

Understanding the nature of assessment standards and their impact on fairness



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Introduction

Why are standards important?

- For institutions – reputations for quality
- For students - grading student outcomes.
- For staff - safeguarding our disciplines

What do we mean by assessment standards?

- Academic standards
- Quality Standards

How much do we know about standards?



How well do we know standards Questions to ask.

Do staff understand standards well enough to

- grade student work fairly?
- ensure consistency with other markers?
- explain standards to students?

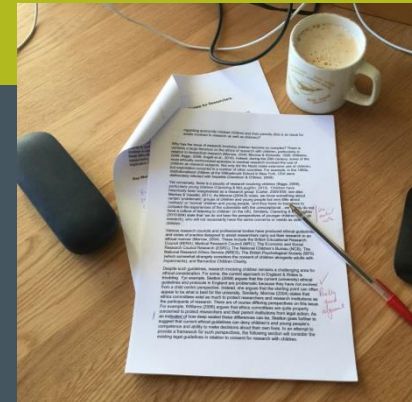
Do students understand the standards well enough to guide them in their work?



Evidence

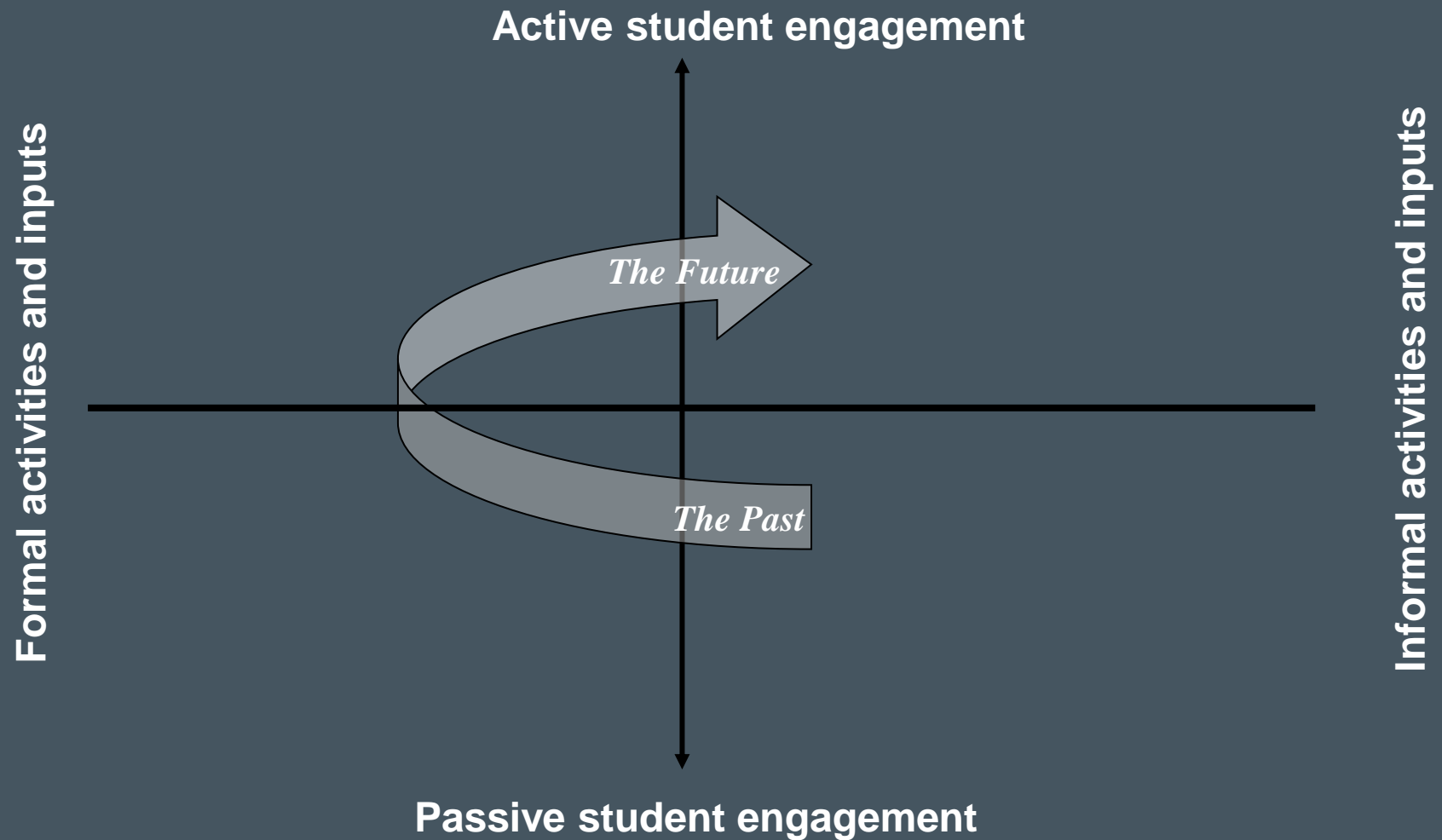
Are we fair?

Are we consistent?



Hartog and Rhodes, 1935; Laming et al., 1990; Wolf, 1995; Leach, Neutze, and Zepke, 2001; Elander and Hardman, 2002; Newstead, 2002; Baume, Yorke, and Coffey, 2004; Norton, 2004; Hanlon et al., 2004; Read et al., 2005; Price, 2005; Shay, 2004 and 2005; Brooks, 2012; O'Hagan and Wigglesworth, 2014; Bloxham et al., 2015 (this list is not exhaustive)

Approaches to standards



Active student engagement

Formal activities and inputs

Informal activities and inputs

The Future

The Past

1. The Traditional Model

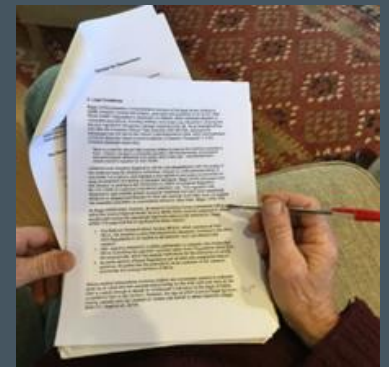
Tacit knowledge of standards absorbed over relatively long times informally and serendipitously

Passive student engagement

Knowing our standards – using tacit knowledge

Tacit knowledge: something you know that cannot be put easily into words

It is fundamental to expertise & judgement-making across the professions. – including judgements on student work.



Active student engagement

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2. The 'Dominant Logic' Explicit Model

Standards explicitly articulated (with limitations) and passively presented to students

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Explicit Assessment standards have problems

Assessors apply different interpretations of key words and phrases within written 'standards'

(Saunders and Davis 1998, Ecclestone 2001, Webster et al., 2000)

Written specifications cannot be applied mechanistically, judgement is required

(Bloxham 2009)

Greater precision is inherently self defeating

(O'Donovan et al 2004)

Nature of standards

“Standards are not conceptualised as having an existence or relevance separately from the context of the teaching team, the course as it was taught and its current students” (Sadler 2005 p190)

Standards do not exist independently of those who use them – they develop their meaning in use through our social involvement in academic & professional communities

Standards are socially constructed

Active student engagement

Formal activities and inputs

3. The Social Constructivist Model Actively engaging students in formal processes to communicate tacit knowledge of standards

The Future

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4. The 'Cultivated' Community of Practice Model

Tacit standards communicated through participation in informal knowledge exchange networks 'seeded' by specific activities.

The Past

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Community and assessment standards

Assessment judgements rely on local, contextualised interpretations of quality underpinned by tacit understanding of 'quality' shared by members of an assessment community
(Knight, 2006)

A key issue in assessment is that students often do not understand what is a better piece of work and do not understand what is being asked of them particularly in terms of standards and criteria.

(O'Donovan et al., 2001)

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Actively engaging in formal processes to share tacit knowledge of standards

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Calibration

Calibration is about shared knowledge of standards, often achieved through social moderation processes in order to create **'calibrated academics'**.



'calibrated' academics ... are able to make grading judgements consistent with those which similarly calibrated colleagues would make, but without constant engagement in moderation. The overall aims are to achieve comparability of standards across institutions and stability of standards over time. (Sadler 2012)

Fairness in assessment standards

- Award appropriate grades
- Consistency with colleagues
- Transparency in grading
- Developing student understanding of assessment standards to support their learning.

Achieved through
calibration and
assessment literacy