

# Allocating academic workload for student consultation assessment and feedback

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## **Abstract**

Assessment is a high priority across the university sector. It is what drives student learning and monopolises much of the academic's workload. Planning and implementing authentic assessment patterns which are relevant to the students' learning are time consuming and challenging. Marking assessments to ensure consistency in judgements and criteria presents dilemmas as it is dependent on many variables. Curtin has recently developed the Academic Workload Management System (AWMS), a university-wide system for allocating academic staff workload. One aim of the system is to ensure transparency and equity for staff workloads across the University. One of the categories for allocation of time is *Consultation Assessment and Feedback* (CAF). The CAF category is used to allocate time dedicated to consulting with students, assessing student performance and providing feedback to students. Factors such as the skills and experience of staff; preparation and feedback provided during the assessment process; student ability; and complexity of tasks impact on the time it takes to perform tasks associated with the CAF category. A key element of the CAF category is the marking of assessments - allocating time to this activity requires informed judgement. This research is an effort to gather evidence to inform discussion on the time allocation for the CAF category in the AWMS. As universities move into a regulatory environment where outcomes and standards will be actively scrutinised, the assessment experience and the quality of student feedback will be of critical importance. It is in the interests of the university to resource consultation, assessment and feedback adequately.

Keywords – workload, consultation and feedback

## **Background**

Issues of academic workload and the associated stresses have gained momentum in recent years as universities are under increasing scrutiny to produce employable graduates and provide a service that meets the needs of students, community and government agendas cost effectively (Yorke, Bridges & Woolf, 2000). Assessment strategies and outcomes are high on the agenda for institutional accountability measures (Bloxham, 2009). These increasing accountability requirements and intensive reporting mechanisms directly impact on academic staff workloads. Allocating a definitive timeframe to specific tasks of a teaching academic is challenging. While there is a plethora of literature on assessment and the issues associated with assessment and many articles conveying the dilemmas of the academic's workload, there is little that specifically discusses workload in relation to the intensity of tasks associated with assessment in the higher education sector.

According to Hersh (2007) assessing learning is crucial to quality and accountability. Hersh argues that 'transparent, systematic learning assessment can be a powerful force for improvement'. The high stakes attributed to assessment and student outcomes reinforces the need for the higher education sector to examine the diversity of assessment practices, the skill levels of staff and the time it takes for an academic to implement the assessment cycle within their workload. Bloxham (2009) recognises that assessment is fraught with the dilemma of inherent inconsistencies of marking practices and standards. This factor impacts on both the workload and stresses for staff charged with planning, marking and facilitating student assessments to ensure accountability and improved student learning.

Staff workload is increasingly an issue for universities and according to Race and Pickford (2007) the most significant element of the work of teachers in post-compulsory education is generated by assessment processes. Stress resulting from the diversity and complexity of an academic's work is on the increase (Hogan et al, 2002; Kearns & Gardiner, 2007) thus impacting on the retention and attraction of quality staff. The biggest issue confronting the higher education sector is the attraction and retention of academic staff (Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report, 2008). Increased workloads and pressures are the key factors in reduced staff morale and satisfaction in the higher education sector (OECD 2008).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that there is an urgency to monitor academic staff workload in an attempt to balance the teaching and research nexus and acknowledge the time commitment required to develop and implement authentic, reliable and fair assessment and provide constructive and meaningful feedback to students (Ferns et al, 2009). Disengaged and overworked staff have the potential to compromise the integrity of the assessment process, thereby making the institution vulnerable in accountability measures. Furthermore, these factors contribute to increased staff attrition.

Due to its complex nature, allotting time to duties associated with assessment are arguably the most difficult. Assessment is a multifaceted undertaking with good assessment practices encompassing a cyclic approach of development, reflection and constant revision. Yorke et al (2000) argue that there are many tasks associated with the assessing of students in a university context. Assessment development, marking and feedback are recognised as the most time consuming of all academic activities and the timeframe for these tasks is variable depending on staff expertise and experience; the nature of the assessment task; complexity of moderation; student ability; the quality of the completed assessment; the number of students; and the type of feedback. The expansion of online delivery adds another dimension to the complexity of marking and feedback. Smith & Coombe (2006) believe the role of the marker is pivotal to the integrity and quality of the student experience, increasingly so in an online environment.

Curtin University has developed the Academic Workload Management System (AWMS), a system designed to allocate academic workloads. This is in response to increasing concern about academic workloads as expressed in the Curtin Voice Survey (Discussion Paper, 2009). These concerns are shared by other higher education institutions where there is a perception of inequity in staff allocations of workload (Gillespie, 2001). The intention of the AWMS is to ensure fair, equitable and transparent workload allocation for academic staff and accommodate the diversity of tasks required of an academic. The application also provides accountability measures for managers of academic staff. The AWMS has attempted to categorise the various responsibilities of an academic role and allocate time according to the category. Perhaps the most challenging of these categories is the Consultation Assessment and Feedback (CAF) category. This allocation covers all activities in relation to consulting with students, assessing student performance and providing feedback to students (Academic Workload Management System Categories and Parameters in Detail, 2010).

There is an abundance of literature on the academic's workload and the stresses it produces (Hogan, 2002) but very little that focuses on the energy and time dedicated to designing, implementing and marking assessments (Smith & Coombe, 2006). The majority of literature discusses the academic workload from a broad perspective and does not isolate specific tasks such as assessment design, administration and feedback to students. The quality of assessment and marking practices is also a well documented topic but there is little literature which discusses workload in relation to assessment. Articles on workload generally place assessment under the collective banner of 'teaching' in an effort to interrogate the research versus teaching dilemma. Bloxham (2009) argues that the process of marking has not been examined in depth and there is little evidence available to quantify time dedicated to the range of tasks associated with assessing students in a higher education context.

Universities are undergoing significant change as a result of both internal and external drivers resulting in an increased intensity in the academic workload (Soliman, 1999). The quality and integrity of the assessment process is also under scrutiny and is becoming a key accountability indicator for the sector. It is imperative that the competing agendas of academic workload and assessment quality do not compromise the course experience and overall outcomes for the student. It is timely that an investigation into the time invested into assessment design, assessment marking and student feedback (including consultation with students) should be undertaken.

### **Research Questions**

The overall aim of this research was to gather evidence to identify the factors that impact on the time it takes to mark common assessment tasks. This study is intended to initiate research in this area and provide the foundation for further investigation.

The research questions are:

1. What are the timeframes allocated to marking assessments in a first year undergraduate unit?
2. What are the predominant factors that impact on the time needed for marking assessments?
3. What are the ways in which consultation with students is undertaken and what are the time impacts of the various approaches?
4. What are the time impacts of utilising different approaches to providing feedback to students?
5. Does the research highlight the efficiencies that may be implemented to facilitate consistency in marking and streamline marking practices?

### **Research Design and Method**

This investigation combined a cross-sectional research design and a comparative approach. A range of both qualitative and quantitative data was sourced to maximise the reliability and validity of the results. The combination of the cross-sectional and comparative models enabled variation between staff profiles, assessment profiles and unit profiles to be quantified in a systematic manner. Ethics approval number OATL-3-11 was granted on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2011.

### Sample of Data

This study focussed on 10 large undergraduate subjects, 2 of which were online units, from across all four university faculties. A total of 16 staff participated in the study. With the increase in demand for units offered online, and the additional stress this places on staff, two large online units were included in the investigation. Templates were developed to gather profiles for units/subjects, assessments, feedback mechanisms employed, consultation procedures and staff.

### Data Collection Methods

Unit information was collated through contact with the Unit Coordinator of each unit. A profile of the assessments in each unit was created using a matrix outlining the criteria with additional information provided by the Unit Coordinator. Unit Coordinators completed a timesheet reflecting the time designated to marking, consultation and feedback and details about the nature and frequency of student consultation. Staff also included the number of assessments marked for each task in the unit. The documents were created so they could be completed online. Following the initial meeting, the documents were emailed to staff early in semester 1, 2011. Based on the total marking time and the number of tasks marked, an hourly rate was calculated for each staff member for every task they were required to mark.

Assessments were categorised using specific criteria including weighting, preparation practices, assessor, assessment type, assessment format, assessment purpose, feedback mechanism and approaches to student consultation. Assessments were then clustered into 9 assessment types under the headings of essay, case study, exam, oral presentation, research assignment, quiz/test, laboratory, poster and reflection on the basis of these criteria.

Level of experience, frequency of delivery of the unit, demographic information and level of responsibility were the areas captured in staff profiles.

### **Results**

To determine the variables that impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of marking and providing feedback to students, a profile of each of the teaching staff participating in the study was collated. Figure 1 below shows the variation of the employment status of staff while figure 2 highlights the diversity in teaching experience. Figure 3 illustrates the spread of age brackets of staff who participated in the study.

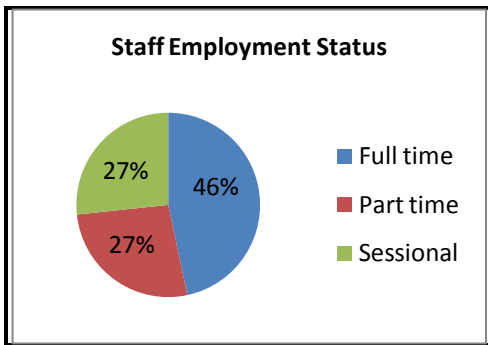


Figure 1. Employment status of staff

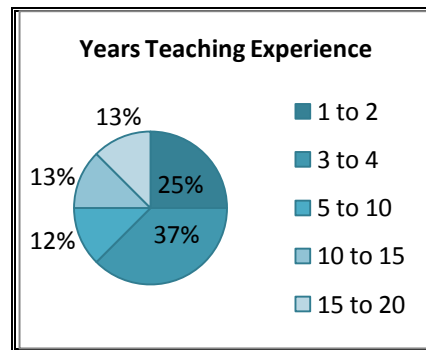


Figure 2. Years teaching experience of staff

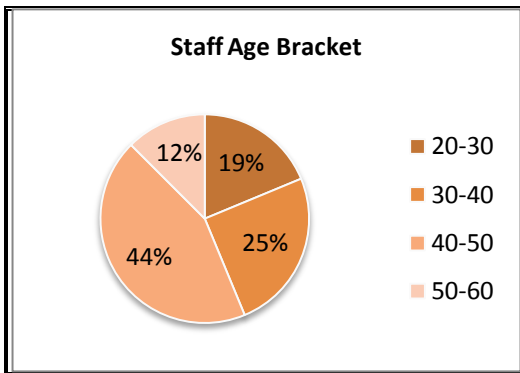


Figure 3. Age bracket of staff

The staff profiles indicate that over half the staff were either part time or sessional and 62% had been teaching for less than 5 years. The bulk of the staff fell into the 40 to 50 age bracket. Of the 16 staff, 12 were female and 9 were employed as Unit Coordinators while the remaining 7 were tutors. All tutors were employed on a sessional or part time basis. The variation in the demographics of staff may account for the diversity in assessment marking time and consultation methods.

The most frequently occurring assessment tasks were written tasks usually in the form of an essay. Exams, research tasks and quizzes or tests were also popular choices for assessing students (See Figure 4 below).

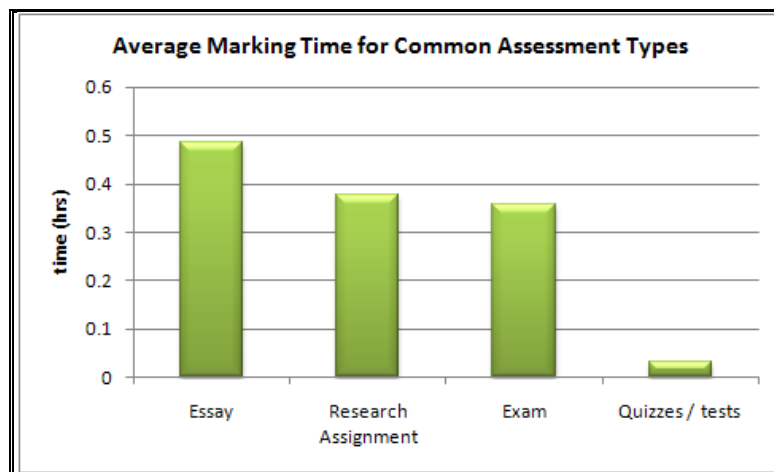


Figure 4. Average marking time for frequently occurring assessment types

Figure 4 demonstrates the average marking time for each of these tasks. The essay, on average, takes longer to mark while a quiz or test assessment type takes the least time. However, much of the time invested in marking the essay was devoted to providing constructive feedback, thereby enhancing the learning experience for students. Interestingly, all the exams were marked by sessional staff and feedback was in the form of a numerical result. Feedback in the form of only a grade or result has little impact on informing future assessments from a student perspective. While assigning a numerical result takes less time than providing other forms of feedback, it does not provide the student with constructive or empowering comments which will inform future assessments and enable the student to apply the feedback to a range of contexts.

Some assessment types showed relative consistency in the time taken for marking while others varied greatly (See Figure 5 below).

- Key
- 1 - Essay
  - 2 - Case Study
  - 3 - Oral Presentation
  - 4 - Exam
  - 5 - Research Assignment
  - 6 - Laboratory
  - 7 - Quiz/test
  - 8 - Poster
  - 9 - Reflection

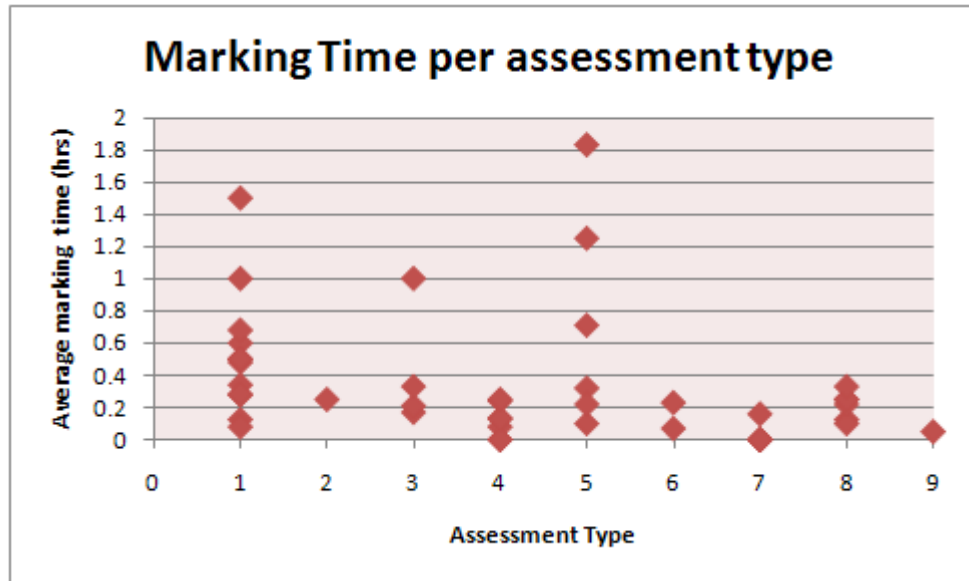


Figure 5. Marking time per assessment type

Figure 5 shows the average time for marking an assessment in each of the assessment types for every staff member included in the study. The greatest variation in time spent occurs with essays, research assignments and oral presentations. Exams, quizzes, laboratories and poster activities show greater consistency in marking time although occurred less frequently as an assessment type.

Figures 6 and 7 below demonstrate the relationship between teaching experience and the time taken to mark an essay and exam. This data suggests that time taken to mark assessments decreases with teaching experience.

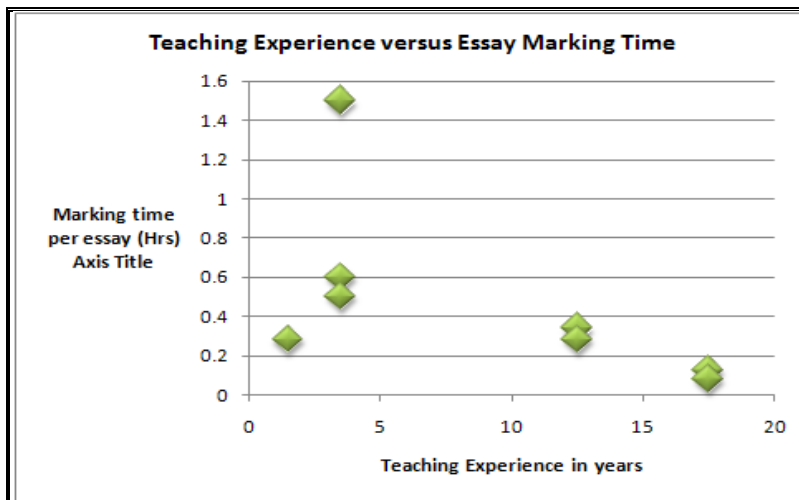


Figure 6. Teaching Experience versus essay marking time

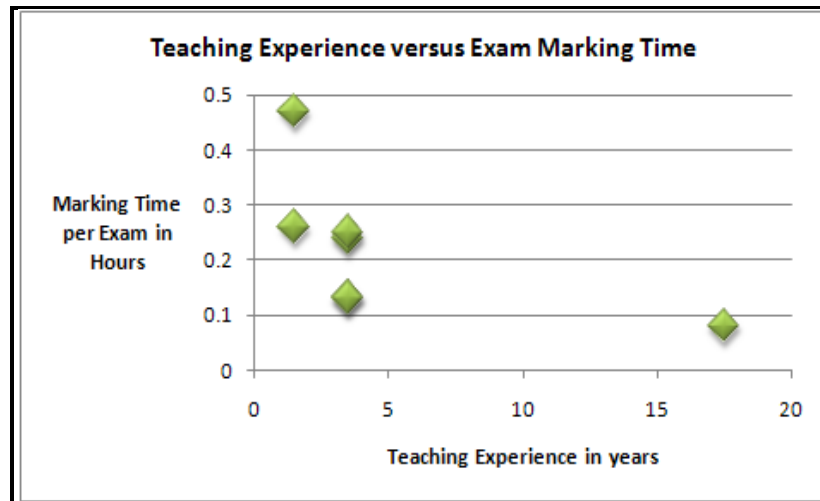


Figure 7. Teaching experience versus marking time

Time devoted to academic misconduct varied depending on the assessment types. Academic misconduct tended to take more time for units which had predominantly written assessments. An online unit recorded the highest time of 7 hours for the unit. However, the sample of online units was insufficient to make a generalisation about time devoted to tasks associated with assessment in a totally online environment. Unit Coordinators appeared to take the bulk of the responsibility for cases of academic misconduct. Time allocated for moderation varied from 12.5 hours to 1 hour over the semester. More tutors were involved with large numbers of students which ultimately increased the time needed for moderation activities. However, the variation in time for moderation did not appear to show a consistent trend based on student numbers or assessment type.

Strategies for time devoted to consultation varied greatly between staff. Eight of the 15 staff reported that they saw 10 to 20% of the students for individual consultation. The Coordinator of an online unit consulted individually with up to 50% of the student cohort. This consultation included telephone calls. The majority of consultation sessions dealt with assessment clarification and feedback with only one staff member reporting the need to provide support for a personal issue. Nine staff stated that consultation sessions were usually up to a half hour in duration. Subjects that included laboratories tended to have less time devoted to consultation as the staff felt that a laboratory session allowed for intensive one on one feedback which negated the need for further individual consultation. Unit Coordinators generally devoted more time to consultation than sessional staff,

possibly due to the ready availability of full time staff. Part time staff reported that they spent a lot of time on individual consultation, frequently in their own time and via telephone. All staff listed email and Blackboard as mechanisms for additional consultation and support. Written assessments clearly required the most additional consultation in comparison to other assessment types. However, when a draft proposal was submitted for feedback as a formative task, consultation time was considerably reduced. Weekly student newsletters and weekly tutor meetings were identified as strategies that reduced the need for intensive one on one consultation with students as information is disseminated widely and is easily accessible.

All staff reported the difficulty in defining consultation as opposed to feedback as the distinction between the two is blurred. Many staff commented on the convenience of electronic forms of communication but also highlighted the time spent emailing students. This time was considered difficult to quantify as it was not an isolated activity and usually happened while the staff member was working on other tasks.

The study highlights the complexity of administering and marking of assessments. Timeframes for marking assessments varied considerably and were dependent on experience of staff, the assessment type and the inclusion of formative tasks.

### **Discussion**

Consultation, assessment and feedback involve a series of time intensive tasks that are difficult to quantify. The assessment process is deemed to be the key driver of learning which has the greatest impact on student satisfaction and overall experience (Ramsden, 2003). The widening participation agenda and the massification of the higher education sector will result in a more diverse student cohort (Mertova et al, 2010) and the quality and extent of feedback on which students rely to progress in their studies. The challenge of providing constructive feedback based on rigorous assessment tasks will increase and the need for streamlined and efficient processes will become more evident.

While much of the literature attests to the importance of constructive feedback in the learning cycle, it is interesting that both staff and students are not always aware feedback is occurring. The experience of staff also varies highlighting the need for targeted professional development activities focusing on assessment and feedback practices. The process of attempting to separate feedback and consultation made staff aware of the frequency with which they provide feedback.

From this study it appears that well designed formative assessment tasks scaffolded with in summative tasks, ultimately result in a better quality student submission which reduces the time invested in marking. Traditionally, assessments have been considered as isolated events in a subject/unit. The concept of scaffolded assessment tasks may challenge the conventional approach to assessment in higher education.

Through conversations with participants of this study, it appears there are many tasks such as data entry and academic misconduct which may demand many hours of work and are impossible to predict and therefore allocate workload. Staff also commented on the instability of online systems for entering data and the stress caused when information technology issues prevent staff from uploading results in a timely manner.

The concept of providing meaningful and relevant consultation, assessment and feedback is dependent on many variables. Future research could focus on time allocations for specific assessment types in an effort to gather more focussed data. Comparison of the time intensity and effectiveness of specific feedback strategies for assessments would also provide valuable data to inform future practices. An investigation to determine the impact of feedback strategies on student results and satisfaction levels and across different disciplines would possibly produce some interesting results. In addition, a benchmarking exercise to investigate how other institutions manage academic workloads associated with assessment and feedback would be worthwhile. This study did not include any subjects with fieldwork components, an area that presents an additional level of complexity. In addition, time devoted to assessment design was not factored into the academic staff workload for this investigation. Assessment design is a critical element of the assessment cycle and ultimately impacts on the marking and feedback time.

Assessment and feedback are what drives student learning and engagement and impacts on the overall student experience. Academic staff cite assessment as the most challenging aspect of their academic role (Race & Pickford, 2007). To provide constructive and meaningful feedback for well designed assessments is clearly time consuming and requires a great deal of support.

### **Conclusion**

Quantifying the academic's workload is a topical issue within higher education institutions. With the increase in accountability measures and mandated outcomes for universities and the challenges of staff attraction and retention, the topic of allocating workloads has become more prominent. In addition, assessment practices and evidence of student achievement is under increasing scrutiny across the sector. Undertaking research which provides evidence of workload associated with assessment is both timely and pertinent to the current climate. It is especially relevant for Curtin University as the AWMS is implemented across the institution. This small study has revealed the need to interrogate consultation, assessment and feedback processes in greater detail. Clearly there are strategies that minimise time devoted to individual consultation but they appear to be implemented randomly with no systematic approach for disseminating and sharing methods of efficacy associated with consultation. According to Ramsden (2003) assessment involves making 'fallible human judgements' and is a process fraught with uncertainty and doubt. Ensuring rigorous, fair and equitable assessment practices which can be accommodated within the academic's workload is complex as there are many variables that impact on managing the assessment process. While some assessment methods require less time to implement, consideration needs to be given to the rigour and integrity of the assessment task and the value of the student's learning experience as a consequence.



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