



**A STANDARDS REFERENCED APPROACH TO
ASSESSMENT FOR THE NEW HSC
July 2000**

In the previous session I defined assessment as the collection of information for a purpose, and indicated that there were a range of ways in which teachers collect information about students and build this information into an image that captures what it is that students know and can do. Teachers record this image using marks and comments and then give meaning to their marks by comparing them to pre-determined standards of performance.



At the end of the session we indicated that the standards-referenced assessment model was characterised by:

1. A Syllabus that contains explicit statements in the form of aims, objectives, outcomes and content.
2. Teachers implementing the syllabus using a variety of Teaching/ Learning Programs.
3. Teachers using a range of assessment tasks to produce a faithful image of what it is students have learnt.
4. Students performances being referenced to the pre-determined performance standards.

In this session I am going to focus upon some aspects of the internal and external assessment part of the model and consider a procedure that teachers might use to reference their marks to performance standards.

Create the Image

In a standards-referenced model, teachers not only have to plan and co-ordinate the teaching and learning activity but have to make sure that the image of the student they create using a variety of measures is a faithful reflection of what it is that students (Supra 1) know and can do, in terms of the outcomes of the course. This image is critical to the awarding of the final grade for the course.

What are some of the things we as teachers can do to ensure the quality of the image?

Link the Assessment Tasks to Outcomes

One of the most important things to do when preparing and implementing an assessment program for the new HSC is to make sure that the assessment tasks are linked to the outcomes. In order to be able to do this effectively, it is important that we as teachers have a good understanding of the outcomes. Because teaching, learning and assessing are all closely linked, we start to grapple with the meaning of outcomes from the moment that we start to plan a program of teaching and learning. Questions such as What is really meant by this outcome? and What does achievement of this outcome look like? are considered during this planning phase. Syllabus documents, syllabus support materials, past examination papers and other assessment materials will help answer these questions. More importantly, however, we get a shared understanding of these outcomes by discussing them with our colleagues.



It is during this planning phase that we start to consider the assessment of such outcomes. For example, we might think It would be really good to assess this aspect of the outcome in a research project or a group activity or This aspect of the outcome is best assessed as part of a semester examination and during class as part of a group activity . As teachers we should keep assessment in mind during all parts of the teaching and learning process. As we plan our learning activities we should also be fleshing out the assessment plan.

It is also very important to ensure that students have opportunities in a variety of different contexts and with different types of assessment to provide evidence that they know, understand and can do what is required, for different levels of performance, of syllabus outcomes.

In the new HSC one task will generally cover a range of outcomes. It is not necessary for us to partition our marks on the tasks to reflect performance on each of the outcomes. However, it is important that we incorporate the information from the tasks into the image so that we can make on-balanced judgements regarding a student s performance against the outcomes.

HSC examiners have to ensure that the examinations are structured in such a way that the tasks they construct are matched to the outcomes and that they enable students of all abilities to demonstrate the standard they have achieved relative to the course standards of performance.

As stated previously, the images that are generated by the students performances on the assessment tasks is critical to a standards-referenced assessment model. Therefore the quality of the tasks that are constructed or chosen by teachers to build that image is critical to the process.

Choose or Construct Good Quality Assessment Tasks

The most important thing about constructing or choosing an assessment task is that the task, whether it be an essay question, a multiple choice test, or a performance, does actually assess the outcomes that are intended to be assessed. If the task does not truly assess the intended outcomes then the information that emerges from it is misleading. Such information can adversely affect the image that the teacher has of the student and hence the overall rating of the performance of the student against standards. It goes without saying that this would be unfair.



Similarly, the tasks should

- assess what they are supposed to assess;
- be technically sound (i.e. they should, for example, be unambiguous, and they should be accompanied by valid marking schemes);
- be editorially correct;
- be free of content and language that would generally be viewed as being sensitive, sexist or offensive;
- be interesting and engaging for the students; and
- yield consistent and valid marks.

When constructing or choosing assessment tasks that will be used to capture or summarise the student's performance in terms of marks or comments it is very important to remember that the marks have meaning. More marks should indicate higher levels of achievement or that students have a greater depth of knowledge and understanding of what is being assessed. Procedures for marking or judging student performance should be

- appropriate for the assessment task;
- developed at the time the task is developed;
- applied consistently; and,
- monitored closely during marking.

Different assessment tasks require different ways of scoring. For example, multiple choice, true/false and matching type tasks require the identification of the best answer and are usually marked right or wrong. Essays, extended response and performance tasks might require marks to be awarded when major points are identified in the response, or they may have model or exemplary answers that can be used as a guide to rate the overall performance. Some marking guidelines may have clear descriptors of the different levels of performance. More marks are awarded to the higher levels of performance as implied by the nature of the standards for the course and demonstrated by the response of the students. When developing marking guidelines, there is a need to balance the outcomes that are being assessed, the requirements of the assessment task and the demands of the performance standards. This doesn't mean that the marking guidelines should mimic or reflect the performance standards, but rather they should be structured in such a way that more marks are awarded to the performances that show a development in complexity that is reflected in the performance standards.



When the assessment task is developed the marking guidelines should be constructed, at the same time. They might need to be changed during the marking process to reflect student achievement on the task. However, as we get better at setting tasks, so the instances where marking guidelines might need to be changed will diminish.

One question I am often asked is, Should the marking guidelines be given to the students before the administration of the assessment tasks? Students should be aware of the standards against which their performances will be judged. Teachers can communicate what is valued through marking criteria, assessment rubrics or marking guidelines where appropriate. While students might be delighted to see the marking guidelines for a mathematics task where the marks link directly to the solution, it is probably not a very practical thing to do. However, if the level of performance can be described more generically, then it is possible to pre-release the marking guidelines before the assessment.

Ensure Consistency of Teacher Judgement

After constructing the tasks and administering them, teachers have to use the information resulting from the assessment to update the image of the student relative to the outcomes. If the student's performance is at variance with what is expected from the image the teacher has developed throughout the teaching and learning process, the question is Why? This is one of the key questions that drives teaching.

A successful standards-referenced assessment model is predicated upon teacher judgement. More particularly it is dependent upon the consistency of teacher judgement. Teachers must internalize the standards and apply them consistently to ensure that students obtain marks that best characterizes their performance. The best way to ensure that we are all working from the same standard is to review all the published support material and to take every opportunity to discuss our understanding of the standards with colleagues.

A shared understanding of what is meant by a standard of performance relative to an outcome will evolve over time as teachers discuss outcomes and consider samples of work deemed to reflect outcome standards. The challenge is to internalize and share these standards as quickly as possible and consistently apply professional judgement to summarize what it is that students know and can do relative to the outcomes of the course.



For the HSC, the draft course performance standards have already been determined. The external examinations will be constructed to match the course outcomes, and the tasks will enable the students to provide evidence as to what it is they know and can do relative to these outcomes. This means that there will be some tasks which students who perform generally in accord with Band 2, will be able to do. Similarly, the examinations will have to contain tasks that will enable those students who are capable of operating at say, a Band 6 of the performance scale, to provide evidence that they are at that standard. Panels of judges (Examination Committee members and senior markers) will capture the image of the student who is on the borderline between a Band 6 and Band 5, for example, and through a process of standard setting, derive a score that such a student would achieve in the examination. This is the cut-score between Band 6 and Band 5. Students who obtain a score on the examination above this cut-score will be deemed to be performing at Band 6 standard. Judges will use the same process to set all the cut-scores. It is important to note that

- there is no pre-conceived distribution of students i.e. if all students are above a particular cut-score and below another, they are placed within the same band. They have achieved the nominated standard irrespective of who else or how many other students have achieved the standard;
- the judges will need to have a shared understanding of the standards contained in the performance standards so that they can consistently apply their judgements.

It is important to realise that the HSC will reflect the process being conducted on a daily basis in schools. The ingredients for a successful standards-referenced model are the same irrespective of who constructs the assessments or how the images are formulated. That is, the assessment tasks must be linked to outcomes; the tasks must be well constructed; and, the students will have their marks referenced to pre-determined standards of performance.

Provide Feedback to Students

In a model where everything is linked to building an image that captures what it is that students know and can do, it is important that the students are given feedback about their work that helps them move forward in their learning and points out any problems. A mark, by itself, does not provide such information.



Summative comments such as, 'To get a better mark in this paper you had to ...' or 'If you had compared these two aspects of measurement rather than just described them you would have been awarded a higher mark for this assignment' are much more informative than just being given a mark. In most cases this will not be a new thing for teachers to do as we have always done it. However, it is even more meaningful in a system where the meaning of the mark does not change as a consequence of the performance of other students. We can finally say, 'If you do this... , this will happen.' Rather than if you do this and others do something not as well, then your mark will increase. This aspect of a standards-referenced assessment model cannot be overestimated.

When we talk about feedback from assessments we generally focus upon feedback to the students and to parents. The latter usually occurs through School Reports and parent-teacher interviews. However, we should also remember that every assessment task, enables us as teachers to get feedback and adjust our teaching or modify the learning situation accordingly. If we see, for example, a class of blank looks when we have tried to explain something, we go back and try a different explanation. Similarly, when we have administered and marked an assessment task we should, where necessary, refine the image we have of each student, decide whether we have to re-teach some aspect of the outcomes that have been assessed and, just as importantly, get feedback about how successful the assessment task has been in assessing what it is supposed to assess. This piece of feedback is critical to improving our assessments and hence improving the quality of the image.

Summary

A lot of the things I have said today are not new to most teachers. This should not be surprising given that a standards-referenced model is built upon good teaching practice. Most of us already do the types of things I have mentioned today and as a consequence the next step involves refining or building upon a sound base. This should be encouraging for all of us.

The key points to keep in mind as we move forward, are to

- teach to the learning outcomes;
- link our assessments tasks to these outcomes;
- develop valid assessment tasks;
- apply judgements judiciously and consistently; and
- give meaningful feedback to students, parents and ourselves from assessment situations.

If we do this we will be moving towards successfully implementing a standards-referenced model of assessment in which the students will be the beneficiaries of our efforts.