missing, because it is a relatively recent requirement for inclusion in assessment statements.)

Problems arise in the approval process with subject descriptions particularly in three areas:

- Amount of assessment required (seemingly either too much or too little);

- Inconsistency of weighting of items within subjects and across subjects within a program;
- Assessments items that are not easily quantifiable.

We will deal with each of these individually.

2.1 Amount of assessment required

A number of Faculties have standard requirements imposed on all subjects at particular levels. If there were standard rules to cover a large proportion of subjects in the University, they would be something like the following:

- Undergraduate 12.5 point subjects have a total assessment of 4000 words or equivalent;
- Postgraduate 12.5 point subjects have a total assessment of 5000 words or equivalent

Generally accepted equivalences would be:

- An hour of examination = 1000 words
- Ten minutes of individual oral presentation = 1000 words

Group presentations and assignments are more difficult to quantify. Generally, depending on the size of the group, the practice seems to be, as far as it is at all generalisable, to require rather more than if it were an individual project, but less than if it were the sum of the requirements for each group member individually. So, a twenty-minute presentation by a three-person group might be considered the equivalent of 1000 words.

Thus a typical undergraduate assessment statement might read

One-hour mid-semester test (25%); 10-minute oral presentation towards the end of semester (25%); 2000 word assignment, due in the assessment period (50%).

This level of assessment assumes that the assessed work is the result of a substantial amount of independent research and learning, and (apart from examinations) has been thoughtfully shaped, carefully revised and is well-presented.

There are many factors that might produce variations from this general standard of assessment:

- It might be that an item of assessed work is intended to be produced more rapidly and without the kind of polish assumed here, and so a greater word count might be justified: journals and weekly contributions to a discussion forum are examples of this;
- It might be that a strict limit is put on the length to develop in students habits of conciseness and direct expression.

- It might be that the contact time is rather smaller or greater than in a standard subject, with correspondingly more or less work expected out-of-class, and so the amount of work produced for assessment varies accordingly (graduate subjects tend to have fewer contact hours which balances the greater assessment demand);
- It might be that a substantial part of the assessment task is done in class (i.e. the learning is in completing in class under supervision a task that is the assessment), and so the assessment requirements might be greater (studio or laboratory work can be examples of this);

However, given these qualifications, there are sometimes assessment demands that seem either rather light or rather excessive, and which are questioned in the approval process. For example, there are sometimes requirements for assessment in a 12.5 point subject that add up to about 10,000 words. This would seem to be putting excessive demands upon students, especially if, within a semester, they have four such subjects. The consideration that is often invoked in discussing this with the academics proposing the subject is the contact time that has been given. The standard contact time for a 12.5 point subject in the University is 120 hours. (The acceptable variation on this is 96-144 hours, but most subjects accept the 120-hour norm.) If there are thirty-six contact hours in the subject (and there are often more), is it reasonable to expect a student to prepare for classes and to produce 10,000 words of assessment in the remaining 84 hours? When put in these terms, most academics agree that the amount of assessment proposed is unreasonable, particularly when the question of quality is raised. The 10,000 words are not likely to be the product of much research or thought and so to be of high quality if they have been produced in such haste. Indeed, it is hard to see how the content of a 12.5 point subject could require 10,000 words in order to assess whether the student had satisfactorily mastered the content or not.

Conversely, if a postgraduate subject has 24 hours of class contact, and only requires 3000 words of assessment, one would ask whether the student really needs ninety-six hours to prepare for class and write 3000 words. It may be that they do, but one would expect the resulting piece(s) to be very thoughtfully written and very concise. The low word requirement would need to be justified.

As a general rule, it might be suggested that assessment in any undergraduate subject outside the range 3500-5000 words (or equivalent), and for any graduate subject outside the range 4000-6000 words (or equivalent) will need to be justified for approval.

2.2 Inconsistency of weighting of assessment in subjects

The percentage weighting given to items of assessment reflects three things:

- Its length;
- The amount of work expected to complete it satisfactorily;
- Its importance in assessing mastery of the material in the subject.

In most cases, within subjects, the weighting of the assessment items mirrors the length of the assessment (e.g. in an undergraduate subject with 4000 words of assessment, a 2000-word assignment will normally be weighted at 50%). This presupposes (and gives the signal) that each of the assessment items requires proportional work to its length, which in most cases is probably true.

Having weightings more or less proportional to the length of the item is fairly standard across the University, and is regarded as so in the approval process. There must be clear reason for major variations from this (although it is hard to put a figure on what might or might not constitute a major variation).

The other two factors mentioned above can reasonably produce variations. For example, a journal, since it can be produced more quickly than a crafted essay, may well have a lighter weighting than an essay of similar length. A Literature Review may be required early in the semester to give students feedback on how they are going, but a revised version of it will also be included in the final project, and so the weighting is reduced. On the other hand, it may be considered that a final examination, because it tests the student's independent command of all the material within a subject, may be weighted more heavily than is justified by its length in relation to other assessment tasks. Conversely, the lecturer might think that the students' achievement of the objectives of the subject is better measured by the assignment than an examination, and so weights the assignment more highly, even though the examination may also be required to ensure they have coverage.

It is hard to put limits on what is reasonable variation of weighting of items of assessment within a subject. It is important for the academic staff member writing the assessment statement to reflect on the message that is being given to the student. If there is a 3000-word assignment that is only being weighted 30% whereas a 2-hour examination is being weighted 70%, then the message to the student is that the assignment is comparatively not very important, and their time and effort is much better spent preparing for the examination. In fact, this level of variation, where the assignment is only given half the weighting one might expect and the examination given 2.5 times the expected weighting, might well be questioned. At least it would be worth asking whether the person proposing the subject really thought that this reflected the relative importance, and the amount of effort that they would expect a student to give.

A more difficult problem, often (but by no means always) related to the overall amount of assessment required in a subject, arises when, within a course, there is huge variation in requirements between subjects. As mentioned above, many faculties have standard expectations of assessment across their subjects, and so this is not a problem there. Other faculties and even departments within faculties, seem to have no sense of a standard requirement. A 2-hour examination, for example, may be anything from 20% to 80% of the assessment within a subject.

Possible reasons for variations of weightings within subjects have been discussed above, but it is scarcely credible that they would produce such extreme differences. Again, the

crucial consideration is the message that is being given to the student, this time not so much about the relative importance of the work that is required within a subject, but about the relative demands of the two subjects. While it might be argued that a subject in which a two-hour exam is weighted 20% is really expecting only a quarter of the work to go into preparation for the exam as would be required if the examination were 80% of the assessment, the truth of the matter is that students will not be so assiduous or so mathematical, and it will be felt that the one subject is overly demanding in its requirements, whereas the other is an easy subject comparatively. Subjects of the same points value should require more or less equivalent amounts of work, and should be seen to do so. Standardised requirements are important so that students do not feel exploited or, conversely, feel that they are not having appropriate demands made on them to engage in depth in particular subjects.

2.3 Assessment items that are difficult to quantify

There are many kinds of assessment items that are difficult to quantify. Words or length of time are easy (although even with words, as already noted, there may be different demands depending on whether it is a journal entry or a thoroughly-crafted essay, or, in creative writing, for example, the number of words might vary radically depending on whether the student was writing a short story or a poem). When it comes to performance, or mathematical problems, or producing a multimedia website, quantifying the assessment in terms of the scale required can be very difficult. Some people give an indication of the amount of commitment involved by saying something like “equivalent to 2000 words”, which gives an impression of exactness but can be quite nonsensical in relation to some kinds of assessment.

There is no simple solution in many cases, but on the other hand, it is important that some attempt be made to quantify the assessment item for the sake of students, since it is not acceptable within a subject description for a lecturer to have a blank cheque to require of students as much or as little as they wish. Besides, some kind of quantification is necessary to make assessment equitable: if assessment items of widely variable scope are being submitted, it is very difficult to divorce the quantity from the quality in the assessment and judge the students’ achievement fairly.

There is no general solution that can be offered. Sometimes, if the assessment is non-verbal but numerical or visual (graphs, designs, images) the quantity can be given in terms of number of pages, or the number of items required. Sometimes it might be possible to quantify in terms of the hours of input: “students are expected to commit approximately twenty hours to completing this task.”

A good way of moving towards quantification, would be for the academic staff member to consider how they explain the scope of the task to students in the detailed statement of the task requirements, or how they respond to students when they ask about the scope of the task. Indeed, the kinds of question the students ask might be an indication of how the task might be quantified (“How long...” “How many...” “How much...”).

In the approval process, the Academic Shepherds and the Committees well understand the difficulties that Faculties sometimes face in providing meaningful statements about the scope of tasks, and are receptive to any genuine attempt to indicate it. However, they are not sympathetic when no attempt is made, since this leaves students open to unreasonable demands with no clear recourse to appeal, except on grounds of the overall commitment time in the subject.

3. A note on special requirements

In a report to UGPC/PCPC earlier this year, it was recommended that special requirements in assessment should appear in subject descriptions. At the moment, lecturers can impose requirements such as that students must pass all items of assessment to pass the subject, or that they must pass the examination to pass, and, as long as the requirement is communicated to students along with details of the assessment in the first two weeks of the subject, there is no expectation that it should appear in the official subject description. Again, in the interests of making clear what the assessment expectations are of students before they enrol in the subject and to have the assessment “contract” explicit and full, it is obviously desirable that they should be.

However, given that such statements are not currently contained in most subject descriptions, it was decided that they should only be required for the present in subjects that are newly approved. To require them in all subject descriptions immediately would produce an avalanche of minor changes that could not be coped with. However, faculties should, over the next few years, ensure that whenever changes are made to assessment statements that special requirements are included. It is planned that, in about five years, there will be a requirement that all subjects comply.

A preferable alternative would be for there to be a general statement covering all subjects within a faculty or department. At the moment, for example, there is often an attendance statement covering all faculty/department subjects, so there is no need to include it within individual subjects. If agreement could be reached (or imposed) across a faculty or a department or a course, then a single statement that all assessment items must be passed to pass a subject (for example) would suffice, and it would not need to be repeated in each subject description.