



## Standards-Based Assessment

# Overview

Standards-based assessment depends on a set of pre-defined statements outlining different levels or standards of achievement in a program, course or assessment component, and normally expressed in terms of the stated assessment criteria.

This system of assessment involves awarding grades to students to reflect the level of performance (or standard) they have achieved relative to the pre-defined standards. Students' grades, therefore, are not determined in relation to the performance of others, or to a pre-determined distribution of grades.

Standards-based assessment lets students know against which criteria you will judge their work, and the standards attached to each of these criteria. It tells students what performance is required and allows you to make comparisons between students based on their achievement of the standards.

[See [Transcripts](#) of videos]

### Video Series - Standards-Based Assessment

In these 7 videos, academics discuss standards based assessment, ePortfolios and Rubrics.

## When to use

At UNSW, the move to standards-based assessment aims to:

- support students as independent learners
- implement defensible, consistent and transparent assessment judgements (Hughes, 2005)
- guide and encourage effective student learning using inclusive assessment tasks, aligned with learning outcomes and reflecting the objectives of the course and relevant graduate capabilities and attributes
- adopt fair, valid and reliable measurements of a student performance of the intended learning outcomes
- place greater emphasis on providing useful feedback
- demonstrate the achievement by students of consistent academic standards
- respond to the sector-wide standards framework ([TEQSA](#)).

## Benefits

In standards-based assessment, marks are awarded to students to reflect the level of performance they have achieved. This means that you can:

- provide much richer information about what you expect your students to achieve by describing what they need to know and can do
- provide more explicit guidance to students
- use criteria and standards to give more efficient feedback to students about their performance
- differentiate between those students who are performing well and those who aren't
- use the criteria and standards to design more effective assessment strategies
- encourage consistency among multiple markers by sharing the same marking criteria and standards
- design both the learning outcomes and the assessment standards for your course to include graduate capabilities
- make it easier to give timely and usable feedback.

In addition, standards-based assessment provides guidance to students about what's important in their learning and assessment, encourages them to understand the goals and standards in order to study towards them and fosters grading consistency over time. As Sadler (2005) points out:

- "Students deserve to be graded on the basis of the quality of their work alone, uncontaminated by reference to how other students in the course perform on the same or equivalent tasks, and without regard to each student's previous level of performance. These two conditions set criteria-based grading apart from all forms of norm-referencing and self-referencing, but they do not specify how it should be done."
- "At the point of beginning a course of study, students deserve to know the criteria by which judgments will be made about the quality of their work. This has a primarily prospective purpose, which is to enable learners to use the information to shape their work intelligently and appropriately while it is being developed. However, specifying the bases for grading also serves retrospectively in that stated criteria help to provide a rationale for grading judgments after they have been made and the results given back to the students."

## Challenges

Developing assessment criteria and standards is a complex and iterative task. Some of the difficulties for staff are that:

- It takes time to develop criteria and standards for all assessment tasks.
- Traditional ways of assessing, with their roots in the standard normal curve ideology, can be resistant to change.
- The form that criteria and standards take varies depending on the type of performance being assessed.
- It is difficult to predict and articulate standards of achievement before trialling tasks and assessment processes. If these trials are not carried out, poor differentiation of achievement levels can result.
- There is a danger of being too prescriptive, e.g. not valuing creativity enough.

## Confusion between criteria and standards

The terms "criteria" and "standards" are often used interchangeably (Sadler, 2005), but they refer to quite different things.

“Criteria are descriptive whereas standards are judgemental—a high criterion does not make the same sense as a high standard does. This inevitably leads to confusion and inconsistency. Criteria can also be specific to an assessment, either implicitly, such as answering an assignment brief, or explicitly in published criteria, or be generic for a discipline or level of study such as Master’s-level criteria. Criteria may or may not contain explicit links to standards such as grading levels or marks” (Hughes, 2011).

This confusion between the terms, when moderation is used during the marking process, can lead to disagreements between markers and to "norm referencing" or a highly subjective “feeling” of the mark.

## Strategies

Before you begin to implement standards-based assessment in your course, ensure that:

- the course's learning outcome statements clearly identify criteria that indicate what students are expected to master
- assessment tasks have been chosen that will appropriately assess the learning outcomes
- the qualitative standards or levels of expected performance for the assessment tasks have been described
- the criteria and standards for the assessment tasks have been organised in a marking scheme and are available to both staff and students
- moderation has been planned so that shared understandings of the expected standards will develop among markers, and consistent application of the standards will be facilitated
- processes are in place for the marking scheme to be explained to students prior to the task, and for the provision of targeted feedback following grading.

To make standards meaningful in students' learning experiences, in the marking of their work and the improvement of grading reliability, consider introducing some of the following processes:

- plan up-front to ensure better shared understanding among staff involved in a course
- discuss and explain the standards with staff and students
- provide exemplars of the standards
- provide opportunities to practise making assessment judgments
- moderate teachers' assessments
- include self and peer assessment tasks
- provide feedback to students
- negotiate the development of criteria and standards with stakeholders

- engage in structured reflection and goal setting.

Ensure that...	...with the objective of...
there are explicit learning outcomes, clear criteria and, where possible, statements of the various levels of achievement	students and staff both being aware of what is expected, what is valued, and what will be rewarded.
a close match is achieved between the assessment tasks—in particular, the knowledge and skills these tasks are capable of determining—and the intended learning outcomes	creating assessment tasks that validly and reliably determine the valued learning outcomes.
the grades awarded (and other information provided to students on their achievement) make a direct link between the intended learning outcomes and students' actual performance on assessment tasks	awarding grades that meaningfully represent the level of learning.
assessment tasks are capable of detecting the higher-order learning outcomes that characterise higher education	developing higher education assessment that determines and reports the highest intellectual skills and accomplishments.
ongoing dialogue takes place, with teachers in the same discipline area in other universities, on learning outcomes, assessment and grading	using assessment and grading practices that are informed by the norms and values of the discipline community.

Adapted from the table "What can individual academics do about standards?" on the [CSHE website](#).

## Standards-based assessment in UNSW learning management systems

In Moodle, you can create [marking guides](#) and rubrics for any assessment activity.

## Additional information

### External resources

- [Poster Booklet](#) (PDF on Google Docs, 4 MB, 56 pages) from the May 2012 UNSW Learning and Teaching [Forum on Assurance of Learning](#).
- [Rubrics Booklet](#) (PDF on Google Docs, 15 MB, 18 pages) from the May 2012 UNSW Learning and Teaching [Forum on Assurance of Learning](#)

- Assessment Toolkit, Macquarie University, specifically the toolkit “Standards Based Assessment” under “Implementing MQ's Assessment Policy”
- **TEQSA** website (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency)

## Further readings

Anderson, R. (1998). Why Talk about Different Ways to Grade? The shift from traditional assessment to alternative assessment. *New Directions for teaching and Learning* 74.

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Goos, M. and Moni, K. (2001). Modelling professional practice: A collaborative approach to developing criteria and standards-based assessment in pre-service teacher education courses. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 26(1), 73–88.

Hughes, C.P. (2005). **Casting some light on a shady practice: Towards guidelines for the development of assessment criteria and standards.** *Making a Difference: Effective Teaching and Learning Conference*, University of Sydney, 30 November–1 December.

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## **Acknowledgments**

The contributions of staff who engaged with the preparation of this topic are gratefully acknowledged.

This topic was inspired by a resource developed for the Macquarie University Assessment Toolkit

### **Standards-Based Assessment**

Document Version Date 15/10/2018

UNSW CRICOS Provider Code: 00098G

<https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/standards-based-assessment>