Assessment Policy for UCT

If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment.
(Rowntree in Ramsden, 2003, p. 67)

Introduction

UCT has an established assessment system comprising of policies and procedures, rules and regulations which operate at institutional, faculty and departmental levels, enabling the institution to perform its core functions of admitting, placing, teaching, promoting and certifying students. There are, however, a number of current national and institutional imperatives which necessitate a review of our assessment practices, with a particular focus on strengthening our **validating systems**, that is, the mechanisms which exist at institutional, faculty and departmental level to ensure the **validity**[1] of our assessment interpretations. Increasingly important is not only the effectiveness of these mechanisms to ensure validity, but the ability to demonstrate *evidence* of the validity of our assessment interpretations to stakeholders within and outside the university.

The intention of this policy[2] is not to prescribe particular philosophies or methods of assessment. The assumption is that academics know best what and how to assess within their disciplines. Consistent with both the national quality assurance frameworks of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and UCT's own quality assurance policy framework[3], the intention of this policy is to provide faculties with a set of criteria for critical self-evaluation of their own assessment systems. The central requirement of the policy is that departments and faculties have validating mechanisms which are appropriate and effective in ensuring on-going critical self-evaluation based on these criteria.

UCT's assessment policy is divided into 4 major sections: Part one provides an overview of the various functions which assessment serves. Part two argues for the crucial role that assessment plays in shaping learning and provides some key principles for promoting 'assessment for learning'. Part three spells out the criteria for validating our assessment practices, and stipulates the responsibility of Faculties for ensuring that their validating systems meet these criteria. Part four addresses specific policies on a range of assessment issues.

Part 1 - Functions of Assessment

Assessment serves a variety of functions which are divided into five broader categories: diagnostic, formative, summative, evaluative, and research. Each of these is divided into more specific functions:

(i)   Assessment for **diagnostic** purposes identifies students' strengths and weaknesses for purposes of, for example, recognition of prior learning, selection, admission and placement.

(ii) Assessment for **formative** purposes serves primarily to enhance the learning process by giving students the opportunity to develop the valued knowledge, skills and attitudes of the discipline. Crucial to the success of assessment for this purpose is feedback which forms the basis of improvement.

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[1]   Definitions of validity: The soundness (or trustworthiness) of assessment interpretations and the uses of these interpretations in decision-making.

[2]   Policy intention: To provide faculties with a set of criteria for critical self-evaluation.

[3]   See Quality Assurance at UCT, November 2001.

(iii) Assessment for **summative** purposes serves to inform judgments about students' achievements for purposes of, for example, promotion and certification.

(iv) Assessment for **evaluative**[4] purposes serves to inform judgments about the quality of a course or programme for purposes of, for example, programme accreditation and departmental review.

(v) A final purpose is the use of assessment for **research**[5] purposes.

Any single assessment event can serve multiple purposes; most course assessment serves a combination of formative and summative purposes, in other words, it serves as an opportunity for learning, but ultimately contributes to a final judgment about students' overall achievement. Assessors are responsible for making those purposes clear to students in advance. Ultimately the validity of the interpretations can only be judged against the intended purpose of the assessment.

Traditionally higher education has privileged the summative purposes of assessment, i.e. the role of assessment in 'measuring' student levels of achievement. While assessment will always have a powerful and necessary summative function, its role in shaping student learning is equally powerful. Thus a central theme of UCT's assessment policy is the importance of designing assessment systems which promote, rather than obstruct, the kinds of learning valued by the discipline.

Part 2 - Assessment Which Promotes Learning: Key Principles

Educational researchers and practitioners internationally argue that assessment is one of the most powerful levers that teachers have for influencing the way students respond to their courses. Learners work strategically to fulfill what they understand the priorities of the assessment system to be. Thus from the student's perspective assessment is what defines the curriculum (Ramsden 2003). This suggests that student performance can often be influenced by the design of the tasks and tests.

If assessment is to promote learning, then there are a number of key principles that academic staff need to consider in the design of their assessment systems, including, alignment, feedback, and balance.[6] **Alignment** refers to the relationship between course objectives/aims, the teaching activities (teaching methods and materials) and the assessment practices (methods, criteria, feedback). The tighter the correspondence between these three aspects of the curriculum, the more likely students are to achieve the desired objectives. Assuming that most courses have a variety of learning aims, this suggests that variety in assessment methods is necessary to cater for variety of learning outcomes. Crucial to assessment which promotes learning is appropriate and timely **feedback**. In order to contribute to student learning, the feedback must be meaningful. Staff need to also give consideration to the appropriate **balance** between under- and over-testing, that is, sufficient opportunities for students to be assessed without introducing the counter-productive effects of over-testing.

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[4] Example of assessment for **evaluative** purposes: Professional bodies will look at key assessment events within a programme as evidence of quality of graduates for programme accreditation.

[5] Example of assessment for **research**: the use of the Alternative Admissions Test in some faculties at UCT.

[6] This policy focuses on the responsibilities of academic staff to design assessment that promotes learning. It is recognized however that for learning to be successful, it must be a mutual commitment on the part of both student and teacher (see A Teaching and Learning Charter for UCT, June 2003).

Part 3 - Key Criteria for Validating Assessment

If educational assessment is understood as the process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting student performance for a variety of different purposes, then the academic community is responsible for ensuring that these assessments are valid, that is, that our judgments about student performance are sound for their intended purposes. The soundness or validity of our assessment judgments can be measured against a number of criteria. These criteria encompass the principles which inform good assessment practice (as noted above) but extend in scope beyond these concerns; they serve as the basis upon which we can be confident that our judgments about student performance are sound. They concern not only assessment which promotes learning but the integrity of the whole assessment system. All assessment practices at UCT, including online and distance mode assessment, need to be able to withstand public scrutiny in relation to these criteria.

Alignment[7] – There is a **correspondence** between programme and course objectives/aims, the teaching activities (teaching methods and materials) and the assessment practices (methods, criteria, feedback).

Reliability[8] – There is **consistency** in marking student performance: consistency within an individual marker, consistency between multiple markers in the same course, consistency within a department and Faculty.

Security – The necessary procedures are in place to ensure that opportunities for cheating are limited. Mechanisms are in place to ensure that where cheating has occurred it can be detected.

Transparency – Information about the assessment is made available to students. Students will be informed about: why they are being assessed, when they will be assessed, what methods will be used to assess, what criteria will be used to assess, how the final mark is derived, and appeal mechanisms.

Fairness – In the design and administration of the assessment there is sensitivity to issues of language and cultural diversity. Assessment administration ensures that students with particular disabilities are adequately catered for. Precaution has been taken to minimize conscious and unconscious discrimination for or against students on the basis of race, gender or any other form of prejudice.

Legitimacy[9] – Both those who are being assessed and those who use the assessment data perceive the assessment to be an appropriate, fair and worthwhile exercise.

Consequences[10] – There are mechanisms in place to monitor unintended consequences which may result from assessment interpretations and their uses.

Feasibility – The costs and practical considerations for administering the assessment are reasonable.

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[7] Example of **alignment** issue: Multiple choice questions are better suited for assessing certain kinds of knowledge and skills. Essay questions might be better suited for other kinds.

[8] Example of **reliability** issue: consistent use of UCT's grading scale across a department or faculty.

[9] Example of **legitimacy**: If students do not take an assessment seriously (for whatever reason) this undermines the meaning of the results.

[10] Example of **consequences**: A pass rate of 80% may reveal that the 20% who are failing are second language speakers of English. Thus an unintended consequence may be that language is being assessed.

Administration – There are adequate human and material resources to ensure that assessment data is efficiently and accurately processed.

While all these criteria are important, the purpose of the assessment will determine which criteria are prioritized. It is also recognized that some of these criteria are in tension with each other, and thus the trade-offs[11] need to be carefully considered.

Faculties will be responsible for ensuring that departments are applying the above minimum criteria for validity with respect to each course. Faculties and departments will also be responsible for being able to demonstrate that these criteria are being met.

The institution is responsible for providing opportunities for the professional development of academics in assessment. In turn, departments are responsible for ensuring that all staff and students involved in assessing are appropriately trained.

The institution and the faculties are responsible for ensuring that there is appropriate resource allocation for assessment to effectively serve its multiple functions.

Part 4 - Specific Assessment Policies

5.1   TYPES OF EXAMINATIONS

5.1.1   Types of examinations

5.1.2   Ordinary examinations

5.1.3   Supplementary examinations

5.1.4   Deferred examinations

5.1.5   Deferred supplementary examinations

5.1.6   Class tests, essays and other forms of assessment as examinations

5.2   ADMINISTRATION OF EXAMINATIONS

5.2.1   Preservation of confidentiality and security in typing and duplicating of examination papers

5.2.2   Identification at Examinations

5.2.3   Presence of department staff at Examinations

5.2.4   Additional time for reading question papers

5.2.5   Calculators – use at Examinations

5.2.6   Dishonesty at Examinations

5.2.7   Examinations written in Afrikaans

5.2.8   Applications for the checking of Examination results

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[11]   Example of **trade-off**: Concerns about plagiarism may result in assessment which is more secure but has poorer alignment to the learning objectives.

5.6   DUE PERFORMANCE (DP) PROCEDURES

5.7   EXAMINATION MARKING REQUIREMENTS

    5.7.1   Publication of Examination requirements

    5.7.2   Class work contributing to the final mark

    5.7.3   Marks for Examination Questions

    5.7.4   Sub-minimum mark in final examinations in the Faculty of Law

5.8   PUBLICATION OF EXAMINATION RESULTS

    5.8.1   Official publication of results

        5.8.1.1   Approval of examination results & award of degrees, diplomas & certificates
        5.8.1.2   Changes to provisional results
        5.8.1.3   Changes to final results

    5.8.2   Classification of Results

    5.8.3   Form of publication of examination results

    5.8.4   Publication of results of essays, assignments etc.

    5.8.5   Publication of results for examinations & class tests written in the first semester

    5.8.6   Publication of Provisional Examination Results at the end of academic year

    5.8.7   Range of Results in undergraduate courses

    5.8.8   Scrutiny of class test scripts

5.9   EXAMINATION TIMETABLE & THE LENGTH & PATTERN OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR

5.10   PRODUCTION OF THE EXAMINATION TIMETABLE

    5.10.1   Examination timetable construction: Hierarchy of principles

    5.10.2   Multiple lectured courses

    5.10.3   Lectures in on course schedule in more than one lecture slot

    5.10.4   Students registered for two courses in the same lecture period

    5.10.5   Courses without fixed lecture periods

    5.10.6   Faculty timetables must follow the main timetable

    5.10.7   Examining arrangements for new courses

5.10.8 Examinations in course requiring more time for marking

5.10.9 The use of Saturdays for examinations

5.10.10   Music Faculty: Examinations in October/November

5.10.11   Final date for deferred and supplementary examinations

5.10.12   Dates by which timetables to be published

5.10.13   Authority to make changes to the final timetables

5.10.14   Venues for Examinations and Class Tests: Sitting examination at centres other than Cape Town

5.10.15   Scheduling of class test and their inclusion in the mid-year examination timetable

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