Quality Assurance & Safeguarding of Assessment

In-depth Assignment – Version 26-11-2019

(Zorgen en Borgen Verdiepingsopdracht)

Contents

Introduction

In the first assignment for the SKE (in Dutch: Senior Kwalificatie Examinering, in English: SQE / Senior Qualification in Examination) trajectory, together with colleague Jeroen Verplanke, I analysed the quality assurance and safeguarding of assessment for the Master's programme Spatial Engineering from the faculty ITC. From that analysis, some suggestions for improvement could be deduced:

1. Develop a vision on assessment and examination connected to the vision on education
2. Develop an assessment policy
3. Develop and implement PDCA cycles for Quality Assurance Student Assessment

Since points 2 and 3 can only be properly executed when point 1 is accomplished, I decided to focus on that point: a vision on assessment and examination for the faculty ITC (and perhaps the underlying programmes). I will not be able to develop this vision myself, but I will do some preliminary work and formulate an advice towards the faculty board.

Therefore the main topic for this assignment is:

A vision on assessment: why, what, and how?

In the rest of this document, I will try to answer the following questions:

- Why is a vision on assessment important?
- What should a vision on assessment contain?
- How much of a vision on assessment is already (implicitly) available at the faculty ITC?
- Are there good examples within the UT?
- How to get to an ITC vision on assessment?

At the end of this document, the main conclusions are summarised in an advice to the Faculty Board of ITC, with suggestions on how to organise the development process towards a vision and policy. The goal of this document is to serve as a starting point for the faculty ITC to work towards a shared vision on assessment and an assessment policy on faculty and/or programme level.

Why is a vision on assessment important?

In 2016, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education published a report[1] on the quality of the assessment in Dutch higher education. This report mentions that '*the board and management of the programme are responsible for a shared vision on the importance and function of tests, in line with the vision on education. They are also responsible for translating that shared vision of assessment into a comprehensive assessment programme in which all the final qualifications of the programme are tested. This therefore concerns the assessment policy and assessment programme (or test outline), the upper layers of the assessment pyramid'* (p.15).

The report further states (p.15-16) that the quality of the assessment depends on the quality of and coherence between the four components of the assessment, i.e. the assessment policy, the assessment programme, the tests, and the test items. Although there is already much attention for the quality of individual tests, the next step is that more attention is paid to the coherence between assessment policy, assessment programme, tests and test items. In particular, the assessment programme provides insight into the coherence between the various tests, both in terms of content and in terms of test form. A lot of programmes still lack a clear assessment programme and assessment policy, and because of that the coherence between assessment and education is not always visible. A shared vision on assessment, related to the vision on education, should be the starting point for an assessment policy and an assessment programme and because of that also has an influence on the tests and test items, test organisation and proficiency in assessment. In other words: it influences all the layers of the assessment pyramid as shown in figure 1 (unfortunately only available in Dutch).
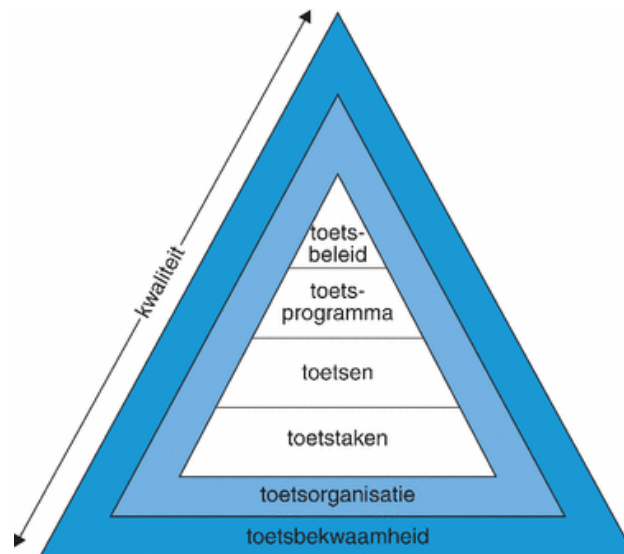

Figure 1: Quality Pyramid for Assessment. Source: Brinke D.J. (2017) Kwaliteitspiramide voor toetsen en beoordelen. In: van Berkel H., Bax A., Joosten-ten Brinke D. (eds) Toetsen in het hoger onderwijs. Bohn Stafleu van Loghum, Houten

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[1] Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2016). *De kwaliteit van de toetsing in het hoger onderwijs.* Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (from https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2016/02/01/de-kwaliteit-van-de-toetsing-in-het-hoger-onderwijs)

The importance of a vision of assessment is summarised in figure 2 on the right, where it becomes clear that a vision on education and assessment are essential starting points for a coherent and comprehensive assessment.

A vision on assessment should lead to an assessment policy, where the principles of the vision are operationalised in procedures, measures, and regulations. When these are all in place, this will lead towards better organisation of assessment, since the rules of the game are clear to all staff involved.

Next to that, the proficiency in assessment will improve since staff will be better informed on the procedures, measures, and regulations that are in place when they are all combined in one document and related to a shared vision.

When the organisation and proficiency regarding assessment improve, so will the coherence between the policy, the assessment programme and the individual tests and test items. Programme management will design and set guidelines for a assessment programme from a clear vision, and individual staff members use that same vision (and the operationalisation of this vision into procedures, measures, and regulations) to design their assessments. As a consequence, the assessment programme will be (more) comprehensive, and all final qualifications will be tested.

Vision on education

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Vision on assessment

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Assessment policy

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Improved **organisation** of and **proficiency** in assessment

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Coherence between assessment policy, assessment programme, tests & test items

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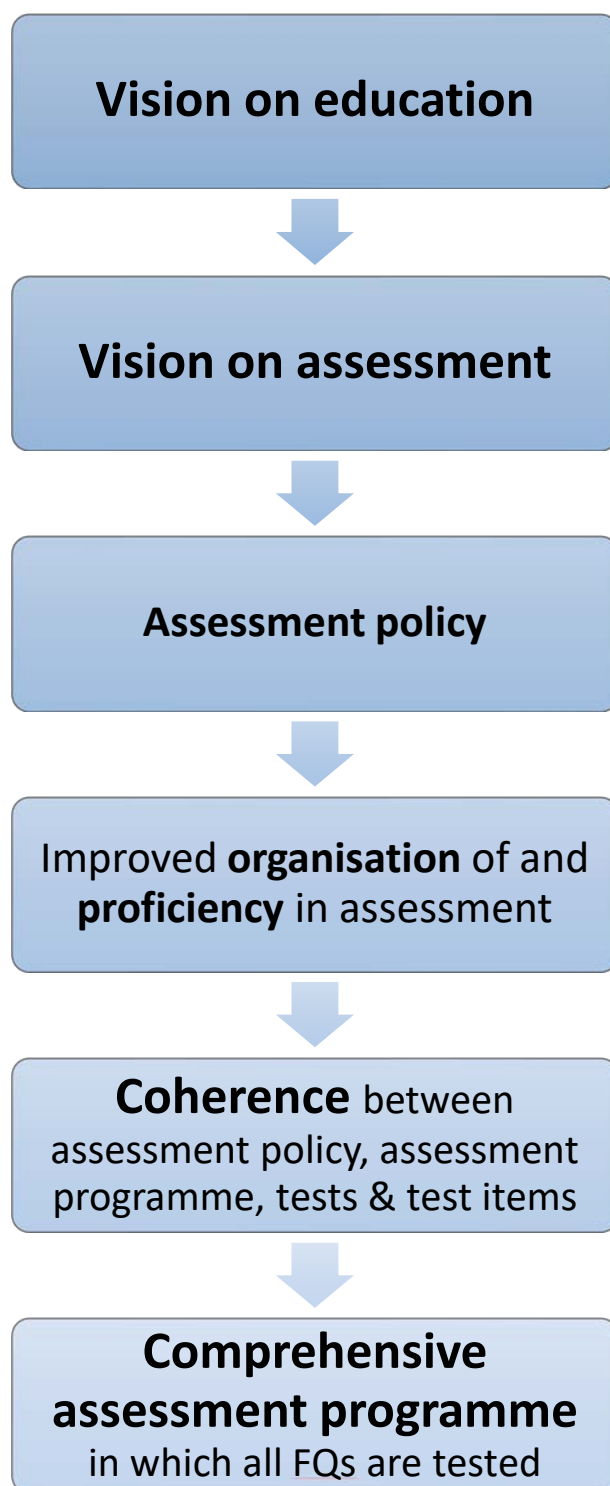**Comprehensive assessment programme** in which all FQs are tested

Figure 2: Schematic overview of the influence of the vision of education and assessment into aspects of assessment.

What should a vision on assessment contain?

To promote the quality of assessments and (final) examinations, UT has adhered to an assessment framework. In this UT Quality Assurance Framework for Student Assessment[2], a 'Guide for Assessment Policy at Faculty and Programme level' is included (chapter 7), to support faculties in the development of their assessment policy.

In section 7.1, the vision on achieving excellence in assessment is described with the recommendation to *'explicitly address the role and function of assessment in the educational philosophy of each programme.'* Furthermore, it is mentioned that the following principles should be addressed:

- The role assessment plays in shaping student learning
- Assessment as an integral component of course and programme design (related to learning outcomes)
- The variety of assessment methods (to support equal rights for all groups of students)
- The balance between formative and summative assessments
- The balance between differentiated assessment modes
- The quality of timely feedback: aiming at further development of students
- Monitoring validity, reliability and consistency of assessment methods
- Assessment design including educating students about academic integrity
- Continuous improvement of assessment based on evaluation and internal and external developments (PDCA – Cycle)

In the next sections of the guide/chapter, other parts of an assessment policy like a clear division of tasks and responsibilities an assessment programme and Education & Examination Regulations are described. Based on the UT framework, programmes are given the responsibility and freedom to shape their assessment policies tailored to their specific educational situation.

The principles above could serve as a starting point for a vision on assessment. What is not clearly mentioned in the guide is whether this could/should be on faculty and/or programme level, and whether it could/should be a separate document or included in an existing document. Therefore, it seems that this is open to interpretation. Also, not all principles are immediately clear; what is, for instance, meant by 'educating students about academic integrity'? This also seems open to own interpretation.

An interesting point of view that strongly supports the first two principles is given by Evelyn van de Veen in her book on how to assess students through assignments. On page 15 and 16, the following statements on assessment related to student learning are made:

'The most fundamental point to make is that assessment and learning are inseparable. The way students are assessed influences how they study and what they learn. […] So it is important to design assessment in such a way that it supports the kind of student learning you are aiming for. This means that assessment design should be an integral part of the design of the module and not an afterthought' (p.15-16).[3]

This particular statement is mainly about module or course level, but is also relevant for programme or even faculty level: what kind of learning is the programme or the faculty aiming for? And what consequences does this have for the assessment? This should be kept in mind when developing a vision on assessment.

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[2] Framework downloaded from https://www.utwente.nl/en/examination-board/Policy-rules-guidelines/.

[3] Veen, E. van de (2017, 2e druk). *Hoe maak ik een toetsopdracht? Handleiding voor toetsopdrachten en beoordelingsformulieren in het hoger onderwijs./How to assess students thorugh assignments*

How much of a vision on assessment does already (implicitly) exist at the faculty ITC?

During this SKE trajectory, together with some other parallel developments and processes in our faculty (a.o. on making internationalisation more explicit), it becomes more and more apparent that within the Faculty ITC, a lot of procedures, regulations, and practices are implicitly derived from the ITC faculty vision, and quite a few policy and vision documents lack in education. With the lack of a clear and separately documented vision on education comes a lack of vision on assessment, assessment policy, and for instance also the absence of a clear goal for internationalisation. This, however, doesn't mean that none of the aspects of such a vision, policy or goal are present, but they are often incomplete, scattered, and/or implicit.

Currently, the faculty ITC doesn't have an assessment policy. However, many aspects of this policy are already available. In an earlier SKE assignment, I already analysed the quality assurance and safeguarding of assessment within (a programme in) ITC, and I concluded that a lot of regulations and procedures are already in place, but scattered across different documents and (digital) locations. What is still missing, is

- one coherent document where all aspects of an assessment policy are combined
- an overall vision on assessment, related to the vison on education.

That vision should form the starting point for the policy. At the moment, it is also not always clear for staff where to find all the information regarding assessment, since it is scattered across different mediums and in various documents.

In table 1 on the next page, I made a quick inventory of the principles for a vision on assessment from the UT Framework on Student Assessment. As I already indicated in the analysis of the assessment within the Master's programme Spatial Engineering for another assignment in this SKE trajectory, that programme has an overview of the assessment methods that are used in the programme, but the arguments for this combination of tests and how this guarantees that the students reach the final qualifications have not been written down (yet). For the Master's programme Geo-information Science and Earth Observation, this is also not available.

A lot of principles from the table are not explicitly addressed (or at least not to my knowledge). What seems to be missing most is why and how. Some questions that come to mind are:

- Why do we assess students?
- Which assessment methods and forms could help achieve this?
- How is the balance and coherence between these different methods and forms?
- How is the connection between the intended academic achievements and the assessment?

The fact that the answers to the above questions are not immediately available doesn't mean that the Faculty Board or programme management hasn't given this any attention, but by not explicitly writing it down there is a risk that there is no shared vision or frame or reference regarding assessment between the staff involved.

Principles from Guide in UT Framework	Already addressed at ITC?
The role assessment plays in shaping student learning	Not explicitly
Assessment as an integral component of course and programme design (related to learning outcomes)	A test plan for each course is included in the study guide, with attention to the relation of each test to the learning outcomes.
The variety of assessment methods (to support equal rights for all groups of students)	Not explicitly.
The balance between formative and summative assessments	Not explicitly
The balance between differentiated assessment modes	Not explicitly
The quality of timely feedback: aiming at further development of students	Not explicitly
Monitoring validity, reliability, and consistency of assessment methods	Yes, the Examination Board safeguards this by test/grade analyses and through test screenings
Assessment design including educating students about academic integrity	Not clear what exactly is meant here
Continuous improvement of assessment based on evaluation and internal and external developments (PDCA – Cycle)	Assessment is part of the education and therefore included in the PDCA-cycles on education. However, assessment is not always given explicit attention yet. This could be improved by for instance giving attention to this in the formats for the development plans on course and programme level.

Table 3: Overview of principles for vision on assessment from UT Student Assessment Framework and the extent to which they are currently addressed within the faculty ITC.

Are there good examples within the UT?

An online search using terms as 'vision on assessment' or 'vision on testing' didn't generate a lot of useful links or documents. Because of that, I decided to focus on the UT to look for useful examples of a vision on assessment.

Through the UT Platform on Quality Assurance of Education, which I am a member of, I gathered some examples of Assessment Policy documents on faculty or programme level. Just like ITC, some faculties/programmes currently don't have such a policy, but some are in the process of developing it. Other policy documents simply consist of an overview of regulations regarding assessment, but without an overall vision or philosophy behind it. I have not come across any examples of separate documents with a vision on assessment.

Within the faculty of Science and Technology, the Health cluster has a well-written assessment policy that starts with a clear statement of the mission, vision, and goals regarding education, the student profile, programme profile, and the final qualifications. This helps to create a shared vision and frame of reference. After that, there is attention to the way the programmes wants to assess, what functions assessment has, different assessment methods or forms, and how these relate to the overall assessment programme. Although the term 'vision on assessment' is not explicitly mentioned in this document, a lot of the principles mentioned earlier are present in this policy document.

I only looked at the few documents that I was able to acquire in a short time. I am sure that a more extensive inventory will reveal more good practices available within the UT. Since multiple faculties/programmes are currently in the development phase of an assessment policy, sharing good practices or joining efforts could perhaps be very useful.

How to get to an ITC vision on assessment?

The starting point for the design and execution of assessment should be a vision on assessment on faculty and/or programme level. This vision should describe why we assess students and, more importantly, why we choose certain methods to do so. This vision should also lead to an assessment policy where the principles of the vision are operationalised in procedures, measures, and regulations. It would, therefore, be useful to combine the development with a vision on assessment with an assessment policy.

Development of a vision and policy

Making sure that such a vision will be developed is not easily done. It needs to be decided whether the Faculty Board would facilitate and support the development of such a vision. It also needs to be determined whether that could be on faculty level or programme level. Different stakeholders, e.g. portfolio holder education, education manager, programme management, education specialist and teaching staff should be involved in the development.

Since the discussions towards the UT and ITC vision 2030 are now ongoing, the development of a vision on assessment could be integrated in this discussion, but also other ways could be used to work towards a vision on assessment. Seven concrete suggestions are explained below. These suggestions could all be applied together at the same time, or a few could be selected to focus on. Most suggestions could be used for all faculties or programmes within the UT, but the suggestions related to the theme year on assessment and the unique international environment are specifically associated with the faculty ITC (although internationalisation and dealing with different educational background is also an emerging issue within other faculties).

The process towards Vision 2030

The UT and the faculty ITC have a vision for 2020. This vision is iterated over the years on the basis of the UT agenda and the vision and programmes developed by the Dutch Ministers of Foreign Affairs and International Development. Since the UT is currently working on the new mission and vision 2030, ITC will start working on a new mission and vision as soon as the UT starting points are available[4].

Early November 2019, the final draft for 'Shaping 2030' with the UT mission, vision, and strategy towards 2030, became available. This document doesn't mention anything directly related to assessment, but for instance the emphasis on digitalisation and sustainability could have (indirect) effects on assessment. Within the faculty ITC, the preliminary discussions regarding the ITC Vision and Mission 2030 have been started as well.

UT Framework for Student Assessment as a starting point

The UT Framework for Student Assessment states nine principles that should be addressed in a vision on assessment. These nine principles could, together with good practices from UT faculties or programmes, serve as the starting point towards a vision on assessment and an assessment policy. All stakeholders in assessment should be involved in this development process. The challenge will be to make sure that the vision that will be developed is supported throughout the faculty and/or programme and corresponds with both the viewpoint from the Faculty Board (if on faculty level) or programme management (if on programme level) and the ideas from the teaching staff and other stakeholders.

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[4] See https://www.itc.nl/intranet/faculty-bureau/general-information-communication/mtd-ow-12-juni-2019.pdf, p.10 & 11 (Note: opening the link by clicking on it might not work, but copying the link to a browser should work, this will open/download the PDF)

Examples within the UT

All UT faculties and programmes have their unique vision on education, and therefore the visions on assessment will differ. But they will all share the UT vision on education and therefore also have many similarities. Existing examples of assessment policies within the UT, for instance the one from S&T Health Cluster, could therefore be used for inspiration. Of course best practices from other universities could also be used for inspiration, but their vision on education and assessment might be further away from the UT vision.

Theme year on Assessment

The Education Unit at ITC is planning a series of workshops and sessions related to the theme *Assessment* in the academic year 2019-2020, among others because it was noticed that there are many differences in how teachers conduct assessment and how much knowledge teachers have on assessment, which is partly due to the lack of a vision and policy on assessment. The specific topics of the sessions are not all finalised yet, and a session related to (discussion on) vision on assessment and assessment policy would fit very well into this theme year.

Working group

Perhaps it would be good to start a working group – with all stakeholders represented – to guide this process and develop a shared vision. This could be combined with or followed by the development of an assessment policy by the same group.

Take staff and students from different educational backgrounds into account

At the faculty ITC, there is a unique international environment with both staff and students from all over the world. These different nationalities and cultures bring a lot of opportunities for internationalisation and cultural awareness, but the educational background should also be considered in the learning and assessment process. Staff and students come from different educational backgrounds and might not be familiar with or used to the teaching and assessment methods that are used that the faculty ITC. To get both staff and students on the same page regarding assessment, the development of a vision and policy on assessment is critical in explaining what the principles on assessment are and why certain choices are made. Next to that, assessment methods and regulations that might seem very clear and obvious to staff and students that are used to the Dutch education system, might be completely new to staff and students from other educational backgrounds and therefore need more explanation.

SKE/SQE experiences

By participating in the SKE/SQE trajectory, I acquired a lot of knowledge of and gained more interest in all aspects regarding assessment – from a shared vision to individual test items and from working towards assessment quality to safeguarding this quality. Next to this assignment on the vision on assessment, I also made an analysis on the quality assurance and safeguarding of assessment for the Master's programme Spatial Engineering and a test screening for a test in that same programme. ITC colleague Jeroen Verplanke did the same for the Master's programme Geo-information Science and Earth Observation, for which he is the programme manager. For parts of these assignments we teamed up and already noticed the need for a vision and policy on assessment at an early stage within this trajectory. I would therefore be happy to be involved in the development process of a vision on assessment and I think that Jeroen is eager to be involved as well. If there are any participants from ITC in the SKE/SQE trajectory for 2020, they could perhaps also be involved and contribute with their assignments.

Implementation and evaluation

Already during the development of a vision and policy on assessment, attention needs to be given to the implementation and evaluation. How will all staff be informed of this? What are the practical implications on and consequences for daily practices for teaching and supporting staff that derive from this vision and policy? Are there more documents and procedures that need to be updated?

After the implementation is executed, it needs to be evaluated (perhaps on an annual basis) whether this vision and this policy are and remain shared, well implemented, and applied throughout the programme and/or faculty.

Conclusions and advice to Faculty Board

A vision on assessment is an essential aspect in the process towards coherent and comprehensive assessment. A shared vision on assessment and an assessment policy based on that vision will contribute to:

- clear organisation of assessment
- improved proficiency in assessment
- coherence between assessment policy, assessment programme, tests & test items
- comprehensive assessment programme in which all final qualifications are tested

Therefore my advice to the ITC faculty Board would be to develop a shared vision on assessment in the near future. Such a policy could be developed both on faculty and/or programme level, so first it needs to be decided whether this will be on faculty level or on programme level, or a combination with for instance a shared overall vision and more detailed descriptions per programme.

As already explained in more detail in the previous chapter, I conclude with some suggestions on how this process could be organised:

- Let the nine principles mentioned in the UT Framework for Student Assessment, together with good practices from UT faculties or programmes, serve as the starting point towards a vision on assessment and an assessment policy.
- Use the ongoing discussions regarding the UT and ITC Vision 2030 to specifically also address and develop the vision on assessment.
- Organise one or more (discussion) sessions on vision and policy on assessment within the theme year on assessment.
- Assign a working group – with all stakeholders represented – to guide this process and develop a shared vision. This could be combined with or followed by the development of an assessment policy by the same group.
- Take into account that at ITC, there are staff and students from a lot of different (educational) backgrounds with different experiences and knowledge related to assessment.
- Use the experiences in the SKE/SQE trajectory from me, as written down in this assignment but also in other assignments, and also Jeroen Verplanke in the development process of a vision on assessment.
- Think about and give attention to (the consequences of) the implementation and evaluation of the vision and policy already during the development phase.