Investigating the assessment practices within an Initial Teacher Education program in an Australian university: Staff perceptions and practices

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Abstract: Effective assessment design and subsequent assessment practices are essential for student success in the higher education sector. A plethora of research on assessment in higher education exists which tends to focus primarily on the student experience. This paper shares results from a 3 phased study that explored staff perceptions related to assessment practices in an undergraduate Initial Teacher Education program within an Australian metropolitan university. First, course learning objectives, activities and assessment items were mapped to identify the presence of constructive alignment. Second, staff were invited to complete a survey and a follow-up interview in relation to understanding of assessment knowledge and skills. Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2013) was used to analyse the qualitative data and findings suggest that staff are highly committed to quality assessment practices but often work in silos rather than teams. Additionally, a lack of professional development and learning was available at the school level, particularly for casual staff. Further research about assessment practices in higher education in relation to staff rather than student experience is warranted.

Keywords: assessment design, constructive alignment, higher education, staff experience, whole of program

Introduction

Effective assessment design and subsequent assessment practices are critical for student success in the higher education sector. Indeed, Angelo (2002) believed that sound program and assessment design ensures that the student experience is positive and rewarding. The research literature explores quite extensively what constitutes effective assessment practices in individual courses (Angelo, 2002; Biggs & Tang, 2011); how these practices can be sustained (Boud & Soler, 2015); and conversely ineffective assessment practices across whole programs (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Elton, 2004; Struyven et al., 2002). While there is a plethora of research on assessment in higher education, it tends to focus primarily on the student experience rather than staff perception and practices (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014; Rathburn, Leatherman, & Jensen, 2016). Given staff are engaged in and responsible for, the

development of assessment– including diagnostic, formative and summative methods– there appears to be a significant gap in the literature.

Significance and Importance of Effective Assessment Design

For higher educators, a greater understanding of the ways in which they undertake and make choices about assessment design is essential in whole of program development. When staff share their knowledge and application of assessment methods it can ensure a consistent and team approach to learning and teaching (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Evidence suggests however, that many academics claim ownership of individual courses and often work in silos (Kurland, Michaud, Best, Wohldmann, Cox, Pontikis, & Vasishth, 2010). Not sharing knowledge about assessment between staff within the same program potentially diminishes student outcomes because it would be difficult to know what students experience from semester to semester and from first year to their capstone year.

This paper maps the current assessment practices within core education and curriculum courses in an Initial Teacher Education program in an Australian university. In addition, all staff, including casual staff were surveyed and invited to be interviewed about their perceptions of assessment, and how this information may impact on their practices.

Defining Key Terms

Assessment involves the use of a range of strategies or tools to document, measure and evaluate learning progress as well as knowledge and skill acquisition. It gathers evidence about both students' learning needs but also learning goals and outcomes. A number of researchers have noted the difference between assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. Assessment *of* learning refers to summative assessment, whereby judgements are

made about students' achievement at the conclusion of a distinct instructional phase (MacLellan, 2001; Pokorny, 2016). Assessment *for* learning is formative assessment and is "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). While both approaches are important to embed in teaching and learning in higher education contexts to ensure effective and positive outcomes for all (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Lublin, 2003) this paper predominantly focuses on assessment *of* learning.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Theories concerning assessment practices are wide-ranging, however, most not surprisingly, aim to improve the experience of the student or learner (Biggs, 1996; Boud & Associates, 2010; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). There is limited research that investigates staff experience and satisfaction in relation to assessment (Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014). As stated above, this paper therefore aims to fill this gap by gaining feedback on how staff within an undergraduate secondary teacher education program develop and constructively align learning outcomes, activities, and assessment. If students achieve

success in their learning as a result of constructive alignment (Angelo, 2002), then feedback from students (such as end of semester opinion surveys) will be more positive, leading to staff feeling valued and more understood.

Aside from the purpose, evaluation of, and feedback about assessment, we are interested in in how assessment tasks are devised, specifically how learning objectives, activities and assessment are brought into alignment during through this developmental phase. According to Biggs (1996) constructive alignment enables both a learner centred and instructional design approach to learning. Instructional design tends to focus on how educators develop and emphasise the alignment of elements such as the learning outcomes and assessment tasks. In this sense, constructive alignment involves a) thoughtful and well-considered development of learning outcomes, b) clear and consistent approaches to assessment that best meets the learning outcomes, and c) planning and programing of learning activities that allow both the learners and teachers to clearly understand expectations and knowledge being covered, as well as opportunities to feel engaged and motivated about the learning process (Angelo, 2002). Constructive alignment requires a thorough understanding of knowledge and the process of learning.

According to Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001), there are three knowledge acquisition processes: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. An extension of their theory is Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2013) (Figure 1). This theory is instructive in coming to better understand how students may learn but also what educators can do to ensure learning is effective as possible.
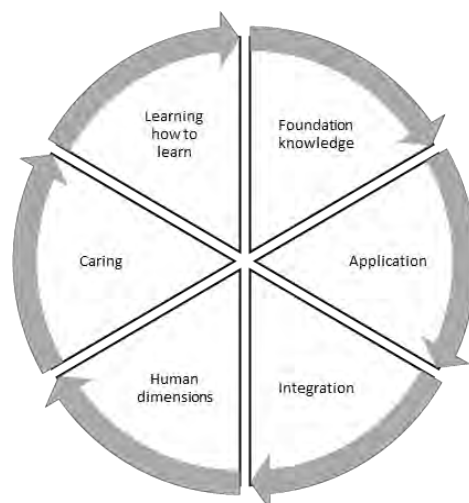

Figure 1: Finks' Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2013)

This paper draws on the above model because it focuses on *foundational knowledge*– which is about understanding and remembering information and ideas; *application*–which concerns skills and critical thinking; *integration*–which explores connections to ideas, people and life; *human dimensions*–covering learning about oneself and others; *caring*–when developing new feelings, interests and values; and *learning how to learn* when becoming a better student, inquiring about a subject as a self-directed learner (Fink, 2013). These aspects are critical for success in a disciplinary field such as education where learning is at the core of the profession. Similarly, the elements in this model all relate to ways in which higher educators are required to consider the development of learning goals and corresponding assessment through the use of constructive alignment. Foundation knowledge and the application and integration of this knowledge through various philosophical values such as human dimensions and a caring ethos allow students to learn more effectively.

Research Questions

The key driving questions for this paper, therefore, are:

1. What are the current assessment practices within the core education and curriculum courses of the Bachelor of Secondary Education program? (including what are the course learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment items? How do staff develop this assessment?)
2. What is the extent of the knowledge and understanding that academic and casual staff have in relation to constructive alignment? How confident do staff feel in relation to the constructive alignment in the courses they convene and/or teach?
3. What approaches and/or recommendations can be implemented to ensure effective assessment design in the Bachelor of Secondary Education program, as well as improved staff satisfaction and engagement?

Design and Methods

This research is empirical as data were gathered across three phases. Phase 1 involved mapping all core education and curriculum courses to identify the following information from course profiles:

- year and semester in program;
- course name and code; (de-identified)
- course mode and campus; (de-identified)
- length of course;
- learning outcomes;
- learning activities;
- assessment items including description of assessment, learning outcomes covered, weighting, and due dates.

Phase 1 answered Research Question One (RQ1). All academic and casual staff who either convene or teach in the curriculum and core education courses in the Bachelor of Education program were invited to complete an online survey. The survey explored staff knowledge and understanding in relation to constructive alignment of learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment within their courses (RQ1 & RQ2). A number of semi-structured interviews were carried out via an appreciative inquiry approach with staff who provided their consent (RQ2 & RQ3). An appreciative inquiry method allows staff to focus in on the aspects of their assessment practices that are positive and effective. The interview questions were based on Fink's (2013) model and illuminated information regarding staff satisfaction and involvement in the program. All appropriate ethical approvals were granted for this study. It is envisaged that findings from this study will assist in improving assessment practices in the Bachelor of Secondary Education as well as the newly developed Bachelor of Education which commences next year.

Results
Phase 1 (RQ1)

The first stage in this research involved a mapping exercise to see exactly what assessment practices were occurring across the core education and curriculum courses in the Bachelor of Secondary Education program. This investigation aimed to seek how course learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment aligned, as evidenced in the

course profiles of these courses. *Constructive alignment*, as stated above, is both constructivist and instructional. If course learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment align effectively then the student experience is more positive – they are able to make connections between the aims of a course, the ways in which they learn throughout the course and how well they have understood this learning.

A constructivist approach ideally takes into account students' individual learning styles, backgrounds and experiences. This ideal however, is difficult to identify in course overviews unless the content itself covers diversity. In relation to an instructional approach, mapping the course profile elucidated information about the types of learning activities and assessment undertaken. The length of course and assessment due dates were also noted to gain a better idea of whole of program assessment load for students, that is, how many assessment items are due and when per semester for each cohort. Of course, this method of gathering data about instructional approaches, utilised in course teaching and learning, would not include actual 'on the ground' strategies because not all course convenors would include detailed information only in the course profile.

Effective *learning outcomes* demonstrate a range of knowledge processes from lower order thinking activities such as remembering, through to high order thinking, including

evaluating and creating. Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revision on Bloom's taxonomy, as outline in Table 1 was referred to when identifying and classifying existing Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) from the course profiles.

Lower order thinking skills ⟶ Higher order thinking skills					
remember	understand	apply	analyse	evaluate	create
Define, label, name, recall, list, select, identify	Interpret, clarify, illustrate, classify	Demonstrate, apply, utilise, model, build, illustrate	Discover, dissect, inspect, contrast, examine, survey	Validate, opinion, support, judge, decide, compare	Compose, develop, invent, produce, design, propose

Table 1: Knowledge Processes Based on Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) Revision on Bloom's Taxonomy

The mapping exercise in Phase 1 of this study revealed that the core education and curriculum courses had between 3 to 8 CLOs. Out of 145 CLOs in total the following was found:
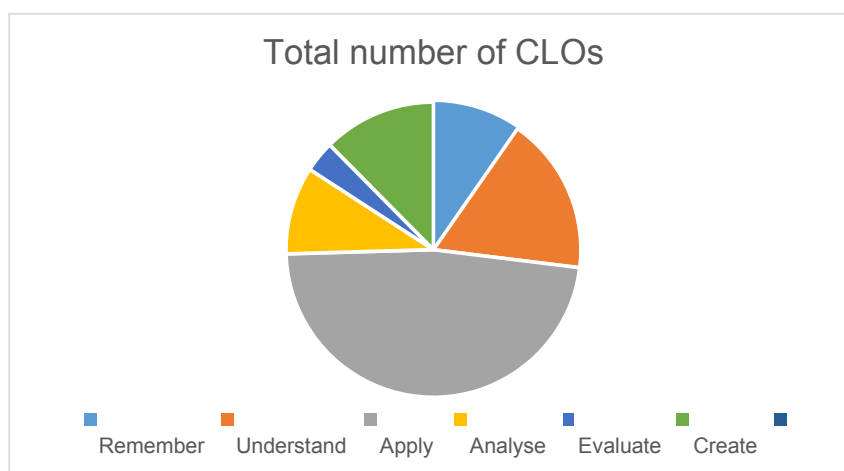

Figure 2: Clos Mapped to Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) Knowledge Processes

The results in Figure 2 display the majority of CLOs are in the *Apply* knowledge

process at 48%, with 17% in *Understand*, 12% in *Create*, 10% in both *Remember and Analyse*, and only 3%. in the *Evaluate* process. Understanding these results could assist staff in improving both the spread and depth of CLOs in general.

In information provided in the course profiles included types of *learning activities,* the *readings required, and specific content topic.* Table 2 shares the types of learning activities listed across the program's course profiles.

	Types of learning activities listed in course profiles
1st year courses	- readings and analysis - discussions - workshops - exploring use of ICTs - create e-portfolio - collaborate - develop practical approaches to learning - work in groups - prepare for assessment
2nd year courses	- analyse tasks - examine effective practices - create tasks - clarify concepts - understand curriculum - apply knowledge through analysing documents
3rd year courses	- readings - prepare for activities - view pre-prepared lectures online - group presentations - compare school cases - reflect on professional experience - explore teachers as researchers - inquiry skills
4th year courses	- practical tasks - complete assessment - plan for teaching - explore theory and metalanguage - develop ideas - workshops - create units - lead peers - design assessment

Table 2: Types of Learning Activities in Course Content

As highlighted in table 2 information about the types of cognitive processes students would be expected to use was available e.g. compare, discuss, explore, reflect. While the course profiles provided minimal information publicly, online course sites often provided much more comprehension information about the course content for students.

Assessment included written documents such as essays, portfolios, learning logs or journals, reflections and reports; exams and quizzes; group presentations such as teaching a lesson; and unit and lesson planning for the classroom. There were distinct differences in assessment in the Junior and Senior secondary curriculum courses, potentially reflecting *disciplinary approaches* to assessment (Shulman, 2005). For example, in drama students are required to write an advocacy document; in visual arts they complete an artist's portfolio, and in science and maths a number of exams are undertaken. Such assessment items display the unique disciplinary literacies in each subject area (Freebody, Chan, &

Barton, 2013).

While the mapping exercise was useful in informing about the types of CLOs, learning activities, and assessment across the program it was necessary to gather more information from course convenors and other teaching staff. Therefore, Phases 2 and 3 of this study aimed to collect further data through a brief survey and follow-up interviews about assessment design and practices within the program.

Phase 2 (RQ1 & RQ2)

Tables 3, 4 and 5 and Figure 3 present the results from Phase 2 of the study. They report on the knowledge and understanding of assessment practices within the core and curriculum courses in the Initial Teacher Education program of 17 academics, comprising of 12 full- time/part-time continuing academic staff (70.6%) and 7 casual staff (29.4%). Fourteen of the academics (82.4%), are course convenors. The same number of the academics, 14 out of 17 reported their involvement in teaching 28 courses. The 14 convenors reported on different types of processes they used when developing the assessment for their course/s. The summary of the processes used is presented in Table 3.

#	Types of processes	N	%
1	I developed the assessment by myself.	6	35.3
2	I developed the assessment with colleagues.	6	35.3
3	I referred to the literature on effective or quality assessment design.	6	35.3
4	I just used what someone else developed.	3	17.6
5	I aimed to include a range of assessment types.	9	52.9
6	I tried to align the assessment with discipline specific knowledge and understanding.	9	52.6
7	I tried to align task with the course learning outcomes.	10	58.8
8	I tried to align task with a marking rubric.	8	47.1
9	I thought about how long the assessment would take to mark.	6	35.3
10	I tried to make the assessment engaging for students.	10	58.8
11	I have high standards for assessment for students.	9	52.9
12	I tried to make it easy for students.	17	100

Table 3: Processes Used for Developing the Assessment for the Courses

These results highlight staff have an understanding of constructive alignment and try to make assessment both engaging and easy for students.

The surveyed academics were asked to rate their confidence, on a scale of 1-7, on different features of assessment practices and on their understanding of the whole-of-program assessment practices. Table 4 presents these data in terms of percentages (%) of responses to different levels of confidence on these assessment features and on their understanding (item 7).

#	Characteristics of assessment items	N (*with some level of confidence*)	Not confident at all	Unconfident	Somewhat unconfident	Neither confident or unconfident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Absolutely confident
1	The intended learning outcomes of this course are clear for students.	16	0	0	5.9	0	5.9	47.1	41.2
2	The assessment items in this course are clear for students.	16	0	0	5.9	0	11.8	52.9	29.4
3	The learning outcomes of this course are aligned with the learning activities such as lectures and tutorials.	15	0	0	11.8	0	0	35.3	52.9
4	The learning outcomes of this course are aligned with the assessment items.	17	0	0	0	0	11.8	41.2	47.1
5	The learning outcomes of this course are aligned with both the learning activities and assessment items.	16	0	0	5.9	0	11.8	29.4	52.9
6	The assessment design of the overall course is as effective as it could be.	13	0	0	12.5	6.3	43.8	31.3	6.3
7	Understanding of the whole-of-program assessment practices	2	33.3	16.7	25	8.3	16.7	0	0

Table 4: Results of Responses to Confidence with Different Features of Assessment Items

Staff were reasonably confident in their own design and implementation of assessment but still felt assessment approaches could be improved. Further, they did 'not feel confident at all' in relation to whole of program assessment practices which points to the fact that more thorough communication is needed.

The surveyed academics were also asked if they thought it was important to know what assessment students were doing in other courses, if knowing more about the assessment practices of other courses would enhance their course, if knowing more about the assessment practices of other courses would benefit their students' experience, and if it helps think about their own assessment practices for courses they were. Their responses (%) are documented in Table 5.

#	Featured statements	Yes	No
1	It is importance to know what assessment students are doing in other courses that run at the same time as mine.	100	0
2	Knowing more about the assessment practices of other courses in the program would enhance my course generally.	94.1	5.9
3	Knowing more about the assessment practices of other courses in the program would benefit my students' experience in my course.	88.2	11.8
4	I find the questions in this survey useful in thinking about my own assessment practices for courses in the Bachelor of Secondary Education program.	50	50

Table 5: Results of Responses to the Importance of Knowledge of Assessment Practices

Staff clearly felt it was important to know what students were expected to do in relation to assessment in other courses offered in the same semester. They also indicated that knowing about other assessment would enhance their own teaching as well as students' learning outcomes. Despite these views there was little evidence that sharing of assessment tasks, including due dates, occurred across the whole program.

Phase 3: Open Responses and follow up Interviews (RQ2 & RQ3)

Phase 3 explored the assessment design and practices of staff in greater depth. As such, a number of open responses were included in the survey as well as a follow up interviews with staff who consented. The interviews were semi-structured and informed by an appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1996) – asking staff what they knew was working well, and how they felt this could be improved. This approach allowed staff to be open to 'new potentials and possibilities' and be engaged in self- determined change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1996). Questions focused on whole of program assessment design and the concept of constructive alignment.

The data from this phase of the study were thematically analysed according to Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2013), as explained in the research design. These findings are outlined below.

Foundation Knowledge and Application: Understanding Current Practices and Skills

A common theme in Phase 3 was the fact that staff tended to operate in individual silos or within their disciplinary teams. The voices of the casual staff also showed that they were often not consulted or informed about whole of program practices.

> *We tend to operate in a subject-specific vacuum when it comes to course content and assessment.*
> (Academic staff member)
> *As a casual lecturer, one can feel at times a bit isolated in relation to the*

complete picture of the whole course. To have understanding of the assessment in every area of the course would be advantageous to seeing where individual subject assessments fit into the whole scheme. (Casual staff member)

Further, a number of staff commented about inconsistencies related to assessment practices within the program. For example, some staff reported that: assessment was made easier for students so that final course evaluations were positive; rubrics were not consistent; students' engagement was impeded by the amount of assessment particular when due at the same time.

A comprehensive review of all rubrics across all subjects is suggested to ensure that all rubrics are being formulated to enable clear and consistent differentiation of standards. (Casual staff member)

Some students have emailed to say they cannot attend tutorials as they just have too many assessment pieces to do/submit at the same time. If they were staggered, it may enhance attendance. Unfortunately, they don't seem to understand that attending tutorials will enhance their assessment process for that particular course, so they are seemingly becoming further 'stressed out' about it all. (Casual staff member)

This was further compounded with courses that included a professional experience where students were on campus for only nine weeks and in schools for the remaining six weeks.

Integration and Caring: Considering Whole of Program Approaches

Staff noted that they are interested in knowing about assessment practices in other courses but they felt there was not enough time to do so. They felt that knowing more about whole of program assessment practices would benefit themselves and the students.

I only really know what happens in other courses when I've taught into those courses or students tell me about the problems they're having with the assessment in those courses. (Academic staff member)

I can see that it would help in establishing links between different courses in terms of content and ensuring they're not just writing essays as assessment for the 4 years but in terms of 'spreading things out' I'm not a big fan. That's really up to students to get their act together, plan out their study and assignment time and ensure that things can be handed in on time. (Academic staff member)

It is important to understand the total assessment load of students as well as when the assessment is due. It would be nice to think assessment tasks could draw on content or skills from other courses. (Academic staff member)

Firstly, it would help students to leave with a better sense of an integrated approach to their teaching. Secondly, it would be great to be able to know that certain outcomes are covered in another course and so can be built on or extended rather than replicated. (Academic staff member)

These comments suggest the potential for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to occur especially in relation to staff knowing about what their colleagues are planning in terms of assessment. It also highlights the opportunity for providing more support to each other by working more collectively together across the whole of program–ensuring a caring approach to assessment design.

Human Dimensions: Being Aware of Internal and External Constraints

Human dimensions is a concept that highlights the significance of learning about oneself and others. In this study there appeared to be a lack of understanding from different perspectives due to down directives and expectations within the system. For example, academic staff commented on the fact that they are always mindful of the importance of receiving good course evaluations, particularly in relation to annual reporting processes and even promotion. They reported that when developing assessment, they felt the pressure to not make it too challenging for students. Further, one casual staff member highlighted the fact that if their course evaluations were not positive they were at risk of not being employed again.

> SETS [end of semester course evaluations] can have an adverse effect upon marker grading and standards as marker grading can be inflated as an unspoken trade-off to derive good SETs from students which facilitates a culture based more on client satisfaction than on professional ethical and academic standards. This is a very serious issue with implications for both the lowering of academic expectations and therefore academic standards within the University. Whilst SETs are linked to
> Academics' performance reviews and/or casual employment there is the potential for this problem to continue. (Casual staff member)

Concern was expressed about students submitting original work, with participants noting that a number of predatory companies were available to complete student assignments for minimal payment.

> There is some concern in some instances about reliability and validity of some test instruments in terms of student authorship i.e. students advise anecdotally that summative online tests are often done in groups rather than individually and that there are external contract assignment writing services that are readily available. (Casual staff member)

Staff also noted how many of the students were committed and attended classes regularly. This commitment was the reason why staff supported students as much as possible so that learning outcomes were positive.

Learning How to Learn: Developing Authentic Teaching and Learning Practices

Many of the staff noted the importance of linking theory to practice in education but also that students appreciated real-world authentic practices that replicated classroom practice.

Staff reported students felt these approaches would assist them during their professional experience and as beginning teachers.

> Students appreciate authentic tasks that represent a judicious mix of theoretical understandings that translate into authentic classroom best practice/applications... Most tasks are oriented to authentic classroom practice and offer opportunities for critical and creative thinking. Students prefer assignments that have authentic classroom connectivity and applications. (Casual staff member)
> So an assessment task aims to engage the student in demonstrating their understandings of the concepts addressed through their application of them in practice. (Academic staff member)
> The challenge is always to find simple tasks that capture the complexity of authentic practice. A task is simple when it is clearly articulated without the

> *need of long explanation about what the task is demanding of the student and why those demands are worth the effort necessary to complete the task.*
> (Academic staff member)

Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice

Effective assessment design and practices are clearly complex and take time to develop and enhance. This is particularly important when considering whole of program design. This study has shown that, despite staff largely operating either ontheir own or within small disciplinary teams, they wanted to know more about whole of program assessment practices.

Further, staff in this program noted they received limited professional development in relation to constructive alignment. Such lack of knowledge may mean that course learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment may not be entirely effective, nor in alignment. It was evident that there was limited communication across this program about other course assessment, due dates, and expectations for students. . We therefore recommend more information is made available to all staff across full degree programs in relation to…….. A multi-pronged approach, based on the Phases of this project could be implemented, as shown in Figure 3).
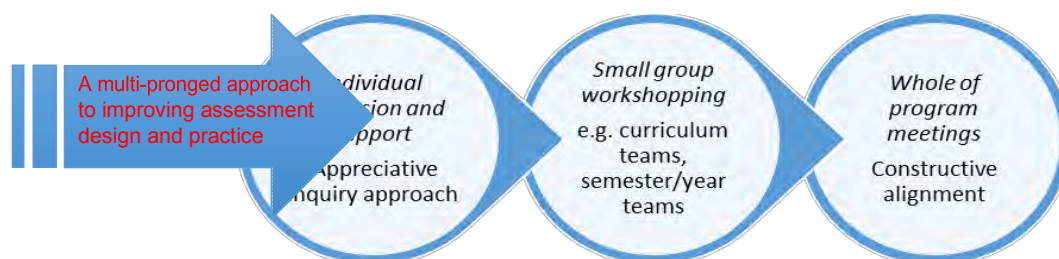

Figure 3: A multi-pronged approach to effective whole of program assessment design and practice

Findings showed that there is a need for academic staff, in administrative leadership positions, to meet with individual staff members and continue conversations via an appreciative inquiry approach, to identify what they know is going well and what areas they consider need enhancing in regards to assessment and constrictive alignment, at the level of course design. Secondly, it is recommended that leaders meet with academic and casual staff across disciplinary areas and teams, to ascertain and refine assessment practices. Finally, a range of workshops could be offered to staff across the whole program teaching team to provide quality professional learning opportunities around constructive alignment and assessment design in particular. Such an approach would ensure that enhanced learning and teaching will occur at various levels within ITE faculties through authentic and consistent methods to assessment. It could improve both student and staff satisfaction and engagement in assessment overall.

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