

# Assessment: Purposes and Principles

## Introduction

Sound assessment practices are a foundational element in the teaching and learning experience. It is widely recognized in the higher education literature that the nature of students' learning, thinking and behaviours are shaped more strongly by assessment than by anything else in their studies. Assessment sends messages to students about educators' priorities and they direct their learning behaviours accordingly. Correspondingly, it is vital that assessment tasks are matched precisely to the kinds of learning that we want students to demonstrate. Assessment is not an add-on to the teaching, it needs to be conceptualized as an integral component of teaching and learning.

## Who? Who has an Interest in Assessment?

Multiple stakeholders have an interest in assessment and their priorities in relation to assessment differ.

## Who Cares?

- Students
- Teachers
- Institutions
- Employers
- Professional bodies
- Governments
- Bodies that award scholarships

## Why? Purposes of Assessment

In addition to the multiple stakeholders with an interest in assessment, assessment has multiple purposes. These include:

### 1. Measurement of Learning (Assessment OF Learning)

This is the most common understanding of the purpose of assessment and it will always be a significant aspect. Assessment tasks are seen as a means of evaluating and measuring the extent to which students have achieved course learning outcomes.

### 2. Certification of Learning (Assessment OF Learning)

Closely associated with the evaluating and measuring aspects of assessment, is the use of assessment to certify that designated learning has been attained. We use the results of assessment to indicate that students have attained specified levels of competency in particular areas and to declare their suitability and preparedness for careers, jobs and other courses of study. Educational institutions and teachers also use assessment results to demonstrate their competency and credibility to different stakeholders.

### 3. Diagnosis of Learning

Diagnostic assessment is a tool to inform teachers of students' prior learning and competency before undertaking a course of study. Diagnostic assessment enables the educator to gain a picture of students' prior knowledge, conceptual grasp of the core areas of a discipline, misconceptions and ways of thinking about the discipline. Diagnostic assessment measures what students bring into a course and is a very helpful tool for teaching that works with what students already know or don't know. Diagnostic assessment can also be used to probe students' emotions, fears and uncertainties about a particular discipline so that the educator can build a learning experience that takes account of these needs and emotions.

### 4. Assessment as a Key Learning and Teaching Tool (Assessment FOR Learning)

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning. It can be used very effectively throughout a course to coach students and help them to develop course learning outcomes. When the primary goal is to help students to practise core competencies and skills, the percentage of marks allocated can be small, but it is helpful to attach some marks. One way of doing this is allowing students to choose a certain number of allocated tasks for purely formative purposes and others for marks.

(For example, if students need to learn problem-solving skills, they could have 6 regular small problem tasks to complete on-line and their best 3 could count for marks. In the course of doing these assessments, students will be learning from practice and feedback. The feedback does not have to be from educators, but can also be from peers).

Another strategy for incorporating practice, coaching and feedback into the assessment process, is to design integrated assessment in which each piece of assessment contributes to the final product. For example, students can do online exercises in which they have to locate a reference for their forthcoming essay. Then students have to write a brief annotation of the reference showing how it can be used for the essay and evaluating its pertinence, strengths and limitations.

### 5. Assessment for the Longer Term (Assessment FOR Learning)

If institutions use assessment results as evidence of students' readiness for workplace participation or further study, it is essential that assessments during the course of study do not simply measure short term learning but that, in form and substance, they also genuinely prepare students for the way they will have to perform and be evaluated after they have completed their formal studies. Assessment in higher education needs to be designed in such a way that it can be a reasonable predictor of students' performance after completing formal study. Ensuring that our types of assessment and ways of assessing also focus on the long term is also an obligation to students. Linked to the long term goals of assessment is the need to develop students' competency to judge the quality of their own performance, an essential component of work readiness.

## 6. Assessment for Feedback: Assessment FOR Learning

Assessment tasks provide both students and educators with feedback on the progress of students' learning. Performance on assessment and the associated feedback enables students to enhance their learning. For teachers, assessment provides feedback on students' grasp of core course learning and adjust teaching strategies in response to the feedback. In order for assessment feedback to be useful to students and educators, assessment portfolios need to include:

- Tasks that are short and regular (like weekly quizzes)
- Tasks that occur early in the semester so that both parties can make adjustments promptly
- Tasks that are broken up into stages or parts

### *Assessment Purposes: A Summary*

- ✓ Measurement of learning and achievement
- ✓ Certification of learning
- ✓ Entry to courses, programmes and vocations
- ✓ Selection purposes
- ✓ Institutional reputation, promotion and marketing
- ✓ Diagnosis of prior and current learning
- ✓ Developing student learning (knowledge, skills, attitudes, ways of thinking, inquiring and behaving)
- ✓ Feedback on learning progress for learners and educators
- ✓ Preparation for participation in work, community and society

## 7. The Multiple Purposes of Assessment: A Balancing Act

The multiple purposes of assessment and the many stakeholders who have a vested interest in it make it a complex and challenging process. Sometimes, it is easier to focus on what is measurable and often this is where much energy is directed. This can be at the expense of ensuring that the most important goal, the development and evaluation of key course learning is neglected. Carless, who was a key figure in promoting assessment FOR learning describes the complex dynamics associated with assessment in the following statement:

“It is about **grading** and about **learning**; it is about **standards** and also invokes **comparison** between individuals; it communicates **hidden** and **explicit** messages; it is both a **technical** matter and one that impacts on students' **emotional** lives. Assessment needs to be **principled** yet also **practical**. It must be justifiable to **lecturers** themselves, **students** and **management**” (Carless, 2009).

## Principles of Assessment

When designing course assessments bear in mind the following principles. Assessment tasks should:

- Align closely with particular learning outcomes in relation to thinking approaches/skills as well as core content
- Help to develop programme graduate outcomes, USP Graduate Outcomes and be informed by the RSD framework
- Be complemented and supported by course teaching and learning approaches
- Be clarified for students, especially the relationship between assessment tasks and core course learning, and include students in dialogue at all stages of the assessment processes
- Provide opportunities for practicing required competencies and receiving feedback on them
- Include documentation of process as well as submission of a final product
- Include opportunities for dialogue with students around expectations and criteria
- Develop students' abilities to make judgements about their own performance
- Be relevant and the relevance made clear to students
- Include different types of tasks to enable students to represent their learning in multiple ways
- Include tasks that prepare students for future work place contexts as well as evaluating academic skills
- Be intrinsically motivating and encourage meaningful engagement with course learning
- Encourage students to be active partners in the assessment process
- Cater for and accommodate student diversity
- Provide feedback that can be used for further learning and assessment in the course

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*Assessment needs to be shifted from the periphery of a course to occupying a central place in learning dialogue throughout a course.*

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## Reference

Carless, D. (2007). Learning oriented assessment: Conceptual bases and practical implications. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44 (1) pp.57-66.  
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