Graded Assessment Pilot Project

An In Progress Research Project Report

NCVER

9th Vocational Education and Training Research Conference Workshop

North Coast Institute of TAFE, Coffs Harbour
July 2000

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ABSTRACT

The issue of graded assessment within competency based training (CBT) has attracted continuing debate since the introduction of competency based training a decade ago. While not supported by national policy there is interest in graded assessment by employers, students and higher education. Swinburne University of Technology, an intersectoral education institution in Victoria, has implemented a Graded Assessment Pilot Project and an applied research project to acknowledge and examine the tensions and challenges associated with graded assessment. To assist with the Graded Assessment Pilot Project, the Curriculum and Intersectoral Development Unit has proposed three models of graded assessment within CBT. This paper outlines the work in progress associated with the graded assessment pilot project and findings to date.
BACKGROUND

Graded Assessment - Policies and Debate

Within the last decade in Victoria, a number of educational institutions comprising TAFE sectors and Higher Education sectors have been established as a result of the restructuring of education. These conglomerate institutions are variously described as either cross-sectoral, multi-sectoral, intra-sectoral, intersectoral or dual sector structures. In Victoria they include Swinburne University of Technology, The University of Ballarat, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Victoria University. Approximately 45% of Victorian TAFE provision of training is now delivered through intersectoral institutions. All promote the provision of seamless education and lifelong learning. It is understandable that the new partnerships should significantly strengthen the opportunities for enhanced credit transfer outcomes.

It is not too early to reflect on some of the changes that have occurred as a result of this educational union. It is useful to consider some of the tensions and challenges ahead for intersectoral institutions as a result of the restructuring that has taken place and the juxtaposition of policies and philosophies.

The issue of graded assessment within competency based training (CBT) has attracted continuing debate since the introduction of competency based training a decade ago (Thomson, Mathers & Quirk, 1996, Dickson & Bloch, 1999). We are informed that graded assessment is wanted or required by a variety of educational stakeholders including students, higher education institutions and employers (P. Hagar, J. Athanasou, A. Gonzi., 1993, P. Thomson, Mathers & Quirk, 1996, Dickson & Bloch, 1999). Yet there is not an extensive body of research about either graded assessment models in competency based training or evaluation of graded assessment strategies. Recently funded NCVER projects on evaluation and the projects undertaken by individual institutions are welcome to this field of inquiry.

The Higher Education position is that CBT is not pedagogically supported but that graded assessment is. It is also relevant that grading was identified as one of four issues highlighted in research related to Competency based Assessment conducted by Dickson and reported at last years NCVER Research Conference¹.

The Australian Recognition Framework National Assessment Principles, endorsed by the Ministerial Council of the Australian National Training Authority in 1998 provide twelve assessment principles. However, grading of assessment is not mentioned. The principles of CBT require that an assessment of either competent or not yet competent status is provided. However, there is a growing body of evidence that additional information and reporting are required by both students and employers for a variety of reasons including credit transfer and articulation as well as employment opportunities.

Victorian State Training Board policy relating to CBT curriculum (January 1994) states that:

¹ M. Dickson, 1999, “Not Just Falling Over the Line” Paper presented at the 1999 NCVER Conference. Major issues included grading, skills versus knowledge, quality and resources.
It must be recognised that competency based assessment against a single level of performance does not necessarily provide useful information when it comes to the allocation of scarce resources to individuals (eg promotion, jobs, university places).

The policy also states that there are a number of assessment mechanisms that may be used to provide differentiation. These include:

- supplementary profiles of learner performance
- grading against specific variables, and
- grading on the basis of extra work undertaken.

With CBT curriculum it was clear that policy existed to support graded assessment. Since the introduction of training packages, the national policy has taken precedence over the existing policy directive.

It would appear that there are mixed messages about graded assessment policies in terms of what policy states and what happens within institutions that requires exploration and examination.
Swinburne University of Technology - A Dual Sector Approach to Graded Assessment

The Board of Technical Studies at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE has established a Graded Assessment Pilot Program to implement graded assessment within selected areas of the TAFE Division in Semester 2 of 2000. The Graded Assessment Pilot Program will examine Units of Competency in qualifications across a range of industry areas and Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels.

It has been acknowledged that graded assessment has continued to be used alongside non-graded assessment in some courses, since CBT was introduced. However, there are areas where graded assessment is not used. In addition, the introduction of a Pilot Program may mean that graded assessment will be introduced for the first time in some areas of training.

Part of the rationale for the Graded Assessment initiative at Swinburne University of Technology is that students' efforts and progression in terms of learning undertaken, in addition to the practical demonstration of skill in a training program, can be identified, recognised and formally recorded.

This is not to denigrate or diminish the importance of educational praxis with regard to the demonstration of knowledge and skill, but rather to respond to the needs of industry, students, higher education and the wider community.

In recognition of the significance of the graded assessment initiatives, the Swinburne University of Technology Intersectoral Advisory Committee (IAC) expanded and strengthened the commitment to this initiative by broadening the scope of the Graded Assessment Working Pilot to acknowledge the intersectoral implications of graded assessment. To oversee and guide the Pilot Program, a Graded Assessment Working Party was established with higher education and TAFE membership.

At the same time as the Graded Assessment Pilot Program was established, it was proposed that an applied research project be established within Swinburne University of Technology to:

- support and complement the Graded Assessment Pilot Program
- examine graded assessment approaches and the development of models for graded assessment in selected Training Package courses.
- assist articulation arrangements between TAFE and higher education
- make recommendations about intersectoral graded assessment and articulation issues to the IAC.

The research will complement the Graded Assessment Pilot Program by focusing on specific intersectoral issues associated with graded assessment and articulation including:

- professional development for teachers and lecturers within the University
- teaching/lecturing staff released to undertake project activities
• the development of information and materials for students to support project activities.

This report provides an in progress report on research being carried out by the Curriculum and Intersectoral Development Unit at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE associated with graded assessment initiatives.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research will be conducted in nine phases in a non-linear manner. The order of the research will be flexible so that it can respond to various circumstances. For example, it is anticipated that research on information about the development of new policies and practices relating to graded assessment will continue to emerge throughout the project. This will necessitate the continual updating of the research database of information on graded assessment. In addition, the formation of some of the research question will not be evident until the project activities are underway.

The following activities have or will be undertaken during the nine phases:

**Literature Search and Review**
The project began with a preliminary review of the relevant literature on Graded Assessment at a state, national and international level. The literature search was confined to graded assessment within competency based training.

**Interviews/Presentations**
A presentation was delivered by Rob Stowell, VetAssess, outlining graded assessment initiatives.

A series of unstructured interviews and discussions took place with Swinburne University of Technology staff, national and international stakeholders identified as a result of the literature search.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their subject matter, expertise and because they reflected an appropriate range of industry sectors/teaching areas within which graded assessment was being already being undertaken.

Interviews and discussions were undertaken both face-to-face, by telephone and by email.

The interviews investigated the relationship between policy and practice and sought to identify the range of graded assessment practices used, taking into consideration the complex factors which underlie policy development related to grading and its implementation.

Policy and practices were examined only in relation to graded assessment within Swinburne University of Technology TAFE, a state registered training organisation in Victoria, Australia.
The introduction of training packages has, in some cases, presented assessment challenges for teachers and trainers. Some training packages cannot easily be graded due to the structure, which focuses on the demonstration of skill rather than underpinning knowledge. This issue is, at times, incrementally exacerbated at higher AQF levels where underpinning knowledge is more complex.

Grading against units of competencies in training packages exposes additional challenges for teachers and trainers in terms of how to grade assessment against units of competency.

Learning program models have been developed to assist teachers and trainers carry out graded assessment against units of competency.

Three graded assessment models were proposed to provide information and guidance to participants in the Pilot Project.

Staff were able to select the model that best met the students' requirements with due consideration to the vocational outcome of the training.

The models proposed were:

**Model 1**

This model has been developed by VETASSESS. In this model, units of competency are graded following the development of additional performance criteria relating to:

- underpinning knowledge
- communication, language and interpersonal skills
- techniques and processes
- supervision and performance of work tasks.

**Model 2**

This model allows for a distinction between the practice and the underpinning knowledge for each unit of competency. It is the underpinning knowledge component of the unit of competency that is graded.

**Model 3**

This model also allows for emphasis to given to the grading of underpinning knowledge for several units of competency through examination of evidence directly related to each unit of competency.
To assist in articulation and credit transfer, the underpinning knowledge component of the units of competency are structured into formal theory subjects.

It is the underpinning knowledge component of the unit of competency that is graded.

Professional Development and Feedback Workshops

A series of professional development workshops were conducted across four campus sites to explain, discuss and obtain feedback about the Swinburne University of Technology TAFE Graded Assessment Initiative to staff.

An information kit was distributed to participants at each of these workshops containing:

- Project Contacts
- Graded Assessment Models
- Key Graded Assessment References
- Glossary of Graded Assessment Terms
- Examples of Assessment Methods
- Graded Assessment Exemplars.

Information gathered at these meetings contributed to the identification of issues associated with graded assessment including:

- methods of assessment
- grading approaches
- articulation to higher education
- administrative issues
- appeals policies and procedures
- professional development requirements.

Graded Assessment Pilot Projects

A two tiered Graded Assessment Pilot Program has been developed.

The areas of study were selected on the basis of a representative sampling of AQF levels and industry sectors.

Stage 1 of the Graded Assessment Pilot Project involved:

- investigation of graded assessment models within CBT
- investigation of graded assessment approaches across intersectoral institutions
- development of administrative procedures to support the implementation of graded assessment
- development of a targeted professional development strategy
- identification of issues relevant to graded assessment.
Stage 2 of the Graded Assessment Pilot Project will involve:

- evaluation of Stage 1 of the Graded Assessment Pilot Project
- development of assessment instruments to assist graded assessment
- further activities will be determined as a result of the evaluation of Stage 1
- a final report including a series of recommendations associated with extending the implementation of graded assessment throughout Swinburne University of Technology TAFE.

Case Studies  
This phase will involve undertaking case studies of current graded assessment practices drawn from Swinburne University of Technology TAFE, including VET in VCE that applies to Model 1 of the proposed Graded Assessment Models.

Issues Paper  
An issues paper will be prepared which describes the practices and policy implications related to graded assessment within Swinburne University of Technology.

Graded Assessment Workshops  
A workshop will be convened to coincide with the completion of the Pilot Projects and Graded Assessment Issues Paper. The aim of the workshop will be to obtain feedback on:

- the findings of the Graded Assessment Pilot Project at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE
- implications of various aspects of the research including professional development needs for staff, and
- additional information sources and new leads.

Final Report  
A final report will be prepared for distribution within Swinburne.
FINDINGS TO DATE

The Research Project has been underway for four months. The following are some of the findings and issues evident to date:

Findings:

• A significant amount of grading occurs informally.
• Significant time and resources are required through professional development.
• There are "mixed messages" about CBT and assessment policies.

Issues:

• Assessment Language

The language of assessment is an important starting point to participation. Feedback has confirmed that assessment language is often difficult, full of jargon and constantly changing.

• Administrative Issues

A significant amount of time has been taken up with trying to define and refine the recording and reporting of results for students within the technological capabilities of computer systems.

Establishing processes and procedures to inform students about the graded assessment initiative and establishing appropriate appeal mechanisms has required significant liaison and negotiation.

• Resistance to Change

For some people there is a degree of frustration with the pace and degree of change, given that they had previously graded assessment and had discontinued the practice.
## REFERENCES

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