

Core principles of effective assessment

Enhancing learning by enhancing assessment

Assessment is a central element in the overall quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Well designed assessment sets clear expectations, establishes a reasonable workload (one that does not push students into rote reproductive approaches to study), and provides opportunities for students to self-monitor, rehearse, practise and receive feedback. Assessment is an integral component of a coherent educational experience.

The ideas and strategies in the *Assessing Student Learning* resources support three interrelated objectives for quality in student assessment in higher education.

Three objectives for higher education assessment	1. assessment that guides and encourages effective approaches to learning;
	2. assessment that validly and reliably measures expected learning outcomes, in particular the higher-order learning that characterises higher education; and
	3. assessment and grading that defines and protects academic standards.

The relationship between assessment practices and the overall quality of teaching and learning is often underestimated, yet assessment requirements and the clarity of assessment criteria and standards significantly influence the effectiveness of student learning. Carefully designed assessment contributes directly to the way students approach their study and therefore contributes indirectly, but powerfully, to the quality of their learning.

For most students, assessment requirements literally define the curriculum. Assessment is therefore a potent strategic tool for educators with which to spell out the learning that will be rewarded and to guide students into effective approaches to study. Equally, however, poorly designed assessment has the potential to hinder learning or stifle curriculum innovation.

16 indicators of effective assessment in higher education

A checklist for quality in student assessment

- 1) Assessment is treated by staff and students as an integral and prominent component of the entire teaching and learning process rather than a final adjunct to it.
- 2) The multiple roles of assessment are recognised. The powerful motivating effect of assessment requirements on students is understood and assessment tasks are designed to foster valued study habits.
- 3) There is a faculty/departmental policy that guides individuals' assessment practices. Subject assessment is integrated into an overall plan for course assessment.
- 4) There is a clear alignment between expected learning outcomes, what is taught and learnt, and the knowledge and skills assessed — there is a closed and coherent 'curriculum loop'.
- 5) Assessment tasks assess the capacity to analyse and synthesis new information and concepts rather than simply recall information previously presented.
- 6) A variety of assessment methods is employed so that the limitations of particular methods are minimised.
- 7) Assessment tasks are designed to assess relevant generic skills as well as subject-specific knowledge and skills.
- 8) There is a steady progression in the complexity and demands of assessment requirements in the later years of courses.
- 9) There is provision for student choice in assessment tasks and weighting at certain times.
- 10) Student and staff workloads are considered in the scheduling and design of assessment tasks.
- 11) Excessive assessment is avoided. Assessment tasks are designed to sample student learning.
- 12) Assessment tasks are weighted to balance the developmental ('formative') and judgemental ('summative') roles of assessment. Early low-stakes, low-weight assessment is used to provide students with feedback.
- 13) Grades are calculated and reported on the basis of clearly articulated learning outcomes and criteria for levels of achievement.
- 14) Students receive explanatory and diagnostic feedback as well as grades.
- 15) Assessment tasks are checked to ensure there are no inherent biases that may disadvantage particular student groups.
- 16) Plagiarism is minimised through careful task design, explicit education and appropriate monitoring of academic honesty.

What students value in assessment

Unambiguous expectations Students study more effectively when they know what they are working towards. Students value, and expect, transparency in the way their knowledge will be assessed: they wish to see a clear relationship between lectures, tutorials, practical classes and subject resources, and what they are expected to demonstrate they know and can do. They also wish to understand how grades are determined and they expect timely feedback that 1) explains the grade they have received, 2) rewards their achievement, as appropriate, and 3) offers suggestions for how they can improve.

'Authentic' tasks Students value assessment tasks they perceive to be 'real': assessment tasks that present challenges to be taken seriously, not only for the grades at stake, but also for the nature of the knowledge and skills they are expected to demonstrate. Students value assessment tasks they believe mirror the skills needed in the workplace. Students are anxious to test themselves and to compare their performance against others. Assessment tasks that students perceive to be trivial or superficial are less likely to evoke a strong commitment to study.

Choice and flexibility Many students express a strong preference for choices in the nature, weighting and timing of assessment tasks. This preference for 'negotiated' assessment is a logical extension of the trend towards offering students more flexible ways of studying and more choice in study options. Students who seek 'more say' in assessment often say they prefer to be assessed in ways that show their particular skills in the best light. They also argue they will study more effectively if they can arrange their timetables for submitting assessable work to suit their overall workload. Providing higher education students with options in assessment — in a carefully structured way — is worth considering in many higher education courses though it is not a common practice. Encouraging students to engage with the curriculum expectations in this way should assist them in becoming more autonomous and independent learners.

Re-positioning the role of assessment

Capturing the full educational benefits of well-designed assessment requires many of the conventional assumptions about assessment in higher education to be reconsidered.

For academic staff, assessment is often a final consideration in their planning of the curriculum. This is not to imply staff underestimate or undervalue the role or importance of assessment, but assessment is often considered once other curriculum decisions have been made. The primary concerns of academic staff are often with designing learning outcomes and planning teaching and learning activities that will produce these outcomes. In contrast, students often work 'backwards' through the curriculum, focusing first and foremost on how they will be assessed and what they will be required to demonstrate they have learned.

How academic staff view teaching and learning

What course content should be taught?
What should students learn?



What teaching and learning methods are appropriate?



How can student learning be assessed?

Assessment can be the final consideration for staff in the design of the teaching and learning process

How students view teaching and learning

In what ways am I going to be assessed?
What do I need to know?



What then are the learning objectives?
What approaches to study should I adopt?

Assessment is usually at the forefront of students' perception of the teaching and learning process

→ **Re-positioning student assessment as a strategic tool for enhancing teaching and learning** ←

For teaching staff, recognising the potent effects of assessment requirements on student study habits and capitalising on the capacity of assessment for creating preferred patterns of study is a powerful means of reconceptualising the use of assessment.

But designing assessment to influence students' patterns of study in positive ways can present significant challenges. Assessment in higher education must serve a number of purposes. The overall cycle of student assessment (from the design and declaration of assessment tasks, to the evaluation and reporting of student achievement) must not only guide student approaches to study and provide students with feedback on their progress, but also must determine their readiness to proceed to the next level of study, judge their 'fitness to practice' and ultimately protect and guarantee academic standards. These purposes are often loosely placed in two categories, developmental ('formative' — concerned with students' ongoing educational progression) and judgmental ('summative' — where the emphasis is on making decisions on satisfactory completion or readiness to progress to the next level of study). Both are legitimate purposes for assessment in higher education and effective assessment programs must be designed with both considerations in mind.