

Authentic assessment to prepare students for employability skills

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Abstract

Employability has become one of the biggest concerns of higher education institutions (Osborne, Dunne & Farrand, 2013). Some authors believe that there should be a focus on bridging the gap between real world and higher education through changing the curriculum towards a more practical, work-related emphasis (Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004; Wilson, 2012). Essential to this process is assessment as it influences what is taught and measures and supports students' learning (Griffith University n.d.). However, traditional forms of assessment such as examinations with multiple-choice questions which test students on rote learning are not suitable to foster deep surface learning.

An authentic assessment as defined by Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004, p. 69), is “an assessment requiring students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that they need to apply in the criterion situation on professional life”. Changing the assessment setting to a more “authentic” one is introduced as an improved way to embed elements of employability into the curriculum.

Despite its current high graduate employability rate, RMIT Vietnam has started the process of following this trend. This paper introduces the implementation of RMIT Vietnam's institution wide initiative to move towards more authentic assessments and in particular to remove all final examinations for all courses by the end of 2018. Aiming to provide students with an enhanced learning experience, RMIT Vietnam is going through a structured process of collecting and analyzing data about current issues with assessments for existing programs; developing supplemental resources for designing authentic assessments; organizing a community of practice for academic staff to share their experiences and collaborating between teaching teams and academic developers to redesign specific courses' assessments. Although very much a work in progress, positive feedback from academic staffs is proving encouraging.

1. Introduction

Employability has become one of the biggest concerns of higher education institutions (Osborne, Dunne & Farrand, 2013). Some authors believe that there should be a focus on bridging the gap between real world and higher education through changing the curriculum towards a more practical, work-related emphasis (Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004; Wilson, 2012). Essential to this process is assessment as it influences what is taught and measures and supports students' learning (Griffith University n.d.). However, traditional forms of assessment such as examinations with multiple-choice questions which test students on rote learning are not suitable to foster deep learning. These different forms of assessments stem from the difference between assessment for learning and assessment of learning. Assessment for Learning 'involves teachers using evidence about students' knowledge, understanding and skills to inform their teaching' and has a formative purpose. Assessment of Learning 'assists teachers in using evidence of student learning to assess achievement against outcomes and standards' and has a summative purpose (New South Wales Education Standard Authority n.d.).

RMIT clearly states expectations for assessment design: "Assessment tasks should aim to support students' learning in addition to demonstrating their attainment of the course learning outcomes. Constructive alignment of assessment with learning outcomes and learning activities ensures that assessment is fair and relevant. Make assessment meaningful by using real-world problems, relating theory to practice, or through demonstration of required skills." (RMIT University n.d.). This statement shows that the focus of the university is on developing assessments for rather than of learning. In order to achieve this, a program level thinking about student experience was needed and so was a better learning through assessments that improve students attainment of Graduate Attributes and were aligned to the strategic plan of the university that every student will be 'ready for life and work'. In order to foster assessment for learning, changing the assessment setting to a more "authentic" one was introduced as an improved way to embed elements of employability into the curriculum. An authentic assessment is an assessment that resembles in the type of task and mode what one would be expected to perform in a real work setting.

This transition toward more authentic learning started in 2016 with the digital transition which involved no reliance on single outdated textbooks and continued in 2017 with a focus on assessment and feedback.

This paper will present a review of the literature on authentic assessments and their link with employability skills before proceeding to explain the process by which the university has begun its enormous tasks to transition towards authentic assessments.

2. Literature review

Assessment in higher education is important as it shapes, supports and influences the students' learning experience and behaviour more than the teaching they receive (Bloxham, Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Griffith University n.d.). Assessment is also an important measure of how much learning has occurred and how well students have learned; therefore, assessments must be designed in a fair and effective way to distinguish between different levels of achievement by students of the intended learning outcomes (William, 2011). However, one fact remains that students will adopt a deep learning approach when assessment tasks are

designed to foster higher order thinking skills and they will only memorize or rote learn and take a strategic approach to completing assessments if the assessment task just requires them to do so (Kneale et al., 1997). These findings lead to the categorization of different approaches to assessment by Earl (2003): assessment for learning, assessment of learning and assessment as learning, in which, assessment of learning is the traditional view on assessment, which focuses more on summative achievement of students. Assessment for learning which was firstly used by (Black, H, 1986) is more formative and diagnostic in nature and provides information about students' performance with the aim of using that information as a feedback for teaching and learning activities in order to meet the needs of the learner. Finally, assessment as learning as a subset of assessment for learning, where students understand the course better through their close involvement with assessment and being their own assessors (Black, P & Wiliam, 1998; New South Wales Education Standard Authority n.d.).

Brown, S (2015) mentions twelve current trends in assessment and assessment for learning (AfL) is among those as a “driver for learning” rather than “just a method of judging student performance”. Kearney and Perkins (2014, p. 9) show that engaging students through assessment increases students' engagement in their learning as they “become the stakeholders in the learning process; rather than being assessed, students learn through conducting assessments.” In order to fully engage students in their learning, among other things, AfL should “emphasize authenticity and complexity in the context and method of assessment rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement” (Brown, S 2014, p. 6). This focus leads way to the occurrence of another emerging trend which is authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is defined by Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004, p. 69) as “an assessment requiring students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that they need to apply in the criterion situation on professional life”. Through various studies, authentic assessments has shown to improve students' engagement, foster deep learning and higher order skills (Azim & Khan, 2012; Kearney & Perkins, 2014; Neely & Tucker, 2012; Raymond et al., 2013).

Nowadays, engaging students in their learning is one key and complicated task for higher education institutions, but at the same time, the institutions also face a rising expectation from external stakeholders and industry to provide them with employable graduates. Employability skills are defined by the CBI/NUS Student Guide (CBI/NUS, 2011, p. 12) as “a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labor market participants should possess to ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace—to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy”.

From the survey of 566 employers in the UK (collectively employing 2.2 million people), 70% of them want to see the development of employability skills embedded in the curriculum for students when being in college (CBI/EDI 2011). And not surprisingly, 70% of future employees say that improving their career opportunities is one of the key reasons for going to college.

Therefore, authentic assessments are expected to positively influence student learning and better prepare them for their future careers as this kind of assessment creates opportunities for students to be involved in professional practices during schooling (Gulikers et al., 2008). Through authentic assessments, universities can bridge the gap between higher education and business by embedding employability skills into the curriculum (Wilson, 2012). However, the concern is about how to do so. In their report, Yorke and Knight (2006) suggest that the process will not be the same across institutions. Institutions need to consider these elements when embedding

employability skills into the curriculum, which are “one size does not fit all institutions”, “employability through the whole curriculum”, and “employability in the core curriculum”.

Next section will present the whole process taken by RMIT Vietnam in designing authentic assessments which will allow employability skills to be embedded.

3. Moving towards authentic assessments at RMIT Vietnam

a. Context

In order to meet and adapt to RMIT global’s general expectations around assessments as outlined in the introduction as well as follow RMIT Vietnam strategic priorities, RMIT Vietnam specifically intends to provide assessment that is:

- Aligned to program, as well as course learning outcomes
- Appropriately scaffolded across the program
- Authentic where appropriate
- Not reliant on invigilated exams
- Varied in format and mode

Preliminary institutional data collection showed that many programs and courses at RMIT Vietnam are over reliant on closed book and invigilated examination. More specifically, most of the largest courses in the School of Business and Management (which is the largest school at RMIT Vietnam) have final examinations. The majority of the other courses across business programs also have final examinations which account for an average of 50% of the final grade. This phenomenon may be due to a perception by lecturers that it is the best, and perhaps only, way to test and ensure students meet the course learning outcomes. However, this practice has created a generation of “strategic” students (Kneale et al., 1997) who approach learning just to satisfy the basic assessment requirements with the least amount of effort. Lecturers usually find it hard to engage these students in learning activities that they do not see connecting to assessments and assess them on how deep their understanding is (McAuley, 2004). Another problem with this approach is that students will only have received, at best, formative feedback on half of their grade by the time of the final examination and they will be receiving a summative feedback, if any, when the semester is already over. Consequently, students have not received enough formative feedback to act on to improve their performance until it is too late.

These issues led to an institutional wide initiative about moving assessments toward a more authentic approach including removing invigilated examinations. The initiative has a two years life span. By the end of 2018, all courses are expected to be exam free however there might be some exceptions, in which case a substantiated rationale and justification will need to be provided. In order to ensure the effectiveness of this initiative, two related academic KPIs were included in 2017:

- program level mapping of assessments and
- move to more authentic assessment including replacement of exams

b. Process

The process for moving towards more authentic assessments is part of a year-long project funded by RMIT Global, run by the Learning and Teaching unit at RMIT Vietnam and whose objectives included:

- Generating current assessment maps of all programs delivered at the Vietnam locations and develop the capabilities of Vietnam-based program and discipline leads to maintain these
- Engaging program and discipline leads in each area in reviewing their assessment maps and commit to a staged implementation of renewal of problematic assessment tasks & modes
- Providing targeted support to the course coordinators and course teaching teams tasked with implementing renewal; track and evaluate implementation
- Showcasing best practice and innovation in assessment; provide strategically aligned professional development opportunities
- Communicating the rationale and outcomes of the project to all academic staff.

This project is being implemented in several phases, most of which are yet to be completed at the date of writing.

i. Assessment mapping

The first phase of the project consisted in mapping assessments across all higher education programs taught at RMIT Vietnam. This assessment mapping process began at the end of 2016 with one program used as a pilot and the remaining programs mapped during the first semester of 2017.

This mapping process consisted in collecting data about each core course within a program so as to obtain a detailed view of its assessments. Interviews were conducted with the course coordinator of each course who was requested to answer 22 questions ranging from the type of assessment task, weight and duration to the level of authenticity and convergence of the assessments.

Once all the interviews were run for all the compulsory courses in a given program, an analysis was performed in order to identify potential issues. The analysis was based on a statement of intent which summarised the university's policy, strategy and direction regarding assessments. The analysis was then shared with the program managers before a whole teaching team meeting was run in order to share the findings with those involved in teaching into these programs. During that meeting, input, feedback and discussion were sought as well as agreed actions for solving perceived issues.

Most of the issues identified related to lack of authenticity of the assessments, in particular for programs that are heavily reliant on invigilated final exams, predominance of written as opposed to verbal assessments in particular in business degrees and issues with designing and managing group assessments.

Other examples of issues with current assessments include:

- courses that expect students to apply technical knowledge such as using computer software or programming, but are conducted on paper
- courses that assess theoretical knowledge through short answer questions rather than critical thinking through case study and thus remain at the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy (remember, understand)
- assessments based on well defined information and/or requirements and which do not realistically reproduces real world ambiguity or uncertainty
- issue with late assessment deadlines and very little feedback until late in the semester as well as pressure on the last assessment for the course (in particular for final examinations).

ii. Redesigning assessments

The second phase of this project consists in working intensively at the course level with those course teams that were identified as having inauthentic assessments. In the first instance, these courses are those that include a final invigilated exam or final take-home exam. In both cases, the tasks requested of students to complete may be authentic but the setting of the assessment is not thus warranting a replacement or redesign. In order for this process to be successful and consistent across programs and schools, Learning and Teaching developed an assessment checklist which includes 21 points for use by academic teams as part of the redesign process. This checklist was based on the 16 indicators of effective assessments developed by the University of Melbourne (Harris, 2005) and includes elements relating to the university policy (constructive alignment between assessments and learning outcomes, equivalence of offerings across locations, balance between formative and summative assessments, etc), university direction (inclusiveness, authenticity, focus on employability skills) and general best practice (minimising plagiarism, providing timely feedback, managing teamwork).

A process for working with academic course teams has also been developed and external consultants have been hired. Each program nominated a timeline for courses to go through the redesign process bearing in mind that the entire removal of final exams is planned for the end of the 2018 academic year.

iii. Development of resources/support

During the process of discussing issues with assessments with academics involved in teaching into the programs under review, emphasis was placed on program level development of skills, in particular generic skills. One of the potential issues that was pointed out was the development across a given program of specific skills such as report writing or ensuring consistency in grading specific skills across courses. The discussions revealed that there was no systematic alignment of these skills across courses as most academics were developing their own resources in silos and were lacking resources (either time or capability) in developing more consistent ones. Consequently, in most instances, development of additional resources such as generic skills rubrics were requested from the academic staff members.

As mentioned in the previous section, in other instances, the presentation of the program assessment mapping findings revealed issues with a high proportion of group assessments and

low proportion of verbal assessments although most in-class learning activities were conducted verbally. Two sets of resources were then developed to address these issues: a set of verbal assessments guidelines including examples of alternatives to in-class presentations and a set of group assessments guidelines including designing, managing and assessing team work.

Other resources targeting specific disciplines are currently being developed with the assistance of the Student Academic Success unit whose aim is to provide generic and targeted support to students.

In other instances, albeit less frequent, program teams requested professional development to be run for some of the previously identified issues. For example, it is envisaged to run a workshop on group assessments for the Engineering program.

iv. Community of practice

In order to foster a sense of belonging to the project and to motivate exchange of experience during the process of redesigning assessments, Learning and Teaching is planning to facilitate a learning community for interdisciplinary sharing of approaches and outcomes with academic staff members starting in the second trimester of 2017. Communities of practice are groups of people that share a common interest and sense of community that enables them to further develop their practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). There are numerous cases of their successful use as part of academic development (Laksov, Mann & Dahlgren, 2008; Reimann & Wilson, 2012; Warhurst, 2006) and within the context of RMIT Vietnam are perceived as a beneficial part of curriculum development projects (Brown, M & Peck, 2016).

v. Evaluation and reporting

As part of a project funded by the university, a plan for tracking and evaluation against objectives has been elaborated with a progress report to be sent mid year 2017 and a final report at the beginning of 2018. This report will include tracking of deliverables against objectives as well as a financial report on the expenditures against the initial budget. It will be noted that most of the funds are used to hire project support officers and external consultants to provide targeted expert support to teaching teams as they move towards more authentic assessments. Another side of the evaluation process will consist in devising a platform and procedure for maintaining assessment maps to hand over to program leads. One of the concerns of this project is that the review of assessments is perceived as being a one-off exercise and is not considered as part of an ongoing commitment to teaching quality.

vi. Showcasing

Finally, the last phase of the project which is planned for 2018 will consist in an internal showcase of innovative assessment approaches undertaken by course teams as a replacement for less authentic assessments. This phase is meant to acknowledge the work that has been put into this process as well as foster a sense of community.

vii. Communication plan

Throughout the project, communication to various stakeholders was sent including emails to staff from Heads of Schools and Departments regarding the mapping process, program level communication regarding mapping sessions, program level communications for second phase (redesign of assessments) and institutional communication of outcomes.

c. Challenges

One of the main challenges about changes to course assessments may be the resistance by Melbourne course coordinators if they perceive that equivalence between courses cannot be maintained (most courses delivered at RMIT Vietnam are also delivered in other locations and thus share the same learning outcomes).

Academic integrity is one of the other main concerns and work is being done to ensure assessments are designed to prevent and/or minimise plagiarism by offering multiple means of assessment and real life situations that individual students can relate to. The main idea is that if the new assessments are more divergent, each student comes up with their own solution which somehow reduces the need from copying from each other. However, Mcnett (cited in Bartley, 2006) suggests that “deadline driven desperation” is a common and significant reason for students to plagiarise and cheat and some students might accidentally plagiarize due to lack of knowledge of how to cite reference properly Harris and Varvel (cited in Bartley, 2006).

Legacy and resistance to change may also be challenges as well as the beliefs that lecturers have about how learning impact their practice in assessment. As being experts in the field, lecturers have their own way of thinking about assessment design. They may have a tendency to think they know best and they do not need support. It might be difficult to change that perception if academic cannot think outside of the exam box.

Creating authentic assessments that have real world connection or replicate real job challenges or relate to students experience and tolerate ambiguity will probably be useful for students however, in the long run, there is a concern about the sustainability of this approach, about what lecturer can do to maintain its originality while engaging students from each cohort.

Even in times where there is a high demand for higher education to provide students with more relevant, applied courses and enhanced graduate employability skills, it remains difficult to define “authenticity” of an assessment as each industry will have their own characteristics and in some specific disciplines, there might be a requirement to combine traditional and authentic assessment in order to maintain the reliability of the assessments.

Similarly to market perception, for accreditation purpose, “validity” and “reliability” of an authentic assessment must be maintained and presented. There may be a need by accreditation bodies to describe the specific competences that assessments help students in building. Or for some accreditation agencies, there are requirements of including invigilated examination to ensure that knowledge is tested on an individual and identified basis.

4. Conclusion

A 'transformative student experience' has been put at the center of teaching and learning by the current Vice-Chancellor with his 2020 strategic plan. While general efforts aim to ensure that the students experience remains as authentic as possible, much is still to be done in regards to the level of authenticity of some assessments and their ability to foster generic skills and in particular ones that will make students employable.

While, in some instances, a legacy of using final examinations for testing students' knowledge prevails, changing attitudes from summative to formative assessments remains a considerable challenge for a lot of academic staff. Thinking outside the box may prove problematic for some but with adequate support and sufficient time to undertake these changes, it is hoped that the ambitious goal of being examination free by the end of 2018 will prove to be truly transformative and not only for the students.

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