Graded Assessment
A Research Project Update Report

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ABSTRACT

At last year's NCVER conference a paper was presented that outlined the work in progress associated with the introduction of graded assessment at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE. The issue of graded assessment within competency based training (CBT) has received considerable attention in the past year. However the policy framework at both national and state levels remains unchanged. Swinburne University of Technology, an intersectoral education institution in Victoria, has formally implemented graded assessment within its TAFE sector. An applied research project to acknowledge and examine the tensions and challenges associated with that implementation was put in place. It has also evaluated the Swinburne University administrative reporting system to accommodate grading. This paper provides an update of these graded assessment activities and reports on findings from the pilot implementation that was conducted last year.
BACKGROUND

At last year's NCVER conference a paper was presented that outlined the rationale for the Graded Assessment initiative at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE. Part of the reasoning behind the strategy included an acknowledgment that students' efforts and progression in terms of learning, in addition to the practical demonstration of skill in a training program, should be identified, recognised and formally recorded.

Over the last twelve months, there have been rumblings of interest in Graded Assessment at both national and state level. A good deal of attention, and public funding, has been directed towards assessment in general and in particular, towards the consistency and validity of assessment.

This report provides an update on research carried out by the Curriculum and Intersectoral Development Unit (C&IDU) at Swinburne University of Technology TAFE on graded assessment initiatives during the last twelve months. Since last year's report, graded assessment has been piloted at Swinburne TAFE and was formally introduced this year.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from this experience. Perhaps the most important lesson is that professional development is essential for teachers, trainers and assessors. There is value in providing opportunities for ongoing reflection about assessment in general, and a need to provide support in the changes associated with graded assessment. This is particularly the case with the increasing number of sessional teachers, trainers and assessors.

RESEARCH INFORMING PRACTICE

Graded Assessment has been consistently referred to in a number of reports relevant to VET. The graded assessment initiative at Swinburne has involved keeping a keen eye out for such reports in order to inform our activities.

What follows is a snapshot of the influential reports. It is by no means intended as an exhaustive list and is not presented in any order of importance.

The Schofield Report of the Independent Review of the Quality of Training in Victoria's Apprenticeship and Traineeship System (2000) was a useful reference point in that it, amongst other things, identified assessment as an area requiring attention and provided strategies for improving quality provision of assessments. Carnegie (Pathways In Partnership 2000, p. iv) noted that any changes in current assessment reporting arrangements should be driven by factors within VET, rather than as a means of addressing any higher education admissions issue. This study also revealed an increased concern for consistency across states and territories and the need to promote confidence in assessment especially graded assessments.

While acknowledging that any changes in current reporting arrangements should be driven by factors within VET, Swinburne, as an intersectoral institution, cannot ignore
the fact that many of our students specifically request graded results to support their pathway to higher education.

The Queensland State Training Authority published what might be regarded as strong support for grading in a report prepared by Dr Larry Smith (2001, pVI, pX). He argues that there are compelling arguments in support of the adoption of graded competency based assessment within TAFE. He identifies six reasons for justifying what he describes as 'performance level' assessment. These are:

1. improve both the validity and consistency of the assessments taking place because it would compel assessors to analyse learner performance with much greater care and scrutiny than is necessary in the two criteria system

2. improve the public perception of assessment validity and consistency by reporting on the obvious differences in knowledge and skill among persons who have been assessed as competent

3. provide more information to employers seeking to make valid decisions regarding employment and promotion

4. provide motivation and feedback to students

5. provide valuable information for teachers, trainers and assessors about their own performance.

Smith's sixth reason is that "an increasing number of providers are doing it anyway, in very different ways, with very different levels of quality control and many employers and universities are using those ratings as a measure of the relative quality of candidates, which will increasingly disadvantage persons being assessed by assessors who are not ascribing grades", p X.

ANTA, through the NCVER, sanctioned a research project on this subject. The purpose of the NCVER research (Williams and Bateman, 2001) was to inform policy development by taking into account changes in the VET environment that have had an impact upon the impetus for graded assessment.

The study proposed the development of key national principles to be complementary to the principles of assessment that underpin the graded assessment policies and practices in states and territories, and guide individual RTOs and assessors. The project also recommended that where statewide consistency is of primary concern, each State and Territory should develop guidelines on graded assessment. Finally, the project promoted the idea that RTOs should have the autonomy to develop local policies, procedures and guidelines to support their assessors in implementing grading. This is not to say that grading must take place but that, if it does, then policies, procedures and guidelines should conform to key national principles.

Williams' and Bateman's findings revealed an increased concern for consistency across state and territories and the need to promote confidence in assessment, especially graded assessments. The findings support the need for national guidance on the issue of grading within a framework that allows for sufficient autonomy at the
RTO level to allow for flexible responses to client needs that reflect current and local contexts.

Griffin et al (2000), in their research work associated with assessment and reporting of VET courses within Senior Secondary Certificates in Victoria, point out that additional information about assessment is required to support a blend of recognition and selection objectives. Additional information may be required to differentiate between students on either a pathway to higher education or into industry. There are also times when additional information about student attainment is required apart from general ranking of students.

The end result of this multiplicity of needs is for broad policies so that each perspective can be covered. Isn't this what constitutes 'good policy'? Or does it mean that there should not be a policy, because it would be too difficult to meet all these needs?

There is still a lack of formal national or Victorian state training board policy on grading. It would appear that mixed messages about graded assessment continue in the face of policy redevelopment.

In his presentation to the NVCER funded national conference in May 2001 titled *Upgrading Assessment*, Andre Lewis from ANTA put on record that, in terms of grading, there should be:

- A validated national rationale for grading in competency based vocational education and training
- Transparency of grading intent and process
- Nationally agreed, consistent and valid approach to grading
- Equity in practice
- Cost effectiveness.

There is now a solid body of evidence around Australia that more information about assessment is required over and above the binary result or either competent or not yet competent provided by competency based training. The stakeholders who require information about grading are clear. They include industry, students, employers and, in relation to VET In Schools, parents of students.

There is strong evidence that professional development for teachers, trainers and assessors is required in relation to all aspects of making assessment judgements and that some form of moderation should apply (Lewis 2001).

National pronouncements on grading take the form of a Jim Hacker (of *Yes Minister* notoriety) type of response which might read, "that it is a policy that there will be no policy on grading" … within competency based training.

Against this backdrop, Swinburne University TAFE has continued on its pathway to formalise graded assessment across the TAFE Division. The approach that has been taken might be likened to that of a prairie dog that keeps burrowing away, pausing every now and then to stick its head above ground to check out the latest results of research on grading. Based on the Swinburne TAFE experience, the need for Professional Development associated with grading, and assessment in general,
cannot be overestimated. It is essential if the commitment to producing a high quality VET system is genuine.
SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY - AN INTERSECTORAL APPROACH TO GRADED ASSESSMENT

The Board of Technical Studies (BTS) at Swinburne University of Technology, with the support of the Intersectoral Advisory Committee (IAC) consisting of higher education and TAFE members, established a Graded Assessment Pilot Program to implement graded assessment for selected Training Package qualifications in Semester 2 of 2000.

The Graded Assessment Pilot Program examined Units of Competency in qualifications across a range of industry areas and Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels. Three models for Graded Assessment were developed as a direct outcome of the Graded Assessment Pilot Project. Regular reports to the BTS and IAC took place during 2000. These models were the result of a detailed examination and trialing of a range of models. In addition, Professional Development sessions and workshops were conducted with staff (both teaching and administrative) from both the TAFE and higher education.

At a special meeting of the BTS on 15 December 2000, they agreed to a number of components of the Swinburne TAFE Division Graded Assessment initiative. In principle, support was given to the introduction of graded assessment for all courses within the Division unless specifically requested or indicated otherwise, and that School Directors, in conjunction with Departmental Managers and/or School Management Teams, would decide which graded assessment model(s) would apply in each School/Departmental context.

Details relating to the Graded Assessment Models are contained in Appendix No 1. They are:

**Model 1** Unit of Competence with a qualitative statement derived from a percentage mark

**Models 2 and 3** Unit(s) of Competence and additional subjects for the embedded, or underpinning, knowledge component (keeping in mind that all overall assessment must be against the Unit of Competence)

**Model 4** Competency with Merit.

It is important to note that graded assessment had to be introduced alongside the existing Office of Employment, Training and Tertiary Education (ETTE) reporting requirements. Competent and Not Yet Competent would remain as the only result categories to be reported to ETTE - the State Training Authority. This aspect of the project took a significant amount of technological manoeuvring over a considerable period of time. The focus of this report is based on statistical data associated with module completion rather than student performance.

At present there does not appear to be a preference for any particular Model across industry sectors or AQF levels. However, there is continued support for grading
among students. It is considered too early for any significant analysis of either how effectively the models work or whether any particular Model is preferred. Evaluation of the models selected will be conducted each year in order to determine any trends.

Since the BTS meeting last year, the C&IDU has put in place a strategy to assist the TAFE Division make the transition to graded assessment. This has included:

- Meeting/s with each TAFE Head of Department to explain and discuss the implications of the graded assessment initiative
- Meeting/s with the Manager Student Administration to ensure that the National/State Accredited courses Module database forms can be adapted in line with the graded assessment initiative
- Adjustment to the student administration information data base to accommodate state training authority reporting requirements and graded assessment reporting requirements for students
- Publication of a series of articles in both TAFE and Higher Education newsletters to promote the initiative
- Liaison with other providers and Industry Training Boards (State and national) to examine and discuss their graded assessment initiatives
- Development of charts to clarify assessment processes
- A schedule of Professional Development workshops as part of the TAFE Professional Development Calendar and as individual activities within Teaching Departments.

Within each of the teaching Department areas at Swinburne, Field of Study groups operate. Amongst other activities, these groups consider graded assessment issues including centrally developed Swinburne examinations, campus specific and teacher specific assessment activities, and combinations of these. Issues associated with consistency of grading continue to be at the forefront of their discussions.

The Swinburne view is now that graded assessment can strengthen the quality of assessment decisions. Fundamental to achieving it has been a commitment to provide Professional Development for staff. This requirement cannot be stressed enough. It has been heartening to witness the growth in teacher confidence about making assessment decisions. However, there is still much to be done in this area. The introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) has intensified the requirement for the policies and procedures associated with assessment to be more clearly understood and supported by documentation.

The introduction of grading has necessitated a thorough exploration of what 'grading' means. Moreover, it has required a detailed re-examination and documentation of the assessment process itself. Appendix No 2 is a sample of the type of flow chart that was documented to clarify the checks and balances associated with assessment and to improve the understanding of assessment and appeals processes. It became
obvious when we tried to chart these processes in relation to grading that we needed clearer documentation about assessment processes in general. Once again, it takes time to develop such flow charts in a collaborative manner. However, this time has proved to be a worthwhile investment, given the involvement of student representatives and a broad range of staff, including representatives from higher education, has resulted in many positive outcomes. Unfortunately the flow chart depicting the process for grading is yet to be finalised.

On reflection, graded assessment could not, indeed should not be implemented without the infrastructure to support it, stakeholder support and professional development of the staff involved.
PROJECT ACTIVITY FINDINGS

The research methodology associated with the project was outlined in last year's paper. This is available on the NCVER website at http://www.ncver.edu.au. It was planned that research would be conducted in nine phases in a non-linear manner. The sequence of these phases needed to be flexible so that the research could respond to circumstances. So, the project activities were not conducted in a linear manner. For example, it was anticipated that research for information relating to new policies and practices affecting graded assessment would continue to emerge throughout the project. This has certainly been the case and necessitated regular updating the research database. To a certain extent, there has recently been less urgency to keep up to date with current research. The reason for this was that it was felt that no 'research' as such, would produce a definitive policy on grading within competency based assessment. There was a general belief in 'just getting on with it'.

In addition, it was considered that some of our research questions would not be evident until the Project activities were well under way. Once again, this remains true. For example, the Professional Development needs of staff have become clearer and will continue to do so, especially as the requirements of the AQTF are implemented.

The following findings and issues associated with graded assessment have also become clearer over the last twelve months.

General Findings from Swinburne Graded Assessment Initiative

- Policy development in relation to grading is lagging, although guidance about the characteristics is becoming clearer
- A significant amount of grading occurs nationwide- but informally
- Across the industry sectors, there has been no identified support for one grading approach, indeed there is preference for a range of approaches
- Significant time and resources are required to implement grading especially for Professional Development
- Technology and State Training Authority reporting requirements may influence grading
- "Call it what it is". The Swinburne initiative, as described at the NCVER conference last year, was called 'performance assessment'. The strong message from staff at Swinburne was to revert to 'graded assessment'.

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.

- Confidence in Assessment
There is a degree of apprehension to share information about assessment activities. Many teachers felt that exposing their assessment strategies to scrutiny would expose their professional judgments. Professional Development has encouraged teachers and trainers to be more confident about their assessment strategies, in general and grading strategies in particular.

- **Administrative Issues**

  A significant amount of time has been dedicated to defining, refining and reconfiguring the recording and reporting of graded results 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, regular and ongoing liaison and negotiation.

  Utilising technology to set up and manage dual reporting requirements that provide only a binary report to the State Training Authority but a graded result to students has been complicated and time consuming.

  To do this, an additional results category was eventually added to the administration data base.

- **Resistance to Change**

  For some people, there is frustration with the pace and direction of change, given that they had previously graded assessment, had discontinued the practice, and were now being directed to reinstate it.

  Some industry sectors are vehemently opposed to the introduction of grading.

- **Clarity of Units of Competence in Training Packages**

  Some people complained about the lack of guidance or clarity of information in Training Packages to assist with making assessment judgements. Among groups of trainers and teachers, this comment was often followed by observation that curriculum also did not always provide the degree of information that was necessary.
• **Professional Development**

A series of professional development workshops for staff were initially conducted across four campus sites to explain, discuss and obtain feedback about the initiative.

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
- policies and procedures for appeals
- Professional Development requirements.

The importance of Professional Development has already been stressed.
CONCLUSION

Swinburne University TAFE is committed to the establishment of graded assessment within an overall quality assured assessment system. Significant effort has been put towards establishing quality assessment systems and processes. Ongoing Professional Development of teachers and trainers and assessors is extending their assessment expertise. While this has been occurring at the local Swinburne TAFE level, there is a need for broader State and national involvement. This could include the development of assessment resources such as tools and validation activities to support staff involved in graded assessment decision making. The forthcoming national Training Package support materials relating to assessment will be welcomed. Getting these resources used on the ground can only strengthen quality assessment activities and practices. Swinburne University TAFE will continue to provide quality, graded assessment by adding to activities and products that support this initiative.
## Graded Assessment

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<th>Graded Assessment</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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| 1. Whole Units of Competency with a qualitative descriptive statement and a percentage | Result reported to student as either:  
- Written descriptive statement at the Departmental level (optional)  
- Competent (GCM) and a result as a percentage, eg: 85%, or  
- Not Yet Competent (GNYC) No percentage is provided against GNYC |

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| 2. A Unit of Competency is assessed  
In support of the assessment, the embedded knowledge component of the Unit of Competency is constructed into a theory subject. This is graded. | The Units of Competency and subjects require approval as a Learning Program.  
The Swinburne University TAFE Learning Program would be given an internal Swinburne Learning Program code and each subject would be given a Swinburne subject code.  
The result against a Unit of Competence would record either:  
- Competent (CM), or  
- Not Yet Competent (NYC)  
The Statement of Results would also contain a grade against the Subject:  
HD D Credit Pass Fail |

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| 3. Components of multiple Units of Competence are gathered together into Subjects  
(supported by a mapping document that clearly identifies and tracks the links between the Units of Competency and the Subject) | The Units of Competency and Subjects requires approval as a Learning Program  
The Swinburne University TAFE Learning Program would be given an internal Swinburne Learning Program code and each subject would be given a Swinburne subject code.  
The result against a Unit of Competence would record either:  
- Competent (CM), or  
- Not Yet Competent (NYC)  
The Statement of Results would also contain a grade against the Subject:  
HD D Credit Pass Fail |
4. Units of Competency are graded as:
   CM
   NYC
   C with merit
   C with distinction

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<th>There is a keen interest in developing this model. More work is required to determine what constitutes “merit”, etc.</th>
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All reporting to PETE relating to student completion is either Competent or Not Yet Competent
ASSESSMENT

At a time as agreed
- Competent
- Not Yet Competent

OR

At any time if
- deemed at risk, or
- urgent attention required, or
- request for interview

Informal Review and Resolution:
- Review Learning and Assessment
- Upgrade to Competent
- Required to undergo further Training and/or assessment
- Not Yet Competent is confirmed - agreement reached
- Not Yet Competent is confirmed - agreement not reached

Formal Review and Resolution:
- Upgrade to Competent
- Not Yet Competent confirmed
- Required to undergo further assessment

Recommend Withdrawal
Refer to Student Progress Review and Appeals procedures

Repeat Assessment Activities

Learning and Assessment Strategy
REFERENCES

- Griffin, P., Gillis, S., Keating, J. and Fennessey, D., 2000b, ‘Assessment and reporting of VET courses within senior secondary certificates’, ANTA funded research project, University of Melbourne, Melbourne
- Smith, Dr L. R., 2000, ‘Issues impacting on the quality of assessment in vocational education and training in Queensland’, Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations, Brisbane