

ITL Resource No. 5

THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

Each of the seven Improving Teaching & Learning Resources can be read and used individually, although there are cross-references as some are closely related. However, it is important to read the *Introduction*, as it deals with the purpose of the Resources and how they relate to the Higher Education Quality Committee's quality assurance mandate and its quality promotion and capacity development activities.

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FOREWORD

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) prioritised quality issues in teaching and learning very early on in the development of its quality assurance systems. Mandated by legislation to conduct institutional audits and programme accreditation and to promote quality and quality assurance, the HEQC initiated a project in 2002 aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education.

The project on teaching and learning was intended to refocus attention on one of the core functions of higher education in an environment where the restructuring of higher education had given much attention to issues such as governance, financing and the 'size and shape' of the system. The project also reflected the importance of quality-related capacity development in the work of the HEQC, especially in a context where historical disadvantage impacts on the capacities of academic staff to plan and deliver good quality programmes and on the capacities of students to benefit from them. These issues needed to be addressed and to be brought to the centre of the debate about the purposes of a new quality assurance system for South Africa. Moreover, the project fitted in with international debates and developments in higher education, which were prioritising the learning experiences of students as well as giving increased attention to the professionalisation of higher education teaching and to staff development and support.

The HEQC set up the project in a way that would involve a number of role-players. It was important to draw on teaching and learning expertise in higher education as well as maximise the impact of those involved within higher education institutions. The Resources for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning should be seen therefore as the fruit of an extensive collaboration between the HEQC, a large number of experts and practitioners and a range of public and private higher education institutions.

It is hoped that the Resources will be adapted creatively for a number of purposes and used by higher education practitioners individually and in teams in the process of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Improvements in teaching and learning are essential to give effect to the transformation objectives in the restructuring of higher education, especially in relation to redress and equity and to the responsiveness of higher education to national goals and challenges.

The HEQC looks forward to further cooperation with key partners in higher education in effectively developing and using the Resources. We would like to acknowledge that funding for the project and this publication was made available by DFID and the Carnegie Corporation.

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Executive Director
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The Improving Teaching and Learning (ITL) Resources are the product of collaboration between the HEQC and a wide range of academics based in private and public higher education institutions (HEIs). These included several academics from other countries who assisted with the project or provided advice. The 14 regional workshops at which the draft Resources were introduced and discussed in 2003 were generously hosted by public HEIs.

FOCUS AREA

This ITL Resource on *The Assessment of Student Learning* applies to institutional, programme and course¹ levels of assessment practice. Assessment policies and systems are usually determined at institutional or faculty level, while their implementation and the extent of their effectiveness need to be evaluated at programme and course level. This Resource is closely related to, and should be used in conjunction with, Resource No. 1 on *Programme Planning, Design & Management* and Resource No. 2 on *Programme & Course Review*.

The assessment of student learning is understood to mean the practice of designing formal tasks for students to complete and then of making inferences from and estimating the worth of their performances on these tasks. Assessment can also be understood to be a form of research that aims to find out what students know, understand and can do. In terms of outcomes-based approaches, assessment is a process during which evidence of performance is gathered and evaluated against agreed criteria. As with the principle of triangulating research methods, so with assessment: one has a better likelihood of ascertaining what students can do if a range of different assessment (research) methods is employed and if the 'research instruments' are fit for their purpose.

Assessment considerations should feature strongly in overall academic planning. Smaller institutions, such as private HEIs, need to pay particular attention to planning and resource allocation in relation to the quality management of assessment. However, for all institutions, the development of appropriate assessment policies and systems has significant implications in respect of planning for the efficient and effective use of

¹ In all cases the use of the term 'course' in these Resources can be replaced with the term 'module'. The term 'subject' in its narrow sense sometimes refers to a course or module within a programme.

resources. In the case of some HEIs, this realisation has led to the review of the institution's overall curriculum structure.

RATIONALE

In South Africa the goal of a transformed higher education (HE) system is sought by means of a variety of strategies. Significant among these are measures to widen access, improve throughput and completion rates and produce graduates with the knowledge and skills considered relevant to the needs of a developing society and economy (see the *National Plan for Higher Education: Ministry of Education, 2001*). Assuring the quality of the assessment of student learning is central to the achievement of these aims for three reasons:

1. Assessment has the potential to determine whether more equitable access (student input) is being realised in the form of more equitable achievement (student output). Historically, assessment practices have often acted as barriers to student progress. In order to strengthen public confidence and promote the credibility of assessment in HE, its principles, methods and procedures need to be both robust and transparent and its assessors accountable.
2. Although the curriculum may target disciplinary and professional knowledge and skills, appropriate to the goals of individual, social and economic transformation, if assessment procedures fail to prioritise and test for these competences, students are unlikely to achieve these intended learning outcomes.
3. It is well documented that assessment has a critical influence on the quality of teaching and learning (the 'wash back' effect) and so can be used as a powerful point of leverage for change and improvement in education. Thus measures to assure high quality assessment of student learning that also activate its potential to improve teaching and learning should be a priority in the face of the challenges currently posed to HE. The quality of assessment is widely considered to be a key indicator of the 'health' of teaching and learning in HEIs. HEQC criteria for institutional audit and programme accreditation give prominence to the quality management of assessment systems and practice. The need for capacity development among teaching staff in this area is also widely acknowledged.

Furthermore, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has assigned to the HEQC – as the Education and Training Quality Assurer (ETQA) for the higher education and training (HET) band – formal functions with respect to the quality assurance (QA) of assessment in the HE system:

1. In terms of the ETQA Regulations (1998), the HEQC is responsible for ensuring the integrity, validity and reliability of assessment in the HET system. Via the combination of institutional audit and programme accreditation that constitutes the HEQC's QA system, it will ensure that it fulfils this responsibility.
2. However, the HEQC recognises the right of the Senates of public HEIs to retain operational responsibility for the assessment of their students in terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997.
3. The HEQC therefore delegates responsibility for assuring and maintaining the integrity, validity and reliability of assessment to its constituent HEIs, both public and private, under certain conditions. For example, the HEQC devolves responsibility for the QA of assessor training to HEIs, provided that they periodically provide sufficient evidence of having established effective quality management systems in that area. As part of the implementation of its integrated national QA system, the HEQC will, during institutional audits, be asking HEIs to demonstrate the effectiveness of their assessment policies and systems. Similarly, in its accreditation and re-accreditation processes,² the HEQC will scrutinise assessment practices at programme level.

DISCUSSION

For practitioners to be reflective, scholarly and innovative, they need to engage in robust debates that are theoretically informed. Kathy Lockett, the coordinator of the working group, was asked to write this section so as to reflect on issues discussed by the working group in the course of developing the first draft of the Resources. Liz Sahigh, of the Academic Development Centre at Rhodes University, also contributed to this section. **The views and ideas put forward in the following discussion do not necessarily reflect the policies, views or practices of the HEQC.**

Assessment is arguably the teaching–learning practice where academic staff most directly exert power over students. There is an increasing awareness on the part of institutions of the benefits – particularly in assessing large groups – of involving students in some assessments through self-assessment and peer assessment. (It is important to note that what is considered a large group varies from one discipline to another.)

² See the HEQC's *Criteria for Institutional Audits* (2004a), particularly Criteria 11-14, and the *Criteria for Programme Accreditation* (2004b).

Students need to be strategic about being assessed since it is also the educational event that holds the highest stakes for them in terms of their achievement. As such, assessment should afford students sufficient opportunities for individual feedback on their progress. Assessment should be authentic, in that it promotes the practice of directly assessing students on credible intellectual tasks, as opposed to making inferences about students' abilities through indirect assessment. Furthermore, authentic assessment tasks help students to focus on demonstrating their ability to discern critical knowledge and to act effectively in situations that make sense in their future professional contexts.

Given the above, measures to quality assure the accountability, transparency and rigour of assessment practices are critical, as are measures to ensure that teaching staff are competent to carry out their assessment responsibilities professionally.

However, the development of fair, valid and efficient assessment provision in HE requires a more comprehensive role for assessment than has traditionally been the norm. The purposes for which assessment is used need to be extended beyond the summative (the measuring, recording and reporting of end-point achievement) and the diagnostic (indicating aptitude and preparedness for a course of study). Assessment should also be used for developmental or formative purposes, namely to inform and strengthen learning and teaching. Assessment should therefore be recognised as an essential and integral part of teaching and learning. The realisation of such a role for assessment in HE is dependent on a concerted effort to professionalise the assessment practices of academic staff, which includes encouraging theoretically informed discussion and research. Assessment practice in HE needs to be de-mystified and made more explicit, accountable and transparent. This could be done, for example, by developing guides for students on assessment.

On the other hand, an emphasis on assessment, reinforced by the modularisation of the curriculum, can lead to *over*-assessment and the consequent over-burdening of staff and students alike. This tendency can be countered by a judicious and strategic use of assessment for clearly defined purposes. For example, summative assessment can be spread across a module, using a range of methods such as projects and assignments to alleviate the heavy weighting and high stakes traditionally attached to examinations at the end of the module. The use of structured and supported peer- and self-assessment for formative purposes lightens the marking burden on staff and enables students to gain a better grasp of the meaning of the assessment criteria. The development of a 'good fit' between the purpose of assessment, the nature of the content and skills being assessed, and the assessment method selected, is crucial to achieving validity in assessment. 'Good fit' usually requires a diversification of assessment methods and

practices within a course, which in turn can alleviate the burden of over-assessment and accommodate a wider range of learning and teaching styles.

Our emphasis on the principle of curriculum alignment³ suggests that assessment methods and tasks should be aligned with the content and skills taught during the course. In other words, care should be taken to ensure that assessment tasks do indeed test for the learning outcomes that were specified for the course. This involves making explicit the learning outcomes and levels of knowledge, understanding and skills one intends students to achieve and then designing assessment instruments that will effectively test students' attainment of these outcomes. More specific 'assessment criteria' can be designed for each assessment task.

In the Suggested Good Practice Descriptors below, we advocate an approach to assessment that is appropriate to HE; this can be described as a 'weak' – as opposed to behaviourist – approach (see the *Introduction* to the ITL Resources, for further discussion). The approach advocated allows educators to use their professional judgment to interpret the meaning of specific learning outcomes and assessment criteria in their teaching practice in ways that are sensitive to disciplines and contexts. Student performance is understood as indirect evidence of students' cognitive development or learning that has taken place. In other words, from a student's set of performances the assessor makes an inference about levels of competence or learning attained; and, crucially, the two concepts – performance and competence – are kept separate and not elided. This approach allows students to demonstrate their learning (competence) in creative and unanticipated ways (performance). It is important to make provision for and to reward students who perform unexpectedly and creatively, as well as to provide a guide to expected performance by means of pre-specified learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Some in HE are sceptical about SAQA's insistence on the assessment of generic skills or 'critical cross-field outcomes' (see the *Introduction* to the ITL Resources, for further discussion) because there is no consensus that generic skills exist independently of specific knowledge domains and contexts of practice. Given this lack of consensus, we advocate the development of explicit academic and professional skills as well as a sound knowledge and theoretical base in the disciplines. It is the concept of 'knowing in action' or 'praxis' in specific disciplinary or professional contexts that perhaps better expresses our understanding of the application of knowledge and skills. This concept suggests that 'generic skills' will mean different things in the different disciplinary and professional contexts in which they are embedded. Furthermore, disciplinary or

³ See Resource No. 1 on *Programme Planning, Design & Management* and Resource No. 2 on *Programme & Course Review*.

professional experts within communities of practice are required to determine the significance of students' performances in these contexts.

EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

The following questions may be adapted for use in self-evaluating the quality of an institution, faculty or programme's assessment of student learning.

1. Does the institution have an assessment policy and effective procedures for guaranteeing its implementation? To what extent do the policy and procedures ensure academic and professional standards in the design, approval, implementation and review of assessment strategies for subject/ courses/ programmes and for the qualifications awarded?
2. How does the institution moderate and validate its assessment procedures and results, in order to ensure their validity and reliability and the integrity of the qualifications it awards? To what extent are the views of the students and other key stakeholders solicited?
3. How is the institution dealing with SAQA's challenge to recognise prior learning?
4. To what extent are the academic staff who are responsible for official decisions on assessment, appropriately trained and experienced and competent to assess? What staff development opportunities does the institution offer its teaching staff in order to improve and professionalise assessment practice?
5. To what extent are institutional/ faculty/ professional rules and regulations governing assessment adhered to? To what extent is assessment conducted securely and with rigour and fairness?
6. To what extent are the principles, procedures and practices of assessment explicit, valid and reliable?
7. To what extent are assessment decisions recorded and documented securely, accurately and systematically over time?
8. To what extent are the assessment methods and tasks aligned to the learning outcomes, content and teaching-learning activities of the programme/ subject/ course/ module?
9. To what extent are the purposes for which assessment is used explicit and appropriate? To what extent are assessment data and results used for developmental purposes – to adjust teaching and assessment practices and to improve the curriculum?



EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTORS

Evaluative Question 1: Policy and procedures

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

There is an institutional policy on assessment, which makes explicit the values, theories or philosophy of assessment on which it is based.

The policy aims to ensure the development of valid, reliable and transparent assessment practices in keeping with academic and professional standards.

The policy also provides for the effective validation of assessment practices.

There are procedures through which faculties and departments/ schools are accountable for the implementation of the institutional assessment policy.

The policy includes guidelines or regulations for the following: formative assessment; the provision of feedback to students; the weighting of class marks (continuous assessment) and examinations; security procedures; disciplinary and appeals procedures; regulations for marking; grading; aegrotats; supplementary examinations; condoned passes; duly performed (DP) requirements; plagiarism etc.

There are structures at institutional, faculty and department/ school level to implement, monitor and review the assessment policy. Assessment decisions made by the committees/ boards at these levels are validated by external expert peers.

Academic managers are committed to the implementation of the institutional assessment policy, and teaching staff and students are aware of the responsibilities and rights that it accords them.



Evaluative Question 2: Moderation system

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The assessment of students at course level

Internal examiners (or 'assessors' in SAQA terminology)

The academic staff who teach a subject/ course/ module are responsible for designing, running and marking both formative and summative student assessments, for recording the results and for giving feedback to students.

The institution makes provision, including time release, for staff development in assessment, especially for new staff members.

Internal examiners (or 'internal moderators' in SAQA terminology)

Internal moderation is conducted to provide a reliability check on the marking process and to provide developmental feedback to staff on their assessment practice.

For summative assessment, and especially where more than one marker is involved, there is effective sampling (for example, 50% of the final marks are moderated) via an appropriate internal system that includes checking the reliability of the marking.

Note: Traditionally such internal examining has been done (after the marking is completed) by another academic, who did not teach on the course, usually from the same department. But for large classes it has often been found to be effective for the marking team, led by the course convenor, to work together and compare and moderate one another's marking as the marking proceeds.

The assessment of students at exit qualifications

External examiners (or 'external moderators' in SAQA terminology)

It is recommended that for summative assessment for exit qualifications, external examiners be appointed to examine at least 60% of the credits at the exit level at which a qualification is awarded (e.g. for summative assessment of the Bachelor's degree at level 7 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), 72 credits are externally examined).

The institution has clear criteria for the appointment of external examiners. Ideally, they are recommended by the examining department, and are independent experts in their fields with qualifications at least one level above the qualification being examined (except of course for Doctoral level), and are changed every three years. Reciprocal arrangements should be avoided. External examiners are approved by Senate and are responsible to Senate.

The institution provides documentation on the curriculum and all relevant assessments and guidelines or a format to assist external examiners in the completion of their reports. Completed external examiners' reports are returned to the academic concerned and also copied to the Programme Director/ Coordinator or Head of Department/ School. Where problems are raised, these are discussed with the academic concerned and the academic manager ensures that agreed improvements are effected.

External examiners have the right to adjust marks and they are required to approve the final marks list for the qualification concerned. Ideally external examiners should also comment on:

- The validity of the assessment instruments in relation to the selected content and the specified learning outcomes, ideally prior to their implementation (there should be a suitable range of different assessment methods to ensure that all outcomes are validly assessed);
- The quality of student learning and the standard of student attainment across the spectrum of results in relation to the learning outcomes, international academic/ professional standards and relevant generic qualification standards;
- The reliability of the marking process;
- The quality of feedback given to students; and
- Any concerns or irregularities with respect to the observation of institutional/ professional regulations.

Remuneration for external examiners is commensurate with the scope and level of their duties.



The validation of a programme's assessment strategies

Programme evaluators (or 'verifiers' in SAQA terminology)

Programme evaluators are the disciplinary/ professional experts who form part of an external programme evaluation team. They may be appointed by either the institution, the HEQC or another ETQA (e.g. a professional body).

The evaluating agency provides guidelines or a format outlining their functions and clear criteria for their appointment (e.g. as for external examiners, but they should also have qualifications and/or expertise and experience in curriculum and assessment).

The functions of programme evaluators should include:

- Evaluating the curriculum design, knowledge base and assessment strategy for the programme as a whole, in relation to its purpose, exit-level outcomes and relevant generic qualification standard;
- Judging the appropriateness and validity of integrated assessments and the standard of samples of student performance on these;
- Reviewing external examiners' reports on courses comprising the programme for the period under review and ensuring that their recommendations have been considered and acted upon;
- Commenting on the overall progression and throughput rates for the programme in relation to its purpose and student intake;
- Checking that institutional and professional regulations and procedures for assessment have been adhered to;
- Making recommendations for the improvement of the programme to the relevant academics and academic manager(s); and
- If appointed by the HEQC: making recommendations and advising on accreditation status to the HEQC's Accreditation Committee.

Remuneration for programme evaluators is commensurate with the scope and level of their duties.

The assessment of postgraduate research

Exit-level outcomes and assessment criteria or an explicit description of the quality of research achievement required, plus thesis production and layout requirements, time frames and examination rules are clearly communicated to students on commencement of their studies. Ideally, the institution has a postgraduate management strategy, which clarifies the student/ supervisor relationship and describes minimal roles and expectations.

Internal and external examiners are appointed according to acceptable criteria; e.g. at least one examiner external to the institution is appointed per dissertation/ thesis. Examiners are appointed on the basis of qualifications, experience and expert knowledge in the research area, and independence.

The institution provides clear guidelines to external examiners on the standard/ quality of research achievement required, on the nature of their task and on institutional examining regulations. The requirements for examination reports are clearly documented for examiners. External examiners report directly to the Senate (or its sub-committees), or equivalent, of the institution.

There are clear guidelines on how assessment judgments, corrections and further work are communicated to students and monitored by their supervisors. Without undermining the principle of assessment by academic judgment, assessment decisions are made transparently and students are afforded reasonable access to information (e.g. examiners' reports). There are appeal mechanisms for students and opportunities for them to defend their theses, e.g. through an oral defence.

Higher degree committees or similar structures consider examiners' reports qualitatively and make considered decisions about examination results.

Evaluative Question 3: The assessment of current competence/ recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution has procedures for assessing and recognising prior learning. This includes procedures for the selection of potential RPL candidates and personnel and structures to support them through the RPL process. This process involves the identification, documentation, assessment, evaluation and transcription of prior learning against specified learning outcomes, so that such learning can articulate with admissions requirements to target programmes and be recognised for entry, exemption or accreditation purposes.

The assessment instruments developed for RPL are designed and implemented in accordance with the institution's policies on fair and transparent assessment.



Evaluative Question 4: Assessment training

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution has an appropriate staff development strategy capable of improving its assessment practice. The institution makes provision for accredited training/ education in assessment theory and practice at both basic and advanced levels. Novice academic staff are encouraged to take the basic level and those with responsibility for assessment above the course level (e.g. Programme Directors and external examiners) are encouraged to take the advanced level. There are adequate opportunities and incentives for staff to undergo this training.

The institution ensures that the necessary assessment expertise is located within the appropriate staffing layers; for example, in each department/ school.



Evaluative Question 5: Rigour & security of the assessment system

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

Adherence to regulations

Regulations ensure the robustness of assessment procedures, particularly with regard to limiting opportunities for plagiarism. Breaches of assessment regulations are dealt with effectively. Institutional/ faculty/ professional regulations governing assessment are published and clearly communicated to students and relevant stakeholders. There is evidence that such regulations are widely adhered to.

Students' rights and responsibilities

Students are provided with information and guidance on their rights and responsibilities regarding assessment processes e.g. definitions of and regulations on plagiarism; penalties; terms of appeal; supplementary examinations etc.

Students have the right of reasonable access to assessment information.

Student appeals procedures are explicit, fair, effective and handled in a timely fashion.



Evaluative Question 6: Explicitness, validity & reliability of assessment practices

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

Explicitness

Qualification specifications meet the institutions' requirements for graduating, as well as those of SAQA, the *Higher Education Qualifications Framework* (HEQF)⁴ and/or professional requirements.

The level of challenge of assessment is appropriate to the level at which the qualification is pegged.

The learning outcomes and content selection for a programme/ course and how they are linked to assessment criteria and judgements are clearly stated and communicated to students.

Learning activities enable the realisation of the required assessment performances, and both are aligned with specified learning outcomes.

There is evidence that this is common assessment practice across the institution.

Validity

Assessment procedures are effective in measuring student attainment of the intended learning outcomes.

A range of assessment tasks and methods is employed to ensure that all types of learning outcomes (knowledge and skills) are validly assessed.

There is at least one integrated assessment procedure for each qualification, which is a valid test of the key purposes of the programme. (Integrated assessment can involve the assessing of the products and the processes of learning and the use and application of knowledge and skills in real world contexts.)

Interpretation of assessment performance

There are published, clear and consistent guidelines/ regulations for: marking and grading of results; aggregations of marks and grades; progression and final awards; compensation and/or condonement; and the publication of results in good time. These guarantee the integrity of the qualifications awarded.

Interpretation of results, especially for student feedback, is qualitative as well as quantitative.

There is an appropriate mix of criterion- and norm-referenced assessment.

Reliability

There is a system for maximising the accuracy, consistency and credibility of results, regardless of who is assessing or how many different people are assessing.

There is concurrence between assessors and external examiners on the nature and quality of the learning achieved.

Evaluative Question 7: Recording of assessment results

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

Student records are well organised, accurate, reliable and secure.

Assessment data are accessible to academic managers, administrators, teaching staff and students, as appropriate.

⁴ Note that *The Higher Qualifications Framework: Draft for Discussion* (Ministry of Education: 2004), which replaced the New Academic Policy, or NAP (DoE, 2002), had not yet been finalised at the time of publishing these Resources.

Evaluative Question 8: The use of assessment data for a range of explicit purposes, which include learning

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

Institutional policies and practices recognise assessment as a key motivator of learning and an integral part of the teaching and learning process. At the programme and subject/ course/ module level, assessment is systematically and purposefully used to generate data for summative purposes (grading, ranking, selection, predicting) and additionally for formative and diagnostic purposes, such as providing feedback in a timely fashion to inform teaching and learning and to improve curriculum and assessment practice itself.

Assessment data are also used to examine student performance trends and to inform institutional academic planning.

SUGGESTED SOURCES OF DATA FOR SELF-EVALUATION AND REVIEW

These suggestions are not intended to be used as a checklist. They are offered rather to assist and guide HEIs on what may be considered appropriate sources of data and evidence. This list will obviously need to be adjusted depending on the nature and context of the institution under consideration.

1. Institutional assessment policies, procedures and regulations, including those for RPL;
2. Guides for external examiners/ programme evaluators;
3. External examiner/ programme evaluators' reports;
4. Correspondence with external examiners/ programme evaluators;
5. Staff development strategy on assessment;
6. Faculty handbooks;
7. Programme and subject/ course/ module templates;
8. Descriptions of assessment strategies and related student hand-outs
9. Assessment instruments (tasks) with any accompanying explanatory/ supporting documents provided to students;
10. Examples of students' work with feedback, as well as marked examination and assignment scripts;
11. Mark sheets and marking guides;
12. Self-evaluation and plans for improvement from academics;
13. Student opinion surveys that include direct or indirect comment on assessment; and
14. Student database.

ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
DP	Duly Performed
ETQA	Education and Training Quality Assurer
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HET	Higher Education and Training
ITL	Improving Teaching & Learning
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
QA	Quality Assurance
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

assessment of student learning is the practice of designing formal tasks for students to complete and then of making inferences from and estimating the worth of their performances on these tasks.

criterion-referenced assessment refers to the practice whereby student performance is judged against pre-specified criteria or standards.

diagnostic assessment is used to predict academic potential (often used in placement testing)

formative assessment is used to improve learning through the provision of feedback to students on their progress; it serves needs intrinsic to the educational process.

norm-referenced assessment refers to the practice whereby student performance is compared with that of peers in the same class or cohort; it is associated with the

averaging of scores and with attempts to obtain a bell-shaped curve of mark distributions.

recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a means of recognising what individuals already know and can do. RPL is based on the premise that people learn both inside and outside formal learning structures (including learning from work and life experience), and that this learning can be worthy of recognition and credit in formal educational contexts. RPL is used extensively in HEI situations where applicants are seeking admission to a course, advanced standing for a course or credits towards a qualification. RPL can also be used by those seeking entry to a particular field of employment, promotion or self-employment.

reliability concerns issues of consistency in assessment: for example, would the same results be achieved on another occasion? Have assessor factors influenced the results in any way? How far can the results of this performance be generalised to other performances? And so on.

summative assessment is used to certify the attainment of a certain level of education and to make educational decisions; it is formalised assessment used to serve needs extrinsic to the educational process.

validity concerns the accuracy and appropriateness of methods of assessment and the dependability of the inferences made on the basis of assessment results. An emphasis on validity seeks to answer questions such as: are we assessing the right things and are we assessing the things right?

Note: In assessment design, there is usually a trade-off between achieving validity and reliability; and between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced approaches.

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