ASSESSMENT ITEMS AND WEIGHTING

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<th>Provided To</th>
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<td>Dr Kabilan Krishnasamy, Education Policy Officer (Academic Policy Services)</td>
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<td>Ms Sue Smurthwaite, Associate Director (Academic Policy Services)</td>
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<td>Ms Sue Smurthwaite, Jan Cardy, Sylvia Lang and Claire McIlroy</td>
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<td>Boards of Studies, Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning)</td>
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INTRODUCTION

As part of the University’s New Courses curriculum approval process, all unit proposals are required to provide, among other details, the following: (i) list of learning outcomes, (ii) demonstration of how each of the outcomes is assessed and (iii) a list of the assessment items and their respective weight. While data for (i) and (ii) have been captured consistently, the way in which details, such as the respective weight of the assessment items are captured in unit proposals have changed over the last 12 – 18 months in a bid to meet the needs of a range of stakeholders.

The view of the Boards of Studies is that a breakdown of the weight attached to each assessment item is critical for pedagogical reasons. At the other end of the spectrum there is a general view that there should be flexibility to allow changes to the weighting of assessment items to occur even after approval of a unit proposal. This paper aims to reconcile both these ends: the need for the Boards of Studies to have this information for consideration at the time of approval of a unit proposal and the flexibility to enable academics to change weighting of assessment items following approval.

The paper begins with a brief description of what is meant by ‘assessment items’ and their logical and pedagogical connections with the learning outcomes of a unit. It then identifies key issues relating to the weight of assessment items. The third section presents a recommended way forward for managing assessment items in unit proposals in the future.

1. ASSESSMENT ITEMS

Assessment items refer to components used to assess students in a unit. For example, the following assessment items may be set for a unit: essay, group project, tutorial participation, and examination. Assessment items in a unit are identified and determined in accordance with the University Policy on Assessment Mechanism Statements.

Assessment items are not stand alone components of a unit proposal. They are listed in the context of how assessment has been pedagogically tied to learning outcomes of the unit. Academic Council by R23/08 approved the requirement that all new units should include a listing of intended student outcomes and that assessment should be explicitly tailored to such outcomes. In other words, a proposer is required to demonstrate how each of the learning outcomes is assessed.

It can, therefore, be inferred that assessment items must be logically arrived from the demonstration of how each outcome is assessed. Thus, changes to assessment items can only occur if there are changes to the way outcomes are assessed. Clause 4.3 of the University Policy on Changes to Units states the following:

“4.3 Where a change to unit outcomes is proposed for a unit within an undergraduate major or a postgraduate course:
(a) it must be mapped to the outcomes of the undergraduate major or postgraduate course; and
(b) the assessment must be tailored to the changed outcomes.”

Therefore, changes to assessment items cannot be dealt in isolation. Either the change in assessment is a result of the changes in learning outcomes and to the way these outcomes are assessed or a change in assessment that leads to changes in learning outcomes and to the way these outcomes are assessed. The key point here is that any change to assessment which impact on learning outcomes will require approval by the Boards of Studies.

2. DIFFERING NEEDS AND PRACTICES

Practices in regard to the weighting of assessment items, however, have varied with a view to meeting the needs of a range of stakeholders including the original proposers of the unit.

Approved details of a unit are published in both the University Handbook and unit outlines. While the Handbook is the University’s official record of the courses and units that will be offered in a given year, the unit outlines provide students with core information about their units of study. As a University requirement unit outlines must include, among other information, details such as assessment items
and their respective weight and must be published at least one day prior to the commencement of semester or teaching period. However, the Handbook process is, and always has been, finalised during the previous year, many months prior.

Although it is a University requirement that unit outlines must align with the information published in the Handbook, the levels of detail of information provided in the two sources may differ. For example, the Handbook may publish the assessment items for a unit but not their respective weight, to date this information has been at the discretion of the Faculty.

However, the Boards of Studies have expressed a view that a breakdown of the weight attached to each assessment item is critical for pedagogical reasons, and that they should be considered at the time of approval. Further, it helps the Boards to consider the relative weight of the assessment items that are tied to the learning outcomes.

The challenge here is to reconcile both ends of the spectrum: the Boards’ view that such details should be considered at the time of approval and the Faculty view that there should be flexibility to enable changes to the weighting of assessment items to occur following approval of a unit proposal without consequent re-approval processes.

### 3. RECONCILING DIFFERENCES

One way to reconcile both these ends is by requiring proposers to provide a range for the weight assigned to each assessment item for a unit. Consider the following example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment items</th>
<th>Weight in percentage (%) range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the proposed range, as provided in Table 1, has been approved by relevant committees as part of the unit approval process, a unit coordinator may then set the actual weight attached to each assessment item within the agreed range for publication in unit outlines as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment items</th>
<th>Actual Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In so doing, the proposer will need to adhere to the following key principles:

(i) That the total value of assessment items for the unit should not exceed 100%; and
(ii) That the minimum value of weight assigned for each assessment item in table 1 should not exceed a total of 100%.

The example below (table 3), which captures related details of an actual unit, may help to further illustrate the key points discussed in this paper.

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1 See University Policy on Provision of Unit outlines
Table 3

| Student learning outcomes: | On successfully completing this unit, students should be able to:
| | (1) identify and discuss key issues in the use and interpretation of various historical sources
| | (2) locate relevant primary sources in a given area
| | (3) produce a viable research plan

| Assessments tailored to outcomes: | Students are required to write a seminar paper on a key issue in the use and interpretation of various historical sources (outcome 1).
| | A report on a primary source collection or database requires the development of skills in locating primary sources and critically engaging with the question of the relevance of different sources to different historical questions (outcomes 1 and 2).
| | Students are required to submit a research plan for assessment. Feedback is provided on a draft of the plan prior to assessment (outcome 3).
| | Participation in group discussions is also assessed, to encourage and evaluate engagement with the material and learning peers (outcomes 1 - 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment items</th>
<th>Scenario 1</th>
<th>Scenario 2</th>
<th>Scenario 3 (Recommended)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One 2500 word seminar paper, (40%); Report on a primary source collection or database, (20%); Research project proposal, (25%, comprised of 5% for a draft and 20% for the final proposal); and Participation, (15%).</td>
<td>Seminar paper; Report on a primary source collection or database; Research project proposal; and Participation</td>
<td>One 2500 word seminar paper, (30% - 50%); Report on a primary source collection or database, (15% - 25%); Research project proposal, (20% - 40%, comprised of 5% -10% for a draft and 10% - 20% for the final proposal); and Participation, (10% - 20%).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The above three scenarios relating to assessment items capture the different levels of detail of information that may be provided in regard to assessment weighting. In scenario 1 the relative weighting of assessment items will be provided, but they are fixed. Faculties may choose to continue or adopt this option. The approved fixed data relating to assessment weighting will need to be reflected in the same in the University Handbook and unit outlines. However, this means that there will be no flexibility to amend assessment weighting without approval by the relevant Board of Studies.

The assessment items in scenario 2 have no weighting. But as discussed earlier, this piece of information is necessary for the Boards of Studies to make any informed decision in regard to the approval of a proposed unit. Therefore, the example in scenario 2 would not be acceptable for the Boards of Studies.

4. BENEFITS OF SCENARIO 3

Although scenario 1 is still an option that faculties may choose to adopt, this paper offers an alternative with adoption of scenario 3 which provides for a percentage range in regard to assessment weighting. This proposed way forward (scenario 3):

1) provides adequate information to the Boards of Studies to facilitate an informed decision when considering new unit proposals;
2) provides for flexibility for changes to occur within the approved range set for each assessment item; and
3) facilitates a process whereby information published in the Handbook and unit outlines is not contradictory.

The approved percentage range for each assessment item will be published in the University Handbook. A unit coordinator may, however, set the actual weight attached to each assessment item within the approved range for publication in unit outlines. As is the current practice monitoring of information provided in unit outlines and its alignment to the Handbook, rests with the Faculty. Any proposed change to the weight of assessment items outside the approved respective range will need to be considered by the Boards of Studies as there may be an impact on learning outcomes.

Recommendation:
That information regarding assessment items at the time of submitting a new unit proposal be provided at the discretion of the Faculty as follows:
Scenario 1: Clarity on the assessment items with a specific percentage value, bearing in mind that any changes to the percentage value can only take place as part of the annual change process. The current deadline for change to unit information is April of the year preceding teaching of the unit.

Scenario 3: Clarity on the assessment items with a percentage range, bearing in mind that change to the percentage value within the range can be made by the faculty up until provision of the unit outline. The current deadline for provision of unit outlines is one working day prior to commencement of semester in which the unit is taught.

In both instances changes to the assessment weighting, either the specific value or outside of the range, will need to be undertaken in accordance with the annual change process, and approved by the relevant Board of Studies, as there may be an impact on learning outcomes.