

## **Getting the context right for good assessment practice**

### Author

Hunt, L, Hammer, S, Sankey, M

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# GETTING THE CONTEXT RIGHT FOR GOOD ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

Lynne Hunt, Sara Hammer & Michael Sankey

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a case study about what happened to promote good assessment practices at a regional university in Australia. It provides a 360° perspective on the top-down, middle-out and bottom-up strategies that were used to get the context right for quality assessment. The argument is that good assessment practice is a whole-of-university responsibility. A simple story illustrates this. Self-plagiarism became a topic of discussion at the University's Learning and Teaching Committee. The question was: What should be done when a student's turnitin.com report indicates considerable overlap with previous assignments completed by the student? The outcome of the deliberations suggested that higher education students should demonstrate evidence of growth and development through assignments. Of necessity, this will result in some overlap and higher order application of previous assignments. Secondly, if the overlap is extensive, then there is something wrong with the systematic design of assessment in the overall degree programme. In brief, staff teaching in the same programme should be aware of assessment tasks in other modules or units and avoid duplication. At the heart of this discussion lay a presumption that universities have a responsibility to facilitate coherent student learning journeys. This provides the starting point for this chapter which argues that good assessment practice in universities is more than the outcome of individual efforts to design meaningful student assignments. It also requires systematic and university-wide strategies that assure and support quality assessment.

The emphasis on a systemic, whole-of-university approach implies that this chapter is as much about context as it is about assessment *per se*. This is because,

Effective change is embedded in context and comes when those involved make it their own through use and adaptation to local histories and contexts.

Enhancements of practice are produced by a complex array of individually and collectively induced incentives, histories and values. A measure of control at the ground level is a condition of success (Bamber et al. 2009, p.2-3).

## **CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY**

The chapter deploys a case study methodology in order to share practice because: ‘Case studies may provide ideas, suggestions, or imagery that might sensitize outsiders to issues they may have not considered, particularly with regard to the process of institutional change’ (Wals, Walker and Blaze Corcoran 2004, p.347). This case study is based on a university that conducted a whole-of-university change management project, known as the Programme Revitalisation Project, which was designed to enhance learning and teaching systems and processes across the board. It has particular import for student retention and progression because one purpose of the change management project was to sustain revenue flows through enhanced student retention. Enrolling and keeping students is more difficult in regional universities like this one which specializes in widening access to higher education. It has particular challenges. For example, many students live in remote areas. Indeed, some 80% of the students at this university study online and by distance education. The University has significant numbers of non-traditional students. Often, they are the first in their families to study for a degree, and many are older students involved in family and work responsibilities.

The change leadership task was to improve the student learning journey for this student population, in particular by enhancing coursework and assessment.

Bamber et al. (2009) caution against the use of case studies as best practice examples because of the unique influence of local circumstance on outcomes. In their view, case studies should be informed by theory: 'Without explicit concepts and theory to illuminate, cases would simply be narratives, more-or-less interesting stories. With a theoretical lens they can help the reader to see enhancement initiatives in a new, more analytical way' (Bamber et al. 2009, p. 5). In this case study change leadership was informed by empowerment theory, which Labonté (1990a, p. 64) described as a murky concept, 'vacillating between politically conservative models of self-empowerment and social action models of political change'. For him, empowerment means 'to gain or assume power'. It is a transformative approach that operates at three levels (Labonté, 1990b, p.73):

1. intrapersonally, associated with self-efficacy;
2. interpersonally, as the construction of knowledge and analysis based on personal and shared experiences; and
3. within communities, as the cultivation of resources and strategies that assist in transformation.

The identification of levels of empowerment facilitates analysis of what needs to be done to get the context right for quality assessment. Much of the literature to promote assessment, for example Suskie (2009), is focused on enhancing self-efficacy. It directs attention to matters over which individual lecturers have influence, such as providing students with clear goals, using a variety of formative and summative assignments, use of marking grids and provision of meaningful feedback to students that leads to their growth and development. This chapter

shifts attention to Labonté's level three which Hunt (2006, p. 64) described as a community development model of change, 'A key point is that the promotion of teaching and learning in universities requires organisational reorientation through a process that engages the hearts and minds of staff. In short, process is as important as product'. Accordingly, the focus in this case study is on the processes and strategies deployed to enhance assessment rather than on the outcome of innovative assessment practices, many of which are described on the University's exemplar website.

In this case study change leadership was informed by the twin philosophies of cross-institutional planning and the student learning journey. The chapter, therefore, starts with a working definition of each before going on to describe a whole-of-programme approach to assessment that is linked to the mapping of graduate qualities and skills. Further, it identifies specific strategies such as an external review of assessment practice at the university; strategic planning; assessment policies; project management methodology; the use of templates and guidelines; professional development for staff; and enhanced support for students for the development of academic learning skills.

## **APPROACHES TO CHANGE**

According to Hunt and Peach (2009) cross-institutional planning traverses the traditional barriers between academic and administrative services and challenges inward looking organizational silos in order to achieve a change-capable culture. It is an approach that represents a paradigm shift towards 'holistic, systems thinking and cross-disciplinary knowledge' and to a world view based on 'participation, appreciation and self-organization'

(Sterling 2004, p. 49-50) – a process particularly suited to change leadership in universities, where academic staff are accustomed to individual autonomy and academic freedom.

In this case study, cross-institutional planning was informed by the concept of students' learning journeys (SLJ) which is an outcomes-based approach that explores students' journeys through their degree programmes from the perspective of students (see Figure 1). It is a holistic approach designed to get the context right for student learning. It is also a plural concept – students' learning journeys – which gives rise to flexible and diverse responses rather than a 'one size fits all' strategy. A key argument in this chapter is that whilst individual lecturers can improve assessment in their own courses, a whole-of-university response is required to create coherent learning journeys for students because 'changing only an element at one level may have limited, local and provisional success ... because the rest of the system is not touched and established patterns prevail over the single change' (Bamber et al. 2009, p.3).

Figure 1. The student learning journey

## **ASSESSMENT REVIEW**

The Programme Revitalisation Project described in this case study was preceded by an external review of the University's assessment practices. This arose from evidence of poor assessment and from the emergence of separate faculty policies and procedures associated with assessment which risked a fragmented and complex time for students studying across

faculties. The outcomes and recommendations of the Review were organized under eight headings most of which were associated with getting the context right. Indeed, the report explicitly recorded the need for a holistic approach:

It is important to read the recommendations as an integrated whole rather than as isolated components. Thus, for example, less use of examinations and strengthening of risk management concerning plagiarism are related ... So, too, providing some form of feedback on every assessment (including examinations) is linked to the overall design of a course (and programme) as well as to management of staff time.

(Assessment Working Group 2006, p.5)

Commendable though an integrated approach may be, addressing the outcomes of the report within a hermetically sealed framework of improving only assessment practices still risked marginalized or limited outcomes. However, shortly after the Review, the University embarked on a year of whole-of-university change in order to put the university on a firm financial footing and direct resources to the core business of research and teaching. The outcomes of the Review were rolled into these new processes providing a much broader context for change.

## **THE CHANGE LEADERSHIP PROJECT**

### **Getting the Context Right**

The University-wide change leadership initiative was organised as four projects: Facilities; Academic Profile; Student Management; and Corporate Services. Only the Academic profile project directly concerned academic matters. It had two phases. The first was to reduce the number of degree programmes offered by the University resulting in a workable platform for quality enhancement of coursework and assessment.

The Programme Revitalisation Project (PRP) that lies at the heart of this case study was the second phase. Its objective was to enhance learning, teaching and assessment to facilitate the SLJ and enhance retention. The University provided the top-down framework for action and its Academic Development Unit (ADU) provided the middle-out drive for change. The aim was to get the context right for bottom-up initiatives by faculty staff that make a difference to assessment where it matters – at course level. PRP was divided into ten sub-projects. All sub-projects had influence on assessment practice insofar as they established the direction of change. The Technology Enhanced Learning sub-project, for example, facilitated the development of online assessment and a broad curriculum project directed attention to internationalising the curriculum and associated assessment practice. However, this chapter will focus on just six of the sub-projects because they were central to getting the context right for quality assessment practice. The six sub-projects are: Human Resources and Management; Teaching Excellence; Assessment; Professional Development, Academic Learning Skills, and the Course and Programme Management System incorporating graduate qualities and skills. Each member of the ADU staff was invited to provide leadership for one of these. Each was charged with setting goals against which they reported every month to their colleagues in the ADU and to faculties. Ultimately, the outcomes were reported up to

the University's Learning and Teaching Committee and, from there, to faculty Learning and Teaching Committees. It was designed as an empowering process of transparency and engagement to build a change-capable culture supportive of teaching excellence.

Organisational reorientation included new ADU work patterns so that some of their time was devoted to university-wide tasks such as the development of resources and templates while most of the working week was allocated to faculties to complete the tasks established in annual Faculty Learning and Teaching Action Plans. This set a context of negotiation, flexibility and goal achievement. Organisational change extended beyond enhanced support for teaching and assessment to ensuring that learning and teaching matters were appropriately integrated into the University's strategic plan, and that budgets flowed to learning and teaching activities. Much of this work was lead through the Human Resources and Management (HRM) sub-project and directed by a member of the Vice-Chancellery team to provide high level leadership for institutional change. Tasks included collaboration with the Buildings and Facilities department to plan spaces that facilitate students' learning and engagement with the Human Resources Department to ensure that learning and teaching achievements feature in appointment, promotion and annual performance appraisal processes. Activities such as these are many steps away from discussion of assessment but, unless students are supported in their learning and unless teaching staff see their engagement with learning and teaching as career building, initiatives to improve assessment risk falling on stony ground.

The integration of teaching into career building prospects required some formulation of expectations including the development of Good Teaching Guidelines. Figure 2 identifies the key features of quality assessment practice noted in the Guidelines, which were developed through a process of back-mapping to current policy. It became a way of making policy transparent. It also revealed the need for significant re-writing and simplification of assessment policies, including the removal of artificial hurdles to students' successful completion of assessment requirements.

### Figure 2 Features of quality assessment practice

The Teaching Excellence sub-project provided the capacity-building for staff to enhance their careers through teaching. It simplified a number of disparate teaching award processes into a streamlined approach incorporating faculty and university awards aligned to national teaching awards criteria. This also entailed coordinating dates so that it became possible for staff members or teams to continuously build their teaching portfolios to ever higher demands within the space of a year. Teaching awards were included in criteria for promotion and staff now have the opportunity to weight their applications to recognition of teaching as well as research outcomes. In brief, the corporate work of the HRM sub-project was supported by the capacity-building work of the Teaching Excellence sub-project.

The institutional reorganisation to get the context right for quality teaching, learning and assessment had so far included the development of Faculty Learning and Teaching Action Plans, the reorganisation of ADU work, embedding teaching in career building strategies including promotion and performance appraisal, documenting clear expectations about good

teaching and assessment practice and the provision of opportunities to develop career milestones through teaching awards. The next task was to make this stick. For example, it became apparent that some academics serving as supervisors in performance appraisal processes may not themselves be skilled in asking questions pertaining to learning, teaching and assessment. Accordingly, a list of possible questions was developed as a resource, housed on the website of Human Resource Management and included in supervisor training. These were closely aligned with the Good Teaching Guidelines so that staff receive consistent messages about expectations and opportunities.

This discussion about getting the context right for good teaching and assessment shows how all university departments have a role to play. Other activities included collaboration with the Buildings and Facilities Department to speed the provision of a Learning Commons (Schmidt & Kaufman 2007) which incorporates a Learning Centre that students can visit for extra assistance with academic learning skills. The University's quality assurance department negotiated widely to develop an annual cycle of Course and Programme Review, which includes reference to the Good Teaching Guidelines and analysis by course teaching team of the outcomes of their assessment processes. The key point is that quality assessment is now embedded in business-as-usual practices. It has become routine, part of the wallpaper of quality university teaching.

### **The Assessment Sub-project**

The Assessment and Graduate Qualities sub-project targeted aspects of ‘getting the context right’ that are specific to assessment. This involved developing templates, guidelines, and quick-fix, bite-sized ‘How to’ flyers including an assessment checklist. It provided resources about criterion referenced assessment, feedback, moderation and designing assessment for students living with disability. The flyers are available online and in hard copy in staff rooms around the University. Some were converted into display banners. Saturation coverage was the key to raising awareness of the importance of quality assessment. An exemplar website provided opportunities for faculty staff to model good assessment practice and the University’s Visiting Learning and Teaching Scholar Programme attracted national and international expertise for professional development workshops. All were interviewed to provide a web-based resource that is now available open-source.

Biggs (2003) model for aligning assessment with learning objectives, graduate skills and teaching activities forms the basis of the templates and guidelines. These define the University’s graduate qualities and skills and provide a breakdown of each that assists academics to customize to their own degree programme. The templates help staff to identify and assess different levels of learning outcomes. The documents adopt a whole-of-programme perspective charting a process of disciplinary mastery, through which students develop foundational knowledge and skills before progressing to advanced levels of application, analysis and evaluation (Morgan et al. 2002). The templates are empowering because they scaffold a process that facilitates staff engagement in programme design, evaluation and review. They are based on good practice principles that enhance the SLJ, including accountability, authenticity, coherence, equity, reliability, transparency and validity (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Sadler 2005). Some are designed to address contemporary

issues such as the increased diversity and internationalisation of the student cohort and feature some of the most recent thinking on the purposes of assessment in higher education (Boud 2009). These resources also emphasize the enduring value of designing assessment for learning as well as for the accreditation of learning and focus particularly on the provision of appropriately targeted and timely feedback on student progress. These practices are designed to engage students and facilitate their progression through their degree programmes.

The development of resources and templates is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for getting the context right for good assessment practice. Certainly the templates scaffold the process of thinking about assessment across whole degree programmes, but the risk is that they will be ignored. What made them stick were requirements to comply with revised policies about embedding graduate qualities and skills in the curriculum. This is enforced through accreditation requirements. Faculty Learning and Teaching Action Plans, which attracted additional funds, were devised to direct ADU support to staff undertaking the alignment of assessment with learning objectives and graduate qualities and skills. This was facilitated by the reorganisation of ADU work patterns and given initial impetus by the PRP that required faculties to focus on the top 15 programmes that accommodate approximately 80 percent of all students. It was a ‘best bang for buck’ process that was project managed with clear goals and accountability for outcomes. This context of top-down policy direction, facilitated by middle-out organisation including, guidelines and templates, gave rise to local, bottom-up initiatives. For example, two faculties began their own Course Revitalisation Projects, in which the ADU representatives worked with the Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching), heads of school and course coordinators to revise course materials in accordance with the now established good practice principles. The ultimate motivation for all arose from

Australian Government requirements to embed and assess graduate qualities and the University's pending quality assurance review.

### **The Professional Development Sub-project**

The Programme Revitalisation Project facilitated the development of an integrated model of professional development that provides a context of continuous support for teaching staff. It begins with three-hour, facilitated online courses for staff employed on casual contracts to ensure that they have the skills for marking student assignments and providing appropriate feedback. New full-time staff must complete a two-day induction to learning and teaching, which is organized as one day of face-to-face professional development with follow-up action learning projects designed to bring direct benefit to students. Opportunities for self development have been created through open source, online foundation modules which, if the staff member chooses to complete assignments, may contribute to progress through the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, a formal qualification that staff members may study without fee payment. Online resources such as the Exemplar Website and How-to flyers together with the Visiting Scholar Programme form part of the integrated professional development model, so too does a comprehensive programme of communities of practice, all of which are supported by a series of professional development workshops including Tailored Professional Development that responds to requests from faculty staff for point-of-need learning.

The University in this case study is known for its effective use of communities of practice (AUQA 2010), which provide what Labonté (1990b, p.73) described as opportunities for ‘the construction of knowledge and analysis based on personal and shared experiences’. Staff meet monthly at informal get-togethers that are purposefully but loosely structured according to Etienne Wenger’s model of building community, sharing practice, and building domain knowledge (McDonald & Star 2008, p. 3). The fluidity and regularity of these sessions make them ideal fora to address problems quickly (Wenger & Snyder 2000, p. 141). For example, the university’s strategic goal of delivering greater flexibility to students through the adoption of a blended learning model put pressure on academic staff to upgrade their learning technology skills. The Faculty of Arts Learning and Teaching Community of Practice responded to this by providing guest presenters and by sharing online assessment practices.

### **The Academic Learning Skills Sub-project**

Any 360° approach to enhancing assessment must support both staff and students. The University in this case study specializes in blended learning opportunities that aim to accommodate equitably the needs of students studying on-campus or by distance education. As a consequence, online resources to facilitate the development of students’ academic learning skills were well established before the advent of PRP. These included an innovative home-grown programme, called AWARE, that enables students to self-diagnose gaps in their academic learning skills. PRP attracted additional funds to fine-tune and advance academic learning skills support for students. The on-campus Learning Centre was relocated to the library to provide greater visibility and accessibility. This meant that its services in support of numeracy and literacy skills could be integrated more closely with the library’s resources

designed to enhance students' information literacy. Further, the University developed a Virtual Learning Centre that aligned with on-campus support services.

### **Course and Programme Mapping System**

A key outcome of the Programme Revitalisation Project was the development of the Course and Programme Mapping System (CPMS). This online system was designed to make it difficult for staff to get things wrong. Rather than asking staff to know detailed policy and procedure about course and programme development, expectations are built-in to the online environment so that staff are now required to complete fields associated with the alignment of learning objectives, assessment and graduate qualities and skills. As a change leadership process this risked being maligned as a draconian and centralized imposition on academic freedom – corporatisation at its worst. Yet in the new order of quality and teaching standards this system makes it easy for staff to get things right. It also provides freedom for staff members to make changes to their courses because the CPMS has built-in approval processes. From the perspective of students, this is important because faculties are positioned to monitor changes and, for example, to check how alterations in assessment in one course might influence another. It is especially important when staff wish to make changes to the now compulsory field of graduate attributes because these need to be managed across students' whole degree programmes. The CPMS also accommodates links to staff and student ePortfolios. This means, for example, that there is an automatic feed of completed graduate qualities and skills to students' portfolios that assists them to collate evidence of their assessed achievements for current and future employment.

Figure 3 The CPMS quality cycle

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has documented a holistic approach to the management of university assessment that includes cross-institutional planning and collaboration and a project management methodology based on sub-projects associated with human resource management, teaching excellence, assessment, graduate qualities and skills, professional development, academic learning skills and the CPMS that incorporates processes to facilitate the alignment of assessment with graduate qualities and skills. It has noted the development of assessment templates and guidelines and organisational reorientation facilitated by the development of Faculty Learning and Teaching Action Plans that attracted additional funding to get the jobs done. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a case study of transformative practices designed to get the context right for quality teaching, learning and assessment. These are summarized in Figure 4, which provides an integrated image of the separate processes described in this chapter.

Figure 4 Getting the context right for assesment

For some, the case study may all be too corporate – organisational intervention that impedes academic freedom to develop assessment as individual lecturers see fit. However, the point of the chapter is to describe the praxis arising from a vision to enhance students' learning journeys. This shifts attention to whole-of-university responsibility for ensuring students continuous growth in learning through quality assessment practices. Further, the chapter describes the development of the CPMS infrastructure that makes it difficult for staff to get

things wrong. This addresses contemporary trends in higher education to greater accountability for standards. The University in this case study can now demonstrate the alignment of learning objectives with graduate qualities and assessment and it provides staff with the freedom to make changes to assessment within the framework of clear approval processes that facilitate consistency across whole degree programmes for students.

The holistic approach advocated in this chapter has a long history that bears repeating because fragmented change leadership strategies detract from students' learning journeys and give rise to situations in which university learning education 'is [merely] the sum of the student's experiences of a series of discrete, largely unrelated ... classes' (Barr & Tagg 1995, p. 7). It is an approach that has much in common with learning organization theory (Tagg 2003) because it recognizes the need for structural and cultural reorientation for change to be effective. Hunt and Peach (2009) noted that there is considerable consensus in the literature about how to manage holistic change noting that effective strategies are multidimensional, systematic and participative. This chapter has identified practical initiatives to enhance university assessment practices that are based on these principles, noting that this adds-up to whole-of-university responsibility for enhancing assessment practices.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

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Communities of Practice. Online. Available <http://www.usq.edu.au/cops>

Course and Programme Mapping System. Online. Available <http://www.usq.edu.au/learnteach/qualpolplan/cpms>

Programme Revitalisation Website. Online. Available <http://www.usq.edu.au/learnteach/prorevital.htm>

Figure 1

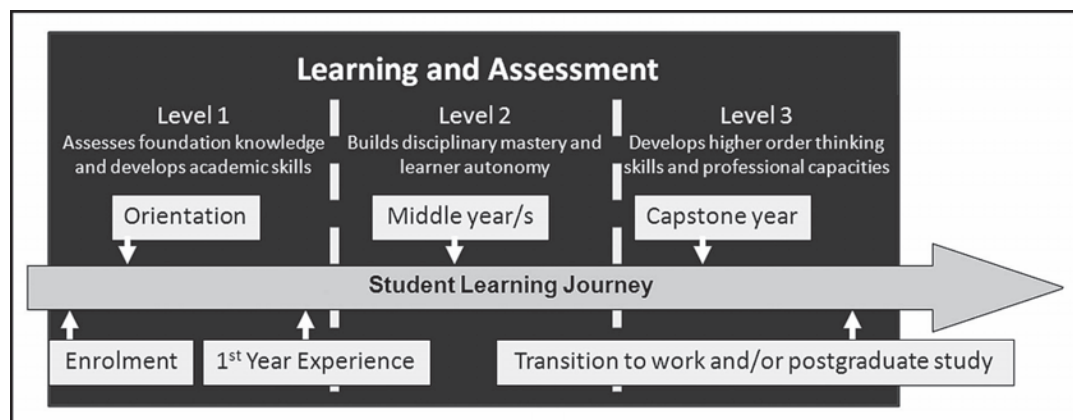


Figure 2

**Good assessment:**

1. is an integral part of the teaching and learning process;
2. is designed to guide students' learning and provide opportunities for personal development planning and the documentation of students' achievements through e-portfolios;
3. addresses the diversity of students' backgrounds, experiences and learning styles;
4. is fair and equitable;
5. informs students of progress through timely, constructive feedback that enhances learning;
6. adopts a criterion-referenced approach;
7. demonstrates alignment between learning objectives, learning activities and assessment tasks;
8. assesses identified graduate qualities and skills, along with disciplinary and professional knowledge;
9. includes clear assessment criteria linked to learning objectives and provided to students at the same time as assessment tasks;
10. is moderated in accordance with policy and, where relevant, contractual arrangements with institutional partners;
11. is designed to take into consideration students' overall workload; and
12. is manageable from a staff workload perspective.

Figure 3

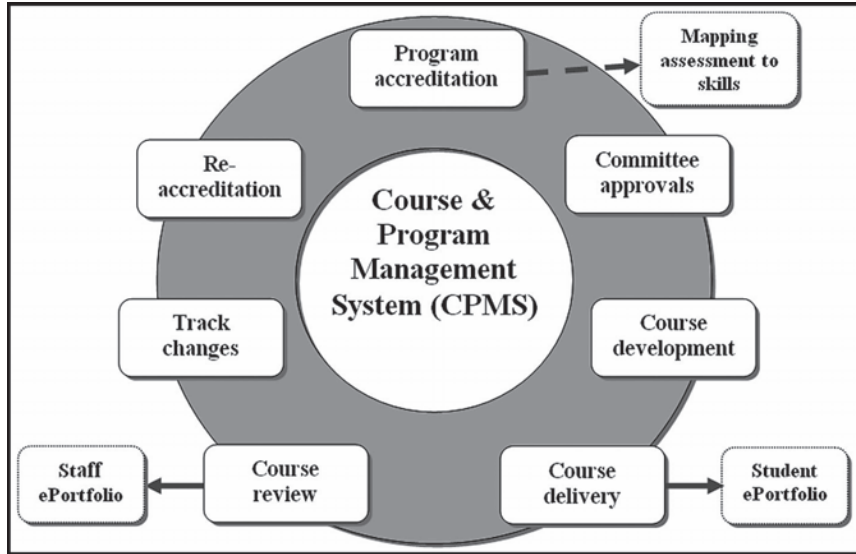


Figure 4

