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Moving from secrecy to transparency: Turning grade appeals into learning experiences

Vidar Gynnild¹

*Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)
NO-7491 Trondheim, Norway*

Abstract

Assessment lies at the heart of the student experience, and grades should be assigned fairly and reliably to the extent possible. Even though nobody would object to this goal, assessment and grading are never a straightforward process, because they require both theoretical insights and practical skills. Subjective judgment is necessary in most instances. Assessment standards are also hard to get to grips with, and not easily communicated to students. This paper draws on a case study of diverse appeals procedures at the University of Oslo involving thousands of students over a 10-year period. The frequency of appeals nearly doubled during the decade, and grades featured greater gaps once access to the originally assigned grades was denied. In conclusion, assessment standards are challenging concepts to deal with. This paper suggests interventions to turn appeals processes into positive learning opportunities.

1 Introduction

A great deal of research documents the importance of assessment in higher education (Brown & Knight, 1994; Rust, 2002; Sadler, 1987; Snyder, 1971). "Assessment" essentially implies judgments on the extent to which students' work meet appropriate standards, and it powerfully frames students' learning and what they achieve. Historically, teachers and examiners have been charged with assessment of students' work; however, transitions are underway to develop students' capacity to make judgments on their own and their peers' work. Since grades are high stakes, though, institutions have been reluctant to get students involved in exam types of grading while still acknowledging the role of assessment as a learning activity.

This study sheds light on students' opportunities to get engaged in grade appeals processes with an emphasis on their qualifications to do so. In Norway, students are free to appeal grades for any reason; this includes the right to challenge academic judgment. The process is digitized, simple and straightforward for students; however, it has led to a notable increase in appeals. A study conducted at the University of Oslo confirmed an annual growth in appeals of three to six per cent over the period from 2006 to 2017 (Gynnild, 2019), and there is no sign of a reversed trend. This is of course costly and time consuming, requiring considerable effort from appeals teams. Unfortunately it has led to little if any improved student learning.

Up until August 1 2014, universities and colleges in Norway were free to choose between two different appeals procedures: one in which the appeals committee enjoyed full access to the already assigned grade, and one in which access was denied. Proponents of both principles defended their practices by reference to fairness and reliability. Access to already assigned grades would equip the appeals committee with a reference point on which to base their new decision, while no access might prevent impacts from potentially flawed prior decisions.

¹ Vidar.Gynnild@ntnu.no

The national student union argued strongly in favour of a nationwide appeals framework with an expressed desire to keep appeals processes separate from already assigned grades and any associated correspondence. Concerns were related to fairness and objectivity rather than missing learning opportunities during the appeals process. “Blind” appeals emerged as a buzzword to express processes “uncontaminated” by potentially flawed prior judgments. Except for access to examiner guidelines and grade descriptions, appeals teams started from scratch to deal with the challenging task of judging achievement fairly, reliably and validly.

The introduction of “blind” appeals resulted in unexpected outcomes. The frequency of appeals increased, while inter-rater reliability decreased (Gynnild, 2019), and on average students earned grades to their disfavour. Some were left in a state of confusion, questioning reliability and consistency in grading. Students called for more transparency and opportunities to reflect and discuss the application of standards and criteria as part of the appeals process. This also motivated the current research question: *How can grade appeals be transformed from a state of secrecy to a more transparent process in which the respective student can be a partner?*

2 Theoretical approaches

Summative assessment aims to bring evidence of the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved. *Formative assessment* typically provides feedback on students’ work during the semester, while *sustainable assessment* seeks to build students’ capacity to judge their own learning. The capacity to judge both one’s own work and that of others is an educational outcome of great importance, and this paper aims to explore how respective students can be included as partners at initial stages of appeals processes.

Currently, *summative assessment* is something done to the students rather than a learning opportunity. Candidates are given an explanation of grades on demand; however, this is not mandatory, and students are not granted opportunities to contest and change grades at this stage. The focus is typically on the examiner’s justification based on model answers, or written criteria that can be hard for students to get to grips with. Appeals can subsequently be filed with or without any prior explanation from the examiner. This simply requires the student to tick a box on a web page with no opportunity to further explain or argue the case.

In Norwegian higher education, *formative assessment* is typically ongoing and integral throughout the semester. This can be offered by teachers or learning assistants; however, in science and engineering feedback often ends up in procedural guidelines for correct answers. In social sciences and the humanities students receive holistic feedback without the use of rubrics, so opportunities to practice peer and co-assessment are limited, and standards remain as abstracts within the minds of the professors (Sadler, 2012). Assessment literacy is not yet acknowledged as a learning objective, and students gain little insight and practice in this area.

In *sustainable assessment*, standards are constituted and enacted by students and academics jointly. This offers an opportunity of exploring assessment standards in context, how they are negotiated and agreed among professionals. The idea of standards as stable reference points is challenged, and the focus is rather on learning and participation. Once students learn to identify high quality work, the expectation is that increased self-confidence will boost efforts because there is an end in sight with less need for external attention (Ajjawi, Bearman, & Boud, 2019).

In the remainder of the paper I will briefly outline how *sustainable assessment* can be enacted as a learning opportunity in appeals processes. I do not propose that students be involved in high stakes grading as a normal procedure, but wish to underscore opportunities to inculcate them with the theory and principles of assessment and help them to develop skills in this area.

3 Practical guidelines

These are my guidelines for students' participation based on *sustainable assessment*:

- Once grades are settled, students can ask for an explanation of the grade as a mandatory first step. This meeting serves the purposes of clarification and justification.
- If this does not satisfy the candidate, s/he can submit a written appeal arguing the case based on written materials, such as criteria, rubrics and examiner guidelines.
- The appeals panel enjoys full access to all data and documents to inform the case.
- The process is guided by values such as respect and mutual learning. The appeals panel considers all relevant information and makes a final decision to close the case.

4 Conclusion

A large-scale study at the University of Oslo supports the notion that students and examiners are in confusion when it comes to the application of standards in appeals processes. Higher education reforms have long strived to improve learning; however, appeals procedures still fall short of achieving that ambition. Counterproductive practices without student involvement have for years operated under the cover of fairness and objectivity. The propositions in this paper aim to criticise current practice, particularly highlighting the learning potential of appeals. Having students as co-creators of standards is probably the only way in which they can be active participants in rather than passive viewers of high stakes decisions. It is still important that guidelines become an integral part of learning activities, and that they do not emerge as a surprise in the event of an appeal.

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