

Taking a Pass on Assessment Grades for a Career Focused Tour of the Middle East

Mat Hardy¹, Sally Totman¹

Abstract

The Middle East Study Tour (MEST) is a capstone elective unit that stands alone as a credit module towards an undergraduate degree. The tour has the dual purposes of exposing students to the Middle East region's political challenges and better illuminating potential career paths for life after university. But is one student's personal discovery (or their ability to express it in writing) more valuable than another's? Attaching a numerical grade to such endeavours would seem to support that idea. For this reason, the MEST uses an 'Ungraded Pass' approach to the assessments. That is, the students pass the assignments (and the module) by submitting their work, but without any score being awarded. This article explains the mechanisms the MEST uses for assessment and how this aligns with the goal of the program to expose students to the real world of political struggles and personal development. It utilises feedback from the participating students to provide a discussion on a program that has a slightly different focus to most of the existing study abroad literature.

Keywords:

Middle East, ungraded assessment, study tour, career development, personal reflection, specifications grading

Introduction

If two people undertake the same journey how can someone else say that one traveller's experience was 'better' than the other's? And in making that judgment, why base it upon an abstract task that may be quite unrelated to the trip and the extent of its impact on the individual? If these seem illogical practices, why might we grade one student's study abroad experience as having 15% more merit than a peer's? Have they displayed that

¹ DEAKIN UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

greater amount of learning? Or have they just managed to complete an assessment task slightly more in line with a rubric?

Such questions on the relationship of grading to learning outcomes are not only relevant to study abroad programs. They are fundamental debates within pedagogical scholarship and in the wider community that have been going on for decades. The question of assessment and how it supports or subverts learning outcomes has spawned thousands of academic works, well-staffed research institutes and weighty journals. This debate is particularly germane to the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), where unmeasurable skills in areas such as critical thinking are often emphasized as outcomes. Yet developing a lifelong ability to use a broad understanding of a system or theory to interpret new events and data is not necessarily demonstrable in traditional written assessment tasks, and the often minor comparisons made between students undertaking these will not always accurately (or fairly) indicate their real learning (Blackstone and Oldmixon 2019, Nilson 2016). Nor is there a great correlation between a resulting GPA and career success (Stanny and Nilson 2014, 3). However, in a competitive higher education market, measuring achievement is intrinsic to a system that also analyses outcomes, rankings, retention rates and return on investment in ever-increasing profundity. Students are also part of this insistence for quantification, either for their own sense of value or to demonstrate to potential employers their achievements relative to other candidates.

But what if those students have no idea about who their potential employers might be? Or even what industry they may work in?

Finding job pathways on the road

The Middle East Study Tour (MEST) is an elective unit that may be counted towards an undergraduate major in Middle East Studies (MES) at Deakin University, Australia. The core modules of the major examine the history and politics of the region, with the final unit examining the Arab-Israeli conflict in depth. This major is generally taken by students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of International Studies degree. It is common for these students to be pursuing an additional major in a related field, such as International Relations or Politics and Policy Studies. Some students will also take a minor in MES from other degree pathways, such as Education or Journalism.

At the point when they undertake the capstone module of the course, these MES majors will be progressing into the final stretch of their undergraduate degrees.¹ This is the obvious stage where conversations are occurring, often with a great deal of trepidation, surrounding life after university. For HASS students, decisions about what careers to pursue may not be as clear cut as those graduating with more vocational qualifications targeted at specific sectors (e.g., Nursing or Teaching or Architecture). After all, what does expertise in Middle Eastern Politics or International Relations qualify you for? In reality, the potential pathways are limitless, which is both an encouraging but dauntingly indistinct vision of the future. For those students who have invested time and passion in MES, their assumptions about careers are often grounded in an idea that they will have 'something to

¹ The exact extent of their total progress will vary as the university allows a great deal of flexibility for students in programming the pace and sequence of their studies. It is technically possible for someone to enrol in the MES capstone unit as early as the second half of their first year of study, though this is discouraged by the academic staff involved. Most students though will complete this final module at the end of their second or third year of full time study. Those in double degrees (e.g., B. Arts/Law) may be in their fourth or fifth year.

do with politics'. What this actually might consist of tends to coalesce around three main categories:

- 1) Something to do with refugees/human rights/humanitarian action ("I want to help people.")
- 2) Something to do with foreign policy ("I want to be a diplomat or work at the UN.")
- 3) Something to do with defence/intelligence/security ("I want to be a spy or fight terrorism.")

These descriptions are not intended to be facetious. They are accurate (if amalgamated) renderings of how MES students tended to express future ideas about their career plans in conversations with teaching staff. Typically, when students are asked to elaborate on their chosen intention, they have little more to offer than one of the above generic statements. Questions as to *why* they want to work with refugees or what type of role or agency in the UN system they might aim for were not convincingly answered. Even the impressions of what such jobs involved were fundamentally naïve or romanticised. For example, the notion of what working with refugees would entail saw students imagining themselves handing out food and blankets to grateful mobs.² Or that working for the UN would result in rapidly changing the world for the better with a commonsense idea and a rousing speech to world leaders.

It therefore seemed to the MES lecturers that despite expressing anxiety about their career prospects, the majority of students had done very little practical research on their options. They had scant idea on how to pursue these paths and even less understanding of what actual roles they might be performing. They had almost certainly never interacted with a practitioner in any of these professions. This was of concern to the faculty members, who felt that students were leaving their undergraduate years ill-prepared for the employment market, and this despite the university placing great marketing emphasis on producing 'job ready' graduates.

The university does offer the chance to undertake some form of Work Integrated Learning, typically in the form of internships, and these either for academic credit or just as résumé boosters. In the career areas noted above though there is little for students to pursue. Outside of 'voluntourism' programs of dubious merit, one or two highly competitive political internship programs are all that really correlate. There is provision for students to organise their own internships with any organisation they choose, but this provides three obstacles. Firstly, students who already do not know much about the industries they are dreaming of working in will have a correspondingly poor understanding of who they should contact to arrange this experience. Secondly, there are discouragingly onerous administrative and reporting requirements for both the student and their chosen organisation in establishing that a placement is of sufficient academic merit. Finally, the chance to obtain *meaningful* work experience or even network with high-

² The reality is that NGOs rarely use Western staff for such frontline work since it is cheaper, less risky, and more economically and culturally beneficial for local employees to undertake these roles. Although foreigners with specific medical, engineering or security skills may be utilised, those with HASS qualifications are far more likely to be working in a back office writing up reports and other collateral to encourage donors or overseeing higher levels of project management. Moreover, except in initial crisis response, refugee care has long ago moved on from doling out food parcels and tents. Longer term assistance of displaced people now often involves cash support through debit cards, smartphone transactions and other forms of digital management.

level staff in areas such as foreign affairs or frontline humanitarian work is remote for an undergraduate.

In addition to these concerns over employment options the MES teaching staff had another challenge that was common to many HASS programs: how to bring the curriculum content to life for the students and then assess it in a complementary manner. In the case of the MES capstone unit on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the deep dilemmas, diverging narratives and reality of life on the ground for those involved are all very difficult to convey to students sitting on the other side of the world in a very safe environment. Even aspects such as physical distance can prove challenging for students who live in a continental-sized island like Australia, where hard borders only occur at airports. That entirely different worlds and security regimes could exist a few hundred metres apart is mind-boggling. This problem of transmitting this content is also accompanied by the challenge of assessing it. The MES program makes significant use of online role-play simulations to impart some of the political dimensions and conundrums for regional stakeholders. This exercise is graded largely on the quality of the role-playing exhibited by the participants; they gain higher scores for acting in character rather than unrealistic co-operation. Spending two weeks playing the Prime Minister of Israel or the Chairman of Hamas gives a much greater insight into the complexities of peace-making and the difficulties of balancing domestic, regional, and international stresses.³ Nevertheless, this is still a limited conceptual undertaking, no matter how well researched the student is in their role.

In order to address these dual problems of bolstering career readiness and providing a more nuanced perspective of the MES subject material, the idea of a study tour to the Middle East was developed in 2014. From the outset the tour was designed to act as a bridge between worlds. Not just the geographical divides of distance and states but also those between people: that is, the Australian students and those living within the political systems they studied. Most importantly, the tour also aims to bridge the gaps between university and career and, finally, the space between assessment and lifelong learning. The first tour was run in 2015 and versions have occurred annually since then.⁴ A total of around 125 students have participated in these tours over the years.

The tour contributes credit towards the MES major and a student's undergraduate degree. It was designed for those who had already completed the academic components of the major and desired the opportunity to take their learning further and potentially develop some vocational clarity through a study abroad experience (Kronholz and Osbor 2016, Franklin 2010). It is not a compulsory component, nor is the tour open to undergraduate students who have not previously fulfilled the academic modules of the major. As a form of 'short-term study abroad' program, the MEST seeks to meld classroom studies with those vague post-university ambitions to generate an experiential learning opportunity. Unlike more defined internship type experiences for specific careers or skillsets, the MEST is more about showcasing *potential* options as well as personal revelations. The assessments seek to support that goal.

It should be noted that whilst a great deal of research and debate occurs on the relationship between 'cultural competence' and short-term study abroad programs (Engle 2013, Wong 2015, Makara and Canon 2019, Engelking 2018) building these generic skills is

³ For a description of the Middle East Politics Simulation used in this major see (Hardy and Totman 2017, 2020).

⁴ In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic saw the MEST cancelled for that year.

not a primary objective of the MEST. Such outcomes are desirable and will inevitably ensue (particularly a greater level of comfort about being in the region) but such soft skills are taken as a given result of international travel.⁵ However, students' perceptions of their own personal development in this area could form part of their assessment response if they choose.

What happens on tour?

The itinerary of the tour was designed to provide professional and personal interactions with the types of organisations and sectors that students aspired to working in. The approach was therefore to treat the MEST as a 'business trip' and add sight-seeing elements on to that, rather than the other way around. Since the Arab-Israeli dilemma is central to the MEST major, an emphasis on interacting with stakeholders in that matter was crucial, as was contact with Australian and foreign diplomats, since such service was an aspiration for many MEST participants.

A compulsory pre-departure briefing is held for all participants around three weeks before we leave Australia. This not only covers the itinerary, but also behavioural expectations, including some of those work-ready skills that they will need to practice on the tour. For example, meeting etiquette, personal appearance standards and how to phrase questions diplomatically. During the pre-departure briefing and in other early conversations with the tour participants, the academic staff also stress the importance of non-scheduled conversations, be they with the people on the arranged itinerary or others they encounter. The students are encouraged to speak with anyone willing, whether it be in a market, a café, or a tourist site. Students who avail themselves of these opportunities often report rich and exciting conversations that place a very human perspective on their understanding of the region.

The MEST itinerary changes every year in terms of locations and organisations visited. These changes occur for varying reasons: security, budget and the willingness and capability of organisations to host a student visit. Jordan has been central to the various iterations of the tour, figuring in four of the five versions to date. It also allows for some interaction with stakeholders in the Israel-Palestine dilemma at times when security issues have prevented tours to Israel and the Palestinian Territories proper. The itinerary of the most recent tour (November/December 2019) is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Indicative MEST itinerary

Day	Activity	Learning Rationale
1	Arrive Amman, Jordan. Lunch at a local restaurant Walking tour of old Amman.	Begin to acclimatise students and get them to learn their way around the neighbourhood we are staying in.
2	Visit to Save the Children head office for a security and child protection induction followed by a visit to two of their Syrian refugee employment training schemes in Zarqa.	Meeting NGO staff, seeing a field program in action and talking with Syrian refugees.

⁵ There is no attempt by the accompanying faculty to 'spoon feed' the students on day-to-day activities such as navigating, shopping, finding places to eat, language issues and so forth. They are expected to work these things out for themselves and feeling 'out of their element' is to be normalized, not avoided.

3	All day visit to the Zaatari refugee camp near the Jordan-Syrian border, the world's largest camp for Syrian refugees. Visit two programs (leadership in sport and early childhood education).	As above.
4	<p>Morning: Visit to the Palestinian National Council mission in Amman for presentation and Q&A session with their delegates.</p> <p>Afternoon: Visit to the Australian embassy in Amman for a briefing from the Ambassador. Evening function with several embassy staff.</p>	<p>Hear from one side of the Israel-Palestine debate and gain an understanding of Palestinian political representation.</p> <p>Hear about Australian-Jordanian relations. Discussion on the life of diplomatic staff and what the career entails. Individual networking opportunities.</p>
5	<p>Morning: Sightseeing at Mt Nebo, Dead Sea, Madaba.</p> <p>Afternoon: Visit to a program (medical and educational centres) funded by the Australian government for Syrian refugees (run by Caritas).</p>	<p>Tourism. Students may also observe first-hand the dramatic shrinking of the Dead Sea and the impacts that industry and agriculture have on the region. Also, Madaba presents life as a Christian community in an Arab state.</p> <p>Meeting NGO staff, seeing an Australian-funded field program in action and talking with Syrian refugees.</p>
6	<p>Morning: Visit to the Israeli embassy in Amman for a briefing on the role of the mission and a Q&A session with their Deputy Chief of Mission.</p> <p>Afternoon: Visit to a Palestinian refugee camp administered by UNRWA. Tour of the medical clinic that provides services to refugees and a girls' primary school. Presentations and Q&A with UNRWA staff.</p>	<p>Hear from another side of the Israel-Palestine dilemma and network with diplomats.</p> <p>Hear from another stakeholder in this debate. See and hear how UNRWA provides services under their mandate, including the financial constraints they operate within. The chance to meet and network with UN staff.</p>
7	<p>Drive to Petra.</p> <p>Cooking class for local dishes.</p>	The cooking class is to give students some experience of the way that local cuisine is prepared and the staple ingredients.
8	Petra	As well as the scenic beauty of the ruins of Petra students gain an appreciation of the importance of tourism to the Jordanian economy and the impacts of masses of visitors. Some discussion of the treatment of animals and the cultural relativisms we have around this inevitably ensues.
9	Drive to Wadi Rum and tour of the desert park.	Largely a fun visit but supported by historical discussion of the area's importance to the Arab Revolt.
10	<p>Camel ride to watch the sunrise</p> <p>Depart for return to Amman via Kerak castle</p>	A fun activity before a long transit day. Kerak castle visit illustrates the Crusader era.

11	Depart Amman for Jerusalem Walking tour of Jerusalem's Old City	Experience the security around border crossings and the various security measures in place around Palestinian and Israeli population areas. See the importance of the Old City to Jews, Muslims, and Christians.
12	Morning visit to the Temple Mount compound. Free day of wandering in Jerusalem. Evening visit to the King David Hotel.	Tourism though with an emphasis on the overlapping historical periods, from the Kingdom of David through to the British Mandate.
13	Morning: Visit to Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Afternoon: Visit to Bethlehem including Bethlehem University. Return to Amman	Appreciate the magnitude of the Holocaust and the impetus that it gave to the foundation of Israel. See life in a Palestinian town and speak to fellow students about what their lives are like under Israeli security control.
14	Free day in Amman	
15	Morning: Visit to the Roman ruins in Jerash. Evening: Depart Amman for Dubai	Some understanding of pre-Islamic settlement of the region and the longevity of human civilisation there.
16	Cultural and tourism activities in Dubai.	
17	Morning: Visit to the Australian embassy in Abu Dhabi Afternoon: Visit to New York University Abu Dhabi	Hear about Australian-UAE relations. Discussion on the life of diplomatic staff and what the career entails. Individual networking opportunities. Understand the 'business' of education and its value in public diplomacy. Hear from academic staff on regional issues.
18	Morning: Tour of a mosque Afternoon: Free time Evening: Depart UAE for Australia	See and understand Islamic prayer rituals and place that religion holds in daily life.

Such an itinerary provides many opportunities to interact with industry practitioners and expose the students to the day-to-day life of the people working in these sectors. Each meeting generally takes the form of a presentation by the hosts, followed by a Q&A session from the students. The questions in this case are unstructured and may be follow-ups from the presentation, additional lines of enquiry or, as frequently happens, questions surrounding how to pursue a career in that organisation. Sometimes these sessions may involve break-out groups, with individuals speaking with smaller numbers of students. For example, at the Australian embassy in Amman, around five diplomatic staff were mingling with the students after the formal presentation and explaining the different roles and programs they were responsible for. Students will often exchange contact details with those they speak with and follow up leads for internships or other opportunities. Naturally, some students are bolder and more capable at networking than others. However, it is notable that even the more timid quickly become inspired by the examples of their peers and by the end of the tour will be making their own advances.

Prior to each session the students are briefed by the accompanying academic staff on things they might want to ask or observations they might make. For example, it is often

more informative to note what a diplomat *does not* say than what they do say. Or how they might turn a question onto another track or what seemingly mild language they might use that actually expresses deep disapproval! Around three de-brief sessions will also be held during the trip at convenient times so that students have time to raise questions or observations with each other and the accompanying staff about anything they want to discuss.

Why assess this?

As the MEST contributes credit towards an academic degree it is subject to university policies and the oversight of Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) that regulates education providers and their course offerings. Students may also fund their costs for the tour as part of their overall federal student loan. All of these factors require that there be an assessable component to the module; it cannot just be a holiday. Since university policy dictates that no single piece of assessment can represent greater than 60% of any module's total grade, this means there needs to be a minimum of two assessment tasks for the MEST.

These assessments are then also subject to a university quality assurance process and must pass through a Teaching and Learning Committee review. The purpose of this is to ensure that both the tour and its assessments are linked with Deakin University's suite of Graduate Learning Outcomes (GLOs). Establishing course learning outcomes (where a 'course' is a Bachelor of Arts, for example) and linking all modules and assessments to them is also requirement to comply with TEQSA standards. Each module (or unit) of a degree must demonstrate how it aligns with these goals through providing Unit Learning Outcomes (ULOs) and each piece of assessment needs to be checked against these. (Note that not every unit or assessment needs to address every outcome. It is the overall *course* that must demonstrate that it provides the full complement over the years.)

In designing a course, the university requires the following GLOs be spoken to:

Table 2. Institutional Graduate Learning Outcomes

GLO1	Discipline knowledge and capabilities: appropriate to the level of study related to a discipline or profession
GLO2	Communication: using oral, written, and interpersonal communication to inform, motivate and effect change
GLO3	Digital literacy: using technologies to find, use and disseminate information
GLO4	Critical thinking: evaluating information using critical and analytical thinking and judgment
GLO5	Problem solving: creating solutions to authentic (real world and ill-defined) problems
GLO6	Self-management: working and learning independently, and taking responsibility for personal actions
GLO7	Teamwork: working and learning with others from different disciplines and backgrounds
GLO8	Global citizenship: engaging ethically and productively in the professional context and with diverse communities and cultures in a global context

The pedagogical rationale for the MEST and the component assessments need then to be mapped against the GLOs. This provides the following set of ULOs for the tour:

Table 3. Unit Learning Outcomes for the MEST

Unit Learning Outcome (ULO)	Related to Graduate Learning Outcomes (GLO)
Demonstrate improved levels of intercultural understanding;	2,4,8
Reflect upon their cultural biases and media- driven preconceptions of the people of Israel and the Palestinian Territories;	4
Be able to extend their understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict based upon their own judgements and their personal interactions with those involved;	2,4,8
Understand the competing narratives and claims of all parties to the conflict and how the past informs current perceptions of the conflict;	1,4,5
Develop a greater empathy for the residents of the region	1,2,8
Manage their personal needs and maintenance across a demanding schedule and as part of a team representing the university. Be confident about returning to the region in the future as independent travellers in the context of lifelong learning and cultural exploration.	6,7,8

What are the assessments?

With the emphasis of the MEST being on personal growth, developing career awareness and building familiarity with the region, the assessment regime was always intended to represent an individual journey rather than a regurgitation of academic material. For this reason, the two pieces of assessment require students to articulate their progress in these developing thoughts. A 'before and after' approach was therefore chosen. The parameters and instructions for these are provided below.

Assessment Task 1: Pre-departure report (1500 words)

(Due one week before departure.)

Write a 1,500 word personal reflection on what you are expecting from the study tour.

This *could* include some of the following prompts, but please feel free to explore other ideas.

- Exploration of what you are hoping to get out of the experience.
- What things you are most interested/excited about seeing and doing.
- What biases you might be bringing in your consideration of this region.
- What things you might be anxious about.
- Any career ambitions you might have that could be relevant to the activities on this trip.
- What mental images and pre-conceptions you have about the states we will be visiting.
- Any reading of books, articles, or media you might have consumed in preparation.

Assessment Task 2: Reflective report (2500 words)

(Due about a month after return.⁶)

During the tour keep a running journal of your experiences. This need not be a daily record, though it would be advisable to make notes on a regular basis. This journal may include:

- Observations
- Surprises
- Self-reflection
- Any developments or changes in your impressions and preconceptions
- Things you would like to find out further information on

⁶ The exact submission deadline will depend on the end of year holiday dates relative to the tour's return day. Each year some students will also elect to continue personal travel at the conclusion of the tour and the lecturers will work with them to organise an extension.

When we return, use this journal to compile a 2,500 word reflective report and describe how your impressions of the region and its conflict have (or have not) changed as a result. Make reference to your first assignment in doing this.

Here are some suggestions of things you may like to explore in your report, though please feel free to follow whatever trains of thought you wish:

- What has changed or stayed the same in your thinking about the region?
- Were your preconceptions and anxieties valid?
- What were the best, worst, most surprising, most unexpected occurrences on the trip?
- Have any career ambitions arisen or been altered by the experiences on this trip?
- Did cultural relativism play a role in your experiences and perceptions?
- Any ambitions for further reading, research or travel that have occurred as a result?
- Whether you thought the experience was a worthwhile aspect of your studies generally and MES major specifically.

You do not need to include traditional academic sources in either assignment. However, if you do opt to use quotes, statistics, and material from elsewhere, these must be appropriately acknowledged and referenced.

The assignments allow for a cycle of reflective learning. Kolb (1984) describes this circle of learning as a sequence of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and then active experimentation, which generates a further concrete experience to be reflected upon. In these assignments' students start with their current experience, which really equates to what they have learned in class about the region and those vague and limited ideas about their future. They then need to reflect upon this starting point prior to the tour: where do they stand and what goals and expectations can they conceptualise? These thoughts and ambitions are then put to the test of active experimentation when they are on the tour, which then leads to their concrete experience. Did the things they imagined occur? Did their experience with diplomats or refugees accord with their preconceptions? Did their career dreams solidify or change? Ultimately, the final assessment asks them to reflect again and move on to the next step of conceiving their future.

Taking out the numbers

With the importance placed on the developing ideas of self and career stemming from this tour the academic staff were, from the outset, uncomfortable with the idea of valuing one student's evolution over another's through a numerical score. Each of them would have different experiences, different revelations, and different personal outcomes. They would also have different rates at which these discoveries may occur to them or bear fruit, if at all. Moreover, there were different levels of academic and writing ability within each cohort, meaning that students would have varying powers to articulate their thoughts. This might lead to the paradox of a talented student, who could quickly conjure a perfect written response that 'ticked all the boxes', being better rewarded than an average student who struggled more to compose their thoughts, even though these realisations and observations may have actually been more personally sincere and ultimately life-changing.

Having seen other study tour and internship offerings with academic type assessments clumsily grafted on to non-academic activities, the tour leaders wanted to find a way of avoiding the usual grading system. A further concern in this regard was the feeling that students were going to some degree of personal financial cost and effort in electing to come on the trip; in the region of \$5,000 (US), not including any extra spending money. Many participants were taking loans or working extra jobs to pay for their place. They

would then also be suffering a loss of income whilst they were on the trip. Would it then be fair to open the potential to 'fail' the tour through poor writing? Or give them the impression that their money had not been as well spent as another student who had provided a better piece of assessment composition a month later?

However, as it was an assessable component of a university degree, the MEST was still required to provide a final grade.

This dilemma was solved by using a non-numerical grading outcome that was allowed for in university policy. Called an Ungraded Pass (UP), this grade allowed for a module to be shown as completed but with no numerical score attached.⁷ No numbers also meant that the outcome would not form part of the student's GPA. This UP grade was not commonly used in the university except for in mandatory compliance type modules, for example, laboratory safety procedures or academic integrity awareness. These were typically 'zero credit point' modules; ones that had to be completed by students but did not contribute towards degree credit. The use of the UP for a study tour with written assessment items was unusual, though not expressly forbidden. Only one other credit module among thousands at the university made use of the UP and this was in a case where the final qualification mandated a certain number of hours of professional placement outside of the university's control. There was a lot of discussion generated by this UP concept during the approval process for the MEST, with some resistance from stakeholders who saw traditional academic grading as the only proper means of assessing any activity. However, the pedagogical rationale was ultimately deemed sound and the arrangement ratified.

With the award of UP available for the MEST this meant that the individual assessment items also did not have to be scored. As long as a student came on the tour and both items were submitted, the module would be 'passed'.⁸ Feedback on the assessments was still provided, in much the same way as it would be for a regular essay or report. The nature of this feedback was formative and intended to assist with the next cycle of reflection and place a focus on the future. For example, the feedback might entail asking students to consider further questions: 'Why do you think you felt that way?', 'How could you go about making this ambition happen?', 'Have you considered transferring to a different degree?', 'Is it specifically refugees you are interested in working with or are there other areas of humanitarian focus that might also be considered?'

Removing numerical scores from assessment grading is not a new concept and there has been significant discussion in pedagogical literature at all levels of education as to the tensions between what students are actually learning versus what is being benchmarked, how this is being done and *why* it is being done (Guskey and Bailey 2001). The freedom granted to individual faculty to determine their own grading approaches also makes for great variation across courses and discipline areas (Lipnevich et al. 2020). Whilst students and teachers may see grades as a means of tracking progress (or stimulating it), grades are also used by internal divisions within a university to measure various performance parameters and then may also be used to demonstrate the 'success' of the institution, either as a marketing strategy and/or to comply with requirements around standards reporting. In these latter functions, the purpose of grading become far removed from an individual

⁷ In some geographies and institutions this might be known as a Pass/Fail or Credit/No Credit grade.

⁸ Failure to submit one of the items or substantial flouting of the instructions would result in an Ungraded Fail. No student has ever necessitated this grade being awarded.

student's learning journey. Grades (and the competition around them) are also noted as a source of anxiety and stress for students and not intrinsically motivating (Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang 2018).

The concept of Standards Based Grading (SBG) is an approach to taking the numbers away from grading. It seeks to emphasize broader, student-directed learning, as opposed to the teacher leading the students through a series of criteria checkpoints that take them towards a specific score (O'Connor 2017). Whilst much of the scholarly interest in this area has so far revolved around secondary schooling, applying the practice to higher education settings has been less frequent, perhaps because the practicalities are more challenging. However there are some institutions that use SBG throughout their degree offerings.⁹ Whilst traditional grading and SBG both use a variety of assessments, a curriculum and research-based practices, there is less tendency in SBG to incorporate 'non-achievement factors', such as attendance, lateness or the adding of statistical points through gaming of rubrics or 'extra credit' (O'Connor 2017).

The MEST's UP grade and the assessments within could therefore be viewed as an SBG approach, albeit one where the 'standards' are around personal growth and career awareness rather than demonstrating curriculum knowledge. The ULOs described above do form something of a framework for these standards, though to what extent someone has increased their knowledge of the Arab-Israel conflict during the tour is not measurable, nor is such a quantification sought.

The pass/fail assessment items are also similar to the concept of 'Specifications Grading' detailed by Stanny and Nilson (2014). Here, a simple satisfactory/unsatisfactory rating is given to each piece of assessment in a 'bundle' of tasks. The difference with this and the MEST system is that Specifications Grading then awards an overall (and traditionally ranked) grade for the entire module.

The assessment arrangements for the tour therefore sit within some of the broader pedagogical discussions on grading in higher education. Further to this theoretical basis, the regime also seems to serve the practical purpose of inducing reflection upon the tour and the individual's developing aspirations. Student response to both the tasks and the Ungraded Pass arrangement has been extremely positive and is discussed below.

The pre-tour assessment

In the first task, students will often focus on their worries about the trip. These fears are not generally concerned with matters of safety and security, but rather aspects of cultural dissonance.¹⁰ A commonly expressed anxiety is that the student will unintentionally offend someone in the Middle East through some act of word, gesture, clothing choice or behaviour. It is difficult to quantify here just how often this unease is stated, but among every cohort it would occur in the majority of pre-departure reports. A related cultural concern is more often articulated by female students who are worried that they may be confronted with sexist or objectifying attention from Middle Eastern males and/or be challenged by witnessing such chauvinistic behaviour directed towards local

⁹ Alverno College, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, uses non-numerical grades and feedback to measure students against eight "core abilities" in all their subjects (Allen 2016). These eight targets are strikingly congruent to the Graduate Learning Outcomes for Deakin University described above, which themselves are quite representative of the goals expressed by many institutions.

¹⁰ Matters of personal safety and security are much more the concerns of the students' families.

women. The moral dilemma in this latter case being whether to intervene, feel personally upset, try to understand their own cultural biases, or some combination of these.

The feedback provided for these sorts of remarks is aimed at easing the trepidation. This might involve pointing out that people are generally forgiving of others' mistakes if committed out of ignorance, but also that Middle Easterners are much more accustomed to the ways of foreigners than vice versa. In regard to the concerns over unwanted attention, the feedback would explain that yes, a group of foreign university students walking together in downtown Amman will attract notice, though not just from males. But it is clarified that in the destinations we visit this attention almost never gets sinister or pushy, certainly not in comparison to other locations in the Middle East where tourists are much more abundant.

In terms of the pre-departure reflections on the vocational aspects of the itinerary, a great deal of the commentary is relatively inward looking and ego-centric. It tends to concentrate on what the students think might be distressing or worrying for them. For example, the inclusion of the visit to the Zaatari refugee camp in 2019 generated a lot of angst for participants. There were many comments about how students expected to be 'confronted' by the visit, that this might then have adverse effects on their personal anxiety levels or somehow cause them undue distress. Some of the more mature reflected on whether the interactions with refugees were voyeuristic or exploitative. The feedback in these cases is aimed at gently reminding the students that their personal feelings of discomfort or inconvenience are as nothing to the circumstances of those refugees we will encounter. It is also pointed out that the purpose of the visit is for them to gain greater awareness of what a refugee crisis response entails, what the human face of it looks like, and that for those of them who are interested in a career in the sector, this visit could be the catalyst for them using their position of privilege for a greater good.¹¹

Expressions of career interest are a third category of comments in the pre-departure reports. Students will express excitement about the chance of visiting an embassy or an NGO and getting the chance to meet those who work there. Those who wish to work in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) will face an extremely competitive and lengthy selection process to attain a position there, so they are motivated by the idea that these encounters may give them some advantage, or at least a better understanding of what the career really entails. Feedback in this case centres around encouraging students to make the most of the meeting opportunities, suggest questions that might be asked or resources that could be investigated.

A final common category of pre-departure interest is directed towards the varying tourist sites on the itinerary. Enthusiasm about visiting places such as Petra, Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is understandable, though these ambitions do not really necessitate great scrutiny or feedback and are of limited interest to the purpose of this article. It is however surprising to the academic staff how early on in life one can have already determined a 'bucket list'!

Throughout all of this pre-departure reflection a prevailing point made in the feedback is that the student should take care to revisit their thoughts in light of their actual experiences on the tour when they come to do the final assessment item. This links the

¹¹ Students are warned before and during the trip that photographing the refugees and minors we visit is not permitted, especially as a way of boosting one's social media status.

formative learning cycle and underscores the message that the student needs to evaluate their own progression in thinking.

Post-tour assignment

The experiences of students on the tour will be many and varied. Whilst everyone will have that common itinerary, what they take from it will obviously differ. Additionally, students will have a whole gamut of incidents and random encounters of their own, generated by them moving about the places we stay at and the people they interact with. Sometimes students may follow up a formal visit with a social outing, for example, arranging to meet fellow university students for dinner. These spontaneous conversations with refugees, retail workers, government employees, UN personnel, expatriates, and many other people from all walks of life are often the most exciting for students.

Responses to the planned meetings will also be varied. Some will interest individual students more, and indeed, some presenters or sessions will be more engaging or exciting than others. The post-tour assessment seeks to draw out and blend all of these formal and informal experiences as valid sources of reflection so that students can concentrate on those aspects they feel were most crucial to them. The resulting assessment pieces will therefore cover all manner of ideas and narratives, from profound analysis of the politics of the region to light-hearted tales about getting lost or some apparently life-changing food discovery. For the purposes of this article the focus will remain on the link between the pedagogic and vocational intentions of the MEST and how they are expressed in the final piece of writing, particularly with a view to the pursuit of future professional callings.

The post-tour assessments show that whilst some students will find that their career ambitions are affirmed, others will be very disappointed by what they are presented with and find their dreams have been, if not crushed, at least dampened, or diverted. This is particularly the case with those who were interested in diplomatic careers; an aspiration that they might have really been basing on popular culture representations of foreign service. Discovering that the job of an ambassador or embassy staffer can be quite bureaucratic and mundane is often a revelation for students, who might have expected a more glamorous lifestyle. The diplomats we have visited on the various tours have also been quite candid in letting students know that the advice they send back to their government, no matter how expertly informed, is not always followed and may be ignored for political reasons. This is something of a shock for many participants, who would have assumed that the sort of regional expertise they themselves are developing would go unquestioned. Likewise, the vagaries of where someone can be assigned and to what role can be a surprise for the students, who are naturally more interested in working in some countries than others! Finally, the cost involved in terms of family life and dislocation from home can seem a disincentive. As an example of how the tour develops these thoughts, one student describes the evolution of their thoughts and how the tour pushed them to seek further information regarding a government career:

In my pre-departure report I noted that visiting the Australian embassies in the Middle East and speaking to staff about their roles was something I particularly looked forward to as I potentially wanted to pursue a career with DFAT. Although I have not completely ruled out the idea of working for DFAT, the study tour ...has made me think how I would go in role where I had to promote policies, that potentially affect thousands of people, that I do not agree with. Since coming back to Australia I have spoken to a couple of people I know who work and have worked in high level positions

in Canberra and they agree that it can be really hard to promote a policy you do not believe is beneficial.

(Student from 2019 tour.)

These realisations are temporarily distressing for those who had their ambitions set in this direction. However, such discoveries are also a very valid outcome in the context of the MEST, which is primarily aimed at giving participants a better idea of their future path. Given the arduous undertaking involved in attempting entry to a diplomatic career, these quick eye-openers can represent a significant saving in future time and emotion. In some cases, this may push the students to consider totally different routes or perhaps a more oblique change of course. For example, more than one student has expressed that whilst they are no longer interested in a foreign service career, they were going to focus on looking for jobs as researchers or advisers in the same broad area. The meetings at the embassies also makes students aware of other government agencies that they had not previously known of, particularly those related to security and intelligence.

This study tour was so helpful as we not only talked about different pathways and organizations that I hadn't heard about e.g. The Office of National Assessments, but we also discussed amongst the group our different ambitions and preparations for our futures...I came home with a much clearer picture in mind of my future and have already begun researching internships and prospective future employers.

(Student from 2017 Tour ¹²)

Those students who were previously considering careers in the NGO sector seem less likely to be dissuaded or diverted by their professional meetings on the MEST. The activities on the itinerary generally affirm their direction, though there may be some 'reality check' in terms of what their potential role in such organisations might be or where they can add value. Those who imagined themselves feeding the masses or driving vital medical supplies through war-torn territory are swiftly disabused of such ideas. The keenest MEST participants make good use of their encounters with NGO personnel to gain insight into potential jobs opportunities, internship placements or contacts back in Australia so that they can further their ambitions.

My (government) career aspirations I held before the tour remain the same today. However, the tour opened my eyes to avenues (within NGOs) I would seriously pursue if my plan A does not pan out - which I never even wanted to consider as an option before the tour. The tour cured my tunnel vision while alleviating some pressure of all the hoops I have to jump through for a government career.

(Student from 2019 Tour)

Another potential outcome for students reported in the assessments is to find a career direction that they had not previously considered. In two or three cases this has seen students pursue post-graduate studies in Law or transfer their undergraduate degree to include Law. These decisions follow discoveries on the tour regarding the way that those with legal qualifications can assist in addressing humanitarian challenges and refugee movements. Somewhat more radical are the number of students who have decided to pursue early childhood or primary school teaching qualifications after the tour, generated

¹² This student did indeed go on to receive multiple job offers in the new pathways she had discovered on the tour.

by 'Road to Damascus' moments when visiting refugee schools and interacting with the children and teachers there.

Throughout the study tour, particularly when we interacted with children, I began to consider teaching as a path I could follow both within Australia and on an international scale... A moment on the study tour that really stood out for me and made me consider teaching as a possible career option was the discussion, we had with the girls at the Palestinian school in Amman... they were so passionate and inspired about their goals and it also clarified for me what I was to pursue and achieve in my life. I know I am incredibly lucky to be a native English speaker and the trip made me realise how valuable English can be in both the Middle East and the wider international context, and it ultimately changed my career ambitions to something I was not even considering before.

(Student from 2019 tour.)

The Study tour to the Middle East had a much larger effect on my career aspirations than I thought it would. Before going on the trip, it was drawing close to applications being open for my dream graduate positions in DFAT and ASIS¹³... The trip to UNRWA and walking through the primary school seeing how happy the kids were to be sitting in a small, overfilled classroom really made me see how much I would love to be able to teach kids someday... I have loved learning about international studies and particularly the Middle East ... and I'm excited to be able to take that with me into a Masters of Teaching.

(Student from 2019 tour.)

The ideas expressed in the post-tour assessments seems to fulfil that component of the learning cycle that asks learners to reflect upon their concrete experience. The formative assessment process provides opportunities for them to conceptualise plans for their futures, or at least provide some more focussed directions as to what they may or may not like to pursue. Such outcomes are exactly what the design of the MEST and its assessment were intended to achieve. The instructor feedback provided on these assessments supports these goals, generally affirming students' discoveries and pointing them towards potential routes for supporting their ambitions, (i.e., organisations, contacts, advice on further study) as well as posing rhetorical questions about why they felt certain ways or whether they had considered a particular alternative course of action.

Student response to the assessment

Student response to the assessment tasks and their ungraded nature has been largely positive. It is perhaps unsurprising that students would be supportive of work tasks that removed the pressure of grading, though beyond that mercenary interest they also indicate that they value the opportunity to explore their reflections without fear of hierarchical judgment. The convenors of the tour know this is the case because all participants are invited to participate in anonymous feedback surveys after each tour. These surveys offer the chance to comment anonymously on a number of aspects of the MEST, including the assessments. Some of the comments from the 2019 version on the value of the assessments include:

¹³ The Australian Security Intelligence Service, comparable to the CIA or MI6.

- *The assessment provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon my strengths and weakness in both a personal and professional capacity, which ultimately made me reconsider my career objectives.*
- *Having a structured opportunity to reflect and meditate on my career goals was definitely helpful in deciding if I really wanted to pursue a career focused on the Middle East. I found it incredibly valuable as a student to look over my trip journal during the post tour assessment and re-evaluate my expectations of what a career in the Middle East would look like.*
- *With the one after the study tour in particular, it allowed me to reflect on how the trip had impacted on how I feel about various career moves in my future. Breaking these feelings down onto paper made sure that I understood my own reasoning better than if I had not.*
- *The act of reflecting on the shared experiences of our cohort cemented my knowledge in a way only tangible learning can do. Many of the political events we learned about in class became real as we walked through places like refugee camps and checkpoints. These moments drove home the complexity of what we were learning, and how difficult it is to make decisions that are 'right'. Doing the reflective pieces was a really helpful way for me to understand my new perspectives about the Middle East.*
- *I just wanted to say that these assessments were imperative to getting the fullest out of the tour...analysis and reflection are essential to understanding.*

That all of these comments above are positive is not due to cherry-picking on the part of the authors. Comments criticising the assessment tasks are very rare and when they do occur, tend to be linked to the (unviable) idea of not having any assessment for the tour *at all*. One participant questioned the value of reflective assessment in terms of whether it actually produced learning any outcomes ("You can't really force someone to philosophize their experiences and learn from them.") though even this critique was wrapped in a longer paragraph that stated their own positive gains from the tasks.

The Ungraded Pass arrangement for assessments and the overall tour also attracts generally positive remarks that are supportive of the pedagogical aims:

- *(Feeling) free to write exactly what I wanted without academic consequence. I felt I could be more vulnerable about the experience this way.*
- *I liked the assessments and they served me well, if they were graded, I would have bullshat more and reflected less.*
- *As much as I want to say a numerical grade would have been beneficial to my (GPA)... grading personal reflections is a contentious thing. If it were graded maybe I would have written less honestly and less personally.*
- *I don't think a numerical grade would have helped me appreciate the layers of learning I got from the study tour. If anything, it would have just made it a point of anxiety rather than a more pure reflection on the experience.*

The praise is not universal though and in the last feedback survey one student did note their preference for a traditional scoring arrangement:

- *A numerical grade would be preferable on such assignments. It would be an incentive to put in the hours/work to complete the assessment piece, thus forcing you to engage with the content material, because you know it ultimately goes towards the end grade.*

This comment is curious since it is not clear what the student means by "the content material", as there is no traditional academic reading or lecturing involved in the MEST. It is possible that they are referring to the content from the other modules in the major and how this might be incorporated into the study tour, with subject knowledge then 'tested' in this final pair of assignments. As discussed, this is not the objective of the tour, which stands apart from the conventional modules of study in the major, where subject knowledge has already been assessed repeatedly. However, the MEST faculty have occasionally noticed some anecdotal concern about the Ungraded Pass system from 'high-flying' students who are anxious that their academic transcript shows a uniformity of superior grades that is therefore 'proof' of their learning. This ill-founded worry does not seem substantial or widespread enough to consider jettisoning the system of the Ungraded Pass.

A final, and uncommon, type of feedback involves suggestions on how the assessment might be improved, or at least diversified. For example, "You could open up the post-tour reflection assignment to have creative options, such as video or photo essays." This is worth considering, since if the aim is to provide a truly personal channel of reflection, some students may be able to do that to an even greater extent via a non-written medium. This may provide some administrative challenges in terms of work equivalence, though the possibility remains interesting. A further difficulty posed in utilising visual media for assessment is that, with a career focus in mind, many of the related itinerary items prohibit photography or other forms of recording.¹⁴ This would reduce such a mixed media project to tourist-type subjects or mean using material recorded by others (i.e., not of the student's own experience).

A final link in the chain of vocational development is that all of the tour participants from each trip year are invited to join a common Facebook group. This also includes alumni of the MES major from the years before the tour was run and who have gone on to successful careers. The group acts as a forum for sharing news, job opportunities and ideas so that students have an ongoing peer and career network linked by that common interest of the Middle East.

Conclusion

In the very first sentence of their seminal work on assessment on higher education David Boud and Nancy Falchikov state: "Assessment affects people's lives. The future directions and careers of students depend on it." (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 3). The assessments for the MEST and the grading scheme employed acknowledge this reality. With a steady focus on the post-university life of the students, both in their understanding of the Middle East and on their developing career aspirations, the study tour, and its assessments, consciously intend to affect the participants' lives. By removing the affectation of numerically scoring how well a student can write down what those effects might be, the stress of needing to perform well or within certain parameters is also taken away. This means that students can enjoy the trip, make the most of the professional encounters it

¹⁴ For example, anything to do with vulnerable people, minors, occurring in a secure location such as an embassy, or within the Chatham House rules arrangement that many of our diplomatic meetings take place.

affords and then take their own contemplation in any direction they like – just as they can with their future.

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Author Biographies

Mat Hardy is a Senior Lecturer in Middle East Studies at Deakin University, Australia. He teaches on the politics and history of the Middle East and publishes on pedagogical issues related to the delivery of Political Science topics, including the use of online roleplay simulations. He is the convenor of Deakin's annual Middle East Study Tour, which takes undergraduate students to the region to further their understanding and develop their career plans.

Sally Totman is an Associate Professor in Middle East Studies and is the Convenor of the International Relations and Middle East Studies programs at Deakin University, Australia. She publishes on the pedagogy of higher education and the link between celebrity and political persona.