

**Application of HETAC Assessment and Standards Policy**

**A Case Study: Griffith College**

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## **Abstract**

In December 2009 HETAC published an Assessments and Standards policy document to be implemented by all providers of Higher Education (HE) by the 2010/2011 academic year. It reflects the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) '*which has become the benchmark for quality assurance in Europe*' (HETAC, 2009, p.4).

This paper will carry out an in-depth analysis of the policy document. The purpose of the research is to identify the strategy and policy issues most adhered to by lecturers currently and, more importantly, the shortcoming that may exist.

Griffith College Dublin (GCD) will be used as a case study. GCD is an ideal environment in which to carry out this research as the range of courses and the diversity in levels being delivered allows for a thorough and varied research domain. The results will also be far reaching in scope allowing for extensive further utilization of findings both in GCD and in other 3<sup>rd</sup> level institutions.

The researchers foresee this as the beginnings of a longitudinal study which with track improvements over the next decade.

## **Keywords**

Assessment, assessment for learning, HETAC, policy, learner, assessor

## **1. Introduction and Background**

The whole landscape of higher education has changed significantly over the last decade, the main impetus being the Bologna Process. The Bologna process was a declaration signed by 29 European countries on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1999, and was an initiative by Ministers for Education aimed to create a coherent European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. At the launch of EHEA in Budapest and Vienna in March 2010, the Ministers acknowledged the excellent progress made during the previous decade in establishing a unified commitment to creating a dynamic European based knowledge economy and emphasised the need for continued effort and dedication from all participating European Countries. They highlighted in particular the importance of lifelong learning, widening access to higher education, mobility, national frameworks and transparency. Mobility of learning requires transparent systems of education that are based on clear and unambiguous interpretable national frameworks of qualifications which can be mapped trans-nationally. Accompanying national frameworks are generic standards of knowledge, skill and competence. These outcomes are explicitly stated in all education programmes and providers of education are obliged to demonstrate how these outcomes are assessed. Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 HETAC were awarded responsibility for ensuring education programmes were compliant (through the NQAI<sup>1</sup> which was established under this piece of legislation). To quality assure programmes provided by HE<sup>2</sup> institutions HETAC produced the Assessment and Standards Policy.

## **2. HETAC Awards and Standards 2009: Overview**

The document is divided into four main parts – foundations; conventions; protocols and interpretation. The first section, foundations, outlines the principles and guidelines for the next two sections, conventions and protocols. The conventions and protocols, which were agreed at sectoral level, are applicable to all types of assessment leading to an award. The broad aim of the policy is to ensure compliance with best assessment practice, thereby making certain of uniform

1 NQAI: National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

2 HE: Higher Education

and consistent assessment practices across all national providers of higher education and training. This will have the effect of bringing ‘*all assessment practices fully into line with the learning outcomes concept...[and] bring about [the] necessary enhancements*’ (Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.5).

The principles set out as the foundations are under six broad themes:

1. Learners are responsible for demonstrating their learning achievement
2. Assessment supports standards based on learning outcomes
3. Assessment promotes and supports both effective learning and teaching
4. Assessment procedures are credible
5. Assessment methods are reviewed and renewed as necessary to adapt to evolving requirements
6. Learners are well informed about how and why they are assessed

(Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.6-8)

These are the principles which, broadly speaking, guided the primary research for this paper. The principles clearly establish the context and set out the stall for the conventions and protocols which follow. In the principles it is evident that the learners learning experience is of paramount importance and is the primary factor underpinning all other elements.

The conventions are ‘*a set of regulations and benchmarks*’. The seven conventions are:

- Convention 1 on Award Classifications
- Convention 2 on Mixed Grading Systems
- Convention 3 on Determination of Award Classification
- Convention 4 on the Percentage and Alphabetic Grading Systems
- Convention 5 on Post-award Achievement
- Convention 6 on ECTS Grade and Grade Interpretation Scheme
- Convention 7 on Exceptions

(Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.20).

These regulations and benchmarks are agreed by the HE sector. It is incumbent upon each provider to be clear on how they manage learners within each of the convention categories. Interpretation, and subsequent transparent application, is the responsibility of programme managers (who by default are programme assessors). The institutions are charged with communicating and auditing application of each convention, and of supporting the programme team affect all conventions to each programme. The conventions, whilst ensuring consistency and quality, are not the main impetus of the document. They are the tools which facilitate

regulation of procedures that all providers must comply with in order to ensure a quality and successful learning experience for students.

Section 4 presents protocols which providers must refer to when reviewing and establishing assessment procedures. They range from assessment structures and flows at top management level through to operational level. The protocols propose a framework and structure for assessment of learning for providers of education. The protocols, whilst imperative from a management perspective, are not the focus of this paper.

Appendix 1 offers an integrated overview of the policy, section by section, as interpreted by the authors.

### **3. Implications for Teaching and learning**

This policy derives from the EHEA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance where ‘... *assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education*’ and is designed to enhance the learning experience for the student. The focus is on the student learning, it is made tangible in the quality of assessment and by implication the programme. *‘The assessment of learning measures the achievements of learners, and by extension, the effectiveness of programmes’* (Awards and Standards, 2009, p.4). Teaching and learning is differentiated in the document with regard to the role of each in students learning. Learning does not necessarily necessitate teaching. *‘A module does not require direct teaching as such but always requires learning and a programme could....be based entirely on a prescribed sequence of assessments with no teaching in the direct sense’* ( Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.26). This clearly indicates the central role of student learning as opposed to teaching. The role of teaching is to support the learning and learning is demonstrated in the assessment. Assessment is not necessarily testing. Assessment in this context is assessing the extent to which learners have achieved the outcomes they set out to achieve. This is reflective of much research in the area (Black & William, 1998; Torrance & Pryor 1998, Gipps, 1999; Shepard, 2000) ‘...*assessment procedures and practices are developed to support learning and underpin rather than undermine students confidence, achievement and progress*’ (Torrance 2007, p.281). It is fair to say that the policy document discussed in this paper appears at all times to be directed by the need to ‘develop and underpin’ student learning.

Formative assessment plays a pivotal role as do timely assessment feedback and assessor availability to learners. McMillian (2007, p.1) defines formative assessment based on the work of many prominent researchers in the area (Sadler, 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002) as being '*...a set of skills and activities that are undertaken by teachers to provide feedback to students to enhance their motivation and learning by designing instruction to meet students needs*'. Hargreaves (2002, p.24) describes assessment for learning as '*a strategy of very high leverage*'. Formative assessment can be a highly effective teaching and learning tool based on the areas of practice identified in the work of Black et al (2003) where questioning, feedback, sharing criteria with the learner and peer and self assessment are the principles underlining formative assessment. Biggs and Tang (2007), talk about good teaching and assessment as being inseparable and this view is substantiated in the work of Black and Wiliam (1998, p.16) who argue that '*...the quality of the interaction [between pupil and teacher]...is at the heart of pedagogy*'. It behooves the lecturer to design and plan teaching and learning tasks that facilitate interaction and assessment for learning (i.e. formative assessment). Perrenoud (1991) takes this responsibility further and says that the tasks should not be 'imposed' on learners but should be 'initiated'. In this way the learner takes responsibility for their own learning and becomes a more autonomous learner – HETAC refer to this as '*...learning to learn*' sub-strand (outcome) which must be developed in all HETAC awarded programmes ([www.hetac.ie](http://www.hetac.ie)). This is further cemented in a key principles of the Assessment and Standards policy; '*Learners can be involved...such involvement...may be used to develop learning-to-learn competence*' (HETAC, 2009, p.12).

In order for successful learning to occur the learner needs to be clear about what it is they are learning. Sadler (1989, p.34) says '*...the learner has to (a) possess a concept of the standard (or goal or reference level) being aimed for, (b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, and (c) engage in appropriate action which leads to closure of the gap*'. HETAC say learners have to be able to '*internalise (conceptualise) minimum intended learning outcomes*' (2009, p.9) and it is the responsibility of the assessor to assist the learners in this regard. Learning is dependent on knowing what the goal is (i.e. the intended learning outcome) and interacting with the learning using appropriate learning activities and feedback (i.e. formative assessment) to ensure the learning gap has been closed (i.e. summative assessment). Key to knowing when the learning gap has been closed is feedback. Black et al (2006, p.128) call

for *'comment-only feedback on written work, with the requirement that pupils respond to the comments by further work'*. Gipps (1994, p.5) says the assessment of student work is *'...more profitably directed to giving them useful feedback in order to show them how to improve their performance and to encourage them to compare their performance in terms of....progress on their previous performance'*. It is difficult to envisage how progress can be tracked or measured unless some form of grading is used. Learners need to know what it is that is expected of them in order to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcome or goal. In this policy document lecturers are *encumbered* to provide full programme and module assessment strategy (including marking criteria) up front. There is a risk of being too helpful through formative assessment thereby reducing the actual learning by the learner. Torrance et al (2005, p.81) asks the question *'wherein does the challenge of learning reside?'* if assignment tasks, associated grades and support become 'too' clear. If we accept that students who *'conceive of assessment in terms of personal accountability for learning achieve more'* (Brown and Hirschfield, 2008, p.13) then we need to further explore the extent to which formative assessment may be a helpful learning approach.

#### **4. Provision of valid and reliable assessment strategies**

In designing assessment strategies lecturers/assessors are required to ensure the tools and methods used are valid. This means that the tools measure what they are supposed to measure. HETAC define validity as *'fitness-for-purpose'*. This is further extrapolated in the manner in which assessment becomes valid as a result of *'(i) allowing inference of attainment of the learning outcomes; (ii) assesses the person it purports to assess; and (iii) is appropriate for informing [the] decisions it purports to inform'* (as opposed to using the assessment tool for other purposes (p.56). *'Student assessment procedures are expected to be appropriate for their purpose'* (Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.11). Crooks and Kane (1996, p.13) propose a framework for evaluating the validity of assessment. The framework identifies eight steps in assessment use and interpretation. Two key steps are, firstly, administration – this refers to the extent to which the assessment task is communicated effectively. The HETAC policy states clearly that *'assessment strategies should be plainly written and communicated at the start of a programme to learners'* (Assessment and Standards, 2009, p. 13). Secondly the steps include

scoring (i.e. criteria that '*...form styles of response [without being}..too analytical [and] ...too holistic*'). This infers that for assessment to be valid it must have clear marking criteria which offer opportunities for learners to demonstrate autonomous and innovative learning that is not necessarily prescribed for in the marking criteria.

The extent to which assessment is reliable is reflected in the consistency and fairness of the strategy. HETAC (2009) define it is '*the confidence one can have in the result or how informative it is...if fully reliable assessment...would return a result with complete certainty*' (p.55). The level of certainty can be ascertained through the use of clearly defined marking or grading criteria of which HETAC are proponents of evidenced in their statement that '*...student assessment procedures are expected to have clear and published criteria for marking*'. In addition the policy advocates a central role for internal moderation and external verification (aside from the role of external examiners) as a means for ensuring reliability; '*...it is good practice for all assessment tasks to be reviewed internally where possible...[in addition]...independent external assessor (as distinct from external examiners) should be used (along with internal assessors) to provide the necessary objectivity*' (Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.15-16). The duality approach of validity and reliability offers fairness and consistency to learners. The policy goes on to say that validity and reliability can be done '*theoretically or empirically or using a hybrid of the two*' (Assessment and Standards, 2009, p.39). Empirical evidence will be through analysis of student performance across modules. Theoretical evidence will be more subjective and will rely on input from the internal review team, verifier and external examiner.

## **5. Research Method**

Burrell and Morgan (1979) explore research in terms of two dimensions, the subjective and objective. The objectivist approach is more pragmatic and deterministic. Researchers see knowledge as external to their assumptions and as existing independently. They view research and knowledge as being detached from them, and as something tangible and measurable. Researchers positioning themselves in the positivist paradigm place huge emphasis on the role of empirical evidence and on the procedures adopted. Procedures ensure or contribute to the reliability of the research.

The researchers of this paper adopted a positivist approach and used surveys to gather quantitative data because the aim of the research is to identify application of practices outlined in HETAC Assessment and Standards principles. The research, at this point, is not concerned with how parties are responding to the principles or the impact of same on the learning experience. So it is not an ethnographic study.

## 6. Findings

The primary research sought to assess the extent to which lecturers and students are aware of the HETAC guidelines and the extent to which the standards are being implemented.

A random sample of lecturers and students in GCD was selected to participate in this research. Sample sizes exceeded 30 in both cases. Survey Monkey and Interactive Response clickers were used on each group respectively to collect and collate the data. Questions were designed to reflect the six broad principles as stated above in section 2 above.

In order to elicit credible responses the format of the questions was altered slightly to facilitate understanding by the students who may not be familiar with some of the terminology.

There was a strong correlation between responses on the following questions where students and staff were in agreement as to how the principles are being adhered to.

<b>Question Number</b>	<b>Summary of question</b>	<b>Lecturer response</b>	<b>Student response.</b>
		+	+
<b>1</b>	<b>Assignments examine the achievement of the learning outcomes.</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>91%</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Learning experiences are offered to accommodate different learners</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Marking schemes are given for all assessments.</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>86%</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Formative feedback is given. (draft work)</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Team based tasks allow for some individual assessment.</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>48%</b>

The correlation between lecturer and student responses is 0.77 which is reasonable strong given the small data set. This merely demonstrates however that the lecturers and students are in agreement with what is being done, it does not show that the principles are in fact being implemented. From the above data, the low percentage of lecturers who are assessing group activities in accordance with the guidelines requires attention.

While most of the answers by lecturers were supported by student responses, there was a significant difference at both the 0.01 and the 0.05 level of significance on the question: “assessment strategies are consistent across each module within a semester” with a Z score of 3.52.

The lecturers were asked to answer the following question “My assessment strategies are consistent (i.e. they are comparable with assessment strategies designed by my colleagues across the same stage and programme)”. 80% said that they were. Students were asked “Do you feel that in each year all assignments are of the same level?” Only 43% of students felt this was true.

Lecturers were afforded in the research an opportunity to voice any concerns or to justify why they were not conforming fully to the standards as set out in the document. One comment regarding this issue of consistency alluded to the difficulty in achieving consistency in standards across modules at the same level without coordination from department heads. Perhaps a formal structure of pre-semester meetings with lecturers from the same course and stage could ensure that consistency in assignments is achieved in the future.

Another area which stood out as being non-conformist with the current paradigm on good teaching is that of formative assessment. Only 65% of lecturers responded in the affirmative when asked “Do you regularly use formative assessment and feedback to support student learning”. This figure was validated by the students’ responses. The issue of class size was given as a reason why feedback is difficult; however, assignment design can allow for formative feedback to be given to large groups. For example short multiple choice exams can be corrected immediately and students are then immediately able to recognize their shortcomings.

## 7. Conclusions and Future Work

Overall this research showed a definite awareness among lecturers of the procedures and practices necessary for compliance with the HETAC standards. It showed up some of the areas that need attention and feedback from lecturers highlighted some of the difficulties faced by lecturers in adhering to these demands. Time constraints and large class sizes were cited as reasons why some of the standards were not met. Further research would allow a more comprehensive review of the issues raised here and how best to advance improvements.

Further questions raised for the authors as a result of this research were; is assessment about assessing the extent to which the interaction between learners and teachers was successful, rather than whether the student can do something? Does the approach facilitate development of independent *'learning to learn'* (HETAC sub-strand) learners? Is current assessment more reflective of Bobbit's social efficiency movement where the assessment process is about dividing *'a very large number of very small steps [with] reinforcement contingent upon the accomplishment of each step'* (Shepard, 2009, p.96)? Is graded or non-graded work more effective in developing students learning? Are validity and reliability issues more concerned with QA than student learning? Notwithstanding these questions for further reflection, the research does satisfy the authors, at a surface level, that lecturers in Griffith College are adopting best practice as identified in the HETAC document. The two key areas (see appendix 3) identified for lecturer support are (i) individual mark with group assessments; (ii) involving students in the assessment strategy.

## Appendix 1

### Overview of Assessment and Standards 2009

Principles	Guidelines	Conventions	Protocols
<i>1. Learners are responsible for demonstrating their learning achievement</i>	Regulate and manage Academic misconduct discouraged - Training for teachers & learners Constant reminder to students of standards of conduct Reasonable accommodations	C3: Determination of Award Classification (when seeking exemptions & honors classification on 1 <sup>st</sup> attempts only) C5: Post award Achievement	Assessment and Programme Structures (staged learning) (4.2) Progression eligibility (4.4) Assessor / learner consultation (4.9)
<i>2. Assessment supports standards based on learning outcomes</i>	Conceptualise & internalize LO's Alignment & mapping – support awards Regulate and manage (Non-arbitrary combinations) Programme AS (incl grading system)	C1: Award Classifications (Criterion referenced) C2: Determination of Award Classification (when seeking exemptions & honors classification on 1 <sup>st</sup> attempts only) C4: Percentage & Alphabetic Grading Systems (related to C1 & C2) C6: ECTS <sup>3</sup> Grade and EGIS <sup>4</sup> (when implemented in Ireland)	Programme level management of assessment (4.6) Functions of assessors (4.7) Complaints Procedures – Grounds for (4.10.2)
<i>3. Assessment promotes and supports both effective learning and</i>	Conceptualise & internalize LO's Test for reliability and validity - use assessment findings in decision	C5: ECTS Grade and EGIS (learner centered credit system)	Assessment and programme structures (4.2) Programme level management

<sup>3</sup> European Credit Transfer System relates to learner effort required per credit awarded (e.g. 20 - 25 hours learner effort per 1 ECTS)

<sup>4</sup> European Grade Interpretation Scheme

<i>teaching</i>	<p>making  Learner feedback and support (timely and constructive)  Accommodates 'natural diversity'  Programme AS (incl grading system)  Alignment  Inclusion of FA  Authentic assessment tasks</p>		<p>of assessment (4.6)  Functions of assessors (4.7)  Assessor/ learner consultation (4.9)</p>
<i>4. Assessment procedures are credible</i>	<p>Appropriate learning opportunities to prepare for assessment (fair and consistent; valid and reliable)  Conceptualise &amp; internalize LO's - AS &amp; procedures made available to all learners in advance  Internal moderation and anonymous grading  Test for reliability and validity - change unreliable practices  Use assessment findings in decision making  Individual component of group marks  Internal &amp; external reviewing  Full programme team aware of programme AS  Competent assessors  Regulations</p>	<p>C1: Award Classifications  C2: Mixed Grading Systems (Percentage Grading System)  C3: Determination of Award Classification (exemptions and honors classification on 1<sup>st</sup> attempts only)  C4: Percentage &amp; Alphabetic Grading Systems (related to C1 &amp; C2)  C5: Post-award Achievement  C7: Exceptions</p>	<p>Structure for Management and Conduct of Assessment (4.3)  Progression eligibility (4.4)  Top-level management of assessment (4.5)  Programme level management of assessment (4.6)  Functions of assessors (4.7)  Appeals, complaints, re-checks and reviews (4.10)  Dealing with Plagiarism and Other Types of Academic Misconduct (4.11)</p>
<i>5. Assessment methods are reviewed and renewed as necessary to adapt to evolving requirements</i>	<p>Learner involvement - Test for reliability and validity  Review to ensure AS accommodates 'natural diversity'  Internal &amp; external reviewing  Reasonable accommodations</p>	<p>C2: Mixed Grading Systems (Percentage Grading System)  C3: Determination of Award Classification (review honors classification on 1<sup>st</sup> attempt only)  C7: Exceptions</p>	<p>Structures for Management and Conduct of Assessment (4.3)  Programme level management of assessment (4.6)  Functions of assessors (4.7)</p>
<i>6. Learners are well</i>	<p>AS &amp; procedures made available to all</p>	<p>C1: Award Classifications (EDS<sup>5</sup>)</p>	<p>Structure for Management and</p>

*informed about how  
and why they are  
assessed*

learners in advance – use and discuss  
with students regularly  
Regulations for governing CA  
Learner involvement – in  
review/testing & design  
Programme AS (incl grading system)  
available in advance to students  
Assessment schedule  
Grading system  
Reasonable accommodations

C2: Mixed Grading Systems  
(Percentage Grading System  
C4: Percentage & Alphabetic  
Grading Systems (students must  
understand the grading system and  
its implication on final awards)  
C5: Post-award Achievement  
C7: Exceptions (notify students if  
relevant)

Conduc  
Progress  
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Function  
Appeals  
and revi

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5 Europass Diploma Supplement is channel for information to students and stakeholders

## **Appendix 2: Lecturer Survey Statements**

I design assessment strategies that determine learners' achievement of the intended learning outcomes

I am conscious of offering appropriate learning experiences for students to attain learning outcomes

My assessment strategies are consistent (i.e. they are comparable with assessment strategies designed by my colleagues across the same stage and programme)

The marking criteria I use for each assignment are made explicit and discussed with students in advance each assignment

I seek student input when designing assessment strategy

My assessment strategy encourages and supports good academic conduct (i.e. reduces the risk of cheating or plagiarising)

I am conscious of designing assessment strategy to accommodate the natural diversity of learners

I endeavour to ensure my assessment tasks and criteria are clear and unambiguous

I make my marking criteria available to students well in advance of assignment due date

I am clearly aware of the award classifications on the programme(s) I am assessing

I regularly use formative assessment and feedback to support student learning

I ensure individuals undertaking team-based tasks have an opportunity to be assessed as individuals also

I allow input from others to influence my assessment strategy (e.g. Year Head, Course Director, Colleague, Verifier, Extern, Students)

I analyse students results and allow this inform future assessment strategy

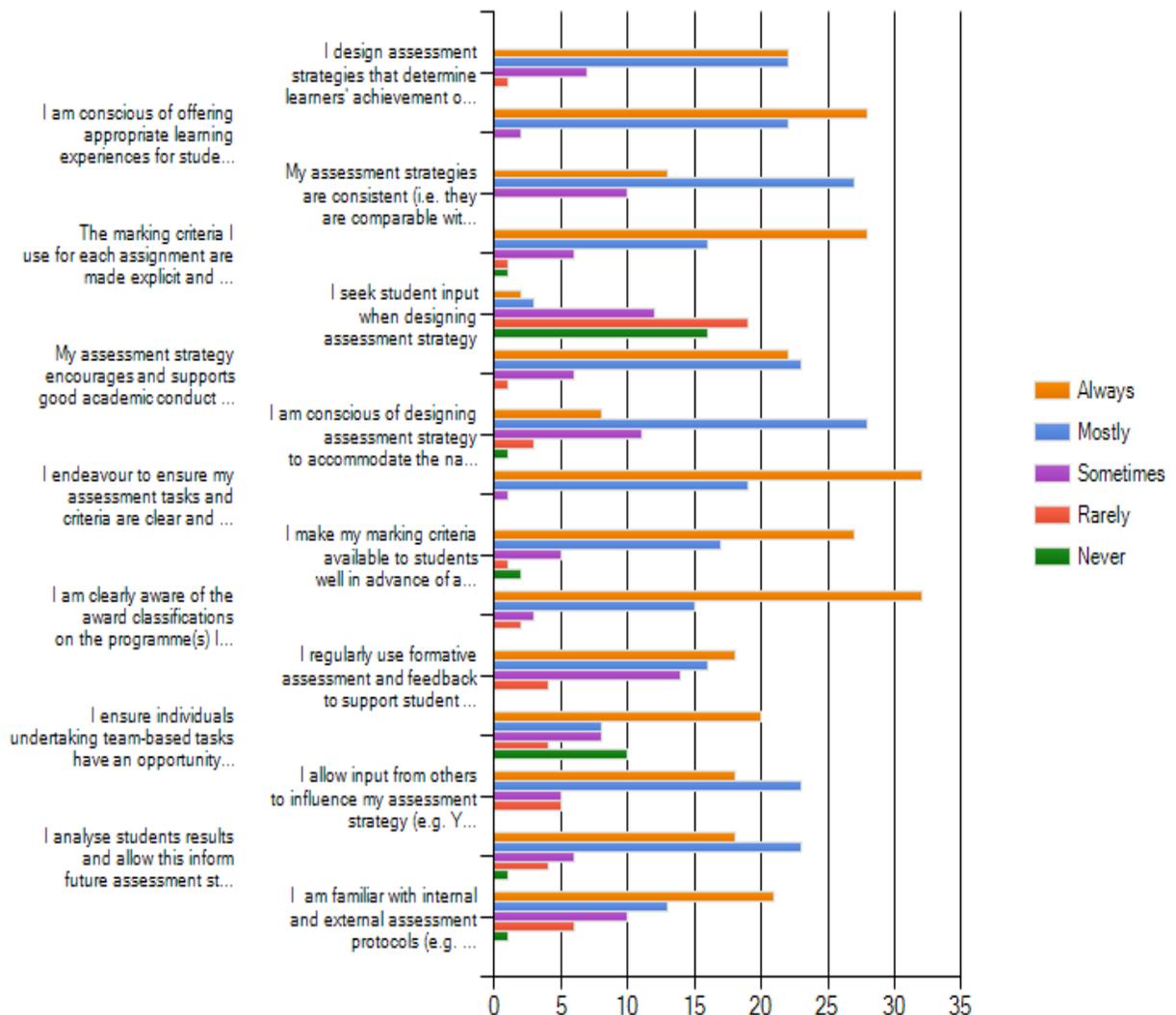
I am familiar with internal and external assessment protocols

(e.g. management structures for appeals; passing by compensation; student progression etc)

Please feel free to offer any comments or feedback you have in relation to the HETAC Assessment and Standards Policy document

## Appendix 3

**Please rate the following statements:**



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