

Teaching employability skills through Assessment Centres

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Many academics feel frustrated by industry feedback that their graduates are unable to demonstrate strong communication and teamwork skills in real-world settings. In the capstone unit of an ECU undergraduate business degree, 'Assessment Centres' (ACs) are used as a graded cluster of in-class activities to strengthen these skills to prepare our graduates for job-readiness. Originally developed by the CIA in the 1940s for candidate selection, ACs are now widely used in companies like Ernst and Young and Air New Zealand as well as government departments to shortlist applicants. ACs put prospective job candidates through a series of exercises that simulate typical individual and teamwork tasks in order to assess capabilities, motivation, and job 'fit'.

We have adapted ACs from industry hiring practices to create a formative assessment learning experience that enables students to deliver and receive constructive peer feedback as they model oral and written communication skills and groupwork dynamics.

During the first AC of the semester, assessors rated student performance on an individual presentation task, and then in a group activity where team members discussed a case study and presented recommendations. Six weeks later, similar tasks were repeated in a second AC, but feedback was given first by peers and then assessors, and rating included performance on tasks as well as during feedback discussions.

In addition to offering a realistic preview of what it feels like to perform under the pressures of the current competitive job market, ACs provided students with the opportunity to build their confidence as they learned from each other. ACs make it easy to show, discuss, and assess formative teamwork skills when deployed as a sequence of graded in-class activities with a focus on learner skill improvement between the first and last sessions. The AC model is readily modifiable to suit the employability skills focus of higher education.