

Universities New Zealand – Overview of assessment practices and addressing complaints

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The majority of people who do university study want to develop skills and knowledge that will make them employable and to gain qualifications that potential future employers will recognise and value. The reputation of a university for its teaching and the employer demand for graduates are significant factors for many students in choosing where and what they study.

As a consequence, New Zealand universities have a strong commitment to providing high quality teaching and to ensuring that graduates are capable and skilled when they enter the workforce.

This commitment to high quality teaching is one reason why all eight universities are ranked in the top 3% in the world, and why we have the highest graduate employment rates and lowest under-employment rates (degree holders working in jobs that don't require a degree) of any country we have statistics for.

To support this commitment to quality, there are robust internal and external quality management and quality improvement processes within every university and across the university system collectively.

The key elements of this quality system are described below;

1. Comprehensive quality assurance of international standing

- Every time a university proposes to add or significantly amend a qualification it is subject to quality assurance through the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP).
- CUAP includes representatives from all eight universities as well as student representatives.
- Proposals to add or amend qualifications are circulated around all eight universities for peer review and comment. Proposals may be amended or clarified at this stage as issues or problems are identified.

- CUAP approves the offering of the new or amended qualification when they are confident all of the following requirements have been met.
 - There is a graduate profile that details the skills and competencies that a student will have gained by the time they graduate.
 - There is a curriculum that will enable students to gain the skills and competencies listed in the graduate profile.
 - There will be assessment that tests the progress of students as they gain skills and competencies.
 - There is sufficient resourcing and teachers with the necessary knowledge to develop student skills and competencies.
 - Potential employers have signed off on the graduate profile to indicate that students with these skills and competencies would meet their workforce needs.
 - There is nothing that would mislead either students or employers as to what a qualification was (and wasn't).
- There is a 'graduating year review' a year or two after the first graduates have successfully completed the programme and entered the workforce. This involves interviewing graduates and their employers to test that they actually gained the skills and capabilities detailed in the graduate profile for the qualification.
 - The interviews are carried out by someone not involved in delivery of the qualification.
 - Results of the graduating year review are reported back to CUAP who can remove approval for universities to offer under-performing qualifications or require them to undergo further reviews in future years where concerns are identified.

2. Regular independent audits

- As part of ensuring these standards, New Zealand universities also participate in regular independent, quality audits undertaken by the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA).
- Both CUAP and AQA processes are themselves subject to international peer review.
- Assessment processes were specifically considered in the latest cycle of academic audits conducted by AQA (2013-2016). These reports are publicly available. Where relevant, recommendations will be made about assessment and grading processes and universities need to respond to the recommendation.
- Through those audits, interviewed staff have the ability to raise concerns of a systemic nature with regard to assessment and grading practices.
- In addition, university qualifications are also subject to international quality assurance processes and accreditations.

3. How university assessment and grading works

- Assessment is a critical part of a student's university experience and a university's quality standing and reputation.
- The processes ensure that assessment is aligned with the learning outcomes of the individual paper, subject or course and are in turn aligned with the graduate profile for a qualification or programme.
- Universities have processes in place to ensure that assessment is appropriate, fair and equitable. These processes are typically part of a specific assessment strategy or framework, or part of a broader learning and teaching framework in universities.
- Universities have regulations that set out principles for assessment, outline the expectations of students and the processes by which grades will be confirmed.
- As part of this, universities have published grading scales to ensure that 'A', 'B', 'C' grades are awarded consistently across different courses and subjects. Accompanying marking guides are commonly used between teaching teams and within departments to help ensure consistency in grading.
- Academics are responsible for implementing agreed assessment policies and practices of their university. This is overseen by course coordinators, heads of departments/schools and school or faculty boards. Academic committees within universities also discuss matters related to assessment.
- Processes for setting and confirming final grades vary from university to university but all have three common elements:
 1. Moderation processes (to ensure that all those engaged in marking share the same assumptions about what constitutes an A, B, or C, for example)
 2. Board of examiners, or equivalent, for confirming final grades (independent of marking staff)
 3. University-wide processes for special consideration, breaches and appeals.

4. Quality assurance of assessment and grading practices

- Assessment itself is subject to peer-review in the form of internal pre-moderation of assessment and further scrutiny from examination committees or board.
- Assessment and grading practices may also be subject to external review, particularly by professional accreditation bodies, and would be considered in regular, cyclical reviews of programmes or qualifications.

5. Robust internal complaints process

- Universities have robust systems and processes for addressing concerns, whether about assessment or other matters.

- Processes for addressing concerns may vary between universities, including: appeals processes, academic misconduct processes, Proctor and discipline processes.
- Persons with concerns may be supported by unions (typically NZUSA or TEU) or other supporters. The final point of appeal within universities is the governing body (Council) of the university.

6. External complaints process

- If a concern or complaint cannot be resolved by the university, persons with concerns or complaints can refer the issue to Universities New Zealand (under Section 253 of the Education Act) Universities New Zealand will generally only use this power once each university's own internal review and appeals processes have been properly completed.
- If a concern or complaint cannot be satisfactorily resolved by Universities New Zealand, the matter can be referred to the Office of the Ombudsman.
- Universities are subject to the Protected Disclosures (aka "Whistleblowers") Act and have internal processes to protect and support whistle blowers.