

**THE POLICY ON THE  
ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING**

**1. POLICY PARTICULARS**

DATE OF APPROVAL BY THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE: 13 May 2005

DATE OF APPROVAL BY SENATE: 27 March 2015

DATE OF APPROVAL BY COUNCIL: July 1999; 07 May 2015

COMMENCEMENT

DATE: July 1999

REVISION HISTORY: First review: May 2005; 2014

REVIEW CYCLE: Every three years

NEXT REVIEW DATE: Process to commence by July 2017

POLICY LEVEL: All academic staff

RESPONSIBILITY

- IMPLEMENTATION & MONITORING: All academic staff, Academic Development Centre, Academic Review Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee
- REVIEW AND REVISION: Teaching and Learning Committee

REPORTING STRUCTURE: Teaching and Learning Committee → Senate → Council

## **2. POLICY STATEMENT**

### **2.1 POLICY DECLARATION:**

One of the primary purposes of the assessment of student learning is to ensure that the standards of qualifications awarded by a university are achieved. In the face of cultural, social and linguistic diversity, however, assessment has the potential both to challenge and maintain social structures. A university therefore has the responsibility to ensure that its assessment is valid and consistent, that its assessment practices are transparent and that its assessors are accountable for the judgements they make.

Another purpose of assessment is to develop students' learning through the provision of feedback. A university therefore has the responsibility of ensuring that students are provided with feedback that is constructive and timely.

In South Africa, learning is described using i) credits ii) HEQSF levels and iii) learning outcomes. Assessment needs to measure and develop learning across the full number of credits and at the HEQSF level specified. It also needs to ensure that learning is measured against and developed towards the achievement of outcomes.

Key to these requirements are the concepts of 'validity' and 'reliability'. The concept of validity relates to the extent to which i) assessment measures the learning it is intended to measure and ii) the extent to which inferences and decisions (for example a decision to 'fail' a student) based on the results of assessment are correct. 'Reliability' refers to the extent to which assessment does this consistently across different groups of learners, at different times and when administered by different assessors. The achievement of both validity and reliability is enhanced through the development of assessment criteria associated with learning outcomes.

The pursuit of accountability and transparency in assessment is furthered by the publication and scrutiny of these criteria in advance of any assessment. The development of learning is also enhanced by the provision of criteria to students before an assessment task is attempted. The availability of outcomes and assessment criteria allows students to understand what they have already learned and what they still need to learn. From this perspective, assessment therefore needs to be perceived as an integral part of teaching and curriculum development.

As an integral part of teaching and learning, assessment needs to be 'aligned' in relation to all the elements (for example, outcomes, teaching approach, learning materials) and also to the purposes of the qualification and, indeed, the purposes of higher education itself.

Higher education is characterised by long-standing assessment practices including, for example, the use of examinations to measure learning. While formal examinations may be necessary, questions about, for example, the proportion of coursework to examinations and the form examinations should take must always be considered in relation to the concepts of validity and reliability.

Given the importance of assessment to be valid, consistent and fair in the face of increasing diversity in the student body, the University recognises the need for all Council appointed staff members to demonstrate their competence as assessors before their appointments are confirmed. Support for the development of this competence is available from the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching & Learning (CHERTL).

## **2.2 POLICY OBJECTIVES:**

This policy aims to ensure that:

- Assessment procedures determine whether or not students have met the stated learning outcomes of a course or module.
- Assessment is sufficient in that it ensures both that students have met those outcomes and that they have been guided towards them.
- Assessment criteria are openly and clearly communicated to students in the interests of transparency and accountability and also to enable students to use those criteria to monitor and develop their own learning.
- Students are provided with feedback which details the extent to which their work has, or has not, met those criteria
- Departments monitor the consistency and validity of their assessment
- Academic staff are provided with support which will allow them to assess validly and consistently

## **2.3 DEFINITIONS:**

**Learning outcome:** A learning outcome describes what students should be able to do by the time they have completed a module, course or a programme leading to a qualification. Outcomes are complex and embody knowledge, skills and attitudes

**Assessment criteria:** Assessment criteria refer to what an assessor needs to be able to see to ensure that students have indeed achieved the outcome.

**Validity:** This refers to the extent to which assessment measures what it is intended to measure and whether the decisions and inferences made on the basis of assessment are justified.

### **3. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **3.1 THE ACTIONS AND PROCESSES BY WHICH THE OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY WILL BE ACHIEVED:**

Individual lecturers are responsible for:

- Developing learning outcomes for the courses and modules they teach
- Developing the assessment criteria associated with those outcomes
- Designing assessment tasks which will allow students to demonstrate that they can meet the criteria and which will contribute to students' learning
- Providing details of assessment criteria to students
- Providing feedback to students describing how their performance on the task has or has not met those criteria
- Liaising with other members of the department in order to ensure that assessment is consistent
- Recording marks and assessment decisions accurately and timeously

Heads of Departments are responsible for:

- Assuring the overall quality of the assessment conducted in their departments
- Ensuring that marks and assessment decisions are recorded accurately

The Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching & Learning is responsible for:

- Providing consultation and support to lecturers which will allow them to assess with validity and consistency.
- Providing developmental opportunities for academics to enhance their capacity as assessors in the form of both formal and informal courses.

This policy needs to be read in conjunction with the following policies:

The Rhodes University Policy on External Examining  
The Rhodes University Common Faculty Policy and Procedures on Plagiarism.

#### **3.2 REVIEW PROCEDURE:**

The policy will next be reviewed at the first meeting of the Teaching and Learning Committee to be held in 2018. Any changes to the policy will be implemented from 1 January 2019 onwards.

