

# Programmatic Assessment for Learning

Using Professional Standards in Curriculum Design to Transform Learning and Teaching Processes

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# Current Context

Traditionally, despite an emerging discourse of assessment *as* and *for* learning, assessment has largely been treated as a postscript to the learning process and a final consideration in curriculum design.

Still have an atomistic approach to the design of assessment regimes, fostering a ‘stocking filler’ approach to students’ engagement in their learning activities has resulted in a lack of coherence within semester subjects and degree programs.

Assessment design has three critical functions:

- defining for students what they must learn
- shaping the way in which they learn
- assuring learning achievement for the community.

# PAL challenges taken for granted assumptions of common assessment practices

## **PAL Approach:**

- Expects students to be self-regulating learners who consider how they will utilise assessment tasks to demonstrate their attainment, or progression towards attainment, of complex, integrated, high order graduate learning outcome standards.
- Multiple sources of student progress information are captured digitally and reviewed by the student with a learning coach to establish a personal plan for learning advancement.
- PAL utilises multiple sources of data to inform fewer progression decision points, which is balanced by increased feedback points to assist students to be agents of their own learning achievement.
- Requires leadership investment in the investigative, deliberative processes that must inform a collective decision for change.
- Requires a high level of assessment literacy amongst students, teachers, policy developers and leadership is critical to their appreciation of the cultural shift needed in adopting PAL.
- A program of scholarship, and research to generate evidence to justify changes priorities in the assessment design.

# Question to debate

In this round table, we will consider the core principles of PAL and ask :

Is it is feasible or desirable for non-medical education programs to shift to a program-based approach to learning and assessment?

It is too easy to consider the achievements in PAL as being due to the favourable funding of Medical Education.

# PAL

An emerging change in some university programs have adopted a more holistic programmatic approach to learning and assessment.

- Largely not in Australia
- Some light house programs
- Mostly in Medicine

# Exemplar UNSW School of Medicine 2005

## Design features:

- 8 Key Program Learning Outcomes PLO:
- core areas that are consistently assessment in each unit of study: Communication, Self Regulation, Professional Behaviour. (on Pass-, Pass, Pass +)
- Assessment in units of study are as normal (diverse methods).
- Meta assessment is through a portfolio-based system. Students include assessments from the units of study that reflect their attainment Feedback , artifacts as well as grades is used as evidence. Student write narrative again each of the 8 learning outcomes.
  - Level 1 (end of year 2) against all 8 PLOs
  - Level 2 (end of year 4) against those where they have poor achievement + any other LO they wish to include.
  - Level 3 (end of year 6) A rite of passage students go before a panel and outline all achievements within the program and outside that have contributed to their attainment of the 8 learning outcomes.

# UNSW Exemplar cont.

## **Infrastructure:**

- Clear program learning objectives (PLO) that are understood by all.
- Assessment literate students and staff
- Audit of all units of study to ensure that PLO are addressed in multiple ways and multiple times.
- A data base that records all assessment performances and feedback provided to students
- Learning coaches
- A meta-structure to monitor and evaluate individual student performance and program effectiveness.
- A different assessment policy environment that is not additive, but wholistic and not bound by tradition, surface factors, unrealistic time frames and rules.
- A skilled portfolio assessment team

# PAL

- Seeks to ensure a direct alignment between its over arching program intentions and its learning assessment processes and student performance and achievement of core outcomes.
- It involves on going evaluation and assessment primarily to **improve** rather than **prove** learning achievement.
- Assessment defines for student what is important for them to learn, is largely formative and progress decisions (summative assessments) are based on a complex compilation of information.
- Formative assessments are sustained and cumulative and the expected outcomes are explicit and clear and informative to shape further efforts.
- The summative assessments are less frequent and the outcomes are not a surprise.



# Tensions

Proving versus Improving

Compliance versus Engagement

Teacher regulated versus Student regulation

Risk avoidance versus Risk mitigation

Predictability & stability versus strategic  
opportunity

Additive approach versus developmental

Minimal standards versus optimal attainment

# Steps in Design PAL

- Audit and evaluate current assessment practices and identify the needs for improvement and change.
- Establish an infrastructure (a standing committee) for dialogue and change management
- Contextualise the framework and guidelines to fit the assessment environment.
- Prioritise the needed changes in assessment by selecting relevant guidelines depending on effort and stakes.
- Education for all participants
- Justify design decisions and develop an implementation plan.
- Evaluate the policy environment to enable and support a new assessment paradigm.

(adapted from Timmerman & Dijkstra 2017)

Promises/purposes	Advantages
Overview of what is and what is not being measured	Promote the validity of content and prevent emphasis on easy-to –measure elements (over- and underrepresentation)
Compensation for deficiencies of instruments by strengths of other instruments	Diverse spectrum of complementary measurement instruments capturing competence as a whole
Matching instruments to free space and time for the assessment of other subjects	Increase efficiency by reducing redundancy in information gathering
Combine information from different sources (tests/instruments) in high-stakes assessment	Reach better-informed and highly defensible high-stakes decisions
Multiple individual assessment points that are maximally informative to the learning process	Optimise the learning function of assessment (assessment <i>for</i> learning)
Aggregated data used for high-stakes pass/fail and remediation decisions	Optimise the certification function (assessment <i>of</i> learning)
Reducing bias in assessment of complex tasks through smart sampling strategies and procedural measures	Expert judgment of competence in performing daily tasks becomes valid and reliable

From Timmerman, A.A. & Dijkstra, J. A Practical Approach to Programmatic Assessment Design *Adv in Health Sci Educ* (2017). doi:10.1007/s10459-017-9756-3

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