PROVIDING GUIDELINES FOR FIRST-YEAR ASSESSMENT TASKS AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING CORE GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES: NURTURING OR SPOONFEEDING?

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ABSTRACT

Developing written and oral communication skills is an important part of the first-year university experience as this is the time to set the tone and standards for later years. This paper will describe the rationale for providing thorough instructions, desired learning outcomes, and assessment criteria to first-year students enrolled in a core business subject – with the objective of guiding students into deep approaches to learning.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and guiding first-year university students can be both exciting and challenging. First-year university is usually the time when a student first encounters the 'academic' approach to learning and begins to establish independent study patterns. In many tertiary institutions much time, energy, and resources are being spent on efforts to generate more effective student learning, especially during the transitional first year of study (Tinto, 1995; Levin, 1998; Levin, 1997; Kantanis, 1998; Macdonald & Arnott, 1999; Gregory, 2000) yet there are still many students who have difficulty interpreting and completing assigned assessment tasks. Student-learning literature comments on the ease of pushing students into surface approaches by the use of certain teaching and assessment methods, and the difficulty of guiding them into deep approaches, which have been shown to lead students to qualitatively better learning outcomes (Ramsden, 1992; Marton & Saljo, 1984; Ramsden, Beswick, & Bowden, 1987).

Since the 'massification' of universities (Marginson, 1993) students with diverse backgrounds, abilities and goals comprise the higher education population. With this increased diversity comes an increase in the range of attributes and abilities students bring with them. The graduate attributes required of exiting students, however, is prescriptive and common to particular professions – for example, engineers and accountants (Institution of Engineers Australia (IEAust), 1999; Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants & Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia, 1996). Faculties across higher education in Australia are now comparing the graduate attributes of students by way of the national academic testing body, the Australian Council for Educational Research, which is trialling graduate attribute testing across a sample of Australian universities (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2000). The graduate attributes include problem solving, writing, and analytical and communication skills. On initial results, business students do not compare well with arts students, confirming earlier debate on the graduate attributes of arts students (Norton, 2000; Dench, 2000; Macintyre, 2000)

According to surveys conducted by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia, the most needed skills in the Australian labour market are the abilities to communicate, analyse and solve problems, work as a team member, tackle unfamiliar problems, and plan one's work (Evans, 1996; Bartley, 1998; McCahon & Lavelle, 1998; Graduate Careers Council of Australia, 1999). This reinforces the importance of focusing on process as well as content. Developing graduate attributes which provide students with transferable skills throughout their working life is paramount given the changing nature of work across the spectrum of careers facing graduates (Martin, 1999). Academics face the challenge of developing lifelong learners and have addressed the issues by diverse means (Tempone & Martin, 2000)

In the Swinburne University of Technology experience, the development of generic skills is seen as critical in first year, and a working group has been established to investigate the experience (School Academic Committee (SAC), 2000). Academic learning is seen to be enhanced by good communication between academics and students about their work programs. Communication with students about learning outcomes and the assessment process is seen as a key element of this development, with assessment guidelines and feedback documentation making the expectations and learning outcomes of items of assessment explicit to students. Schramm's communication model (see Church, 1999) is used as the basis for the development of clear guiding principles inasmuch as it enhances understanding of good communication in a learner-centred environment. Particular examples from Swinburne in a marketing subject – and for the School of Business as a whole – will be provided as examples of attempts at enhancing good communication.

This interrelationship can be expressed diagrammatically as illustrated in Figure 1.

THE COMMUNICATION MODEL

People who play cricket find the rules of the game straightforward, but people who are not familiar with cricket may find a description of the game quite confusing and will interpret the rules in a variety of ways. Veronesi uses this example when trying to illustrate how people can interpret the same message differently (Veronesi, 2000). But why do people interpret the same set of words differently? In order to explain this, one can turn to the theory of communication.

The basis of many models of communication is the one developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949. It was developed with the technical side of communication in mind and it considered the flow of information through an electronic system. This model, however, did not consider the meaning of the message, which is included in Schramm's model (Church, 1999). This model (Figure 2) begins with a sender who has a message to transmit. This message is translated or encoded and sent to a receiver who must decode the message, thus developing an interpretation of the message. Interfering with the basic communication model is the element of noise which takes the form of random and competing messages that may interfere with the intended communication. The final element of Schramm's communication loop is that of feedback, which is transmitted back to the sender. This complex model shows the various elements that are present when assessment tasks are being set and communicated. The message that the student (receiver) receives is unlikely to be the same as the message that the sender (lecturer) initiated as there are many elements along the way that can affect the way the message is received and interpreted.

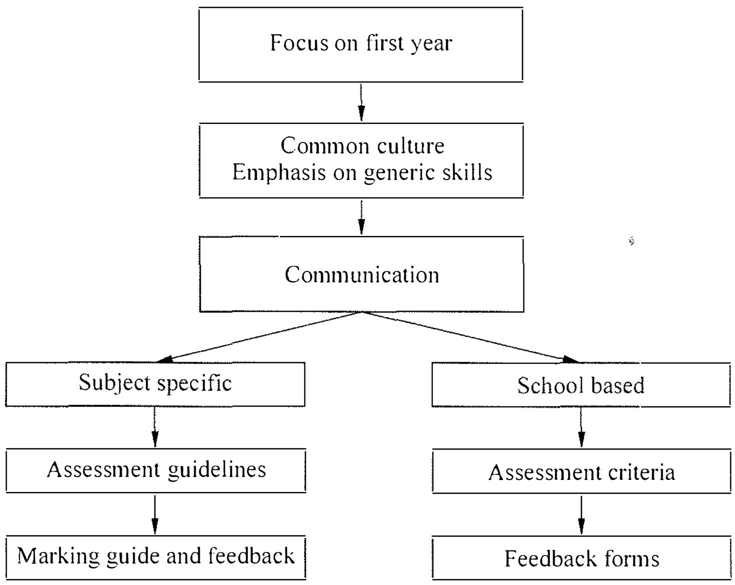

Figure 1. Pedagogical schema.

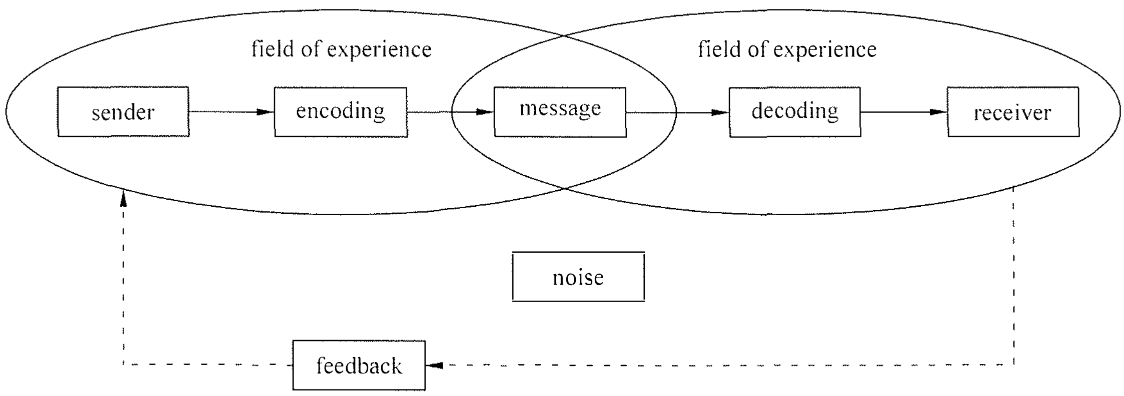

Figure 2. Schramm's model of communication – source: (Church, 1999).

The Sender and the message

The communication process model highlights the key factors in effective communication. Senders must know their audience and what response they want. Thus it is important that the lecturers who set the tasks send very clear messages to the students. However, interviews with lecturers have revealed that while they "know good writing when they see it" they have difficulty in explaining why a piece of writing is poor (Lea & Street, 1998).

Studies that have examined student writing from subjects representing a range of disciplines have shown that there is a significant difference in the writing requirements between different disciplines – including differences in the discourse patterns adopted and the linguistic features used. In addition to this, not all players within disciplines have similar expectations. In fact, on many occasions conflicting instructions are provided to students (Vardi, 2000; Craigie, 1998; Radloff & de la Harpe, 2000). Through literature reviews, Vardi has found that literacy practices at university are not clearly agreed upon or even universal in their nature; rather they are contested, resulting in an unclear and confusing path for many students (Vardi, 2000). The reasons why expectations for essay writing vary so greatly is due to the interaction of four factors. First, the reason for setting the task; second, the thinking of the discipline; third, the lecturer's beliefs about good writing in relation to learning objectives and; finally, the need to assess understanding (Vardi, 2000). As these factors vary, so lecturers' expectations can vary. This means that each task can potentially result in a unique set of expectations which makes it extremely difficult for students to always clearly determine what is expected of them. This can be quite challenging for first-year students as they need to be able to predict what the lecturer wants for each written task.

Chanock (1994) looked at the ways academics communicated their expectations to students. She stated that there are three kinds of teachers, those who take the time to consider what students need to know about the approach of their discipline and who explain these things openly; those who are so immersed in their discipline that its ways are 'transparent' to them; and those who are aware of the culture and nature of their discipline but believe that students can and should learn how to participate in it by 'osmosis'. Teachers from this last group feel that if they model the practice of their discipline, the students will enter it by a kind of apprenticeship, they will learn by doing (Chanock, 1994).

This is an interesting view and exemplifies the notion of the students as an apprentice, which is discussed by Spinks (2000). The use of the metaphor of the undergraduate writer as an apprentice in the craft of mature academic writing implies a two-way responsibility relationship with academic mentors. Subject convenors and class teachers have a responsibility to frame the discourse for their students, through specific instruction and modeling as well as through marker feedback. Students have a responsibility to follow the instruction, to learn from the models and to be prepared to take risks and 'get their feet wet' in the intellectual contexts of the discipline (Spinks, 2000).

Most students are faced with a multi-faceted task which involves learning new content, learning new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing that new knowledge, and learning new ways of writing their knowledge. For many students the last of these new ways poses one of their major problems. They are told that analysis, interpretation, and evaluation are important aspects of good academic writing practice, but what academic markers mean exactly by such terms is not always clear; nor is it clear whether the meanings are constant across disciplines (Spinks, 2000; Vardi, 2000). Despite some reservations about the apprenticeship metaphor within academia, it remains a useful conceptual framework for discussing best practice in the communicative relationship between teachers and their first-year students.

Black & Wiliam (1998) recognise that the essential and necessary role of the teacher is to act as a mediator between the learner and a body of knowledge and skills. The learner is, however, a cognizant being, situated in a context largely constructed by others. The knowledge base is inanimate, and in some instances not rigidly fixed but still malleable. The role of the teacher could broadly be described as working to reduce (but not necessarily eliminate) the rate of error production in trial-and-error learning, and thereby to make learning more efficient. Teachers can do this effectively only if they know thoroughly both sides of the operation, and how to build bridges between the two (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Black and Wiliam concur with the findings of Chanock that although teachers bring a deep knowledge of criteria and standards appropriate to the assessment task, these may exist in an unarticulated form, making them difficult to share with learners (Chanock, 1994). Unclear instructions are one of the contributing factors to students adopting surface approaches to learning (Ramsden, 1992).

In many instances, devising assessment tasks represents creative and integrative activity of a high order (Sadler, 1998). Learners often have little on which to base expectations about what should be delivered as they have little access to the performances of others, historic or current. Teachers, on the other hand, do have access to this information and they often make adjustments to their expectations about how students should perform a task *after* the students have made their attempts. These adjustments are often made on the run, more or less intuitively, sometimes to correct for deficiencies in assessment task specifications, but mostly for the putative 'benefit' of the learners (Sadler, 1998).

The studies quoted above provide an insight into the differing philosophies of academics and the difficulties that some academics have in developing clear assessment guidelines that are interpreted consistently by the student cohort. The elements of Schramm's model will be elaborated upon below.

Encoding

In education it is most common to use words to represent the message – but words have different meanings depending on one's previous knowledge, culture, and experiences. Problems occur when a sender transmits a message which is encoded in a way that is unfamiliar to the recipient. It is the task of the designer of the message to ensure that the material that is presented is partially in the field of experience of the learner. The other part may be outside this field, in order to provide a learning experience. Therefore the designer has to know what knowledge and experiences the learners already have so that the new knowledge can add to this (Communication theory and models, 2000). When constructing and explaining assessment tasks it is important that the lecturer is cognizant of this.

For a message to be effective, the sender's encoding process must mesh with the receiver's decoding process. Thus, the best messages are essentially encoded in signs that are familiar to the receiver. The more the sender's field of experience overlaps with that of the receiver the more effective the message is likely to be. This requirement puts a burden on communicators from one field of experience who want to communicate effectively with an audience that has a different field of experience. They must encode their messages in a way that takes into account how the audience usually decodes the messages. Given the diversity of cultural and educational backgrounds of the student body, and their experiences, this can be more problematic for some students (Marginson, 1993; Auyeng & Sands, 1996; Long, 1995; Tempone & Martin, 1999; Tempone & Martin, 2000; Gregory, 2000).

The sender of the message must also transmit the message through efficient media that reach the audience. Assessment tasks are usually communicated in written and verbal forms. Thus at least two types of media are employed to disseminate the message.

Receiver

There are many reasons why students do not receive that intended message and complete unsatisfactory assessment tasks. However the comments in this paper are limited to the sender and message section of the model.

Noise

The sender's task is to get his or her message through to the receiver. The audience may not receive the intended message for several reasons – poorly encoded message, differing fields of experience, and noise. The noise factor can take many forms – people might distort the message and hear what they want to hear. Receivers often add things to the message that are not there, or they do not notice other things that are there. Thus, the communicator's task is to strive for message simplicity, clarity, and repetition to get the important points across to the audience.

Feedback

Often in the communication process the sender does not receive feedback from the recipient. But when a lecturer sets an assessment task, the feedback appears in several forms. These include questions asked prior to submission of the assessment, the submitted piece of work, and regular subject evaluations. Thus the sender is fortunate, as he or she can determine whether in fact the message was received as originally intended. The originator of the task is not the only one who receives feedback on the assigned task. Often students approach learning support advisors for assistance with assessment tasks, in which case the feedback is not being provided directly to the initiator of the message.

THE MARKETING CONCEPT EXPERIENCE

In the first-year marketing subject which is studied by students from a variety of courses as diverse as business, engineering, information systems and multimedia, academics go to considerable lengths to provide both written and verbal instructions for the various assessment tasks that are set. There are four assessment tasks which include: tutorial participation, oral and written presentation of a case study (group work), an industry analysis (group work), and an exam. Written information on assessment requirements is contained in the subject workbook and is also available via the subject website. Hints on preparation of case studies, writing business reports, and presenting oral presentations are provided in the workbook as well as notes on using the Harvard referencing system. These notes have involved several authors and taken several years to compile.

Additional activities are also undertaken in order to provide a blueprint for successful completion of this subject. These include:

- thorough coverage of requirements during the first lecture, and reiteration in tutorials throughout the semester;
- links on the subject website that connect assessment tasks to relevant sections of the workbook;
- assessment forms and marking guides included in the workbook, so that students know what criteria are being assessed (see Appendix A);
- a library skills session during second week of the semester, and a web page developed specifically for the industry overview, providing students with links to relevant websites;
- an industry speaker to reinforce literature searches and to answer specific questions;
- past assignments circulated during tutorials;
- students directed to learning-support staff.

Despite the fact that students are guided and provided with clear instruction, some students still find the assessment tasks overly challenging. The average mark for both assignments is around 70 percent with the distribution of results shown in Table 1.

Mark	Case study % of students*	Industry Overview % of students*
Less than 50	1	5
50-60	15	7
61-70	20	35
71-80	33	32
81-90	25	17
91-100	5	3

Table 1. Distribution of marks for two assessment tasks.

*Note: there were approximately 240 students enrolled in this subject.

In general, the submissions received were well completed and few students enquiries were made regarding assessment expectations. This is supported by the subject evaluation questionnaire which asked students to rate whether "The assessment requirements are clear" on a five point Likert scale. Less than 10 percent of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (11/112). The mean rating was 3.83 (standard deviation 0.89). Thus the majority of the students felt that the instructions provided to complete assessment tasks were well communicated.

THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

In response to student evaluations and also as a response of a working party into assessment guideline and feedback, assessment guidelines are being trialled across the School to provide clear expectations for students when preparing assessable material. Feedback documentation is also being trialled in order to determine if this clarifies academic expectations for students in terms of graduate attributes and content issues and, long term, to determine if feedback leads to an improvement over time in the academic culture. Examples of these are provided in Appendix B (Wong, 2001) and C.

WHY SHOULD EXPECTATIONS BE MADE EXPLICIT?

Why is all this necessary now, when we managed without it in the past? Answers include mass education, the information age, and time-poor students who receive little financial support from the government, forcing many to work – but these are just the beginning (Marginson, 1993; Martin, 1999). There is a push to reduce teaching contact time, so lecturers and tutors tend to focus on content delivery rather than on spending precious time on process (Di Virgilio & Evans, 1999). Due to the increasing pressures on academic staff there has been a gradual reduction in the number of pieces of written work submitted. Tests and exams that provide little opportunity for students to develop the critical communication skills demanded by industry have replaced assignments, reports and essays. Universities are pushing for a research focus – students are expected to possess research skills which are difficult to develop and consolidate in the current undergraduate environment.

There are four stakeholders involved in the issue of providing clear guidelines – the academics, the students, learning-skills advisors, and potential employers. From the perspective of the academics it is critical to be effective yet efficient teachers. More time spent planning up-front will provide savings in the long term. A little time spent on carefully designing and clearly explaining assessment tasks will result in savings on two fronts. First, less time will be spent answering student enquiries. Second, due to the clear instruction, students will better understand what is expected or required of them, and thus will submit reports and papers of higher quality, which are more stimulating to assess and require less time for writing corrections and more time for writing constructive comments (Sadler, 1998). In addition, a clear link between assessment criteria and core graduate attributes can be identified and reinforced in order to encourage students to develop and enhance their communication, analytical, and interpersonal skills.

The students benefit because they understand the expectations of the lecturer and know how to approach the assessment task. Hopefully this will mean that less time is wasted trying to interpret the task and more time is used researching, analysing, synthesizing, and developing communication skills vital for the graduates of the future.

In addition, the learning-support staff benefit in the long term. Time spent at the outset planning and working with academics to provide unambiguous instructions will result in fewer frustrations and enquiries and allow more time to focus on other activities. Finally, potential employers will benefit as they will have access to a pool of well-equipped graduates who have mastered the essential skills expected of graduates and that are required in the workplace.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MAKE EXPECTATIONS MORE EXPLICIT?

There are a variety of methods that the message originator can use to reduce the sources of confusion when setting assessment tasks. An assessment task must have clear objectives, both subject specific and generic. These should be clearly communicated to students in a variety of forms – for example, written and verbal. In addition, it is highly desirable to provide students with the assessment criteria that will be used for marking the task. This will enable students to understand the aims and requirements of the assignment, and indicates to the student those areas and issues that are valued and considered important.

Student feedback can be a powerful tool in the editing of assessment tasks. Academics should keep records of students' enquiries and the problems the students encounter while attempting to complete assigned tasks. These should be used to modify guidelines for future semesters in order to reduce students' confusion.

Ideally, a panel of academics should be involved in developing and composing the assessment tasks to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation or ambiguity. Once the assignment has been constructed it should be thoroughly moderated by an academic who was not involved with the task development. If a panel is not available, then the author of the assessment task could utilize the assistance of an outside academic or the learning-support staff.

Usually, learning support staff work with the receiver of the message, that is the student. Clearly, the problem does not always lie at this end of the communication process. It may be prudent for learning-support staff to focus on the sender of the message, the encoding of the message, and the message itself (Chanock, 1994).

Most of these strategies are equally valid for post first-year subjects. However, if assessment instructions become too prescriptive there is the possibility that creativity may be stifled. The balance between providing direction without removing flexibility presents a challenge.

CONCLUSION

If academics can provide explicit, unambiguous, and detailed guidelines during the first year of tertiary studies, and if they can discuss requirements prior to submissions and after grading, then students will have an opportunity to understand what is expected, what they have done well, and what requires attention. This knowledge will serve them well in the future. Fewer instructions will need to be provided in subsequent years, as the students have a model from which to work. However, this requires considerable work on the part of the instructors. First, they have to understand the objectives of the assessment tasks in the first year, as well as the requirements of subjects in later years. They must also be aware of the core graduate attributes and incorporate these into assessment tasks which will assist students in developing these skills. This then needs to be translated into clear and detailed instructions which will guide students to submitting reports, assignments, and essays in the appropriate form, meeting the expected standards.

In order to encourage effective learning, more emphasis must be placed on designing assessment tasks that facilitate these outcomes. Different disciplines have significant differences in their report and essay and assignment writing requirements. However, the techniques discussed are quite generic and applicable across a variety of discipline areas. The suggestions do not guarantee that all students will be engaged, but those students that choose to listen and follow the explicit guidelines provided for them will produce better submissions, achieve qualitatively better learning outcomes, and will have acquired some of the generic skills expected of graduates.

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APPENDIX A: Marking Guides provided to students prior to assessment submission

HBM110 Assignment (Bread Industry) Marking Guide
Value 30%

Students: ______________________________

Marker: ____________________

Level of attainment:	N	L	M	H	
Research Task (primary & secondary research)					
• evidence (cited in report)					
• scope					
• relevance					
• use					
Industry Background					
• description of the market including: • market size/ structure etc					
• major players					
• critical success factors					
Macro Environment					
• identification theory/factors					
• discussion of impact on the industry					
• appropriate identification of practical examples for each of the macro factors					
Segmentation					
• identification of theory					
• discussion on how & why product group is segmented					
• use of interviews to illustrate how product group is segmented with reference to target markets and marketing mix					
Report Presentation					
• referencing technique					
• business report format					
• word limit					
• expression, spelling					
overall excellence (originality/creativity/analysis)					
Key to level of attainment scale above: N = not shown L = low M = medium H = high					

Overall Grade:
High Distinction Distinction Credit Pass Fail

HBM110 Case Study Presentation and Report Marking Guide
Value 15%

Case Study Name: ______________________________

Group Members: ______________________________

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Oral Report

Visual Presentation • quality of visuals • professionalism • pace • interesting • clarity	High Medium Low Not Shown	
Content • major issues covered • degree of understanding • relevant & informative	High Medium Low Not Shown	
Class Discussion • useful • learning achieved • within time frame • well managed	High Medium Low Not Shown	

Written Report

Report Presentation • structure • professionalism • within word limit • scope of research referencing technique	High Medium Low Not Shown	
Key Issues • appropriate • reasoning • clarity	High Medium Low Not Shown	
Analysis & Interpretation • definition of terminology • use of theory • practical examples	High Medium Low Not Shown	

Overall Grade:
High Distinction Distinction Credit Pass Fail

APPENDIX B: Assessment Criteria for the School of Business Swinburne University of Technology

School of Business

Assessment criteria

Subject Code and Name: Assessment Item:

Due Date: Return Date: (normally add 2 weeks)

Learning Outcomes for this assessment item are:
On completion of the assessment item, the student should be able to:

Grade	Meaning
HD	Outstanding, Insightful. Goes beyond requirements of the task to develop a response which is thoughtful, reflective, and considers alternative views and makes connections among ideas and information from different sources or from different aspects of the course. Well researched and documented. Displays creativity and originality.
D	Very good. Purposefully and logically developed. Thoroughly addresses all aspects of the task. Synthesis of details and concepts from various sources or topics shows evidence of sound understanding and thoughtful examination. Research information appropriately cited.
C	Good. Generally clear, accurate and relevant. Adequately addresses all requirements of the task. Demonstrates understanding of course concepts, with evidence of some thoughtful examination and reflection. Development is generally logical, facts generally correct. Tends to focus on one interpretation.
P	Satisfactory. Superficial understanding of concepts with some gaps obvious. Little evidence of reflection or thoughtful analysis. Complies with the basic requirements, relies on limited sources of information, little integration of concepts.
N	Unsatisfactory. Fails to address the topic in a meaningful way. May be extremely brief, inaccurate, illogical or undeveloped.

Source: Wong, K. (2001) Writing Clear Assessment Criteria Learning and Teaching Support, Swinburne University of Technology (p. 11-12).

APPENDIX C: Assessment Feedback Form
Swinburne University of Technology
School of Business

Assessment feedback for student

Title of assessment: Student name and ID:

General issues	**Specific issues: to be added by lecturer**	**How student addressed the issue**
Objectives of assessment item • • •		
Content issues to be addressed • To be developed from assessment item itself • • •		
Level of engagement: See Assessment Criteria Guidelines		
Presentation issues: Consistent/appropriate presentation style Expression Clarity Logic Argument Originality Bibliography & referencing		
Other: •		