



# Assess

## FOR SUCCESS

## Approaches to Assessment

by Sally Brown and Kay Sambell

### What is the issue?

Assessment is an integral part of student learning and can impact significantly on students' satisfaction, engagement and ultimate achievement. For this reason, it is imperative that programme designers choose approaches and strategies that build on research and good practice to enable students to achieve real learning gain through the assessment activities they undertake in class and as assignments. The more assessment is seen as fully part of the learning and teaching process, with capacity to support learning for learning's sake rather than an add-on at the end, the more likely it is that students will benefit from it.

### Why does good assessment matter?

Good assessment can enhance the student learning experience and potential outcomes, but when it doesn't work well it can lead to high failure rates, anxiety and workload pinch points. Student satisfaction tends to be poor when learners (especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds) don't understand the rules of the game. They can feel frustrated and demoralised, and may not be convinced assignment support and marking is being undertaken fairly, particularly if they feel their inclusivity requirements are being ignored. If they feel they are on their own, without a chance to discuss what they are doing with a dearth of developmental comments on their progress or scant insight into assessment expectations, or if they find the feedback information they receive on their

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work is dismissive or incomprehensible, they are likely to have a negative view of the whole assessment process and may be more likely to indulge in poor academic conduct. We believe students and staff value academic integrity, and we need to create the assessment conditions, including selecting the appropriate approaches, which promote high levels of good academic conduct.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and the national bodies that accredit them, rely on effective, valid and reliable assessment to justify the judgments made on student achievement, and to assure the standards of the qualifications they award. Employers and other stakeholders require assurances that the claims made by course documentation are borne out in the capabilities of students who graduate from these courses. Hence, effective assessment is at the heart of successful university programmes and is important for the students who enrol on them.

# effective assessment performs a powerful function, enabling all students to enhance their achievements as well as providing rigorous, reliable and valid verification of student performance

## Research-informed thinking about assessment

Effective assessment performs a powerful function, enabling all students to enhance their achievements as well as providing rigorous, reliable and valid verification of student performance without allowing this summative function to dominate learning and teaching. It operates within a coherent assessment strategy, employing a diversity of methods to assess genuine and valued learning as well as supporting students to develop personal agency and judgment, enabling them to develop as autonomous learners and effective professionals. This can be termed Assessment for Learning (AfL) (Sambell et al., 2013).

AfL can stimulate student engagement whereby students are supported to act as partners in learning, via active involvement in and commitment to study (Sambell et al., 2013), rather than simply measuring what has already been learned. This can be achieved by designing more authentic, learning-oriented assessment tasks which students work on over time: these can positively enable student engagement through guidance and feedback processes, which can in turn empower learners to develop evaluative expertise and self-regulation.

This entails redesigning assessment practices to foster individual engagement in learning activities and subject matter, but also involves the development of assessment practices whereby students learn via participation and the development of identity (Sambell, Brown and Race, 2019, p. 3).

The style of assessment chosen has important implications for student behaviours, inclusivity and hence success.

Although there are differences between disciplines, memorisation is not the ultimate learning goal in any subject, and memorisation ill-equips students for the complex demands of life and work they face on graduation. The achievement of deep learning may require progressively advancing towards it, incorporating memory, analysis and transfer, in different weightings, until students become familiar with the cognitive complexity required (Villarroel et al., 2020, p.2).

## Practical advice

The more that students are able to recognise that assessment processes are transparently designed to enable them to demonstrate achievement, the more they are likely to maximise time and energy on the tasks in hand.

Educators need to think through and make explicit to students their rationales in designing the assessment components of a programme so that conscious decisions are being made about each of the following questions:

**Why are we assessing?** To help students get a measure of how they are doing in the early part of a programme for instance, or to develop skills through active practice, or to make an end point judgment to enable accreditation/qualification/fitness to practice.

**What is being assessed?** Normally we want to enable students to demonstrate knowledge, skills and abilities that have close relevance to the criteria, which are in turn constructively aligned to the stated learning outcomes of a programme (Brown, 2015), but all too often we assess what is easy to assess or what we've always assessed. It's important to check to what extent students are being assessed on applying theory to practical contexts in ways that go beyond simple recall (Villarroel et al., 2020).

**How should we assess?** There are at least 170 diverse types of assessment including, reports, portfolios, presentations, OSCEs, blogs, videos, essays, in-tray exercises, short-answer questions, reflections, in-class quizzes, exhibitions, artefacts, practical sessions, moots and so on, but pre-pandemic, formal, unseen, time-constrained exams were all too often the default position, and these are often not fit-for-purpose because they tend to test a relatively narrow range of abilities, and are vulnerable to

disruption. Every assessment method has advantages and disadvantages, and wise course leaders select assessment methods that best fit the disciplinary subject area, the context, level of study and the focus of the HEI. They also strike a careful balance between offering a variety of assessment tasks (which enable students to showcase and practice a range of appropriate skills) and enabling students to improve cumulatively by becoming gradually familiar with expectations and honing their insights into what a good response looks like. We shouldn't be overwhelming students with new and different challenges but instead helping them get to grips throughout their programmes with judiciously-chosen, varied but appropriate ranges of methods and approaches.

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**Who should be doing the assessment?** Summative assessment is largely undertaken by tutors, practice assessors and employers but there is an important role for students in reviewing each other's work and indeed their own.

**When should we assess?** If all summative assessment is undertaken at the last minute, there is a risk of the 'wet ink' phenomenon and of poor academic conduct. It is stressful for students and staff when assessment is all crammed in at the end of sessions. Far better to phase it incrementally throughout the study period so that it becomes fully part of learning.

### To sum up

Well-designed and implemented assessment practices that are fully integrated into the learning practices of students are indicators of thoughtful curriculum design and can be good predictors of student success. Ensuring that appropriate approaches are taken to assessment design, preparation and implementation are important stages in ensuring student success.

### Over to you - what might you do next

- ✓ Consider using the questions included in the 'Practical Advice' section of this guide to support your own decision-making regarding approaches to assessment.
- ✓ Look at Brown and Sambell (2020-2021) 'The Changing Landscape of Assessment: some possible replacements for unseen, time-constrained face-to-face invigilated exams' and Brown and Knight (2012) to learn about the 170 types of assessment that we mention in this guide.
- ✓ Connect your reading on approaches to assessment with other guides in this series, for example, 'Developing Authentic Assessment' and 'Designing Effective Feedback to Foster Learning'.
- ✓ Share your approaches to assessment, successes and failures, with colleagues by contacting the Assess for Success hub team at [teachingandlearning@mu.ie](mailto:teachingandlearning@mu.ie)

### References and wider reading

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