

ASSESSMENT POLICY

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| Document name | Assessment Policy |
| Owner | Council |
| Portfolio manager/initiator | Vice Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support |
| Approved by | Council |
| Date approved | 30 September 2005 |
| Revision date | 5 April 2013 5 July 2015 19 June 2019 |

1. PREAMBLE

The purpose of the University of South Africa (UNISA) is set out, amongst others, in the following founding documents and related policies:

- Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended
- National Qualifications Act 67 of 2008
- Level descriptions for the South African Qualifications Framework (SAQA 2012)
- White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013)
- Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-school System (2014).

The vision, mission, values and strategic direction of UNISA are described in UNISA 2030, and in accordance with the legislative and regulatory framework describes its *fitness of purpose*; in essence, its unique identity as South Africa’s only dedicated distance education university and as a comprehensive university fulfilling the three main acknowledged tasks of a university, namely teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

UNISA 2030 also describes the transformative trajectory of the university to take it into the 21st century. This transformative trajectory hinges on both curriculum transformation to make UNISA a truly decolonized African university, and pedagogical renewal to move UNISA to the new ODeL (Open Distance and e-Learning) model.

2. PURPOSES OF THIS ASSESSMENT POLICY

The purposes of this policy are to:

- 2.1 guide all assessment practices at UNISA;

- 2.2 ensure that all assessment practices are aligned to the national higher education legislative and policy environment;
- 2.3 ensure that assessment is an integrated process within the learning experience;
- 2.4 ensure that assessment is a constructive, engaging and transformative experience for students.

3. DEFINITIONS

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| Applied competence | refers to the practical and reflexive aspects of learning. In other words, students must demonstrate their understanding of the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes associated with a particular discipline or field of study be able to apply this knowledge in given and new contexts and be able to reflect on the knowledge and application in a critical way, as well as to provide creative alternatives; |
| Assessment | is the systematic evaluation of a student's ability to demonstrate the achievement of the stated learning goals or outcomes in the curriculum in a module or programme; |
| Assessment for learning | is assessment that forms an integral part of the learning of the students and the instructional design of the module; it occurs throughout the learning period and is designed to ensure that students are active, motivated and receive feedback on their achievement of intermediate learning goals and outcomes, including that students become reflexive and meta-cognitively aware of their own achievement, and is sometimes referred to as formative assessment; |
| Assessment of learning | is the final assessment and judgement of whether a student has reached the stated goals and objectives of a learning unit such as a module or programme at the end of the learning period and is sometimes referred to as summative assessment; |
| Assessment plan | is an annual plan that will primarily contain the assignments and other methods/forms of assessment and assessment criteria as well as the weighting of assignments and other assessment activities and their contribution to the year mark as well as the due dates in any given year; |
| Assessment strategy | refers to the overall assessment strategy in the curriculum and materials development stage of module development, and includes the module assessment criteria, as well as the formative and summative assessment, and moderation to be done in each module; |
| Capstone assignment | integrates learning that has taken place throughout the module which is not limited to the content or scope of a particular section of the work in the module; |
| Capstone module | integrates the learning that has taken place throughout the programme to assess if the exit level outcomes of the programme as a whole have been achieved; |

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| Competence | refers to foundational, disciplinary and situational knowledge that students require in line with the specific curricula for modules and programmes; |
| Continuous assessment | refers to the assessment of a student throughout the tuition period and may be an alternative to a single final summative assessment; |
| Formative assessment | is a process used by lecturers and students during instruction that provides explicit feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of stated learning outcomes and goals; |
| Summative assessment | refers to the final assessment of the learning and the result summarizes the performance of students after a period of teaching; |
| Taxonomies of learning | are hierarchical and/or sequential models of learning objects, goals and/or outcomes based on complexity, specificity and scope, the most well-known of which is Bloom's Taxonomy. For the purposes of South African higher education the NQF level descriptors (SAQA 2012) are the most relevant. |

4. ASSESSMENT AT UNISA

Assessment is an integral part of curriculum development as outlined in the Curriculum Policy. During curriculum development an assessment strategy that is aligned to the ODeL Policy is developed using the Framework for a Team Approach (FTA) and in line with the ODeL strategy of UNISA.

Assessment can have different focuses, namely to:

- a) improve the quality of students' learning experiences by focusing on significant knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, and providing motivation to work through the material through tasks and feedback, known as assessment for learning.
- b) focus on the ability to transfer knowledge to new contexts and to apply knowledge in specific contexts in line with the NQF level descriptors and other taxonomies of learning;
- c) focus on programmatic and graduate attributes and critical cross-field outcomes in assessment of learning;
- d) make academic judgements related to diagnostics, placements competence, progression and/or qualification completion; and as a feedback mechanism to improve curricula, known as assessment of learning; and to
- d) create opportunities for students to creatively engage with the content, with their context, with the lecturer and with fellow students.

Assessment can be divided into formative, summative and continuous assessment. The function of formative assessment in open distance and e-learning (ODeL) is to provide contact, support and structure to the learning experiences of students often unfamiliar with and alienated by the distance learning experience. It is a key motivator of learning. The function of summative assessment is to make an informed academic decision on the competence of the student to be credited with the learning outcomes as set for a module in the applicable module form.

5. PRINCIPLES INFORMING THIS POLICY

Assessment at UNISA is informed by the set of principles as described below. The principles have to be in balance and the weighting of some principles over others have to be done in a transparent fashion within the team approach when (re-)designing modules and programmes.

5.1 Curriculum development

Assessment is conceptualised and planned for during the development of a curriculum as described in the Curriculum Policy and operationalized through the *Framework for the implementation of a team approach to curriculum and learning development* (FTA). The FTA process facilitates the design and planning of assessment which is aligned to the pedagogy used in the academic programme and other institutional policies (e.g., Tuition Policy, Curriculum Policy, ODeL Policy, Experiential Learning Policy, Admission Policy).

The conceptualization of assessment as part of curriculum development ensure coherence and alignment between the learning outcomes, the learning materials, the learning experience of the student and the assessment.

The resulting assessment strategy will provide details about the transformative pedagogical stance to be taken in the module which will be annually expressed in the assessment plan which will provide details about formative, summative and/or continuous assessments, weights of different assessment components, due dates of assessments and nature of feedback.

5.2 Validity

Assessment must be valid or fit for purpose. That is, it must measure predetermined outcomes, using appropriate and contextually relevant assessment methods (e.g. considering the language and cultural context of the student). Three important aspects of validity are:

5.2.1 Face validity

This means that the assessment should be perceived to be fair, giving students a reasonable opportunity to show what they know and what they have mastered. For example, any suggestion of bias that may be to the detriment of some would reduce face validity for students (e.g. gender or ethnic bias). It should not advantage or disadvantage any student. Tuition and assessment are equitable when they take into account the instructional context and the special background of students (e.g. prior knowledge, cultural experience, language proficiency, cognitive style and interests). In distance education these characteristics can only be broadly determined based on the student profile for individual modules.

5.2.2 Content validity

Assessment should be appropriate for the stated outcomes of the course and should cover the knowledge, ideas and skills, attitudes and values as well as the practical experiences of students in the module adequately.

5.2.3 Construct validity

This refers to the extent to which assessment succeeds in measuring and evaluating the abilities (theoretical or practical 'constructs') that it intends to assess. Measurements used to determine construct validity must be contextually and culturally sensitive and relevant.

5.3 Reliability

Assessment should be reliable or consistent. That is, it should produce the same results when:

5.3.1 particular students are assessed across time for the same knowledge, skills, attitudes and values using a variety of methods.

5.3.2 different markers assess the same piece of work.

The amount of work assessed should be sufficient in proportion to the comprehensiveness of the study package.

Value judgements (such as passing or failing marks) should be as objective as possible. There should be academic and administrative quality control before, during and after the assessment. If a student's marks differ significantly depending on who marks the assignment/examination, assessment is not reliable. Guidance for marking must also be transparent and defensible. All markers, both internal and external, should be sufficiently qualified and trained to mark a specific module.

5.4 Feasibility

Assessment should be manageable. Efficient systems must be in place to administer the various types of assessments used by the university academic programmes.

Quantity and type of assessment should also allow lecturers to achieve reliable results in a reasonable period of time. This also relates to timely and constructive feedback to students in order to improve their learning for the next step in the learning process.

5.5 Authenticity of assessment

Assessment should be as direct as possible. That is, it should be directly related to the real-life use of the knowledge and skills outside educational settings and must take into account the student's language, values and beliefs, to ensure that teaching and learning is culturally and contextually sensitive, and to avoid unfair assessment practices. Authentic assessment also includes assessment of processes, practices, skills and reflection that occur in the learning situation. To ensure relevance and validity, the focus should be on measuring students' mastery of significant, not trivial, outcomes. During the planning for a new module/learning programme, tuition and assessment methods should be developed simultaneously in relation to student learning and the meeting of learning outcomes to ensure that assessment is relevant.

5.6 Authenticity of the students

The university must be satisfied that the work being assessed is attributable to the person being assessed.

5.7 Alignment between learning outcomes and assessment

The alignment of the learning outcomes and goals as stated in the approved curriculum and design of the module with the various assessment activities is a quality issue and should be clearly stated and documented for each module. The module learning outcomes should also be aligned to the programme exit-level outcomes and should reflect the NQF-level descriptors.

5.8 Range of assessment methods

Lecturers will use a range of assessment methods to ensure that assessment is educationally sound, appropriate to the discipline or field of study, all outcomes are assessed and the criteria of validity, reliability, authenticity and feasibility are met. No single assessment method can assess a student's learning fully¹. It is necessary to use a set of assessment methods to achieve consistent and fair results. The total assessment package for a learning programme should be carefully designed to cover all learning outcomes. The assessment type(s) used will also be suited to the underlying teaching/learning principles outlined in the *Tuition Policy and Curriculum Policy*, the learning students need to evidence, the level of the module and diverse student abilities, learning styles and contexts. The constraints of ODeL and the particular tuition model should be considered as well.

UNISA should continually embrace the use of emerging assessment methods particularly within the online environment. This includes designing continuous assessment activities that provide students with an increased number of assessment opportunities.

5.8.1 Formative assessment

Formative assessment refers to assessment that takes place during the teaching and learning process and is sometimes referred to as assessment for learning. It is thus designed to support the teaching and learning process and is developmental in nature. Formative assessment

- a) is a 'learning opportunity', not just a test of student performance;
- b) assists in planning future learning;
- c) diagnoses the student's strengths and weaknesses; and
- d) provides feedback to the student on his/ her progress.

UNISA students will be involved in formative assessment that will add value to their learning, while also providing them with effective cognitive skills (foundational and reflexive), practical skills, and learning attitudes and values that they will need for further study or in a workplace situation or for any other goals after certification. Students should show through the submission of formative assessment activities that they are actively learning throughout the tuition period. Students' learning in the tuition period should contribute to their final mark in a module in percentages as approved by Senate. Modules should have an adequate number of formative assessment activities to prepare them for the summative assessment.

5.8.2 Summative assessment

Summative assessment refers to assessment that is used for making a judgement about the achievement of outcomes in order to certify that a student may progress in his/her studies or may graduate. Such assessment is carried out at the end of a section of work or at the end of a module/learning programme/qualification and is sometimes referred to as assessment of learning. It determines whether the student is competent or not yet competent in respect of pre-determined outcomes. There should be alignment between the formative and summative assessment, as well as between the assessment content and methods and the learning outcomes and learning materials so that students are adequately prepared for

¹ Where a specific discipline, such as Mathematics, wishes to use only a single type of assessment because it is the only one appropriate to that discipline, they should indicate this exception in documentation submitted to the Senate for the approval of the relevant modules.

summative assessment.

5.8.3 Integrated assessment of applied competence

UNISA strives towards integrated assessment of stated learning outcomes. Integrated assessment refers to:

- a) assessing a number of outcomes together;
- b) assessing a number of modules together;
- c) using a combination of assessment methods and instruments for an outcome/outcomes;
- d) collecting naturally occurring evidence (such as in a workplace setting);
- e) acquiring evidence from other sources such as supervisors' reports, testimonials, portfolios of work previously done, logbooks, journals, etc.

The use of different types and combinations of integrated assessment will be dependent on the nature of specific disciplines.

In submissions of new learning programmes, the lecturer/department/ College concerned will indicate to the Senate how integrated assessment will be carried out. Two appropriate methods would be the inclusion of:

- i) a capstone module for a learning programme in the student's final year of undergraduate study;
- ii) a capstone assignment in all final year modules.

5.9 Criterion-referenced assessment

The lecturer makes judgements about students by measuring each student's work against a fixed and concise set of pre-determined outcomes and related assessment criteria. These criteria state the quality of the performance of students at different levels of competence. The relationship between assessment and learning outcomes, the definition of standards, the performance expectations held of students and feedback on performance can all be more easily and explicitly expressed when criterion-referenced assessment is used.

Other advantages of criterion-referencing are transparency, student involvement and greater inter-marker reliability. While the use of criterion-referenced assessment supports the educational purposes of assessment, it does not impede the functional purpose. Students can be marked and graded according to their levels of achievement against well-defined criteria. The fact that the criteria are explicit means that the judgements made are more readily defensible in terms of rigour and consistency.

These well-defined criteria can be expressed as a statement of standards or by the use of examples that are provided in advance so that students can direct their learning accordingly. More precise explanations may be provided after assessment has taken place because it is possible to point to the characteristics of the students' performance that led to the judgement that a particular outcome was or was not achieved. While such judgements may sometimes be fallible, their overall reliability is likely to be enhanced by the explicitness of the criteria used.

Assessment/performance criteria specify how much learning has to be evidenced, at

what level of complexity and responsibility and how well. Assessment criteria complete the stem: 'Evidence must show that students ...': for instance, 'Evidence must show that students use words according to standard dictionary definitions and the demands of context'. Assessment criteria have to indicate how to determine whether a student has achieved the outcome to a satisfactory standard and what makes the difference between acceptable and unacceptable performance of the outcome.

5.10 Sufficiency

Standards and criteria must be consistently met across different tuition periods. The evidence collected must establish that all criteria have been met by the students and that performance to the required standard, both internally and externally, can be repeated consistently.

5.11 Systematicity

Assessment planning and recording must be systematic and rigorous to ensure that assessment is fair. The purpose of assessment should always be made explicit. Results must be communicated clearly, accurately, timeously and meaningfully.

Assessment data should be recorded safely and accurately. On an academic level, assessment data provides a profile of student achievement of specified outcomes in formative and summative assessment is developed. Formative data enables the lecturer to plan interventions to support students. On an administrative level, assessment data provides an accountable basis for credit and eventual certification of students in relation to outcomes of particular qualifications.

5.12 Transparency

The expected learning outcomes and their associated assessment criteria will be available to students and other stakeholders so the learning and assessment system will be transparent, reliable and accountable. Students will know what is expected of them and employers and/or other stakeholders will know what a person who holds a particular qualification has achieved.

5.13 Ethical and fair assessment

UNISA is accountable to students and the society at large for the validity and reliability of its assessment procedures.

UNISA is responsible for ensuring ethical treatment of all students, with regard to fairness in assessment practices, privacy and confidentiality issues, transparency around dispute mechanisms and procedures.

Relevant sections of the policy and procedures will be published in appropriate documentation that is available to students (e.g. Calendars, the Disciplinary Code for Students and on the website).

6. GOOD PRACTICES

6.1 Grading

Percentages will be awarded to assessment activities, bearing in mind the principle of criterion-referenced assessment. 50% constitutes a pass mark up to Master's level. Higher pass marks require Senate approval. Master's and Doctoral criteria are specified in the Procedures for Master's and Doctoral Degrees.

6.2 Feedback

Instructional feedback is fundamental to the learning process. Lecturers will provide timely and constructive feedback that identifies where misunderstandings have occurred and the ways in which the student can improve, on both marked and self-assessed assignments. Feedback should be individualized to the specific student's attempts whenever possible and practicable. Generic feedback should also be given in answers/guidelines to self-assessed tasks in study materials and lecturer-marked assignments.

Feedback on assignments, other assessment activities or in tutorial letters must reach students before they write summative examinations.

6.3 Weighting of assignments and examinations

Formative assessment at undergraduate level and for Honours and course work Master's as well as postgraduate certificates/diplomas will contribute towards the student's final mark in combination with the examination mark, according to guidelines developed by academic departments and approved by Senate. A subminimum of 40% in the examination is required, below which the year mark will not count. Exceptions to this stipulation require Senate approval. Formative assessment (e.g. assignments) submissions should contribute to the year marks as approved by Senate and could also be used to determine examination entrance.

6.4 Diagnostic testing

Diagnostic testing will be used from time to time to allow the institution to better know the students and develop appropriate interventions. Diagnostic assessment for placement may be part of recognition of prior learning.

Diagnostic testing may also be used to improve the teaching and learning practices, learning materials and assessment strategies adopted by the university to accommodate the student's cultural and language-related contexts.

6.5 Students with disabilities

The university is committed to ensuring fair treatment for all its students. The Directorate: Student Assessment Administration will collaborate with the academic departments, ARCSWiD and the National Students' Representative Council to make arrangements for students with special needs resulting from disabilities including aspects such as venues, time for completion of examination and mode of the examination (taped, oral, braille, etc).

6.6 Supplementary examinations

Students will be granted a supplementary examination if they achieve a minimum percentage of 40% as determined by Senate from the combined year mark and examination mark. In the case of a student writing a supplementary or aegrotat examination, the year mark will only be taken into consideration if it benefits the student. This rule includes non-venue based supplementary assessment. The granting of a supplementary examination to all except candidates who failed the main examination but qualified for a supplementary will be subject to rigorous scrutiny.

6.7 Appeals process

Students will be granted an opportunity to appeal to the university on the outcomes of their assessment. Appeals can be based on special cases, such as trauma, disasters etc. The university may implement strategies and procedures to assist students which

are close to completing their qualifications.

6.8 Security

The Directorate: Student Assessment Administration and academic departments will develop procedures to ensure the security of question papers and answers.

6.9 Integrity of data

Procedures will be put in place to ensure the integrity of assessment data to ensure the accuracy, consistency and credibility of results so that the university's certification is reliable.

7. SCOPE OF THIS POLICY

This Policy informs all aspects of assessment for taught modules (including taught modules at postgraduate level up to taught Masters courses), practical modules workplace assessment, transfer of credits and RPL

This policy is informed by and supports the UNISA *Tuition Policy*. The *Assessment Policy* will in turn inform assessment procedures to be developed by Departments/Schools/Colleges through the Senate, as well as for the Directorate of Student Assessment Administration.

Colleges/Schools/Departments will ensure the implementation of this policy within the respective disciplines, including all aspects of assessment design, implementation, and moderation.

Colleges/Schools/Departments will apply to the Senate if they wish, in exceptional cases, to deviate from the *Assessment Policy*. There must be a strong motivation for such an exception.

8. QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee will oversee and monitor the implementation of the *Assessment Policy*. The culture of ongoing reflection and research into the quality of assessment policies, principles and practices should be consolidated.

8.1 Appropriate quality assurance standards and guidelines

Each functional unit involved with assessment at UNISA, be it academic or administrative, will have a set of approved quality guidelines dealing with all processes of assessment within their ambit of responsibility.

8.2 Assessor and moderator functions and training

UNISA appoints suitably qualified assessors to carry out functions of assessment. All assessors should be trained and certified by the university before assessing students' work. The roles of the different assessors are stipulated in the *Assessment Procedures Manual*.

9. IMPLEMENTATION PROCEDURES

The Directorate of Student Assessment and Administration will, in collaboration with the Colleges, the Academic Planner and the Executive Director (Tuition Support and Facilitation of Learning), draft a procedural *Assessment Manual* on assessment practices to be

incorporated in the *Corporate Manual* on the intranet, including aspects such as:

- 9.1 reliable systems of assessment tracking and record keeping that are transparent and defensible to students, lecturers and the wider community;
- 9.2 guidelines for the submission and security of examination papers;
- 9.3 guidelines for invigilators;
- 9.4 *Mark Adjustment Procedures* to be followed by internal and external moderators that are ethical, responsible and responsive to the rights of UNISA students to fair and reliable assessment;
- 9.5 guidelines on authenticity, plagiarism, etc.

This set of procedures will be submitted to the Senate for approval.

10. IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY

This policy will be in effect from the date on which Council approves it.

