

CRITERION REFERENCED ASSESSMENT

Criterion-referenced assessment is part of USQ learning and teaching policy.

What is criterion-referenced assessment?

- *Criterion-referenced assessment* evaluates students' assignments against criteria, defined as desirable qualities or dimensions of a student's performance, whereas *norm-referenced assessment* compares students' performance with that of their peers'.
- Criteria are task-specific; the desirable qualities of an essay will necessarily differ from those of a laboratory experiment.
- They can express expectations of student performance that relate to required knowledge, as well as information literacy, application, analysis, evaluation and synthesis skills. They may also address other academic and graduate skills or skill groups including, research, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, creativity and management.
- Criteria may explicitly address separate parts of an assignment. This approach suits components of assessment tasks that have a clearly prescribed function or structure, such as an introduction, a data analysis section, a graph(s), a conclusion or a reference list.
- Criterion-referenced assessment allows for some definition of learning standards when you combine assessment criteria with descriptions of expected student performance for each grade (*grade descriptors*), as in this essay rubric excerpt:

Criterion	High Distinction	Distinction	Credit	Pass	Fail
<i>Clear, concise, well structured, introduction</i> 25%	Demonstrates an excellent grasp of the question's key issue. Explicitly states the argument and clearly sets out the steps the essay will take to support it.	Clearly restates the question. Explicitly states the argument and offers a step by step plan for the essay.	Addresses the question, states the argument and offers a plan but lacks clarity and/or precision.	The introduction is missing one of the three main elements and lacks clarity and/or precision.	The introduction is missing two or more of the three main elements.

Why adopt criterion-referenced assessment?

- *Criterion-referenced assessment can make disciplinary norms and practices transparent:* Explaining and exemplifying performance standards helps students to internalise disciplinary or professional understandings of excellence, and to begin evaluating their own individual performance against them

- *Criterion-referenced assessment assists learning*: using criteria and standards makes explicit to students the disciplinary understanding and skills they are expected to demonstrate in an assignment. Subsequent feedback, focusing explicitly on the criteria, identifies specific points for commendation or improvement.
- *Criterion-referenced assessment grades students according to explicit criteria and standards*: Criterion-referenced assessment encourages all students to strive for high standards because there is no predetermined grade distribution.
- *Criterion-referenced assessment enhances assessor accountability*: Descriptive qualities and standards allow markers to make transparent and defensible moderation decisions about which grade level should be awarded.

Using criterion-referenced assessment effectively

- Assessment criteria should be aligned with stated course objectives, including knowledge and skills.
- Assessment criteria should be specific to the task being assessed. It is difficult to communicate expected performance qualities and standards with overly generic or misaligned assessment criteria.
- Each assessment criterion should be weighted using either a raw percentage or a percentage-based allocation of available marks.
- Assessment criteria can be supplemented by marked student exemplars, learning activities and dialogue between teaching team members, and between staff and students (See LTSU flyer on moderation).
- The same assessment criteria should be used consistently within disciplines and programs for comparable tasks.
- Assessment criteria are used in combination with grade descriptors, which describe expected levels of student performance for each grade.

Further resources and reading

Sadler, DR (2005), Interpretations of criteria-based assessment and grading in higher education, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(2), 175–194.

Teaching and Development Institute (1999) *Assessment Criteria, Standards and Marking Schemes*, Accessed 22 July 2008, <http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/downloads/Criteria.pdf>

Centre for the Study of Higher Education, (2002), *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities: Ideas, Strategies and Resources for Quality in Student Assessment*, University of Melbourne, Accessed 22 July 2008, <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/index.html>.