



Guidelines for Assessment Quality and Equity

Context and scope of these guidelines

ACACA agencies are responsible, directly or indirectly, for enormous amounts of assessment—hundreds of examinations, thousands of questions, tens of thousands of assessment items set in schools—in the high stakes area of senior secondary assessment.

Senior secondary assessment has a significant impact on the lives of the students involved. Accordingly, they each deserve a fair go—the same opportunity to show what they know and can do, regardless of factors such as gender. Fairness—equity—and quality are closely related, not least in the sense that reasonable quality is a prerequisite for the deliberate achievement of equity. Low-quality assessment will almost certainly lead to inequitable outcomes.

There is, of course, always room for improvement in the quality of assessment. Each year sees an increase in the sophistication of educational assessment.

The adoption and implementation of these guidelines represent a step forward in improving the quality, and hence the fairness, of assessment. They do not represent a definitive, final or complete position. They should be read as representing a commitment by ACACA agencies to moving forward by setting down some principles and adopting nationwide an agreed position. The guidelines are intended to be a starting point and so should be read as being deliberately both provisional and incomplete. Experience with, and evaluation of, the effect of their adoption will lead to their further development and enhancement.

ACACA agencies are responsible for assessment, not for how schools operate. The need to be fair to all students means that ACACA assessment practices should not seek to adjust for missed opportunities to learn by saying that students have demonstrated achievement that they have not in fact demonstrated. In this sense the equity issues connected with ideas of Opportunity to Learn are not, therefore, part of these guidelines.

These guidelines are concerned with the practice of assessment. Syllabuses specify the knowledge and skills that should be assessed. The task of assessment is to assess in terms of these specifications, not to redefine the syllabus. However, the guidelines include the need for systematic and regular evaluation and review of assessment: its methods, its materials and its results. The systematic evaluation and review of assessment in a subject provides information about the syllabus: information that should be fed back into the syllabus review and development process.

Fundamental to equity in assessment is the recognition that the construction of the knowledge and skills to be assessed should involve a critical evaluation of the extent to which the choice of a particular set of knowledge and skills is likely to privilege certain groups of students and exclude others by virtue of gender, socioeconomic, cultural or linguistic background. A concern with equity also leads to adopting a proactive stance on the appropriate representation in the curriculum of different kinds of cultural knowledge and experience as valued knowledge and skills.

Guidelines for assessment quality and equity

(Note: **Bold** text indicates references to the guidelines.)

These guidelines are about the quality of assessment - methods, materials and results - and hence implicitly and explicitly about equity. The principal touchstone of quality in assessment is the extent to which it gives students a fair go .

To **certify**¹ achievement in a subject requires **assessment** of **students'** command of the **knowledge and skills** defined and required by the syllabus. This assessment occurs through a **set** of assessment instruments. **Assessment instruments** include such devices as supervised examinations, assignments, projects, practicals, orals, aurals, observational schedules and portfolios. Assessment occurs under various **conditions** - supervision, notice, access to resources, times, dates, handing-in procedures and acceptance of late submissions. Each assessment instrument comprises one or more **assessment items**. An assessment item requires a response from students in one or more of a variety of **modes** such as multiple choice, short answer, paragraph, extended written response, oral, graphical, diagrammatic and so on. As well as the knowledge and skills that are the direct focus, assessment items draw on **assumed knowledge** and often make use of **background material** contextualising the task presented. **Cues** and the **layout** of assessment items provide guides to students about the requirements of the task set by the item. Assessment items are devised by **item writers** and selected and combined into assessment instruments by **test designers**².

1 Agencies may need to replace some or all of the highlighted terms with the terms they currently use.

2 Frequently, of course, the test designer is also the item writer.

These guidelines were endorsed at the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) meeting in August 1995.

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For quality, and hence equity—

Each assessment item should:

- actually assess what the item writer intends it to assess
- assess what on face value it purports to assess
- only require for its successful completion the decoding of a subtext after critical examination of the necessity and appropriateness of this requirement
- use specialist language or jargon as an aid to clarity and accuracy and not as an irrelevant obstacle to successful demonstration of the required knowledge or skill
- only involve the reproduction of gender, socioeconomic, ethnic or other cultural stereotypes after careful consideration of the necessity of such reproduction
- in order to avoid being itself a barrier to students' demonstrating their command of the characteristic the item is supposed to assess:
 - be clearly presented through appropriate choice of layout, cues, visual design, format and choice of words
 - state its requirements explicitly and directly
 - use as background material and require as assumed knowledge only that to which students may reasonably be presumed to have had ready access
- be marked by explicit, clear, unambiguous, criteria declared in advance that:
 - allow the student to identify appropriate ways to demonstrate command of the required knowledge and skills
 - allow the marker to recognise, where appropriate, different ways in which a student may demonstrate command of the required knowledge and skills

Each assessment instrument should:

- give students clear and definite instructions
- be used under clear, definite and specified conditions that are substantially the same for all
- be used under conditions that do not present an inappropriate barrier to the equal participation of all

Each set of assessment instruments used to assess a student's achievement in a subject should:

- involve the use of a range and balance of background contexts in which assessment items are presented
- involve a range and balance of types of assessment instruments and modes of response, including a balance and range of visual and linguistic material
- involve a range and balance of conditions

Each agency should endeavour to improve assessment practices for which it bears responsibility:

- by regular review of the methods, materials and results of assessment
- by including an examination of equity in quality control and quality assurance procedures such as research and data analysis
- by training item writers, test designers and markers directly employed by the agency
- by communicating its quality requirements to suppliers of assessment items and instruments
- by promoting the adoption of these guidelines by teachers responsible for school-based assessment contributing to results certified by the agency.

An illustrative list of strategies for developing improved practices in assessment emphasising quality, equity and gender equity

Agencies can:

- distribute summaries of relevant research findings to item writers and test designers
 - conduct reviews of the representation of gender in assessment instruments
 - evaluate the occurrence in assessment instruments of reproductions of gender, socio-economic, ethnic or other cultural stereotypes
 - evaluate the consistency of the syllabus and the total set of assessment instruments by identifying the relative importance given by each to particular knowledge and skills
 - review the extent to which the set of assessment instruments in a subject are, to the full extent permitted by the syllabus, inclusive of the experience and achievements of women as well as of men
 - provide item writers and test designers with examples showing the full extent to which the construction of knowledge and skills to be assessed allows assessment incorporating references to human contexts
 - conduct equity scanning of assessment instruments before use
 - promote research into the validity and fairness of assessment items for which the agency is responsible
 - scrutinise assessment instruments to eliminate material that may prove an unnecessary and irrelevant distracter for some students
 - employ specialist editors to examine the language of assessment instruments in terms of possible barriers to equal opportunity for all students
 - involve students in critical examination of the quality of assessment instruments they have experienced
 - involve teachers in critical examination of the quality of assessment instruments their students experience
 - involve parents and the wider community in reviews of assessment practices
 - review marker recruitment, selection and training procedures
 - evaluate the weighting of assessment items and instruments in terms of analyses of gender differences in student performances.
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