

Role of assignment essays in tertiary education



Assignment essays are developed from set questions that give students a period of time to research a topic and produce their answer with references to their sources of information. While there are some disadvantages with using assignment essays as an assessment tool, there are sound educational purposes underpinning this practice. This essay examines the reasons why assignment essays are beneficial for student learning and considers some of the problems with this method of assessment. Body paragraph 1 Assignment essay tasks are set to assist students to develop mastery of their study subject.

Firstly, assignment tasks enhance understandings about subject matter. Yang and Baker (2005) reason that “to master your learning materials and extend your understandings, you need to write about the meanings you gain from your research” (p. 1). Secondly, research Oinx, 2004; Zapper, 2006) clearly demonstrates that students learn the writing conventions of a subject area while they are researching, reading and writing in their discipline. This activity helps them to “crack the code” of the discipline (Bloggs, 2003, p. 44).

Thus, students are learning subject matter and how to write in that disciplinary area by researching and writing assignment essays. Body paragraph 2 Using assignment essays for assessment supports student learning better than the traditional examination system. It is considered that course-work assignment essays can lessen the extreme stress experienced by some students over ‘sudden-death’ end of semester examinations: If we insist that all students write about everything they have learned in their study courses at the same time and in the same place (e. g. in examinations), we are not giving all of our

students equal opportunities. Some students are not daunted by the exam experience while others suffer 'exam nerves' and perform at the lowest level of their capabilities.

(Wonderland University, 2006, p. 4) Additionally, Jones et al. (2004, pp. 36-37) propose that assignment essays can be used to assess student learning mid-course and so provide them with helpful feedback before they are subjected to the exam experience. Exams only provide students with a mark rather than specific feedback on their progress.

Therefore, setting assignment essays for a substantial part of student assessment is a much fairer approach than one-off examination testing.

Body paragraph 3 As an assessment tool, assignment essays have some disadvantages for lecturers and students. It has been found that assignment essays consume a great deal of staff time and money to mark and student time to prepare (Sankey & Liger, 2005, p. 192). A consequence of this is that feedback to students is frequently delayed, and this is much less useful to students than rapid feedback (p.

94). It is partly because of these disadvantages of time and expense that other assessments such as multiple-choice tests and short answer questions have an enduring place in the tertiary learning environment. Conclusion To conclude, it seems that assignment essays continue to have a prominent role in tertiary education as an assessment tool. This is mainly because they are very effective in developing knowledge and writing skills for subject areas. Also, assignment essays can be less stressful than examinations as they allow students to show their understanding of content in less pressured

circumstances. On the other hand, the time consuming nature of writing and marking essays points to some disadvantages that also need to be considered.

The weight of evidence, however, supports the writing of assignment essays for student assessment because this approach has such positive and proven effects for improved student learning.