

Facilitating reflection on assessment policies and practices: A planning framework for educative review of assessment

Kerri-Lee Harris, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Australia, k.harris@unimelb.edu.au

Richard James, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Australia, r.james@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

This paper draws on a project at the University of Melbourne to support academic staff in reviewing and developing effective assessment policies and practices. It is concerned with the role and location of assessment within the higher education curriculum, the practical issues associated with planning pedagogically effective assessment, and the means through which academic disciplinary knowledge can be incorporated alongside generic principles of good assessment practice. We argue in this paper that consideration of approaches to assessment is central to enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, yet the planning of assessment and creating change in assessment traditions raises complex issues and challenges. The paper discusses the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*, a framework for 'bottom-up' review of assessment that is designed to stimulate and support collegial reflection on assessment practices around key aspects of good practice.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education.

© Copyright of articles is retained by authors. As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.
ISSN 1832-2050

Introduction

Our interest in this paper is with the practical issues associated with reviewing and creating change in assessment practices in higher education. The paper traces the development of the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*, which derived from our objective to create a non-prescriptive, yet research-based tool to guide and support academic reflection on assessment practices. The *Guide* is an attempt to achieve harmony between the growing need for institutional control and regulation of assessment practices and the necessary diversity and variation that flows from the, often tacit, educative beliefs, experiences and goals of individual academics. The *Guide* therefore aims to encourage academics to reflect on the rationale for their current approaches to assessment, to review these against some broad reference points, and to articulate, where appropriate, policy positions – in effect, to make the tacit more explicit.

In Australian universities, and elsewhere, there is renewed interest in the effectiveness and robustness of student assessment practices. This is in part a response to the sustained emphasis in recent years on improving teaching and learning in higher education. The scrutiny of approaches to the assessment of student learning at departmental, school and faculty level is taking place alongside broader reflection on teaching and learning practices. Notably, the newly formed Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education has the 'improvement of assessment practices throughout the sector' as one of its stated priorities (Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2006). Commencing in 2005, the Carrick Institute commissioned a series of national development projects focused squarely on improving assessment methods in specific fields of study.

These trends are welcome. In particular, consideration of assessment practices should be integral to efforts to enhance teaching and learning. However, assessment is one of the more problematic issues for universities, largely because assessment must serve a number of purposes which include: grading and ranking for external stakeholders; providing students with feedback on their progress; guiding students towards what they should study; and, not least, providing feedback to staff on the effectiveness of learning and teaching programs. When academics design assessment they face the perennial issues of balancing formative versus summative intent, ensuring the learning objectives are adequately covered, ensuring workloads for both students and staff are appropriate, and limiting the opportunities for cheating and plagiarism. Often this must be done within an institutional policy framework that establishes parameters for the timing and weighting of assessment tasks and the ways in which reporting and grading are to be carried out.

We begin with these points simply to illustrate that the design of good assessment is rarely simple and that the transformation of assessment, should it be needed, is a significant 'change management' issue for universities. The challenge is to develop and implement processes that encourage institution-wide engagement with the complex issues surrounding the design of assessment and that provide a framework for decision-making based on sound educative principles. There is a risk, however, that 'top-down' approaches to the review of assessment will elicit compliance rather than reflection and may generate a focus on facile reporting rather than improvement.

Our objective at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) has been to devise a process for engaging academics in reflection on assessment practices within their local 'communities of practice'. As a result, we have developed an approach to facilitating review of assessment that primarily supports academic staff involved in subject or course¹ coordination (Harris, 2005). The planning framework developed is designed to assist staff in departments and faculties to reflect on, evaluate and report on assessment practices and to develop educative assessment policies. The framework acknowledges the need that time-pressed academics have for efficient and effective tools, and centres around a distillation of the core principles of effective assessment into a series of questions for discussion.

¹ In the text of this paper, the terminology used to describe 'subjects' and 'courses' is consistent with that used at the University of Melbourne and, therefore, in the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*. There is, however, a diversity of terms used across the sector. Specifically, 'subject' is used here to describe a discrete sub-component of a broader program of study (e.g., English Literature 101). In some other institutions this is synonymous with 'unit' or 'course'. In this paper, 'course' is used to refer to a program of study (e.g., Bachelor of Science; Diploma of Education).

The paper describes the rationale behind the review framework, the framework itself and the strategy for change that it is designed to support.

Enhancing assessment practices in higher education: The political pressures and educational imperatives

Assessment in higher education is often the point at which politics, institutional priorities and pragmatism, meet academic values and core disciplinary beliefs. While assessment, grading and standards are therefore perennial issues in universities (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002), particular aspects of the Australian context are prompting universities to re-examine their assessment practices. First, and most notably, there are the political drivers. The Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has recently introduced a national, performance-based incentive fund intended to financially reward those institutions that demonstrate outstanding learning and teaching (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). The Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) will allocate A\$250 million over three years commencing 2006. Allocation is based on a set of performance indicators, the recommendations of an Expert Panel and advice from DEST (reviewed in Harris & James, 2006). This new Fund, with its direct monetary rewards and significant implications for institutional status, has focused institutional attention on strategies for enhancing learning and teaching, in particular, around the set of performance indicators.

The quantitative indicators on which the LTPF is based relate to student satisfaction and outcomes. The data are derived from the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Ramsden, 1991) and the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004), both of which are administered to graduates in the year following their graduation, as well as institutional data on student retention and progression rates. There are many questions around the likely effects of the LTPF on learning and teaching, but interest in this paper is solely with the way in which assessment practices are factored into the performance indicators. In 2006, the Fund's inaugural year, 55 per cent of each university's overall measure of performance was based on CEQ data. The LTPF uses three scales from the CEQ: "Good Teaching", "Generic Skills", and "Overall Satisfaction". Though, at the time of writing, the Fund does not use the CEQ's "Appropriate Assessment" scale, two of the six items that comprise the "Good Teaching" scale are directly related to assessment: "The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work" and "The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going". These survey items will almost certainly focus institutional energies on the ways in which feedback to students can be improved.

Second, there is the continuing priority to teach and assess the so-called generic or transferable skills. The LTPF focuses on these too, with the CEQ's "Generic Skills" scale being used as the performance indicator. The "Generic Skills" scale is derived from student self-reports on six items, such as "The course developed my problem-solving skills" and "The course improved my skills in written communication". Little is known about how students make self-judgments on their skill development of this kind and whether or not their judgments are reliable. Given that generic skills are often or usually taught and learned incidentally within the context of discipline-based learning, students may not receive direct feedback on their acquisition of such skills. Nevertheless, it can be expected that student

perceptions of their generic skills development are likely to be influenced in part by the grades and feedback that they have received during assessment. Yorke (2005), in arguing for greater emphasis on formative assessment of generic skills, describes the link between feedback, generic skills and students' preparation of robust portfolios:

Formative assessment can provide a vehicle through which students can develop their capacity [to] make claims to their employability, supporting these with an appropriate distillation of the qualitative and quantitative (i.e., grade-based) evidence that they have collated during their time in higher education. This may provide a richer depiction of graduates' qualities and achievements than numerical grading systems (even if subdivided into a transcript of performances on curricular components). (Yorke, 2005, pp. 234–235)

Third, there is the broad issue of academic standards and how these can be safeguarded (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002). As argued elsewhere (James, 2003), assessment methods and approaches to grading within *disciplines and fields of study* will be the lynchpins of standards in tertiary education environments of flexibility in entry pathways and study modes. In other words, there is a case for a primarily student outcomes-based approach to defining and monitoring academic standards, one grounded in the assessment and reporting of student learning:

Traditionally, universities have given attention to input factors as a means for defining and protecting standards. These include factors such as entry stringency (student preparedness or capability), academic staff qualifications, course duration, and course content. But the use of input factors as a measure or safeguard for standards is strongly challenged by contemporary trends in access, modes of delivery and modes of student participation...[In the] circumstances, in which university entry pathways and the modes of student participation and engagement with learning resources diversify, student learning outcomes might come to provide the ultimate test and safeguard for standards. Standards will be embodied in assessment practices and will be essentially outcomes-oriented; that is, standards will be more closely associated with the nature and levels of learning that students demonstrate during their university studies (James, 2003, pp. 193–194).

Fourth, and finally, much of the interest in assessment derives simply from awareness of the pedagogical influence of assessment practices. Assessment sends unambiguous messages to students about the type of learning most valued and therefore strongly influences the approaches students take toward their studies. Assessment drives learning – 'what is assessed gets done' is largely true. It follows that assessment practices are in themselves teaching tools for they spell out the 'real' curriculum rather than the espoused curriculum presented in the ubiquitous lists of learning aims and objectives.

The complexity of creating institutional and local policies to guide assessment practices

In the context of these pressures and priorities, universities are particularly interested in devising processes for reviewing and developing assessment policies

and encouraging good practice. However, ‘top-down’ assessment policies are likely to have little impact if they do not represent the beliefs and values of the academics who implement them. This realisation, combined with other factors, makes this a complex area for university management and policy development. In this section we argue that the essence of effective assessment lies in determining the appropriate mix of assessment types, and that this mix will necessarily be different among disciplines and local contexts, requiring extensive local dialogue and reflection within academic communities.

While attempts to develop overarching institutional policies to ‘prescribe’ assessment practices may be frustrated by a number of factors, not least is the fact that assessment serves multiple purposes in higher education. On the one hand, assessment must validly and reliably measure individual student achievement for grading and certifying ‘fitness to practice’ or ‘fitness to graduate’ – clearly universities have a community obligation to measure and report on student achievement appropriately. Alongside this primarily judgemental or ‘summative’ role of assessment, all educators are, or should be, well aware of the potent influence of assessment methods and requirements upon students’ approaches to learning.

The realisation of the educative role of assessment presents perhaps the largest pedagogical challenge for university educators. If it is accepted that good assessment must both *guide* and *measure* student learning, and provide valuable feedback to academics too, then the design of assessment techniques, their timing and ways in which feedback is given to students will require much judgement. From our experience, the majority of issues for university academics reside in determining the mix of assessment techniques, the timing and the weighting rather than in the implementation of individual assessment exercises. In addition, disciplinary diversity and local contextual knowledge are critical considerations in the design of effective assessment.

In determining the ‘assessment mix’ there are incommensurable priorities to be confronted and the inevitable trade-offs to be made – departmental and faculty-wide discussions of teaching and learning often revolve around ‘perennial’ assessment questions to which there are rarely clear answers. We suspect that while the influence of assessment on learning is well documented in the literature and intuitively recognised by academic staff, the creation of educationally effective assessment practices is often constrained by the higher imperative to grade and rank – that is, the trade-offs are more often in the guiding role of assessment. During the 2002 *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities* project undertaken by the CSHE for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) we concluded that:

There is a strong emphasis on final examination and the culture of ‘testing’ is strong. Inevitably, the balance is firmly on the summative rather than formative role of assessment. This tendency runs counter to most pedagogical thinking and is arguably the result of an over-emphasis on the sorting and certification role of assessment in higher education (James, 2003, p. 197).

In this context, there is a tendency for university management to attempt to regulate assessment practices in institutional policies. This is understandable, for the certification of learners is ‘core business’ – universities are vitally interested in the fairness, transparency and reproducibility of assessment. Overarching institutional assessment policies are often preoccupied with the necessary minutiae of assessment, such as the procedures for re-submission, the relationships between

percentages and grades and so on. Yet this desire for institutional order and consistency sits uncomfortably alongside academic autonomy and the diversity of disciplines, including the distinctive approaches to teaching and the student learning that is valued.

Ultimately, we suspect the expectations of university management for detailed assessment policies will be outrun by the realities of the diversity of pedagogical practices. It seems inevitable, then, that there will be gaps and inconsistencies between institutional assessment policies and faculty/departmental practices. Our view is that while there is little point in excessive central regulation of assessment practices, a greater alignment between institutional policy for best practice and faculty/departmental activities might be beneficial. The question therefore is how to support and encourage academic staff to develop assessment policies and practices that reflect pedagogical good practice while also meeting the institutional imperative for order and consistency. This thinking led to the idea for the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment* (Harris, 2005), which we describe in the next section.

The *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*: 'Filling in the blanks' with disciplinary knowledge

Given the complexity of designing assessment and the many considerations involved, an objective at the CSHE has been to establish a reflective tool that would be non-prescriptive yet based on a set of principles for good practice. The result is the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*, which is based on the assumption that many of the day-to-day questions surrounding assessment have no single 'correct' answers.

The principles for effective assessment described in *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities* (James, et al., 2002) were offered as a checklist for good practice in university assessment. Despite the widespread recognition of this resource among educators, feedback suggests that more is needed to link these principles to assessment practice. The *Guide for Reviewing Assessment* aims to meet this need by providing subject and course coordinators with a tool for reviewing their current assessment strategies. It is a question-based checklist of the fundamental aspects of effective assessment that can be used to evaluate current assessment practice and to test the merits of alternative approaches. It is primarily a tool for practical application, not a reference document; hence it provides a framework rather than a prescription. We are strongly of the view that educators within particular disciplines and learning/teaching contexts are best placed to make decisions regarding appropriate assessment strategies. The *Guide* is designed to support them in this endeavour.

The *Guide* is structured around seven themes, with each theme title elaborated in the form of a question. Taken together, these themes emphasise the central role of assessment in directing student learning, acknowledge the multiple purposes of assessment and the critical role of feedback, and stress the need for clarity in communicating criteria and standards:

Matching assessment, learning exercises and objectives

In what ways is it ensured that assessment is matched to subject and course objectives, including generic skills?

In keeping with the practical purpose of the *Guide*, the layout is that of a workbook with boxes to encourage users to record their current practice and to consider what changes or actions might be appropriate. In this way the *Guide* is intended to be useful for planning meetings and discussions, and will ‘automatically’ produce a series of actions.

While primarily designed for subject coordinators, the *Guide* can support assessment review at a number of levels from course coordination and planning to departmental reporting and the development of assessment policies (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The intended users and purposes of the ‘Guide for Reviewing Assessment’ (excerpt p. 5)

Who might use the Guide?	For what purpose?	How?
Subject coordinators	1. Subject review, planning and development	By addressing each of the questions at the level of a specific subject
Course coordinators Major or stream coordinators Associate Deans	2. Course / program review, planning and development	↓ Using responses collected from subject coordinators (step 1) to review and coordinate assessment practices across a course.
Teaching review committees Heads of departments Associate Deans Deans	3. Accountability and reporting	↓ Using the consolidated information (collected & collated in steps 1-2) as the basis for reporting.
Heads of departments Associate Deans Deans	4. Formulating assessment policies	↓ Using the reports (step 3) to identify assessment issues and approaches requiring policy support. Such policy statements might form part of either departmental or faculty-level assessment policy statements.

The generic principles of good practice that provide the evaluation framework

The seven themes presented in the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment* are based primarily upon the findings of the *Assessing Learning* project (James et al., 2002), institutional assessment reviews, our individual experiences and discussions with colleagues. An explanation of each theme and the reasoning behind its inclusion in the *Guide* is given below.

1. Matching assessment, learning exercises and objectives

Clear alignment of intended learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment tasks is essential. As we noted earlier, for many if not most students, assessment defines the curriculum. Assessment signals to students the learning that is most valued and thereby directs their attention and efforts (Gibbs, 1999). While much effort on the part of subject coordinators goes into preparing subject content and

designing learning tasks, the more important driver of student learning, assessment, typically receives far less attention.

Assessment of generic skills presents a particular challenge for course coordinators. Generic skills and graduate attributes are most commonly ascribed to programs of study, rather than to individual subjects. Therefore, the development and assessment of these skills require course-wide coordination and monitoring. The task for coordinators becomes one of mapping learning objectives, learning exercises and assessment tasks across a program of study.

Overall, the extent to which universities are able to assess generic skills reliably is far from clear. Certainly there are complex measurement issues involved, given that these skills are highly abstract and their demonstration is always highly contextual (despite the connotations of 'generic'). The assessment of generic skills is likely to require regular 'open-ended' opportunities for the skills to be demonstrated, multiple contexts and perhaps even multiple assessors given the degree of subjectivity involved. In a mass higher education environment it is difficult to create these opportunities. As noted during the review of assessment conducted by the CSHE for the AUTC, "The assessment of generic skills is uneven and far from fully integrated into assessment regimes. Often students do not perceive assessment tasks to be 'real', assessment is not seen to assess workplace skills" (James, 2003, p. 197).

The strong interest in generic skills of both the academic community and employers will continue to focus the higher education sector on the ways in which these skills are assessed and reported. The desire to understand the comparability of university graduates, especially in the higher-order intellectual skills, is one factor behind the Australian Council for Education Research's (2001) development of the Graduate Skill Assessment test. With the availability of such tools, there is the growing likelihood of calls for standardised national testing of graduates.

2. Variety and complexity in assessment

Effective assessment strategies involve a variety of assessment methods, while avoiding unnecessary burden on either students or teaching staff. Variety is necessary in order to meet the different purposes of assessment, to overcome the limitations inherent in any single assessment method, and to accommodate the diversity of students' learning styles and skills.

Different assessment methods vary in their capacity to meet the different purposes of assessment. Well-designed multiple choice questions, for example, can form a highly reliable measurement instrument for some types of knowledge. However, their usefulness in providing students with meaningful feedback and in encouraging critical, reflective approaches to study is questionable. Preparation of oral presentations, on the other hand, can promote students' engagement with the relevant literature and ideas, creativity and the development of communication skills – but assessment of these presentations is highly subjective and is therefore a less sound basis for ranking students.

All methods of assessment have their limitations. Therefore, combining assessment methods is an effective strategy for achieving a specified assessment aim. In situations where reliable measurement of student learning is an imperative, for example, a combinatorial approach is likely to prove more reliable than is any single assessment method.

Assessment strategies need to accommodate student diversity, and variety in assessment methods can contribute. It is the responsibility of educators to create conditions in which all students are able to demonstrate best their understandings and skills. Students differ in their styles of both learning and demonstrating knowledge and skills. Inclusive assessment strategies recognise this diversity.

The assessment tasks that students encounter over the duration of their study should also increase in complexity. While this principle may be applied to single subjects, or single-year courses, it is particularly relevant to undergraduate courses that span several years. In many courses, later year subjects are more specific and detailed in their content coverage than the foundation studies of early years. Yet it does not automatically follow that the requirements on students will become more complex – they may simply become narrower in focus. A deliberate shift in emphasis from demonstrating knowledge and understanding in early years to more analytical challenges, and the need to synthesise ideas and to evaluate information in the final years, should be considered in curriculum design.

3. The timing of assessment

A traditional approach to university assessment involved a single, summative assessment task – the ‘final exam’. However, more typically contemporary curricula include additional, in-semester assessment that is often formative in nature, intended to provide students with feedback on their progress and to guide their learning.

Clearly excessive assessment should be avoided. The fact that in-semester assessment is often called ‘continuous assessment’ is problematic, suggesting as it does that the assessment tasks are many and evenly distributed across the teaching period. In some courses this is precisely the approach taken, yet such an approach can lead to a counterproductive overloading of both students and teaching staff.

The timing of in-semester assessment tasks, irrespective of how many such tasks are included in a particular subject, should take into account the overall workload pattern of the course. The potential for students to benefit from formative tasks, or to demonstrate their learning in summative tasks, will be diminished if students are overwhelmed by a multitude of concurrent demands. In addition, formative assessment should be provided sufficiently early in the teaching period for students to benefit, and perceive benefit, from the feedback.

4. Informing students

Assessment will be most effective if students understand its purpose, what they are required to do and the standards that are expected. It is common for university assessment policies to prescribe a minimum level of information that must be provided to students. However, this is often little more than a list of the mandatory assessment tasks in a subject, the relative weighting of the tasks, submission dates and examination procedures. Good practice in assessment requires more explanation than this. It involves informing students of the logic behind the choice of assessment tasks and helping them develop an understanding of the criteria for assessment and standards for grading.

5. Equity and fairness

Focus upon equity and fairness in assessment design and implementation has become increasingly important with the move to mass higher education. Student cohorts are larger and more diverse than ever before. Larger student cohorts mean that, increasingly, subjects are taught by teams and additional staff may be enlisted specifically to assist with assessment and grading. To ensure fairness in assessment where multiple assessors are involved, measures must be taken to maximise consistency and coordination. Assessment tasks should be presented in language that is inclusive of all students, and good practice addresses the identified special needs of individual students.

6. Feedback to students

While the importance of feedback to student learning is well-recognised, it remains one aspect of university teaching with which students are often less impressed. This raises questions of what can be done, within the obvious constraints on staff time.

It has been shown that the timing of feedback is critical if students are to both value it and benefit from it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004–2005). A compromise must be reached between providing comprehensive, detailed and individual feedback, and providing feedback as soon as possible after a task's completion. Students learn more from 'minimalist' feedback that is timely than they do from more considered and tailored feedback that they receive 'too late'.

Qualitative feedback is not typically provided for end-of-semester assessment. This can be justified in that the principal purpose of the final examination is summative rather than formative. However, it is helpful to provide students with opportunities during semester to practise tasks similar to those assessed in the final examination and to provide feedback on their efforts.

7. Feedback to staff

The results of student assessment provide valuable information for those teaching. Completed assignments, examinations and projects provide insights into student conceptions and misconceptions. However, in order for this information to be made accessible and useful, two actions must be taken – first the results must be analysed and interpreted, and then the information must be made available to all those involved in teaching the relevant parts of the subject or course. There is a wealth of feedback for educators that often remains buried in completed student assessment materials, or is not widely shared among teaching teams.

Use of the *Guide* and its influence upon assessment policy

While the influence of the *Guide* upon assessment practice and policy has yet to be formally evaluated, preliminary observations are informative. The document has been widely accepted across the University of Melbourne by both new and experienced members of staff and has generated constructive discussion of assessment practice. It appears that the trigger questions are affirmative in that they provide an opportunity for users to describe what they currently do within an acknowledged framework of good practice. In addition, the combination of trigger

questions and illustrative examples are provocative and lead to consideration of new and different approaches.

The *Guide* was released to the University of Melbourne community with commendation from the Academic Board. Importantly, however, its use was encouraged not mandated. This may have contributed to its widespread acceptance by individual academics – it was received positively and deemed to be of practical use, not burdened by regulation or compliance demands.

Yet the *Guide* is influencing institutional policies around assessment and curriculum review. Some faculties have used the principles illustrated in the *Guide* in their review of assessment policies and guidelines, explicitly advocating the use of the *Guide* by coordinators engaged in subject review. Some University departments have taken a further step, requiring all subject coordinators to undertake a review of assessment and to complete the *Guide* in consultation with colleagues involved in team-teaching those subjects. It may be that, in time, the *Guide* will become a standard instrument for collecting, collating and sharing information regarding assessment practice.

While the *Guide* was primarily developed for the University of Melbourne, it has attracted the attention of other institutions in Australia and elsewhere. It has generated interest among teaching and learning units, assessment policy review committees and individual, discipline-based academics.

Conclusion

The development and review of assessment policy is a contemporary challenge for many faculties and institutions, in part triggered by external auditing processes and the need for policy to demonstrate commitment to excellence in teaching and learning. While most institutions have assessment policies, these typically describe administrative and procedural matters such as ‘special consideration’, composition and role of the examination board, and security of examinations. Issues of pedagogy are rarely addressed. The *Guide for Reviewing Assessment* described in this paper may be used by institutions to identify pedagogical issues which, in their local context, require policy support.

During the CSHE’s national study for the AUTC of issues in the assessment of student learning we concluded there was considerable scope to ‘professionalise’ assessment practices (James et al., 2002). There are many resources available to academic staff that outline good practice and provide examples (for example, Diamond 1998; Nightingale et al., 1996), but these resources do not always encourage collective reflection and influence practices. An inhibitor to wide-reaching change in assessment is the tendency for universities to be conservative about change in assessment traditions. There is some virtue in conservatism for continuity in assessment and grading from year-to-year generates trust in standards. In many ways it is this conservatism that is often reflected in assessment policies, where the emphasis is on regulating assessment and grading practices in the interests of fairness and transparency. These objectives are appropriate and necessary, but there remains the challenge of developing assessment policies that support and inform the educative role of assessment in shaping effective approaches to learning.

This paper is a small case study of our attempt to locate development of curriculum policy, in this case assessment policy, squarely in the hands of local communities of practice. The *Guide* is designed to support individual and collective reflection on educational issues using as a starting point some accepted principles of good practice.

The authors

Dr Kerri-Lee Harris and Professor Richard James are higher education researchers in the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Dr Harris developed the *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*. In 2002, Professor James led a national project for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) to examine assessment issues, practices and strategies for enhancement in Australian higher education.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2004, September). *Directory of Education and Statistics Graduate Destination Survey*. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from <http://www.abs.gov.au/Websitedbs/d3110120.nsf/0/75e153a41ed8c97bca256988001f8db1?OpenDocument>
- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2001). *Graduate skills assessment: Summary report*. Occasional Paper Series 01/E. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from http://www.acer.edu.au/tests/university/gsa/documents/grad_skills_assess.pdf
- Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. (2006). *Priority projects program*. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from <http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/go/pid/111>
- Department of Education, Science and Training. (2002). *Striving for Quality: Learning, teaching and scholarship*. Paper prepared for the Government review *Higher Education at the Crossroads*. Canberra, ACT, Australia. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from <http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/review.htm>
- Department of Education, Science and Training. (2005). *Learning and Teaching Performance Fund 2006: Administrative information for providers*. Paper issued by Teaching and Learning Unit, Higher Education Group. Canberra, ACT, Australia. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/learning_teaching/ltpf/2006ltpf.htm
- Diamond, R.M. (1998). *Designing and assessing courses and curricula – a practical guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gibbs, G. (1999). Using assessment to strategically change the way students learn. In S. Brown and A. Glasner (Ed.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches* (pp. 41–53). Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Gibbs, G., & Simpson, C. (2004–2005). Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 1, 3–31. Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.glos.ac.uk/adu/clt/lathe/issue1/index.cfm>
- Harris, K-L. (2005). *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*. Melbourne, Vic., Australia: Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/publications.html>

- Harris, K-L., & James, R. (2006). The Course Experience Questionnaire, Graduate Destinations Survey and the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund in Australian higher education. *Public Policy for Academic Quality*. Retrieved October 14, 2006, from http://www.unc.edu/ppaq/CEQ_final.html
- James, R. (2003). Academic standards and the assessment of student learning: some current issues in Australian higher education. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 9, 187–198.
- James, R., McInnis, C., & Devlin, M. (2002). *Assessing learning in Australian universities: ideas, strategies and resources for quality in student assessment*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee. Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/>
- Nightingale, P., Te Wiata, I., Toohey, S., Ryan, G., Hughes, C., & Magin, D. (1996). *Assessing learning in universities*. Sydney, NSW, Australia: University of New South Wales Press.
- Ramsden, P. (1991). A performance indicator of teaching quality in higher education: The course experience questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16(2), 129–150.
- Yorke, M. (2005). Formative assessment in higher education: Its significance for employability and steps towards its enhancement. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 11(3), 219–238.