Issues Impacting Student Workload at ACU

This is a companion document to the ‘Guidelines on Student Workload’ and should be read in conjunction with it. The ‘Guidelines’ provide clear principles for good practice in assessment design and emphasise that the workload associated with undertaking a unit of study comprises a range of activities. The University specifies that the workload for students should be set at 15 hours per credit point, that is, 150 hours for a 10 credit point unit. Activities that comprise the total 150 hours of workload include a combination of some or all of the following:

* Class attendance (both face-to-face and/or online)
* Undertaking required learning activities including reading or research
* Undertaking assessment tasks
* And, for units that include it, field experience.

Whether we like it or not, research shows that student effort is driven by assessment, so the onus is on academic staff to design assessment so that it distributes student effort appropriately in the unit. This document provides some examples of good and bad practice as well as practice that needs improvement, with rationales for why the good practices should be used.

**Over Assessment** happens when more assessment tasks are set than are required to make a valid assessment of students’ achievement of the learning outcomes and development of graduate attributes for a unit.

Over assessment is a problem because it tends to overwhelm students, and to precipitate surface learning behaviours instead of deep learning behaviours. Students regularly complain about over assessment, in part because assessment (more than any other feature of a unit) directs students’ study activity. It is incumbent on academic staff to appropriately design assessment to distribute and direct students’ study behaviours in ways that are appropriate to the achievement of the learning objectives and development of graduate attributes. However, this needs to be accomplished using the minimum number of assessment items necessary to inform a reliable and valid judgement about the students learning outcomes. Good assessment design is therefore critically important.

The ACU Assessment Policy stipulates that a maximum of three summative tasks can be set for any one unit of study. Three well designed tasks that appropriately assess the different kinds of learning outcomes and graduate attributes in a unit will be sufficient.

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| **Good Practice** | **Bad and questionable Practice** |
| 3 clearly articulated assessment tasks which work together to appropriately assess the learning outcomes and graduate attributes for the unit. | Weekly quizzes with each question worth a tiny mark. |
| Ungraded, corrected weekly quizzes which are designed to scaffold students’ learning. This is formative assessment which works as a learning activity. | Assessment tasks which are ‘broken up’ into ‘Parts’ so that the total number of items for the submission across all assessment tasks exceeds 3. |
| One task for a whole unit of study which is carefully designed so that it is presented as two or three parts, due over the period of the unit and each of which scaffold the parts that follow, each of which is submitted through the semester, but that cumulatively (together) assess all the unit’s learning outcomes and graduate attributes. | Setting tasks which ‘force’ students to attend lectures and tutorials (including on-line forums) or online participation that requires a student to be ‘present’ at a particular time when learning outcomes and graduate attributes for the task could be achieved without physical attendance (or synchronous on line attendance).. |
| Setting tasks that are the minimum necessary to validly judge achievement of the unit learning outcomes and embedded graduate attributes. | Overuse of one style or mode of assessment |

**Appropriate Assessment** is based on the idea that the assessment tasks selected and used must match the kind of learning outcome they are designed to assess. For example, assessment of learning outcomes comprising knowledge requires different assessment methods than the assessment of comprehension or skills of application. Over use of assessment methods that can only validly assess low level learning outcomes is not appropriate. Use of assessment tasks that do not validly assess the kind of learning outcomes they purport to measure is not appropriate.

Importantly, courses are designed so that learning progresses in a constructive sequence that allows for foundational knowledge to be acquired before more complex understandings are assimilated and skills of application developed. This means that learning outcomes are taught and assessed in the following order: 1. knowledge, 2. assimilation of knowledge and 3. skill development/ application. Thus, appropriate assessment needs to recognise this progression and ensure that there is a matching progression in the choice of assessment items.

Appropriate assessment also requires appropriate weighting of tasks so that the most valuable and important outcomes (usually those that are achieved later in units) are worth more marks than less important outcomes (usually those that are achieved earlier).

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| **Good Practice** | **Bad Practice** |
| Three assessment tasks which work together to assess the learning outcomes and graduate attributes and gradually support the learning of the student. | Assessment tasks which do not assess the learning outcomes or graduate attributes of the unit.  Assessment tasks which assess the stated learning outcomes but not the embedded graduate attributes. |
| Choosing tasks that assess the kinds of learning outcomes and graduate attributes attributed to them. | Assessment tasks that are not capable of assessing the kind of learning outcome they purport to assess.  Assessment tasks which are not optimal for assessing the kind of learning outcomes and graduate attributes as stated in the unit outline. |
| Attributing higher weighting to tasks which assess more important and valued learning outcomes and graduate attributes for the unit. | Attributing high weightings of marks to tasks which are of less value to the achievement of the higher order learning outcomes of the unit.  Assessing higher order learning outcomes before the foundational Knowledge-based learning outcomes which provide the learning platform for ‘skills-based’ learning outcomes. Normally, for example, ULO 1 and 2 should be assessed before ULO 3 |
| Setting different kinds of task as the unit progresses, such that the kind of assessment matches the kind of learning outcome to be assessed as students learning develops through the unit. | Setting tasks that repeatedly assess low level learning outcomes such that the total proportion of marks for low level outcomes exceeds what is appropriate, while tasks that progress to the assessment of higher learning outcomes are insufficiently weighted. |

**Attendance** cannot be mandated unless it is (genuinely) a requisite for achieving learning outcome/s for the unit. It is *necessary* to mandate physical attendance at practical placements, for example, in nursing and in teaching contexts where competence in physical procedural skills is impossible to achieve without physical engagement. Where a learning outcome can be achieved without attendance, however, attendance must not be mandated. Marks cannot be linked to attendance under any circumstance – marks are to be awarded for achievement of learning outcomes, not participation in the process by which these outcomes are achieved.

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| **Good Practice** | **Bad Practice** |
| Providing access to lecture and tutorial material and activities in multiple modes (online as well as face to face for example). | Providing only face to face access to lectures and tutorial material and activities. |
|  | Attributing marks to attending lectures and/or tutorials. |
| Using universal design to flexibly deliver the unit so that equity is provided to all students. |  |