

## ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 7/95 (26 OCTOBER 1995)

### WORKING GROUP ON REVIEW OF ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

##### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Working Group has completed its Report. We have consulted widely within the University community (responses were sought from all Heads of Departments) and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. This Report does not include the section on discrepancies in honours grades. That section requires further work and will be the subject of a separate, and much shorter, document.

##### 2. THE GENERAL MESSAGE

The general message of the Report is that the University should design assessment tasks that promote learning consistent with the objectives of subjects and courses. All assessment creates incentives for students to behave in certain ways. (This is particularly true if the assessment affects their grade). Because of these incentive effects, all assessment is formative.

Good assessment will form the learning processes of students in ways that are consistent with the objects of the subject or course. Good teaching practice will involve the development of (and even experimenting with) assessment practices that promote the objectives of subjects and courses.

##### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

###### 3.1 The Working Group recommends to the Academic Board that :

*Section 3.2 Appendix 2 in the Academic Committee Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes, being the form for proposals for the introduction of new course or existing program changes, be amended to include a section to provoke thinking and elicit information on the linkages between objectives and assessment methods. (It is not intended that such information be for publication in the Handbook).*

###### 3.2 The Working Group recommends to the Academic Board that:

*Section 3.1 Whenever assessment tasks are set, academics should make clear to their classes, the criteria by which the work will be assessed.*

*Section 3.4 In order that students can have confidence in the grading, academics in each subject inform students of the procedures that have been adopted to ensure that the assessment is fair.*

*Section 3.5 Wherever practicable, marks awarded during a subject should be made available to students and information should not be withheld.*

### **3.3 To Working Group recommends to the Academic Board that:**

*Section 3.3 All Departments and/or Faculties give attention to the overall assessment workload and be aware that load varies constantly and at particular times. Faculties and Departments should act to avoid excessive loads and ensure that students are not significantly disadvantaged.*

### **3.4 The Working Group recommends to the Academic Board that the Directions of the Academic Board under Statutes 12.1.2 and 12.3.8 be re-written to convey:**

*Section 4.2 (i) That peer assessment may determine some proportion of a grade in a subject providing the peer assessment is undertaken in accordance with Department guidelines that have been approved by the Academic Board.*

*(ii) The requirement that a student will fail only if at least two examiners agree that a student should fail. In arriving at a judgement, the second examiner should review the evidence that is available and may consult the first examiner about the assessment of material that is not available for re-examination.*

### **3.5 The Working Group recommends to the Academic Board that :**

*Section 4.2 Statutes 12.1.2 and 12.3.8, along with the other statutes, be re-drafted in plain English.*

**3.6 The Working Group recommends to Academic Board that:**

Section 4.4 *Student Administration investigate the possibility of including class distributions on all result sheets that are posted on University notice boards and that these distributions preserve the rights of students to privacy.*

Section 4.3 (i) *The descriptions of subjects in the Handbooks contain information about assessment only in general terms but have sufficient information to enable students to form an impression as to the nature and extent of workload. For example, the description should state if there is to be a final exam and if there is to be grading based on essays or assignments. Although weights may be stated, there should be no requirement that such detail be included. Detailed information about the forms of assessment and weights should be published in a form readily accessible to students of the subject, not later than two weeks after commencement of teaching in the subject.*

(ii) *At some future date Statute 5.4.13 be reworded to clarify any misunderstanding in meaning that has emerged.*

**3.7 The Working Group recommends to the Academic Board that the Centre for the Study of Higher Education that:**

Section 5.0 *The Centre for the Study of Higher Education should continue to support innovative practices and to provide advice routinely, as requested:*

- *To the University, Faculties and Departments on assessment policies and procedures;*
- *To Faculties and Departments on the role of assessment in the curriculum, department assessment policy and the effectiveness of otherwise of particular assessment procedures;*
- *To individual academics on the particulars of assessment in relation to specific courses and subjects.*

## REPORT

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Working Group was established by Academic Committee and given the following Terms of Reference:

- i) To investigate the use of assessment in the overall educational process, and particularly to examine the relationship between assessment and education.
- ii) If possible, to recommend policy guidelines for methods of assessment across the University.
- iii) To examine the role of assessment in the development of oral and written communication skills.
- iv) To make recommendations concerning the role the CSHE may play in supporting the use of satisfactory assessment procedures.

The members of the Working Group are: Professor Philip Williams (MBS-Convenor); Dr Daine Alcorn (Anatomy & Cell Biology); A/Professor Michael Lambiris (Law); A/Professor Liz Sonenberg (Computer Science); Ms Fleur Taylor (Student Representative); A/Professor Allan Thomas (Education); Dr Bill Wignall (Physics); Ms Rosemary Senior (Central Secretariat).

The Working Group wishes to thank the Centre for Higher Education for their generous help. In particular, we thank Richard James for his detailed comments on the draft of this report.

### 2. THE USE OF ASSESSMENT IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

Discussions of assessment commonly classify the various functions of assessment as either summative or formative. Assessment serves a summative function when it is used to determine the extent to which a student has achieved the objectives set by the subject. It is common to think of assessment primarily (or even exclusively) as summative in function. Indeed, Statute 12.2.1 introduces the University's Statutes and Regulations concerning assessment by defining assessment as summative:

"12.2.1 In this statute, unless the contrary intention appears - 'assessment' means the method of determining:-

- a) whether a student has passed; or
- b) whether a student has otherwise satisfied the examiners; or
- c) the grade to be awarded to a student in a degree course."

This concentration on the summative role of assessment should not divert us from the formative roles that assessment plays. Assessment forms or influences the learning behaviour of students.

The theme of this report is that academics, departments and faculties should pay more attention to the ways in which methods of assessment influence the behaviour of our students. In particular, we should be careful to devise forms of assessment that facilitate the development of good learning behaviour.

The University's statutes, regulations and the Academic Committee have dealt with assessment almost exclusively in terms of its summative role. The statutes and regulations concerning assessment have been drafted to protect students against arbitrary or vindictive grading by academics and to ensure that students do not inflate their grades by cheating. The Academic Committee has also been concerned to ensure that students are safeguarded against assessment requirements which are not commensurate with the size of the subject and that students are protected from methods or weightings of assessment that are not notified in the University Handbook. These rules and practices have been introduced to uphold the interests of students. However, the Working Group learnt that the benefits provided by the statutes, regulations and Academic Committee have been achieved at a very real cost in terms of educational processes. As a University we have developed rules and procedures to protect the interests of students; but these rules and procedures are limiting the formative role of assessment. There is a trade-off between rules and procedures which safeguard the immediate interests of students and the development of good educational practice. In opting for regulation we have compromised our effectiveness as educators.

Our recommendations below seek to redress this imbalance.

### **3. PRINCIPLES OF GOOD ASSESSMENT**

The literature on assessment yields a set of principles which characterise good practice in assessment. These might be summarised as follows:

- i) Communicate assessment requirements accurately, clearly and early.
- ii) Ensure that assessment adequately reflects and rewards the learning goals that are most important.
- iii) Be considerate of student workloads and the timing of assessments.
- iv) Create instruments that achieve consistent and fair results.

- v) Use assessment to assist learning by providing feedback to students that is timely and identifies ways in which the student can improve.
- vi) Design assessment procedures to provide feedback to academics on the areas in which the education process can be improved.

At its first meeting, the Working Group decided that it could not make recommendations to Academic Committee on how to promote good assessment practice until it had a better feel for the range of assessment methods used in the University. We wrote to all Heads of Departments asking them to nominate one or two subjects within their Departments where the person in charge of the subject made a particular effort to implement assessment that furthers the educational objectives of the subject. Forty-two subjects were nominated. We then asked for documentation of the assessment procedures in the nominated subjects and we selected eleven subjects for more detailed investigation. In general, this involved interviewing the lecturer in charge and interviewing students who had completed the subjects.

The case studies that resulted are included as an attachment to this report.

The case studies illustrate the proposition that good practice in assessment can take a wide variety of forms. In our investigations we paid particular attention to the way in which assessment reflects and rewards learning goals that are most important (objective (ii) above) and the way in which assessment assists learning by indicating ways in which students can improve (objective (v)). We paid particular attention to these two objectives because we believe that the university both could and should do much more toward their promotion.

### **3.1 Communicate assessment requirements accurately, clearly and early**

In recent years, the Academic Committee has placed a great deal of effort in ensuring that this precept be followed. The overwhelming majority of subjects taught in the University convey the nature of the assessment tasks and their weight in the official University Handbooks.

It may be thought that this information is required under Statute 5.4.13(1) which states that "On the recommendation of Faculties, the Board must annually prescribe all details of subjects for lectures and assessment in the University" and 5.4.15.(1) which states that "the academic registrar must publish the details of subjects prescribed by the Board under section 5.4.13 on or before 31 October each year or as soon as practicable after that date".

The President of the Academic Board may give permission for these requirements to be varied. This permission is generally available before the subject has started; but, if the subject has started, permission is usually granted only with the consent of all students who have enrolled. The procedure to have the subject detail varied after publication is outlined in the Academic Board and Academic Committee *Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes*, 1994, which is included as Appendix A to this report.

These procedures have evolved to provide students with information. In the experience of members of the Working Group the procedures are far more demanding than is required by leading international universities. Furthermore, as we discuss below, it may well be that these procedures that have been designed to provide students with information do so at the cost of discouraging innovation in methods of assessment because of the length of time needed to implement changes. Of course, accurate communication of assessment requirements requires more than an entry in a handbook. In particular, it requires that students be aware of the criteria by which they will be assessed.

*The Working Group recommends that, whenever assessment tasks are set, academics should make clear to their classes, the criteria by which the work will be assessed.*

### **3.2 Ensure that assessment adequately reflects and rewards the learning goals that are most important**

The concern of students for their grades means that the methods of assessment we use determine to a large extent the nature of the students' learning. If we assess a student's ability to recall particular facts or theories, we are creating a powerful incentive for students to learn to recall those particular facts or theories. This may, indeed, be the objective of the subject.

However, suppose the objective of the subject is for the students to be able to diagnose particular diseases. If we assess students by their ability to recall symptoms of diseases, we are encouraging them to learn to recall symptoms - and, because their time is limited, we are discouraging them from learning to diagnose diseases.

This point is of very general application. Academics frequently claim to value wide reading, critical thought, high standards of oral communication and ability to learn in groups. However, if we assess attributes other than those in this list, we are encouraging our students to use their limited time to master the skills that we assess and to direct their time away from the attributes on the list. Methods of assessment should be selected so that they are targeted directly towards the skills that we seek to develop. To do anything else encourages students to devote their limited time to the pursuit of objectives other than those of the course or subject.

*The Working Group recommends that Appendix 2 in the Academic Committee Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes, being the form for proposals for the introduction of new course or existing program changes, be amended to include a section to provoke thinking and elicit information on the linkages between objectives and assessment methods. It is not intended that such information be for publication in the Handbook.*

Number (iii) of the Working Group's terms of reference asked us to examine the role of assessment in the development of oral and written communication skills. Many subjects require written work; and many academics give students useful feedback as to how they may improve their writing skills. Our case studies also

indicate that some subjects within the University encourage the development of oral presentation skills.

Our investigations suggested two factors which may be inhibiting further development of the teaching and assessment of written and oral presentation skills. The first is that academics work in discipline-based Departments; and these Departments tend to have expectations that the objectives of a subject should be directed towards the imparting of the subject matter of the discipline. These expectations may bias individual academics away from teaching and assessing generic skills that are vital for the future careers of our graduates.

A second factor that may inhibit the teaching and assessment of oral presentation skills is the two-examiner rule which is discussed in 4.2 below.

### **3.3 Be considerate of student workloads and the timing of assessments.**

In general, this precept is followed. Many Departments and/or Faculties collect details of the dates on which assessments are due so as to ensure that students are not inconvenienced by having a large number of assessment tasks that are due at the same time.

*The Working Group recommends that all Departments and/or Faculties give attention to the overall assessment workload and be aware that load varies constantly and at particular times. Faculties and Departments should act to avoid excessive loads and ensure that students are not significantly disadvantaged.*

### **3.4 Create instruments that achieve consistent and fair results**

There is a well developed literature on the science of assessment. The working group decided to avoid the complex questions that this literature addresses, nevertheless, fairness demands at least two elements: to be fair and to be seen to be fair. In general, academics make vigorous efforts to ensure that assessment is fair by means of blind marking, examiners being allocated to questions rather than to papers, and so on.

*The Working Group recommends that in order that students can have confidence in the grading, academics in each subject inform students of the procedures that have been adopted to ensure that the assessment is fair.*

### **3.5 Use assessment to assist learning by providing feedback that is timely and identifies ways in which the student can improve**

Feedback may take many forms - and these vary in the assistance they provide students. At the very lowest level of assistance, students can be provided with a grade or a mark. Until 1994, the University only released grades - but it now releases marks. This change was appropriate: it served no good purpose to conceal information by refusing to release marks. For the same reasons, marks of components of the grade in a subject should not be withheld. If grades are to be fitted to a distribution at the end of semester, examiners should ensure that grading of each component is roughly consistent with the desired distribution.

Nevertheless, feedback that is limited to marks or grades is not of great use to students - because it contains no analysis of how students could better achieve their potential. Feedback from assessment only begins to be useful when it includes *verbal and/or written comments*. Teachers need to verbalise their reactions to the student's performance, saying which aspects strike them as strong, weak, or simply interesting. Ideally, they should give whatever suggestions they can to help the student improve.

*The Working Group recommends that, wherever practicable, marks awarded during a subject should be made available to students and information should not be withheld.*

### **3.6 Design assessment procedures to provide feedback to academics on the areas in which the education process may be improved.**

This may seem difficult with self assessment or if grading is undertaken by persons other than the academics who are responsible for the subject. Nevertheless, our case study of Chemistry 160 shows that even computer-aided self-assessment can assist in addressing this problem.

Recent developments in the University have emphasised the importance of gathering student feedback on teaching quality and making effective use of it. Another source of data on the effectiveness of teaching programs is the performance of students on assessment tasks. The usefulness of this data depends on the care with which academics design the tasks and analyse the results.

## **4. CAUSES OF CONCERN**

During the investigations by the Working Group, we became aware of certain practices, systems or proposals within the University that may inhibit good practice in assessment. These are discussed in this section; and we make proposals to deal with the problems.

### **4.1 Rewarding academics whose practice is excellent**

Good assessment practice takes time to develop, to administer and to provide appropriate feedback to students. During our investigations, we discovered many examples of excellent, innovative assessment practice. Some of these were being undertaken by limited-tenure academics. If Departments and Faculties are serious about encouraging good assessment practice, these efforts by junior faculty must be rewarded when the responsible faculty are being considered for tenure or promotion.

In the Code of Good Practice in Teaching, the University claims to value effective teaching equally with other academic activities and claims to recognise and reward teaching in selecting and promoting academics. It is important that these policies be disseminated to, and understood by, all academics. The Code of Practice should be provided to new academic staff as part of their orientation program.

#### **4.2 University statutes relating to the appointment of examiners**

As was noted in section 2 of this report, the University Statutes define assessment in terms of its summative function. This definition is not inappropriate given its context: the rules concerning assessment are concerned principally with its summative function. The rules are designed to ensure, as far as possible, that students are graded fairly and objectively.

Some of the rules governing assessment are not appropriate for a university which uses assessment to develop professional skills. Several of the subjects included in our case studies almost certainly violate the University's rules. The fault seems to lie with the rules rather than with the subjects. Furthermore, one of our case studies suggested that because a Faculty was attempting to follow the University's rules, good practice in formative assessment was inhibited.

The rules that seem to be a particular barrier to the formative function of assessment are 12.1.2(1) and 12.3.8.

##### **"Examiners for subjects and theses**

- 12.1.2 (1) Subject to this statute the examiners in any subject for a degree, diploma or preliminary course are to be:-
- (a) (i) if the subject is taught by one person, that person; or
  - (ii) if the subject is taught by two or more persons, one or more of those persons designated by the chairperson of the examination board;
- unless the Council decides otherwise; and
- (b) after consultation (except in special circumstances) with the appropriate faculty, any additional examiners the Council thinks fit."

This Statute means that any peer assessment that is currently undertaken almost certainly violates university rules. For students to be assessed by their fellow students, the fellow students would either have to be approved by council under 12.1.2 or approved by the Chairperson of the examination board as assistant markers under 12.1.9.

Involving students in the task of assessing their peers may be a valuable learning experience in some contexts. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate to involve students in the grading of their peers.

One such case is the allocation of marks among members of a group that undertook an assessment task. As every teacher knows, it is difficult to ascertain the contribution of each student to a group assignment. However, it may be appropriate to award marks at least partly on the basis of individual contribution - both to create disincentives for free-riding and for reasons of fairness. Peer assessment is one method by which marks may be allocated among members of a group for a group assignment. It is a common practice in leading business schools throughout the world; but it is effectively proscribed by our rules.

Peer assessment like any other assessment may raise issues of fairness. These issues may vary with the context in which peer assessment is utilised. If academics wish to utilise peer assessment, their Departments should discuss the matter and develop guidelines to ensure fairness. Peer assessment should accord with the Guidelines of the relevant Department.

#### **"Procedure for assessment**

- 12.3.8 (1) A Student may not be returned as having failed or not satisfied the examiners in a subject unless two members of the examination board have independently satisfied themselves in accordance with sub-section 2 that the student's performance in the subject as a whole is below pass standard.
- (2) For the purposes of sub-section (1)-
- (a) the two members of the examination board must-
- (i) independently consider the marks or grades of the student in each component of assessment in the subject;
- (ii) satisfy themselves that each component of assessment in which the student has failed has been marked by two examiners or assistant markers at least one of whom is a member of the examination board;
- (iii) be entitled, at their discretion, to re-mark any component of assessment; and

- (iv) independently determine, after considering the student's performance in all the assessed components of the subject, whether to administer any further component of assessment;
- (b) if assessment in a subject includes more than one component of the same kind, the requirements of sub-paragraph 2(a)(ii) are satisfied if different markers, at least one of whom is a member of the examination board, have independently assessed the performance in different components of that kind; and
- (c) if one member of the examination board decides to administer a further component of assessment under sub-paragraph 2(a)(iv), the decision is binding unless reversed by at least two members of the examination board."

Part (2)(a)(ii) of this statute seems to indicate that a student may fail only if each component in which the student has failed has been marked twice. Although the qualification of clause 12.3.8(2)(b) may provide an escape, the rule would seem to place a very severe restriction on assessment of proficiency in clinical subjects, and of contribution in class to case studies in business subjects. Either the academic is constrained not to fail the student on the component or two academics must assess each component.

These constraints are made much more explicit in the Directions of the Board. Although the Directions under Statute 12.3 are not printed in the current version of the Statutes or in the current Student Diary, they are still in force. The Directions under Statute 12.3 state:

- (i) All oral and aural tests should be conducted before two markers. If this is not possible, and a single marker fails the student on that test, the student must be given another test by another marker, and in that case at least one of the markers must be a member of the examination board.
- (ii) As far as practical components are concerned, each item should be assessed by two markers, one of whom is a member of the examination board. If it is not reasonably practicable for each practical component to be so marked then Direction (v) can be applied.
- (iii) Each written test or assignment which is intended to form part of a student's assessment in the subject and on which the student is failed by one marker, should thereupon be marked by another marker before being returned to the student. Alternatively, a board of examiners may retain a second copy of any failed test or assignment for marking by another marker at the end of the year should the student's overall result be a fail. In each case, one of the markers must be a member of the examination board.

- (iv) Each written test, examination, essay or similar assignment which can reasonably be assessed by two markers shall for the purpose of these directions, be considered as one complete and separate component and shall not in part or whole be grouped with any other such items as part of one component or as components of the same kind.
- (v) Components of assessment other than written tests, examinations, essays or similar assignments which can reasonably be assessed by two markers may, for the purposes of Regulation 4.2.7(2)(b), be grouped together as components of the same kind in the following groups:
  - (a) items of practical work such as work in the laboratory, architecture design projects, music performance or similar assignments;
  - (b) separately assessed items of field or clinical work;
  - (c) oral examinations and tests;
  - (d) aural examinations and tests;
  - (e) miscellaneous components each having a weight of ten per cent or less of the total assessment in the subject, grouped either as one kind or together with any of the above; and
  - (f) each other grouping of components of assessment of the same kind as may be defined by the Academic Board on the advice of the board of examiners and published to students;

provided that the combined weight of components of one kind does not exceed sixty per cent of the total assessment in a subject, and provided that no component has a weight of more than half the combined weight of the components of one kind in which it is grouped.

As is stressed throughout this report, assessment is formative. An obvious way to encourage participation in class is to assess it. A clear way to encourage time management and professional attitudes and behaviour is to assess them. The constraints imposed by statute 12.3.8 place too great a cost of the use of assessment to encourage good learning behaviour.

The Directions of the Board under of statute 12.3.8 require all assignments, essays and practical reports that fail be available for second marking. The response of one faculty to this requirement is to compel students to submit all essays in duplicate so that a copy can be retained for second marking. The cost of paper, storage space and handling is not inconsiderable. A more common alternative is to violate the rule and to submit only the final examination to second marking.

*The Working Group recommends that the Directions of the Academic Board under statutes 12.1.2 and 12.3.8 be written to convey:*

- (i) *that peer assessment may determine some proportion of a grade in a subject providing the peer assessment is undertaken in accordance with the guidelines of the relevant Department.*
- (ii) *the requirement that a student will fail only if at least two examiners agree that a student should fail. In arriving at a judgement, the second examiner should review the evidence that is available and may consult the first examiner about the assessment of material that is not available for re-examination.*

*The Working Group also recommends that:*

*Statutes 12.12 and 12.3.8, along with the other statutes, be redrafted in plain English.*

### **4.3 The tyranny of the handbook deadline**

As was noted in section 3.1 above, the recording of assessment tasks and their weights in the University's Handbook have the benefit of providing students with useful information.

Under Statute 5.5 each faculty must conduct an annual review of details of assessment of subjects in the faculty. The recommendations from this review must be submitted to the Academic Board before its September meeting and the Academic Registrar must publish the assessment prescribed by the Board on or before 31 October.

The Academic Board/Academic Committee's Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes require that details of new subjects include an explanation of the components of assessment.

In practice this means that Departments must secure Faculty approval for change, as early as March in one year, for implementation in the next, as changes to subject must go through the Academic Board approval process and/or meet a June copy deadline for publishing by August for the following year. Any changes subsequent to that which will be/is published in the Handbook must be approved by Council. Approval is given in exceptional circumstances and where there is unanimous consent of the students enrolled in the subject.

These procedures provide a powerful disincentive against change. The Working Group was told of the case of an academic who was criticised by students during first semester 1995 for giving too high a weighting to a mid-semester test. The subject was to be repeated in second semester so, during the first lecture of this semester, the academic announced that the weighting would be reduced in accordance with the feedback from students. This flexibility to experiment and to respond to feedback is desirable. However this was contrary to current procedures. The procedures of the University should be

changed so as to facilitate more flexibility and greater responsiveness to feedback from students.

*We recommend:*

- (i) *that the descriptions of subjects in the Handbooks contain information about assessment only in general terms. For example, the description should state if there is to be a final exam and if there is to be grading based on essays or assignments. Although weights may be stated, there should be no requirement that such detail be included. Detailed information about the forms of assessment and weights should be published in a form readily accessible to students of the subject, not later than two weeks after commencement of teaching in the subject, and*
- (ii) *that at some future date statute 5.4.13 be reworded to clarify any misunderstanding in meaning that has emerged.*

#### **4.4 Proposal under consideration within the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences**

The Working Group discussed proposals submitted to the Curriculum Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences concerning quantitative and qualitative feedback to students re assessment as outlined in a memo from the General Manager of the Faculty, Mr D.Mead.

The Working Group supports the thrust of the proposals, i.e. to provide students with more feedback about their assessment. Student assessment should not only be used to rank students, provide them with a grade and detect whether they have achieved the aims of the subject, but assessment where possible should also form part of the educational process. Providing formative and/or continuous assessment is very helpful in this regard. Thus this Working Group felt that feedback to students should be constructive, enabling them to improve their performance where possible.

A specific proposal for detailed quantitative feedback to be sent to students at the end of each semester was outlined in which marks on individual assignments or even sections on the final examination were to be sent to each student. The proposal was to provide summative assessment in a much more detailed form. In addressing this specific proposal, members of the Working Group believed that the detail required to be sent to individual students as suggested by the proposal was not necessarily constructive and could pose significant problems for the institution. Problems may arise from both administrative and procedural complications, e.g. the administrative load for each Faculty Office, whether in fact the Faculty Office is the appropriate body to send official results, etc.

It was considered that whilst the administrative and procedural problems were not directly part of the Working Group's brief, current practices in assessment feedback were part of the review and that we should comment on them.

In some cases distributions of grades are currently available allowing students to gauge performance relative to other members of the class. In the near future such distributions may be available electronically through student computer work stations.

*The Working Group recommends that Student Administration investigate the possibility of including class distributions on all result sheets that are posted on University notice boards and that these distributions preserve the rights of students to privacy.*

The Working Group felt that interviews between academic staff and students were still the best method of personal feedback to the student particularly on individual components of the assessment. This system works well and is available to all those students requiring further discussion of their assessment endeavours. The subject co-ordinator or lecturer is the most appropriate person to ascertain particular weaknesses and/or strengths in the student's performance and constructively advise them on how to improve their results if necessary or to congratulate them on those areas where they have done well. Such interviews are an integral component of feedback on assessment for students who want to improve their performance. Of course, this method requires significant time from academics. However, the case study of Chemistry 160 suggests that methods can be devised to provide detailed qualitative feedback even to students in subjects with high student/staff ratios.

The Working Group endorses the proposals to provide qualitative information about assessment tasks. In particular, the publication of model answers and examiners' comments about common errors or misconceptions is part of the process of informing students about the criteria by which their work will be assessed. As we noted in section 3.1 above, this is part of good assessment practice.

#### **4.5 Inconsistencies in Honours Grades**

This section will be completed at a later date.

### **5.0 THE ROLE OF THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

CSHE plays a valuable advisory role in the context of its mission to improve the teaching and learning in the University. The Centre is aware of the growing demand to improve assessment practices in regard to the overall quality of education, and aware of its proactive role in fostering good practice by initiating and supporting innovations in consultation with Faculties, Departments and individuals.

*The Working Group recommends that the Centre for the Study of Higher Education should continue to support innovative practices and to provide advice routinely, as requested;*

- *To the University, Faculties and Departments on assessment policies and procedures;*

- *To Faculties and Departments on the role of assessment in the curriculum, department assessment policy and the effectiveness or otherwise of particular assessment procedures;*
- *To individual academics on the particulars of assessment in relation to specific courses and subjects.*

## ENCOURAGING SELF ASSESSMENT: COMPUTER AIDED LEARNING

### **610-160 CHEMISTRY**

**Subject Coordinator: Dr Peter Tregloan**

Year Level: 1st Year

Class Size: 200

Degree: BSc

Of the 1400 enrolments each year, some 150-200 have a weak or non-existent background and these students have had a high risk of failure - many simply disappeared during the subject. Chemistry 160 was developed to address this problem.

Because of the large number of students and resource constraints it was not feasible to provide through traditional means the on-going program of personalised tuition and feedback that these students required. So the teaching team has developed a package of computer-aided learning, with assessment and feedback for students and faculty.

The development of the package was funded by Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching. It consists of 500 primary screens with more than 2500 assessed responses which closely support printed lecture summaries and laboratory notes.

Unlike many self-assessment packages, this ChemCal program provides detailed feedback to both students and faculty.

Each screen presents the student with a set of problems. If the students find the problem difficult, they are provided with feedback which assists with their learning. They can ask the package for a hint to help them; they can ask for a written explanation; and/or they can ask for a written solution. During seven formal sessions each week, a tutor is present in the computer lab to assist students who are having difficulties with any of the problems in the package.

The students interviewed spoke highly of the usefulness of the feedback that was provided by the system. In particular, at the end of each computer session, each student was provided with feedback as to the topics on which they need to work further.

Feedback about student progress is also provided to faculty. The package records show how many students attempted each week's module and how they coped with each question. If this shows that students are having difficulty with a particular segment, that can then be followed up in lectures.

## **ASSESSING GROUP WORK AND ORAL PRESENTATIONS**

### **327-613 CURRENT ISSUES IN ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR**

**Lecturer: Dr Mara Olekalns**

Year Level: 5th Year

Class Size: 18 students

Degree: M.Comm

#### **Assessment**

Assessment is based on:

- (a) Submission of a team Case Study, 2500 words, (30%).
- (b) Class presentations (20%). These will be based on the team developed case study (10%) and regular presentations of journal articles (10%).
- (c) A 2-hour final examination (50%). The exam contains four short-essay questions and an extended case study analysis.

Assessment in this subject is unusual in the Commerce Faculty for the high weights it accords to group work and oral presentations. These weights are not uncommon elsewhere in the University. Dr Olekalns states that the group case study was developed for two reasons:

- (i) it broadens students by encouraging the predominantly part-time students to look beyond their own organisations and to exchange ideas with students from other organisations; and
- (ii) it teaches students to work in teams.

Dr Olekalns explained that the two-examiner rule presented her with a problem. In order to comply with the rule, the faculty graduate studies committee required that any assessable class presentations must be summarised in written form so as to facilitate second marking, if that were necessary.

We asked Dr Olekalns about the problem of free riding in group assignments. She said that the problem has largely been overcome by allocating to each particular member a proportion of the team's grade in accordance with their contribution - as judged by their fellow team members.

## **CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS**

### **476-415 EDUCATION STUDIES D**

**Coordinators: Mr Roger Hewitt and Mr Richard Cartwright**

Year Level: 4th Year

Class Size: 300 students

Degree: BEd

This subject, taken by about 300 students each year, is concerned with the theoretical basis of teaching. Its design is centred very strongly on the idea that students must take responsibility for their own learning. The students are divided into Seminar Groups, each of about 26 students, and their work is partly under the supervision of the Seminar leader and partly under staff of the Faculty of Education as a whole, depending on the students' area of interest. There are three assessed components: a project contracted by the student on some education topic (4000 words, 55%); an elective essay (2000 words, 30%); and a negotiated topic (1000 words equivalent, 15% - a hurdle requirement, i.e. not graded). Each student must present one of the seminars in Semester 2.

Assessment of the project is as follows (a similar type of assessment is used for the elective). Formative assessment is provided by individual interviews with staff members, and the final summative assessment is based on a set of criteria. Students get marks from 0 to 4 (each level being described in an assessment matrix) on each of 10 criteria: the form of the project (completeness, presentation, expression, source citation) and its content (relevance, source selection and use, understanding, transformation, cohesion) totalling 40 marks. The relation between numbered mark and grade is carefully matched to the way it is assessed, as the assessment has such detailed definitions of performance on each of the criteria; for example, a first-class honour requires a mark of 38 out of 40.

The assessment of the subject is closely related to its stated objectives. The first three objectives are assessed collectively under the "content" criteria, while the fifth objective - development of critical judgment and reflective practice - is assessed strongly by the "transformation" criterion. The fourth objective, on assessment strategy, is assessed in other components of the course, in particular the seminars.

The whole assessment procedure in this subject has a strong dynamic character, and is itself assessed and reflected upon by the subject coordinators, and modified from year to year as indicated by what they have learned from their reflection. It is also very transparent to the students, who can see very accurately why they have received their stated marks - something which is, of course, particularly appropriate for people who will themselves have to assess school students as a crucial part of their future work.

## CHANGING ASSESSMENT METHODS TO MATCH NEW OBJECTIVES

### 516-011 ANATOMY FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS

**Lecturer in Charge: Dr Norman Eizenberg**

Year Level: 1st Year

Class Size: 200

Degree: MBBS

The course was redesigned some years ago with this objective: to take anatomy - traditionally a subject associated with rote learning and unimaginative regurgitation of minutiae - and change the assessment so that the emphasis lay on development of diagnostic practice and on grouping the information into conceptual areas. This was achieved by attention to how the assessment methods fitted with and served to effect the teaching objectives, using the assessment both to correct student errors and to refine academics' methods of teaching.

#### Details of Assessment Practices

When staff in the department were considering how best to redesign the course, they noted that the tasks required by assessment are the primary way in which students gain information about the way the subject is to be studied. In other words, if the assessment seems to invite students to learn in a superficial, regurgitative manner, no amount of exhortation on the part of the teacher about the importance of understanding concepts, rather than memorising lists, will induce them to do otherwise. Bearing this in mind, the first and second year anatomy course uses a number of teaching and assessment techniques which emphasise a holistic, concept-based method of learning. These include:

- Flag races: Students take 50 minutes to examine ten anatomical structures and answer a series of short questions about them. These are marked and immediately returned to the students as a means of providing feedback to both academics and students. One each semester - worth a total of 30%.
- Examinations: Examination questions (both written and oral) are structured so as to avoid closed questions (e.g. What is this?) and to encourage short discursive answers which demonstrate that a student has understood the meaning of the structure or function (e.g. explain how this may be endangered by such-and-such procedure). The end-of-year examination is worth 50%.
- There is also ongoing assessment of practical and dissection work. In addition, students in the course are provided with a handbook and syllabus which provide clear and detailed information about the content and the form of the course, the objectives and expected standard of the course, past exams with model answers, feedback from previous student questionnaires, and what has been done in response to them, and information about the philosophy underlying the course structure.

### Student Consultation

Four students were interviewed who had been in the first-year anatomy program in 1994: Catherine Francis, Simon Ling, Edward Giles and John Rophael. The students' assessment of the course was extremely positive. All felt that the methods adopted by the teaching staff were not only fair, but also motivating. By the time of the final exam, students in the course felt that they not only knew what they had to study, but also that they knew a fair amount. This was contrasted to other first-year subjects where students reached the end of the year and felt they did not know what to study. They also appreciated having results returned immediately or soon after an assessment.

Students were asked whether they thought the course could be improved, and they responded that sometimes the mark obtained in the practical assessments seemed to depend on who was giving the test - that there were some tutors who were not fully aware of the philosophy behind the course ; thus, one had to be lucky in who examined the work in this section. The students also commented that Medicine was always trying to find out what students thought of the course, and there was a perception that student input mattered to the teaching staff.

## ASSESSING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

### **511-502 INTEGRATED DENTAL PRACTICE**

**Coordinator: Associate Professor Martin Tyas**

Year Level: 5th Year

Class Size: 50 students

Degree: BSc

The particular focus of assessment for this case study is the continuous assessment of clinical work during the year in endodontics, fixed prosthodontics, and general practice/integrated dental practice, counting for 12% of the final mark for the subject.

The general aim is to assess the students' performances under three main headings:- performance of clinical procedures, time management and professional attitude and behaviour - under each of which there are several questions for the demonstrator to consider, the forms of the questions being related directly to the stated objectives of the subject. Moreover, the assessment is continuous and is done in such a way that each student gets immediate feedback on his or her progress and can understand the basis of the final mark received.

The basic instrument of assessment is a set of optical scan forms (OSF) issued to each student for completion by the demonstrator. A fifth-year student receives about 25 OSF's, each with space to record his or her work with four patients. The section of form for each patient-visit has mark-sense boxes for the type of dentistry involved and for the demonstrator's assessment of the student's work under the three headings above, the gradings being on a five-point scale: exemplary, high standard, adequate standard, some areas of concern, major areas of concern (explanatory comments are required if either of the two "areas of concern" boxes are marked).

At the end of the semester the student hands in his or her set of completed forms for optical scanning, the calculation of a mark (based on a 5/4/3/2/1 scale, with equal weights for the three main headings), and statistical analysis of the performances of the whole class.

This assessment system, which has been developed with the help of Mr Richard James of the CSHE, is still evolving. In 1994 there was a first trial of the system providing continuous feedback (previously there had just been an end-of-year mark), on a four-point scale but without automatic generation of a mark; the 1995 system has a five-point scale and yields a final mark in a simple and transparent way. In addition, the written comments on "areas of concern" provide a continuous and progressive indication to student and staff as to problems requiring further attention. The system should be of considerable interest to other departments whose subjects involve assessment of clinical work.

## ALIGNMENT OF ASSESSMENT WITH SUBJECT OBJECTIVES

### 531-031 PATHOLOGY 1

**Lecturer: Dr Janet Gross**

Year Level: 3rd year

Class size: 230 students; tutorials of 12 students

Degree: MBBS

Weekly contact: 4 lectures, 1 two-hour tutorial/practical class; all year (BSc - one semester).

Assessment Outline:

- midyear written examination 30%
- end of year written examination 35%
- end of year practical exam 35%
  - oral exam for those below 56% aggregate
  - honours oral exam offered to those above 78% aggregate.

The teaching and assessment of the subject are designed not only to increase students' factual medical knowledge but also to provide them with a broad practical foundation for future clinical work. For the majority of students, this subject provides their first contact with 'live' patients, and with the consequent demands of integrating factual and personal histories to arrive at a diagnosis. In particular, the subject seeks to build students' skills in listening and in scientific observation, as well as to teach them relevant information about pathology - the nature and causes of disease.

Subject objectives and outline are provided to the students in a detailed 45 page handout. The midyear examination tests material covered in lectures and tutorials, is designed to test not only students' knowledge, but also to emphasise the importance of learning to integrate this knowledge with what they can identify about the particular patient. Following the midyear exam, a comprehensive feedback program permits students with poor performance to identify and address their weaknesses. The end of year written exam takes the form of longer questions designed to further test students' understanding of the impact of disease on the patient as an individual. The practical examination tests skills practised in the tutorial/practical classes and focuses on scientific observation and diagnosis. The oral exams provide an opportunity to more closely monitor the struggling students and to identify and encourage the excellent students.

This subject illustrates good assessment practice in that:

- subject objectives and assessment requirements are clearly communicated to students
- varied forms of assessment tasks reflect the different types of knowledge and skills that are important in the subject
- feedback is available to students during the course of the subject to enable weaknesses to be identified, and then is followed up on a personal basis.

**USING ASSESSMENT TO ASSIST FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN THEIR TRANSITION TO TERTIARY STUDY**

**111-105 INTRODUCTION TO CINEMA STUDIES A**

**Subject Coordinator: Ms Angela Ndalianis**

Year Level: 1st year

Class Size: approx 180 students

Degree:

Weekly contact: 1 lecture, 1 tutorial, 1 two-hour screening;

First semester assessment outline:

- |   |                                    |     |
|---|------------------------------------|-----|
| • | exercise (March) on narrative form | 20% |
| • | visual test (May) on film style    | 20% |
| • | annotated bibliography (May)       | 10% |
| • | essay (end of semester)            | 50% |

The object of the first-year level subject is to provide students with a rigorous foundation of theory on which to develop their understanding of key concepts in cinema studies. The current structure of teaching and assessment in this subject has grown from previous work identifying students' difficulty in understanding the demands of tertiary study in this discipline (as reported in "The First Year Experience", CSHE 1995). The revised practices were introduced in 1994 and further refined in 1995. Objectives and subject outline are provided to students in a detailed 16 page handout, with other written support materials also provided. The changes in teaching structure involve more focus and more 'signposts'. Additional work has been put in by staff to ensure that tutorials are a participative learning experience for more students. More varied classroom and study activities are encouraged and these more clearly relate to the skills that students are expected to acquire and are tested in assessment.

The individual assessment components on narrational strategies, film style, and preparation of an annotated bibliography involve students in the development and practice of skills which are essential for their final essay component. Other, non-assessed, classroom activities are organised to also assist students understanding of the key components of this discipline at the rigorous tertiary level.

Staff in the subject have observed that students are now much better prepared in second year than before, when there were two components of written assessment in the semester and there was no feedback during the semester. The improvements involve students' stronger research and library skills, and greatly increased ability to deal with more complex concepts in the subject area.

This subject illustrates good assessment practice in that:

- subject objectives and assessment requirements are clearly communicated to students
- varied forms of assessment tasks reflect the staged development of different skills that are important in the subject
- the assessment components during the semester build skills which are needed for the final essay/exam.

**ASSESSMENT FOCUSED ON THE SUBJECT OBJECTIVES OF  
CLINICAL PROFICIENCY**

**513-301 MUSCULOSKELETAL PHYSIOTHERAPY 1**

**Subject Coordinator: Mr H Wajswelner**

Year Level: 3rd Year

Class Size: 80 students

Degree: Bachelor of Physiotherapy

This subject forms about 25% of the third-year load for the 80 physiotherapy students in the School of Physiotherapy. It is a clinical subject in which students spend 6 weeks in a clinical environment on their rotation and the rest of the time back in the School of Physiotherapy attending theory classes. The assessment takes two directions. One is to examine the theoretical material taught to the students throughout the year, and the second is to examine the students competency in clinical skills. Both of these assessment directions relate well to the stated objectives of the subject. To assess the theoretical component the students present a case study (10%) to the examiners and sit a written three-hour examination (40%). To assess the clinical competency the students undergo continuous assessment (30%) in the clinics with weekly feedback on their progress. This is well structured and designed to bring all students up to a level of competency by the end of the rotation. The second part of the assessment is a one off clinical presentation (20%).

Mr H Wajswelner explained the assessment aspects of the subject and a group of third-year students (Kathryn Nitschke, Michelle Hughes, Ed Leahy, Daniel Karp, Tin Choo, Preme Lucas) who had undergone the clinical aspects of the subject but were yet to sit the written examination (to be held at the end of the year) discussed the assessment. One student (repeating) has sat the written examination at the end of 1994.

As this was a relatively new program and the clinical placements had just been increased (Physiotherapy intake had increased from 40 to 80 students), there was still a small amount of finalising of assessment details and this would take several years to fine-tune. To standardise the clinical assessments meant strict guidelines and the clinical assessment team met once a month to discuss progress.

The students were very positive about the program and felt that the different forms of assessment were very complementary and fair. Minor differences between clinicians in the various placements in their dedication to the students (many were in very busy departments) and the amount of detail and feedback given to the students, were felt by the students to be very small problems that could be ironed out with more standardised handouts and clearer student instructions. The students rated highly the feedback that they received in the clinical setting, as this not only helped with their clinical skills but also called on some of the theory.

In this subject the students are helped to achieve their objectives by the formats of the assessments and are able to assess their progress because of the feedback.

## **ASSESSING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND GROUP WORK**

### **CURRICULUM STUDIES 1B**

#### **Subject Coordinator: Mr K Fell**

Year Level: 1st Year

Class Size: approximately 150 students

Degree: Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies

The subject Curriculum Studies 1B prepares students of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies (approx 150 in 1995) for their first professional practice placement.

Part A of the subject is a Curriculum Project (30%) and Part B (70%) is the professional practice or practicum. This summary deals with Part A. (In the long-term, Mr Fell reported that the aim was to integrate Part A and Part B).

Mr Kevin Fell outlined the assessment for this subject. (No students were available as the subject will not finish until December). This is the first time this subject has been run with these assessment methods. Initially in the Curriculum project, students work together in groups of 4 to 6 to design a plan of action, each student submitting a 1000 word document. This document (approximately worth 40% Part A) is assessed by staff and returned to students with feedback before their practicum placement. Following the practicum placement each student submits a 1500 word report evaluating their experiences in curriculum and teaching in light of their initial plan of action. This is an individual report and accounts for 60% of the final assessment for Part A.

During the subject, students have ready access to staff to discuss their progress. When taking both staff and associates into account, there is a student-to-staff (associates) ratio of about 8:1, allowing plenty of interaction, direction, guidance, support and feedback from staff.

In this subject assessment is clearly directed at the objectives of the course. Students are required to plan, implement and evaluate a professional activity. An integral part of the assessment process is for staff to provide feedback to students early-on in the subject (as well as maintaining close interaction throughout the subject). Other innovations in the assessment are that part of the assessment follows a group task, ensuring that all students are exposed to a situation where they have to partake in a group situation, share ideas and help one another as a team to earn that assessment. The final assessment task is an individual student assessment and relies on the students reflecting on their overall experience in the subject.

## **A FORMATIVE APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT**

### **491-317 DRAMA C2: STUDIES IN PERFORMANCE PROCESS 2**

**Lecturer: Ms Denise Varney**

Year Level: 3rd Year

Class Size: 35 students

Degree: BEd

This subject deals with the theory, practice and process of mounting and participating in a theatrical performance.

The objectives emphasise the students' participation in the process, their theoretical preparation for it and the need for reflection on all aspects of the process. To this end the assessment is in three parts:

The first features participation in the total project. This includes both acting and non-acting tasks and involves the keeping of notes which describe and reflect upon the performance building process. It also allows students to consider the theoretical questions which are being addressed through the performance process.

The second, a casebook, allows for the documentation of the performance preparation process. It is loosely related to the first, in that the notes from it are submitted with the casebook. The casebook is a dramaturgical exercise through which students learn to apply information about dramaturgy to their own work.

The third is a critical essay on the performance. This essay gives students the opportunity to reflect on their work in total and to consider theoretical issues which arose during the process.

It is impressed upon students that while each component of assessment can be related to a single objective, the tasks they are asked to complete have been designed to encourage them to reflect upon their involvement in the whole process.

## **ASSESSING ORAL COMMUNICATION**

### **585-031 COMMUNICATION SKILLS COMPONENT OF COMMUNITY MEDICINE 1**

**Lecturer: Associate Professor Doris Young**

Year Level: 3rd Year

Class Size: 200 students

Degree: MBBS

This component is but one of several in a large subject taught over two semesters. The objectives of this component stress the acquisition of:

- effective talking and listening skills
- effective recording skills
- ability to assess strengths and weaknesses in communication styles
- ability to provide constructive feedback
- the acquisition of strategies to cope with a range of communication issues relevant to medical practice.

To accomplish these objectives, students work in pairs to produce a video-taped interview using role play. The students role play both the interviewer and the interviewee in their tapes. The tapes are presented to tutors, with students making self-evaluative comments about the performance and content revealed in the seven to ten minute-long interviews. It is emphasised that the students control this debriefing session with their tutors.

The interesting match of theory and practice which derives from this exercise has been awarded an innovative teaching grant.

#### 4. LATE CHANGES IN DETAILS OF SUBJECTS

Late changes to details of subjects in the University *Handbook* are made only in **exceptional** circumstances. They should be strongly discouraged as students rely on the information provided in the *Handbook* to plan their courses. Statute 5.5.15(2) reads as follows:-

"The details of subjects shall not be altered or added to without the consent of the Council after they have been approved for publication by the Board."

In the light of this the Academic Board has adopted the following special procedures in relation to changes proposed by faculties after the date on which the Board has approved the details of subjects for publication:

- (a) The Academic Board would need to be persuaded of the desirability and urgency of the change. The Board would normally require **written agreement by all students** where a change is proposed for a year in respect of which enrolments have already taken place.
- (b) With respect to changes which it is necessary to make by force of circumstances, for example because of the resignation or illness of a staff member, because of general budget cuts, or any emergency arising from circumstances where the published material does not reflect the reality of the policy decision previously taken, **the Academic Board will consider a proposal for suspension of a subject or part of a subject or some other change without requiring the assent of the students;** if the proposal is supported and approved by the Board and approved by Council, it would be the responsibility of the department concerned to ensure that, as far as possible, all students enrolled for the subject are notified.

If a faculty decides that exceptional circumstances requiring a late change exist, details of the proposed change, together with a description of the exceptional circumstances, should be sent to the Secretary of the Academic Committee, who then forwards the proposal to the Chairperson of the Committee, for consideration on behalf of the Committee as a matter of urgency. If the Chairperson endorses the proposal, it is then sent to the President of the Academic Board. If Academic Board approval for the change is granted, the proposal is then sent to the Council.