

# Principles of International Education Assessment

By Darla K. Deardorff

What tool should we use to assess our program? We don't know anything about assessment, where do we start?

These are questions I have heard frequently in working with different institutions as they tackle assessment of internationalization on their campuses or of a specific international program. Given the current trend toward more accountability and with an increased focus on outcomes assessment in higher education in general, citing numbers and program statistics are no longer sufficient in determining a program's success. This trend is driving administrators to ask these kinds of questions, forcing them to become more familiar with assessment principles and terminology.

In fact, while regional monitoring bodies have traditionally focused on inputs and outputs of institutional programs and services, the trend is for regional accrediting agencies to now emphasize specific outcome measures—both institutional outcomes and student learning outcomes. To that end, numerous institutions have actually built international education outcomes assessment into the accreditation process. For example, Wake Forest University included the development and implementation of a comprehensive intercultural competence program for study abroad students into its Quality Enhancement Plan, with assessment built into the entire program. Other institutions have similarly incorporated international education outcomes into the accreditation process. Yet, it is important to remember that assessment goes beyond a one-time report, pre-post survey, or an accreditation process. Successful assessment involves a long-term commitment to continuous improvement of student learning, as well as to increased effectiveness of programs and services.

As various institutions and programs more intentionally address assessment, it is important to consider some hallmarks of international education assessment. While there is no one right way of undertaking assessment, no magic solution or one ideal assessment tool, there is some guidance found in assessment literature.<sup>1</sup>

## SPRING 2007 UNDERGRADUATE ASSESSMENT SYMPOSIUM

North Carolina State University is hosting a Spring 2007 Undergraduate Assessment Symposium (April 13-15, 2007) which features an international education track. Details can be found at [http://www.ncsu.edu/assessment/sym\\_home.htm](http://www.ncsu.edu/assessment/sym_home.htm).

### Mission/Goals/Objectives

The starting point with any assessment is in reviewing the overall mission and goals. Based on the goals, what are specific measurable objectives? In the case of student learning outcomes, these measurable objectives usually begin with an action verb. For example, students will “demonstrate a high level of proficiency in a foreign language.” So, back to the question of “What tool should we use?” The goals and objectives determine the assessment tools and methods used, not the other way around. Just because one institution is using a particular tool does not mean the same tool is appropriate for another institution. What is being measured? The answer to this question determines the tools and methods we use.

### Definitions/Indicators/Criteria

Too often, assessment involves general statements such as “students will gain cross-cultural awareness” or “students will become more intercultural competent.” What do these terms mean? How are they defined and operationalized and according to whom? Research has found that even when administrators define concepts and terms being assessed, they often do not consult existing literature. In the case of intercultural competence, an entire study was conducted in which 21 leading intercultural experts achieved consensus on a definition of intercultural competence, thus becoming the first study to document consensus on a definition of this complex term. Once such a definition has been established, specific indicators can be developed. The key is first defining what it is we intend to measure.

### Assessment Plan

Often, administrators may begin collecting data before an assessment plan has been developed. While this can work for some schools and programs, it is best if an assessment plan can be developed from the outset. In developing such an assessment plan that is integrated into the program, it is important to involve stakeholders, listening to their needs and incorporating their input into the assessment plan. Such a plan would ideally be a multi-year plan, which takes into account the assessment cycle, includes an evaluation of the assessment process itself, has the appropriate resources to support it, and contains details for how the data will specifically be used.

## Multiple Methods

Since no single measure can be entirely reliable (consistent) or valid (accurate), it is important that multiple methods and tools be used in assessment. Such multiple methods lead to triangulation, thus increasing assessment reliability and validity. For example, in a survey of institutions currently assessing intercultural competence, a variety of methods were being used, ranging from two to six different ones at each institution. And in the case of intercultural competence assessment, it is important that assessment involves multiple perspectives beyond the student's perspective, to avoid bias. In utilizing different methods and tools, it is important to include a mix of direct (e.g., embedded assessment, portfolios, presentations) and indirect methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups) with clear, detailed rubrics when needed. In using specific instruments, be sure to understand specifically what the instruments measure and make sure they match the goals and objectives.

## Integrated, Ongoing Assessment

Satisfaction surveys and pre/post assessment instruments tend to be quite popular among administrators in assessing international education, especially education abroad programs. While summative (final) assessment is part of assessment, it is important that assessment be integrated into a program and that it is ongoing (formative)—not something done solely at

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students. It was selected, after rigorous international scientific competition, for a multi-year, multi-million dollar research award from the National Institutes of Health to establish an International Center for Alternative and Complementary Medicine. In short, the success of the UM-UWC link can be measured in the growth of faculty, students and institutions both in South Africa and in Missouri. It is a remarkable story of international cooperation, and it is widely recognized as a model academic exchange program.

What factors contributed to the first 20 years of success in this linkage? First, the program was based on institutional policy at the Curators level in Missouri and at the Senate level at UWC. The program also benefited from the commitment of the executive leadership at both institutions. The institutional committees on both sides were and are absolutely key to the real work of the linkage.

one point in time (summative). In the case of student learning outcomes, it is important that the results of this ongoing assessment be given as feedback to the students so that they can improve their own learning.

## Effective Use of Assessment Data

How will we use the assessment data? We should collect data that will actually be utilized. Such information needs to be used continuously to improve student learning as well as programs and services. Assessment results also need to be communicated effectively, clearly and concisely to all stakeholders—in the case of international education, such stakeholders include senior level institution officials, faculty, students, institution offices (such as public relations, admissions, etc.), parents, and alumni. In some instances, assessment information may also be used to advocate for international education within the institution as well as externally in the community and beyond.

## Assessment Support

Assessment of international education needs to become an integral part of what we do. To be effective in our assessment endeavors, the leadership, resources, environment and commitment must be there. Staff and faculty need the appropriate training to implement the necessary assessment measures. International educators not familiar with assessment need to

Faculty members at Missouri and UWC became engaged in the program from the outset, and they remain enthusiastically and productively engaged after 20 years. The program was founded on principles of mutual respect, and all program decisions were made jointly by the institutional committees and staff. In this regard, the effort has truly been a team effort. The program has produced significant outcomes in faculty development, student development and institutional development based firmly on research, instruction, and community service.

I want to salute the hundreds of colleagues at UWC and Missouri for their contributions and dedication to the creation and advancement of this important program. Without the sacrifice and commitment of faculty and students willing to bring their unique talent and insight to such a venture, it surely would have failed. Thanks to them, it did not

develop more knowledge and skills in assessment when possible.

Given current trends, the need for international education assessment will continue to grow. For international educators to be successful and effective, we need to pay attention to key assessment principles which include an integrated, intentional, well-supported and sustainable assessment plan that is built upon the mission and goals of the institution and programs and that is developed in dialogue with stakeholders. As assessment data are collected and used effectively in continuously improving student learning and the programs/services provided, the impact of our endeavors could be enormous. Effective assessment is a long-term commitment that involves time and resources, but can be well worth our efforts in ultimately improving international education and transforming lives. ●

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## Notes

1. *Assessment Literature: Astin, 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Banta, Lund, Black and Oblander, 1996; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996; Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick, 1997; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998; Banta and Palomba, 1999; Stufflebeam, Madau, and Kellaghan, 2000; Banta, 2004; Hernon and Dugan, 2004 that can be applied to international education.*

fail, and a model of international academic cooperation that is worthy of the best of both institutions has emerged and will endure.

The 20th Anniversary of the UM/UWC program is compelling testimony to the fact that the academy stood at the crossroads dividing oppression and freedom, fear and hope, progress and regression and did so with insight, courage and dedication. This is a celebration of collegiality across thousands of miles, across cultures, and barriers to access and advancement. It is a celebration of good will, mutual trust and institutional capacity to open new vistas for student and faculty growth. It is a lesson in endurance and hard work. It is, at the core, a confirmation of the power of universities to succeed against the odds for the benefit of current and future generations. ●

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