

ENhance QUICK GUIDE

Supporting international students in assessment

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What's the problem?

Assessment approaches methods and practices vary worldwide and sometimes students studying in the UK find our systems confusing/incomprehensible and puzzling. For example, not all nations express what is expected of students in terms of learning outcomes and the provision of transparent assessment criteria is not always undertaken. For this reason, some international students may struggle to understand how marks are derived and how they match up to the criteria we provide in programme documentation. This guide is designed to help assessors clarify key assessment issues for our students and provide some practical tips on how we can support their understanding.

Why is it important?

International students are of high importance to every university nowadays, both in terms of the income streams they bring in to HEIs and, more importantly, the cross-cultural fertilisation they provide for home students, enriching the learning environment by introducing diverse international perspectives in group activities and assignments (Killick, 2016). However, insufficiently supported international students have high rates of attrition, which is problematic for both institutions and individuals.

What can we do?

We can:

1. Explain what we see as the purposes of assessment. In some nations, assessment is solely about judging outputs, but other purposes can include determining readiness to progress to the next level of study, deciding with what grade or classification students will graduate, enabling a judgment to be made about whether a student is fit to practice in a clinical or other professional setting, determining whether professional requirements have been satisfied sufficiently to achieve professional accreditation and providing statistics for internal and external agencies. The better the students understand why we are asking them to do certain kinds of tasks, like critical reflective commentaries, the greater likelihood there is of them succeeding.
2. Clarify for all students how on any particular assignment marks are allocated according to evidence against criteria and weightings of different criteria. You may wish to play one of the games that many assessors use to induct students into assessment; for example the Biscuit Game, (which is outlined on a separate Enhance Activity briefing sheet).
3. Discuss with students what the pass mark is at this university and how this varies from nation to nation; for example in some countries the pass mark may be as low as 25%

or as high as 85%, and even 100% is not unknown as the minimum mark necessary for progression.

4. Explain what marks and grades mean (since in the US, for example, a B+ grade is regarded as depressingly poor), and explain that getting 40% doesn't mean that you got more than half of everything wrong: it simply means you have met the threshold, implying your work is satisfactory.
5. Make it clear how much reproduction of what is taught in lectures is prized in assignments, and how much use of wider reading, interpretation, reflection and analysis are valued, since some national contexts regard the accurate demonstration of learned content of prime importance, whereas in others, *use* of that information in context is the key expectation.
6. Demonstrate through practical examples what we mean by appropriate, accurate and complete referencing. In nations where key texts are ubiquitous, for example, referencing them may be considered superfluous (and may indeed be thought to imply that the assessor is ignorant of them).
7. Prepare students for diverse assessment methods. It's a good idea to outline what students can expect in terms of how we will assess them and for us to explain what, for example, a portfolio comprises, or an open book exam, or a reflective commentary, or indeed any number of methods used in the UK which may be unfamiliar in other nations.
8. Check with students what common forms of assessment exist in their countries which are less usual in the UK. For example, oral assessment at undergraduate level is widely used in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, but less so in Mediterranean nations. Similarly, the extent to which computer-based multiple-choice questions are used varies greatly from country to country, while formal presentations of the kind regularly used in the UK are largely unknown in some Asian nations.
9. Allow rehearsal opportunities at which students can ask questions, and indeed discuss with you exactly what you are expecting them to do when introducing any form of assessment which might be novel to your international students or indeed your UK ones. It's also often helpful to use annotated model answers, worked examples or other forms of exemplars (see the Enhance guide on 'Using exemplars to enhance learning and support development') in order to help students to see in detail what is required of them.
10. Demystify the purposes and value of self and peer assessment, which is uncommon or completely unknown in many nations, where students may find the idea of others judging their performance and capabilities for example entirely alien, or even unacceptable.
11. Students writing essays may be confused by our insistence on brevity and closely constrained word counts if they come from nations where this isn't considered important (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). For example, a long, personalised introduction is conventionally polite in some countries but may be dismissed by UK assessors as extraneous waffle.

12. Recognise that writing long assignments in a second language can cause problems for students who might have been top students in their state or region in English language, but may never have written assignments which exceed 1,000 words.
13. Explain how and why we use formative feedback. There can be considerable differences in expectations internationally about the type of feedback (oral, written, in-person, face-to-face, online), and its timing and purpose. It's necessary also to manage student expectations about how detailed the support we offer will be (for example, whether we are prepared to review multiple pre-submission drafts, which is common in some countries and unknown in others) and what students are expected to do when they receive feedback (requiring students to take action to improve future performances is common in some nations and less common in others).
14. Be sensitive about cultural issues by avoiding, for example, setting exams late in the day during Ramadan when Muslim students are likely to have been fasting since dawn, and questioning the importance as a criterion of making eye-contact with the audience in formal presentations, since to do so with strangers is impolite or even totally unacceptable in some Caribbean and Asian nations as well as in Maori society.

Key takeaways

There is substantial variation in methods, approaches, formats and expectations around assessment and feedback globally, and it is prudent for UK assessors to be aware that what we may regard as common practice is not ubiquitous and accordingly to brief students carefully on our requirements, particularly early in their academic careers. Actually, this is good practice for all students, as inevitably there will be many home students who will benefit from clear advice and guidance on assessment expectations.

References and further reading

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