



# Connecting students with ‘industry’: A pilot implementation of authentic assessment tasks in business education

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Universities are continuing to encourage academics to implement more authentic assessment strategies into their teaching and learning activities to ensure that students are work-ready on graduation. Connecting students with the expectations of industry through these assessments encourages students to identify key competencies which need to be strengthened in order to ensure they are employable upon graduation. Since COVID-19 struck in early 2020, we have all had to consider how technology can assist in connecting people to continue to be able to work. This is no truer than with students and teaching staff as well as connecting students with industry. This paper reports on the implementation of a new authentic assessment project for business students where students worked both face-to-face and online to complete a major work-based project.

Keywords: authentic assessment, industry connection, business education

## Background

Authenticity. True to Life. Work-Ready graduates. All terms that we, as academics, continue to have included in our communications from our faculties, universities, governments and business. Since the 1990’s the development of student graduate attributes has been a focus of many universities in Australia, and around the world, whilst today, more than ever, we are being encouraged to focus on ensuring our students are Work-Ready when they emerge from their studies as fresh graduates. The combination of these foci has led to a much greater emphasis on teaching and learning, and particularly on assessment practices.

Researchers have long discussed the importance of assessment in higher education and more recently this has led to discussions of assessment as a key component of the student learning experience. Authors such as Kinash et al. (2018) and Boud (2010) have discussed the significant impact that well designed assessment has on the quality of student learning as well as the ability to evaluate student progress in a course.

Authentic assessment has been defined in many ways over recent years (e.g. Boud & Falchikov, 2006) however it is primarily considered to be “an assessment that calls for students to utilize the same set of knowledge, competencies and attitudes that they should apply in the “criterion situation” in real-life” (Sokhanvar et al., 2021, p. 1). Akbari et al. (2021, p. 70) identified that the main reason for including authentic assessment in higher education courses is to ensure that students acquire the skills and competencies needed when entering the post-graduation job market. Studies of authentic assessment implemented in business curriculum have shown that where students see the significance of the task it can motivate them and lead to feelings of contentment (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017; James & Casidy, 2016).

The design of the authentic assessment task is a crucial element to ensuring that students will engage with and be motivated to complete the task at hand. Numerous guides have been published on the key features that should be included. These are fidelity of the task, including realistic conditions, using a variety of resources and producing a valuable and professional product (Colthorpe et al. 2021). With the advent of COVID-19, work has increasingly and quickly moved to the online environment. Authentic assessment tasks in current times are required to not only show how students can apply knowledge to practice, but also deal with the issues of having to communicate more effectively online.

This paper reviews a work in progress case study of the initial implementation of a course (subject) wide

authentic assessment scenario. An application for negligible risk ethics was submitted and advice was received that ethics approval was not required for this study. Anecdotal feedback from the students together with anonymous survey responses have been used to analyse this approach to assessment.

## Case Study

This case study takes place in the business academic unit of an Australian university based on a metropolitan campus. Students enroll in either face-to-face or external offerings however all of the learning materials for the course are available on the course learning management system (LMS). Courses are delivered over a 10-week study period with a two week break after six weeks.

The pilot implementation of this whole of course authentic assessment project was undertaken in a third-year undergraduate business course, Managing Decision Making, with a specific focus on decision making (hereon referred to as “MDM”). This course is one of eight courses that comprise the major in the Bachelor of Business (Management) program. The project was developed as a staged implementation over the past three (3) years with components being moved from formative to summative assessment to ensure that the work was adequately scaffolded and feedback given so that students could improve their performance throughout the study period.

The course assessment structure has evolved over many years of the author being involved in the teaching of this course as it has generally been one in which different methods of assessment have been tested. Table 1 below outlines the alterations that have been made to the assessment tasks over the past few years, some of which were due to changes in assessment procedures being prescribed by the academic unit.

**Table 1: Assessment structure of MDM**

Assessment	2018	2019	2020 and 2021
<b>Continuous Assessment</b>	Not Used	Not Used	Online Activities (20%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DSI/Personality quiz (25%)</li> <li>• Problem Analysis (50%)</li> <li>• Excel Quiz (25%)</li> </ul>
<b>Minor Assessment</b>	Online Activities (40%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intro quiz (12.5%)</li> <li>• DSI/Personality quiz (12.5%)</li> <li>• Problem Analysis (25%)</li> <li>• Excel Quiz (12.5%)</li> <li>• Blog (37.5%)</li> </ul>	Online Activities (40%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem Analysis (25%)</li> <li>• Literature Review (37.5%)</li> <li>• Blog (37.5%)</li> </ul>	Report (30%)
<b>Major Assessment</b>	Group Project (60%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Literature Review (15%)</li> <li>• Group Video Report (30%)</li> <li>• Group Model (40%)</li> <li>• Individual Reflection (15%)</li> </ul>	Group Project (60%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Video Report (40%)</li> <li>• Group Model (40%)</li> <li>• Individual Reflection (20%)</li> </ul>	Team Project (50%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team Model (60%)</li> <li>• Individual Reflection (40%)</li> </ul>

The business academic unit altered the approach to assessment where the number of submission points were considerably reduced. This was undertaken as a result of feedback from students regarding the large number of courses that had implemented continuous assessment, or continuous assessment style, with weekly submission requirements causing stress and anxiety for many students enrolled in business courses. The author made significant reduction in the tasks required by the students over this time, whilst reflecting on how this may be similar, or different, to actual practice in the business world. Constructive alignment was used to ensure that all course learning objectives were still being assessed and that the assessment was giving students the opportunity to apply their knowledge to real-world business practices.

## The Inbox Challenge

With the reduction in permissible assessment tasks and the author’s desire for the assessment tasks to take the

next step to being as authentic as possible, “The Inbox Challenge” (TIC) assessment was implemented for the first time in 2022. This task was first identified by the author in a professional development webinar they attended at the commencement of 2020 and was being developed in parallel with the changes identified in Table 1 above. It was identified that not only would the task be required to adequately reflect the types of tasks undertaken in a business environment, but also consider the nature of work in a post-COVID-19 environment where many workers need to work from home on a more regular basis, due to illness or government requirements to isolate.

An investigation of the literature published on authentic assessment over the past five years found no discussion of this type of task or the success/failure of recent implementations of any similar authentic assessment tasks. Although nothing is currently published in referred journals about the Inbox Challenge assessment, the author is aware that similar tasks are currently being implemented and trialled in other universities around the world.

The assessment tasks were discussed with the Dean of Programs and the Program Director, and changes approved in late 2021. The assessment tasks for MDM were then altered to the structure shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: The Inbox Challenge Assessment Structure 2022**

Assessment	2022
Report	Problem Analysis Report (30%)
Continuous Assessment	Online Activities (70%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DSI/Personality quiz (10%)</li> <li>• Team Contract (10%)</li> <li>• Model Design (30%)</li> <li>• VIVA (10%)</li> <li>• Model Development and Instruction Manual (20%)</li> <li>• Individual Reflection (20%)</li> </ul>

The premise of the course wide authentic assessment scenario (TIC) was that the student was being employed by MDM Consulting, a management company who problem solves for small businesses, providing technology-based decision-making solutions for their clients along with management advice. Students are sent an introductory email from the managing director of MDM Consulting welcoming them as a new employee for the short-term internship (12 weeks). Along with the welcome email, they are sent a series of documents to read, representing what a new employee may expect on their first day in the job. Table 3 sets out the information passed on to students at the commencement of the course to introduce the project.

**Table 3: The Inbox Challenge documentation**

Document	Contents
Welcome letter	Welcome from General manager
Induction checklist	List of tasks and due dates (summative tasks highlighted in red)
Expectations document	Includes list of do's and don'ts
Professional development schedule	Timeline of workshops, pre-workshop requirements and what to bring to each workshop
Client brief	Details of the team project requirements from the client's perspective
Decision style article	Copy of a journal article outlining the importance of understanding your own (and other's) decision style.

The students were treated as employees throughout the interactions with the teaching staff to ensure fidelity of the tasks being undertaken. Workshop classes (offered face-to-face and online) were identified as Professional Development sessions and students were required to sign-in. Each session was not only dedicated to linking the theory to practice but also giving student teams time to meet and discuss their projects.

Students first work on analysing the problems being experienced by the business in their Problem Analysis report. The problems are presented in the form of a video for the students to observe issues being experienced. Students then work with a team to develop a decision support tool, in the form of an MS Excel spreadsheet and accompanying instruction manual, for the client to assist in making financial decisions for the client's business. The team project tasks are presented as a project with milestone deliverables from which they are able to receive feedback from the client. These deliverables include team contract, model design, and one on one meeting (VIVA) to ensure each member of the team is contributing and understanding the issues of the project. During

class meeting time team are able to ask questions of the client (class instructor) to ensure they are working on the right track as well as presenting questions to their manager (course coordinator) regarding the approach the team is taking with the technicalities of their model design.

Technology support tools were used extensively throughout the assessment task including staff to student and student to student video conferencing (using Zoom), online chat groups (Messenger, WeChat and Whatsapp), video reviews and information sessions (using Panopto) as well as “company” based emails from “manager” (staff member) to “employee” (student). All of this was combined with significant resources being made available on the Moodle course site.

## Discussion

As with any new initiative students were quite wary of the tasks being introduced and the impact that this may have on their overall grades, particularly when working in a team for a large component of the assessment. The course results showed a minor (1%) increase in the course pass rate from 2021 to 2022 but a major increase of 10% in the course pass rate compared with 2019 (note 2020 not considered due to effects of COVID-19). This shows that the changes made to the assessment structure across the last 3 years may have had a positive effect on the student grade distribution.

The teaching team noted that student engagement in the tasks and student class attendance was greater than in previous years. When students were questioned about this in general discussion it was identified that they didn't want to miss out on information that would assist in the development of the team project. In addition, they noted that time in class to meet with their team and work on the project was very beneficial. The ability for students to connect with each other during the class time (be that face-to-face for the internal students or in the virtual classrooms for the external students) was appreciated. Students related well to the expectations document that they received on day 1, with students respecting each of these expectations throughout the study period. One of the teaching staff noted that 100% of students who were unable to attend class due to illness or other commitments emailed each week they were unable to attend with an apology and an update of their progress as well as any questions that they had. This was in complete contrast to another course being taught concurrently by this staff member.

Student comments about the authentic assessment task in the anonymous surveys conducted included:

*'It gave an insight as to the level that MS Excel can be used for real business situations and teamwork situations'*  
*'That all the information wasn't there was a good thing – that's very real world'*  
*'I think because it was a real-life situation, it was easier to understand who the clients were, what background they have and what they need'*

Although there was a lot of anecdotal feedback about TIC that was positive there was also some negative commentary about the workload and the number of submissions required. Some students were critical of the lack of information or the requirement to ask questions of the “client” to ensure that they had all the information necessary to complete the tasks.

## Conclusion

New assessment design is difficult but can be rewarding. Being able to see students effectively engaged in what could be a workplace project, and treating the students as employees gave them a sense of understanding as to possible activities in their future management careers. This is supported by Sokhanvar et al. (2021) who identified in their extensive review of authentic assessment studies that students “were overall welcoming and receptive to the idea of authentic assessment and found it equitable, helpful, and related to their future occupations” (p. 8).

That said, this is a work in progress and there are a number of factors that can be improved for future offerings. These include giving the students a clearer understanding as to why this approach is being taken, making the tasks a little clearer in their design and setting up better communication channels for the students to contact the “client” and the “manager”.

Colthorpe et al. (2021) identified that where students had a specific target audience for the product of their assessment it added authenticity to the task as well as driving the students to be more professional in their

approach to the assessment task being completed.

Future offerings of this course will implement these strategies, consider a more authentic audience for the project results and continue to strive to develop the employability skills and knowledge required for our future business leaders.

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