

Assurance of Learning

What is Assurance of Learning?

This material introduces you to what Assurance of Learning is and how the assurance of learning process is carried out in the Faculty. Simply put, Assurance of Learning (AOL) is making sure that our students achieve what we say they should be able to learn and do. We express what we want them to be able to learn and do through our program learning goals and objectives and each subject's learning objectives. We then ensure that our teaching and learning activities and assessments all contribute towards achieving those learning outcomes.

This relates to the outcomes assessment process pursued by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) where AOL asks these questions (AACSB, p. 3):

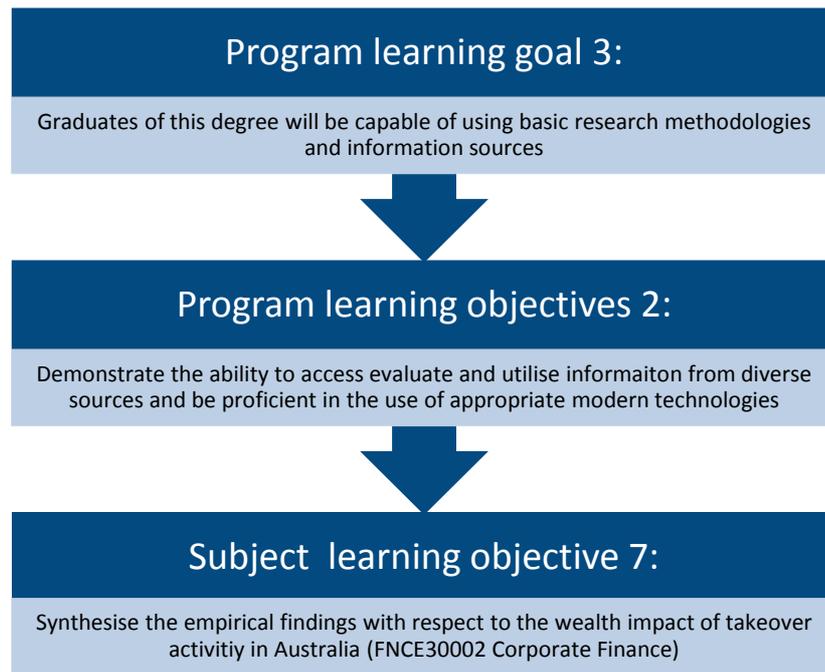
1. What will our students be like when they graduate?
2. What will our students learn in our program?
3. How will they learn it?
4. How will we know they have learned it or not?
5. What will we do if they have not learned it?

Why do we do Assurance of Learning?

The primary purpose of doing AOL is **ensuring that students have achieved the goals we have set**. When we say "Graduates of this degree will be knowledgeable of financial management principles and their application to corporate financial policy" (Master of Finance, program learning goal 1), and more specifically, "Explain the primary financial theories relating to the way in which financial managers make common finance decisions", we want to make sure that they are **able to learn and do** these through their course of study. Thus, teaching and learning activities and assessments have a bigger role to play. For a large part, lecturers and students are responsible for achieving these goals.

How are learning outcomes interrelated?

Each program the Faculty offers has program learning goals and program learning objectives. Each subject in a program has subject learning objectives. The figure below shows an example, drawn from Bachelor of Commerce, to illustrate how program learning goals, program learning objectives, and subject learning objectives are expressed and related:



In this particular example, the teaching and learning activities and assessments conducted in the Corporate Finance subject contribute to what we say Bachelor of Commerce graduates should have achieved. The same is true for all subjects, including breadth studies, **ensuring all of them contribute to achieving established program goals and objectives, including the development of generic skills.**

As a lecturer, you should be aware that your subject does not work in isolation but is an important part of the whole program.

How is this interrelationship established?

The interrelationship between program learning goals and objectives and each subject's learning objectives is established through a **curriculum mapping process**. This process involves coding all programs and subjects and all program and subject learning outcomes (you were probably approached to help in this process because of your expertise). The Faculty maintains a curriculum mapping database which shows which subject learning objectives are aligned to which program goals and objectives. If you wish to know how your subject is coded in the database (i.e. which subject learning objectives in your subject are linked to which program learning goals and objectives), feel free to contact WCLA. This is helpful to know because you will be able to know which learning objectives in your subject(s) are mapped.

How is Assurance of Learning process carried out in the Faculty?

The AOL process in the Faculty of Business and Economics comprises both direct and indirect measures. Indirect measures include employment data, the national Course Experience Questionnaire, Graduate Destinations Survey, Subject Experience Survey, employer surveys and data from a range of activities in the Faculty that enrich the Melbourne experience. Direct measurement of the achievement of program learning goals and objectives uses course-embedded assessments. This started in 2009, following the development of learning goals and objectives at both the subject level and the program level.

Prior to the start of each semester, the AOL team identifies a selection of program learning objectives to commence the AOL process based on the overall AOL plan (Step 1). The plan identifies all program learning goals and objectives and the subjects that have been identified as those most suited to an AOL process. The plan outlines a five-year process that began in 2009 and will roll through all learning goals and objectives up to the end of 2013 when the process will start again. This is in addition to regular degree reviews which include external reviewers of each degree program as part of the quality assurance processes that exist in the faculty to ensure programs are appropriately targeted and aligned with the strategic direction of the Faculty. The curriculum mapping database is used to identify which subjects map with the selected program learning objectives and goals. Initial discussions are arranged with lecturers to engage them in the process (Steps 2-3). How the AOL can be best conducted in their subjects is discussed.

Once assessment information is collected, arrangements will be made to assess the pieces of assessment against the rubric developed in consultation with the lecturer (Step 4). Student work and records are stored either electronically or in paper-based format depending on the nature of the assessment task that has been used (Step 5). Once the student responses to the assessment task have been analysed, a brief report is sent to lecturers and program directors to solicit their reflection and response.

Lecturers are asked to respond to several questions related to action they may decide to take as a result of the AOL process or reasons why no action is appropriate (Steps 6-8). The AOL results and subsequent actions for the year are summarised in an annual report which is sent to the Bachelor of Commerce Course Standing Committee and the Graduate Programs Committee. Results also form one part of the material provided for regular degree reviews (Step 9).

The figure on the following page shows the nine-step AOL process within the Faculty.

Identification of subjects for AoL

- Identification of subjects for sampling using the curriculum mapping database



Engagement of staff

- Acquisition of subject outline from subject coordinator in the identified subject
- Discussion with subject coordinator for (1) identification of an existing individual assessment instrument; (2) a representative sample to be taken, (3) a rubric for the assessment instruction, and (4) the target level appropriate to the achievement of the subject learning objective



Collection and analysis of assessment information

- Arrangement for assessment
- Sampled work copied for AACSB records by the AoL Team



Reporting and dissemination of results and feedback

- A written report provided to the subject coordinator following analysis of the AoL results
- Brief written response from the subject coordinator/lecturer addressing the points in the report
- Program directors will be sent a copy of results and responses for all subjects that undertook the AoL process in their program each semester



Curriculum review and revision

- At the end of the year a summary report of results and curriculum responses will be provided to the Bachelor of Commerce Course Standing Committee and the Graduate Programs Committee

What are the benefits of being involved in Assurance of Learning?

As a lecturer, conducting AOL has a number of benefits to you, your students, and the program as a whole (see also Johnston, Smith, & Calma, 2010):

- As there is clear alignment between the program learning goals and objectives and each subject's learning objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment methods, it serves you to **establish visible links** between selected assessment tasks and the subject learning objectives and program learning goals and objectives;
- You are in a position to **directly and swiftly develop strategies to improve aspects of your teaching and assessment** through the analysis resulting from the application of the subject rubric which is related to the program goals and objectives;
- It stimulates greater awareness of the position of your subject to the program as a whole;
- You are helping to **provide feedback** for the purposes of improving your subject and the program; and
- When you develop a rubric, you are **communicating clear expectations to your students** in relation to achieving subject objectives – the performance criteria you wanted to focus on and the level of performance you wish them to achieve.
- Further **improve the Melbourne student experience** by engaging students in activities that help them to succeed.
- Enhance your teaching practice.

Roberts (2008) indicate that there are also 'unexpected benefits' in doing AOL: awareness of problems, opportunity for early intervention, and creating an open forum for discussion.

What are rubrics? Are they similar to marking sheets?

A rubric is like a matrix. It shows the performance criteria with which the lecturer wants students to focus on and the levels of performance under each of those criteria. In a business case analysis assignment, for example, assessment criteria can include clear identification of the business problem, identification of a range of alternative courses of action, justification of the chosen decision, and so on. Levels of performance can be "below expectations", "meets expectations", or "exceeds expectations".

The following is a more concrete example developed by a lecturer for a specific assessment task in one of the subjects in the Master of Accounting program. It shows a 3x3 rubric. That

is, it shows three criteria and three levels of performance. Rubrics need not be 3x3 in size. You can develop a rubric for a manageable number of criteria and levels of performance.

Level of achievement	Dimensions of question		
		Critically assess management's strategy to act in shareholder's interests	Specify performance measures to align management's interests with those of shareholders
Below expectations	Does not challenge non-sequitur in management's statement that asset write-downs ensure higher dividends in later years and argues (wrongly) dividends necessarily increase shareholder wealth	Does not challenge performance measures being considered by compensation committee for aligning interests	Does not challenge management's premise that growth in sales will necessarily increase shareholder value
Meets expectations	Challenges non-sequitur and identifies measures related to residual earnings as benchmarks for performance rather than dividends	Identifies deficiencies in either of the offered performance measures as they do not necessarily increase shareholder value	Evaluates residual earnings computed in first part of question as a benchmark for growth to evaluate claim of growth by management
Exceeds expectations	Refutes non-sequitur and identifies clearly residual earnings as benchmark for growth in shareholder value	Identifies clearly residual earnings as a performance measure that resolves individual limitations of the performance measures considered and explains how performance measures relate to residual earnings	Shows a link between performance and residual earnings and shows capacity to conduct comprehensive analysis of management's claim through this link

A marking sheet can be quite similar to a rubric, except that it may not explicitly define the characteristics of the outcome the lecturer was looking for, for which students are expected to be able to achieve and would be assessed.

It is suggested that lecturers **develop, and discuss, the rubric with their students**. Not only does it clearly provide students

of what is expected, it also guides them in preparing their assignment.

Why are Rubrics used in the Assurance of Learning?

A rubric is useful for both lecturers and students. When a rubric is developed for a particular assessment task (e.g. mid-semester essay assignment), lecturers will be able to:

- increase objectivity in the marking process;
- clarify and demystify the marking process;
- explain more easily to students why they received the mark they did;
- assist students to improve their work and their marks;
- encourage students to become aware of and monitor their own levels of performance; and
- minimise the number of questions regarding expectations for assignments, performance, and marks given (The University of Newcastle, 2010, para. 5).

These are the same reasons why rubrics are used for AOL. They provide useful information to indicate those students who have met or exceeded expectations set for a particular assignment, which is aligned to achieving the relevant learning objective(s). Because the rubric can be used as a marking guide, lecturers can provide it to the students to inform them of how their assignment was marked against it.

Usually, lecturers also write a few sentences to discuss their comments overall, such as reporting on which aspects the student was good at and how the submitted assignment could have been made better.

These rubrics are used for AOL purposes because they can specifically answer the questions posed earlier: “How will we know they have learned it or not?” and “What will we do if they have not learned it?” The rubric can help identify gaps in skills and knowledge of students and alert the lecturer to devise some strategies to help students perform better.

What does closing the loop mean?

‘Closing the loop’ means applying the results of the AOL process. This means getting back to the subjects and the program as a whole, and **developing strategies to improve the whole curriculum**. The data collected during the AOL process and reflection and planned actions suggested are **meaningless if they are not translated into tangible improvements**.

Improvements can be at a subject level or at a program level. At the subject level, if the results indicate that students barely meet the expectations, it is an opportunity for lecturers to think of ways to help students perform better. This could mean refining their teaching approaches, allowing more time for consultation, tackling difficult concepts in-depth, using more case studies and so on. At a program level, AOL results can be one of the many sources of information which can be used when conducting program reviews.

The following are actual examples of ‘closing the loop’ activities that lecturers have done or planned to do following the results of the AOL process.

The primary learning in this subject relates to moving students from the mechanical skill of documenting a process, into the more interpretive and subjective arena of analysing and improving a given specific process instance. In order to support improvements to the more complex skill set it is planned to introduce the use of visually rich process examples in the form of multimedia based learning exercises [lecturer, ABIS].

Students are encouraged to: 1) re-write responses in the light of feedback and attend consultations for further discussion of the re-vamped response; 2) students are encouraged to draft responses to other in-class test samples (which may not be formally assessed) and submit for comment.; and 3) samples of good in-class test responses are posted on the LMS. These practices aim to improve student performance; particularly those who may have struggled in earlier assessed tasks. This coordinator valued the rubric idea and indicated that he would use this in 2010 and demonstrate to students more formally the differences between stronger and weaker responses [lecturer, ABIS]

The AOL conducted in 2009, as reported in the Assurance of Learning Report 2009 (Johnston & Smith, 2009), resulted in a number of **subject-level adjustments** as a result of the AOL process in the interest of **continuous improvement** and ‘**closing the loop**’.

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- Greater emphasis on directing students to the range of sources of assistance at the undergraduate level;
 - More emphasis on topics that appear to cause some difficulty for some students;
 - Increased use of model answers for students to better understand what is expected;
 - Review of examination question in terms of time to complete as well as complexity;
 - Use of simpler models in cases where students are experiencing difficulty building to the more complex models;
 - Development of problem solving strategies to support and expand student learning of fundamental concepts;
 - Further use of cases to illustrate concepts and strategies;
 - Inclusion of mid-semester tests to provide early feedback to students;
 - Introduction of multimedia learning experiences; and
 - Increased time on some topics.

In conclusion

Assurance of learning provides opportunities to reflect on the factors that contribute, or inhibit, the achievement of program learning goals and objectives and subject learning objectives. The process contributes to greater accountability, quality, and continuous improvement of subjects and programs. Students can benefit most from the improvements made into the curriculum while lecturers can communicate clear expectations and reflect upon their teaching practice.

References and Resources

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