



Assessment and Feedback Design Guidelines

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Overview

The importance of assessment

Assessment serves many purposes (Boud and Associates, 2010). The main purposes are to:

- **judge** students' achievement of learning outcomes and assure standards (assessment of learning)
- **promote**, develop and enhance student learning, student engagement and the development of graduate attributes (assessment for and as learning)

“Assessment of student learning is a fundamental function of higher education. It is the means by which we assure and express academic standards and has a vital impact on student behaviour, staff time, university reputations, league tables and, most of all, students’ future lives.”

(HEA, 2012: 7)

This means that assessment is a nuanced, complex and extremely important process, which needs to be sensitive to diverse disciplinary ways of thinking and practising as well as local contexts. A strategic programme-focused approach allows Programme Leaders and disciplinary experts to make decisions about how best to address these multiple purposes in a coherent, sequenced and ‘joined up’ way.

Assessment and feedback at Edinburgh Napier University

Designing, organising and delivering assessment so that it really works in our students’ interests is key to achieving the strategic objectives of Edinburgh Napier’s Academic Strategy 2020.

The Strategy states that what we want to achieve is

- Inspirational teaching that is based on **active engagement** and **participatory learning**, exemplified by:

- Student-centred approaches that provide intellectual challenge and engage all students as co-creators of transformational learning experiences;
- Active learning approaches such as enquiry based learning that embed the development of research skills;

Delivering this will be underpinned by:

- A **programme based approach** that stresses the **holistic coherence** of the learning experience in the design of the curriculum, teaching assessment and feedback.
- Coherent assessment and feedback **processes** that emphasise authenticity, application and inclusivity, are rich in feedback and adopt the **principles of Assessment for Learning**.

Key conditions of good assessment at Edinburgh Napier University

Overview

Assessment at Edinburgh Napier University is underpinned by the following principles and conditions:

1. **Promotion of learning** (assessment should promote as well as measure learning).
2. **Programme coherence** (assessments should encourage the gradual and planned development of skills and attributes).
3. **Clarity** (assessments should be clear in their requirements, procedures and rationales).
4. **Inclusivity** (assessment must not unfairly prejudice the chances of students with diverse backgrounds and needs).
5. **Validity** (assessments should test and measure what they state they do – the learning outcomes – rather than some proxy or un-written alternative, such as recall).
6. **Reliability** (summative assessments must provide information that can be benchmarked and compared with public standards and has some degree of repeatability).

Promotion of learning

- The design and development of curricula, learning and teaching methods, and modes of assessment are fully aligned, to promote student learning and evaluate learning outcomes.
- All modules incorporate formative assessment wherever possible, with the primary purposes of developing and consolidating knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies and providing students with constructive and timely feedback (or, rather, feedforward that informs subsequent summative assessments).
- Whilst summative assessments have the primary task of fairly and reliably evaluating knowledge and skills, they also act as a prime driver of student behaviour. Hence they are carefully designed to maximise deep learning, rather than mere recall or strategic approaches to learning.

Programme coherence

- Modules, and levels of study, complement each other, with the learning from assessments and feedback in each designed to support other assessment and feedback in the programme.
- Assessment and feedback builds on previous experiences, looking for deliberate pathways by which students have the chance to experience key assessment types and carry forward the feedback from them to use in similar but increasingly sophisticated or demanding contexts.

Clarity

- An assessment brief, underpinned by the Code of Practice for Assessment Setting is written and disseminated to students and staff to provide clarity regarding the criteria by which students will be assessed, its size/time limit, weighting, and arrangements and dates for submission and return.
- Published module marking/grading criteria are applied to all summative assessments.
- Approved module descriptors include a clear statement of the type(s) of assessment required and their alignment with learning outcomes.
- The timings and the types of assessment and feedback are communicated clearly in programme and module assessment maps, and the rationale for approaches to assessment and feedback is articulated in programme handbooks.

Inclusivity

- The conduct of summative assessment is subject to procedures and approaches which safeguard against dishonest or illegitimate practices.
- Across their programme of study, students have the opportunity to engage in diverse assessments that maintain academic standards and recognise differing learning preferences and communication styles.
- Assessment arrangements may be varied to provide an inclusive curriculum to meet the needs of individual students, for instance students with a disability.

- Anonymous marking/grading of all examinations and the principles of anonymity in assessment are applied wherever appropriate in accordance with the Code of Practice on Anonymous Assessment.
- To ensure parity and fairness among different markers, elements of questions, student cohorts and different bands, moderation takes place in accordance with the Code of Practice on the Moderation of Marks and Grades.

Validity

- In order to ensure validity, module and programme approval processes ensure that curriculum design aligns assessment to module learning outcomes.
- Assessments are judged according to published marking/grading criteria that are an expression of all or some of the module learning outcomes and cross-refer to relevant level descriptors.
- The validity of the assessment system is subject to university-wide quality assurance procedures, including peer support and review; a key element is the external examiner system.

Reliability

- Assessment is predicated on the academic judgement of professional staff supported by appropriate professional development activity.
- Academic judgement is reached through the systematic application of assessment criteria, grade and level descriptors.
- Assessment is subject to the process of internal moderation of marks, independent scrutiny of assessment processes by external examiners, and cross-institutional analysis of assessment outcomes.

The multiple purposes of assessment

There are different reasons for undertaking assessment, including using assessment summatively, formatively and sustainably.

Definitions

Summative assessment is the use of assessment to measure the level of achievement that a student has reached at a given point in time, such as the end of a particular module. It is used to explicitly measure the achievement of learning outcomes.

Formative assessment is intended to 'form' – to help students develop. It usually does this by providing regular, useful, timely and constructive high quality feedback from which they can learn to identify ways in which they need to improve. Formative assessment tasks need to be planned in a systematic way so that the learning encouraged will 'feedforward' to appropriate tasks and challenges.

Edinburgh Napier University defines formative assessment as follows:

Explicit and planned activities that feature throughout a programme and are designed for all students studying on it. Formative assessment is not credit-bearing. Its purpose is to provide high quality feedback to students on their current knowledge and skills so that these can be developed and demonstrated in subsequent summative assessments.

The idea of sustainable assessment and feedback is growing across the sector. Sustainable assessment relates to learning for the longer term.

Boud (2000) defines sustainable assessment as:

Assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs.

Boud (2000) argues that, in order to continue learning throughout their lives, learners must develop the capacity to make decisions for themselves, decide what approaches to take and become skilled in using feedback. Self-evaluation and reflection are key graduate attributes. Ultimately, as graduates and professionals, students need to take over for themselves much of the assessment that lecturers do for them, becoming skilled at drawing on the resources of workplace colleagues and others to support their ongoing development. Hence our assessment practices should equip students to be assessors of their own and others' learning and operate with a future-facing view of learning for the longer term.

Many of the complex skills and qualities that are valued in higher education are slowly learnt, taking time and sustained practice to develop (Yorke, 2001). A programme-focused approach to assessment, ensuring that there is coherence, clear linkages and development between different assessments, is needed to ensure sustainable assessment is achieved.

Assessment also performs several functions with respect to quality assurance and enhancement: it provides feedback to lecturers on student learning, evaluates a module's strengths and limitations, improves teaching, and monitors standards over time.

A programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback

A programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback gives Programme Leaders and programme teaching teams the opportunity to review practice and align the planning of assessment at the module level to the overall programme. Such an approach considers assessment and feedback holistically from the student point of view, seeking to ensure that the overall package a student experiences is manageable, coherent and fit-for-purpose (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Brown 2015). This is important because, from a student perspective, assessment design considered purely at a module level may appear as fragmented and piecemeal.

Thinking about assessment and feedback holistically at the level of the programme (Jessop et al, 2014) has the potential to:

1. **Enhance assessment and feedback practice**, improving student engagement and student outcomes with a positive impact on retention, progression and satisfaction (including NSS scores relating to assessment and feedback).
2. **Reduce staff and student workloads**, recognising concerns about over-assessment in the sector. Typically, a programme level consideration provides opportunities at module level to reduce assessment loading but make it more effective for the students.
3. Encourage students' ongoing **engagement with feedback**, building on the principles of assessment for learning.

Adopting a programme-focused approach

Natural opportunities arise to consider the assessment and feedback strategy within a programme at various stages of existing processes: module and programme design and approval, periodic programme re-approval and annual review. Programme teams and module tutors are encouraged to use these opportunities to reflect upon the assessment and feedback practice.

The particular approach adopted towards assessment and feedback should be articulated in the programme handbook for the benefit of both students and teaching staff, as well as external examiners, programme review panels and professional body accreditation panels. This may involve using one of the existing assessment and feedback templates within the programme handbook template, or a suitable alternative. Sophisticated online tools are also available to help programme teams map, understand and describe assessment and feedback across a programme (for example, Map My Programme).

The assessment and feedback strategy should be established through the normal peer review quality processes for modules and programmes. Through these processes, academic peers will be looking for a coherent approach that supports students' learning. Consideration should be given to the balance, phasing, overall loading, variety of assessment and opportunities for feedback and feedforward. Indicators of good assessment and feedback practice will also include the module and programme performance indicators, in particular the students' module evaluation; student outcomes (attainment and progression) and programme-level NSS outcomes.

Designing assessment within a Programme Focus

Programme Leaders and programme teams should consider assessment and feedback holistically from a student perspective.

- Think about the **cumulative effect** of the individual assessment tasks and feedback at module level across a student's programme of study, looking at how and when assessment and feedback occur.
- Consider the balance of a student's **assessment workload**, including bunching of deadlines, variety of assessment tasks and opportunities for students' **engagement with feedback** (and feedforward) across a **level** of study and **across years**.
- Give consideration to the balance of **formative** work and **summative** assessment and the balance and sequencing of **assessment types** across the programme, such that students are enabled **progressively** to master required skills, learn from feedback and demonstrate all the intended learning outcomes.
- Review how modules **build on each other** and **align** effectively to demonstrate appropriate outcomes, and develop appropriate learning and graduate attributes.
- **Within modules**, consider the ways in which students will be supported to gauge the progress they're making towards the learning outcomes, understand assessment criteria and standards and develop and improve their learning as the module unfolds.

The role of modules within a programme-focused approach

The basic building blocks of programmes at Edinburgh Napier University are 20 credit modules, each of which will have specified assessment tasks. The assessment tasks will lead to summative marks (used to define achievement and progression) underpinned by feedback that supports learning. This approach does not change within a programme focus. Assessment occurs at the module level, where all module learning outcomes are assessed, and these 20 credit modules (with associated assessment and feedback) continue to be the building blocks of programmes. However, in discussion with programme teams, module tutors are encouraged to look for opportunities to reduce the assessment workload associated with summative assessment while improving student engagement with feedback. In addition, module tutors are encouraged to explicitly articulate the role of feedback (and feedforward) in their modules.

There are no new restrictions on the number of pieces of summative assessment within a module: the normal regulations continue to apply. However, module leaders are encouraged to look for opportunities to reduce the assessment burden where possible. Summative assessment brings with it marking, data management and quality assurance procedures which can overload staff, and over-assessment can also over-burden students, pushing them into surface approaches to learning or into a tick-box mentality where they focus on marks (McDowell, 2012; Wass et al, 2015). Hence it is good practice to review the extent to which multiple summative assessment points are needed in a module. There is evidence that **streamlining** assessment into **one integrative assignment** (see, for example, Boud et al, 2010) and carefully aligning the tasks which feed into the summative assessment can pay dividends in terms of staff time and student engagement (see for example, McCann, 2016).

The key to this is thinking carefully about the balance set within the module between **formative activities** and the **summative task(s)**.

Describing Assessment within a Module: The Module Descriptor

Module tutors developing modules should use the module descriptor form to articulate the chosen approach to assessment and feedback. In particular:

- Identify when and how **feedback** is planned within the module (under “Formative Assessment” on the module descriptor template). Typically this will briefly outline **non-credit bearing** activities/tasks planned for the students on the module (for example, feedback provided on draft elements of the final summative assignment; on practice exam questions; via peer-or self-review activities; on in-class tasks or discussion of criteria using exemplars; via group feedback in seminars; in regular progress-review tutorials).
- Describe type(s) of summative assessment, including weighting and scheduling (under “Summative Assessment” on the Module Descriptor).
- If feedback is gained from developmental longitudinally-linked **low stakes summative assessment tasks**, this should also be described under “formative assessment”.
- Consider principles of effective feedback and assessment for learning.

Principles of good assessment for learning practice, with examples of different approaches to assessment and feedback, are outlined more fully later in these guidelines and will be supported with ongoing staff development activity and support from the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement.

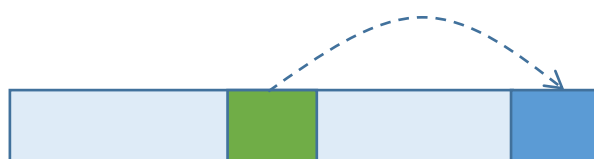
Designing and implementing effective assessment and feedback

Planning formative assessment and feedback at module level

It is widely accepted that good assessment for learning practice creates low-stakes opportunities for feedback as students progress through modules. It is important, therefore, to plan feedback effectively and deliberately to develop student understanding and confidence appropriate to the level of study.

This might include the following approaches:

- A. If a **single summative assessment task** is used in a module, separate formative task(s) should be available which provide feedback to learners on their current subject-related knowledge and skills so these can be developed in subsequent tasks, as illustrated below.



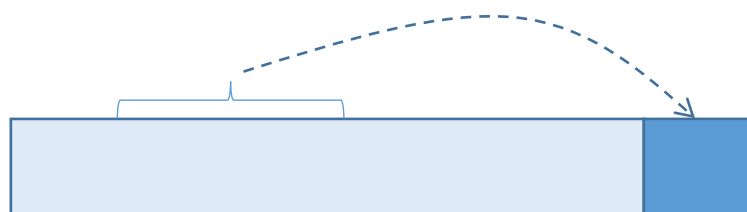
Within module: formative to summative

A range of indicative formative activities are outlined later in the Focus on Feedback section of these guidelines, which illustrate diverse ways of fostering feedback-rich environments at module and programme-level. Here the presiding principle is that ‘providing developmental feedback is the most important thing we can do for students’ (Brown, 2015). Suggestions for further resources and practical ideas to try are included.

Some approaches are necessarily tutor-intensive, and this is another reason for planning carefully across programme teams, so programme teams may identify where and when tutor-intensive feedback loading occurs. However, while what the *teacher* does is an important determinant of academic success, a considerable body of HE research now maintains that students should be afforded a much more active, participative and dialogic role in assessment and feedback processes (Boud 2000; Rust, O’Donovan, and Price 2005, Sambell et al, 2013, Carless, 2015). Activities and guided discussions around tasks, criteria and standards are needed to help develop students’ assessment and feedback literacy (Price et al, 2012), so that students can focus on the important business of learning, rather

than spending too much time and energy guessing what lecturers want them to do (Brown, 2015), or working out what standards or criteria might look like in practice.

This kind of guidance is known to be highly prized by students (Hendry, 2013; Carless and Chan, 2016).



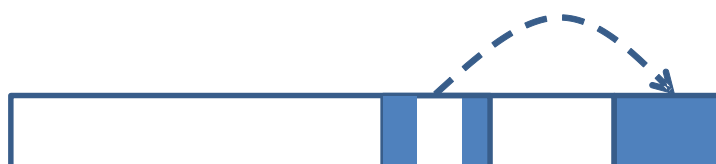
Within module: guidance and support for summative

Such activities go beyond simply giving students criteria lists or rubrics in a module guide, or expecting students to understand the assignment brief in written form. Instead, they give students the chance to discuss, apply and internalise criteria and standards so they are supported to see the relationship between them and the grades awarded (Sadler, 2010).

Examples include tutors guiding their students to discuss the assignment task demands in groups and getting them to rephrase in their own words; discussing exemplars of good, weak and satisfactory work; peer feedback exercises (Nicol et al, 2014); self-review and reflection on feedback. The key here is that the more carefully-guided opportunities students have to engage with the task goals, criteria and exemplars, the more able they will be able to internalise requirements and develop the capacity to regulate their own work (Nicol, 2009).

- B. **Multiple discrete**, isolated summative assessments in a single module can disproportionately increase workload for students and staff and, if each ‘stands alone’, this can reduce opportunities for formative feedback and timely feedforward.

If more than one summative assessment task is used in a single module, good assessment for learning practice is normally for the tasks to be clearly linked longitudinally, in a phased or integrated manner. Thus if feedback within a module is derived from summative assessment tasks then this will usually imply the summative assessment contains components that are linked, so that feedback from the first feeds into the subsequent task.



Within module: Summative to summative

This 'low-stakes' approach is successfully used as a pedagogic tactic in some disciplines, and can be particularly effective when inducting 'new' students in the early stages of a programme, or during project-work that involves students meeting key milestones.

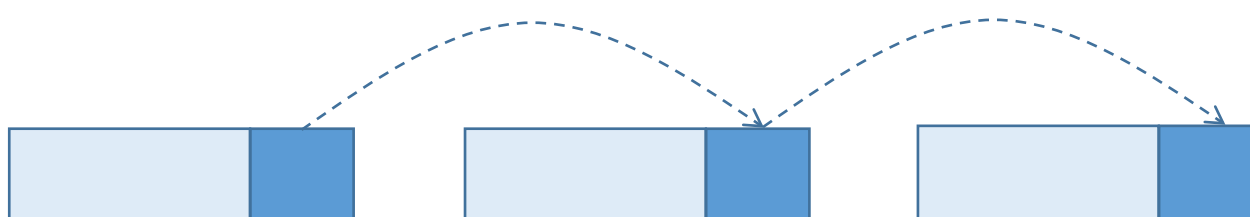
Building assessment and feedback across programmes

There is a growing body of literature that shows how assessment and feedback at the level of the programme, as well as at the module, determines student satisfaction and learning. For example, measures of student satisfaction and understanding correlate positively with the amount and quality of feedback on a programme, whilst there tends to be a negative relationship with the amount of assessment in a course (Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2013). Feedback is an important aspect of programme design, and students need opportunities for feedback on their ongoing performance and achievements which is prompt, informative, helpful and that they can act on.

It helps to communicate plans clearly to students so they know how, where and when they can expect feedback on their programme, and get advice on how, when and where they are expected to make best use of it (Price et al, 2011; Winstone et al, 2016). Programme-focused feedback protocols can be very useful to support this. It is also helpful when students not only have clear communications about each module's assessment expectations, standards and marking criteria set out in briefs, but, ideally, opportunities for discussion about the bigger picture across the programme, so they can understand, contextualise and interpret feedback.

Programme teams are encouraged to think about, and explain to students, how assessment and feedback works across the programme. This may involve mapping, sequencing and streamlining assessment within modules and across the programme, so that assessment and feedback is: balanced in workload, coherent and integrative, and developmental and supports progression throughout a programme.

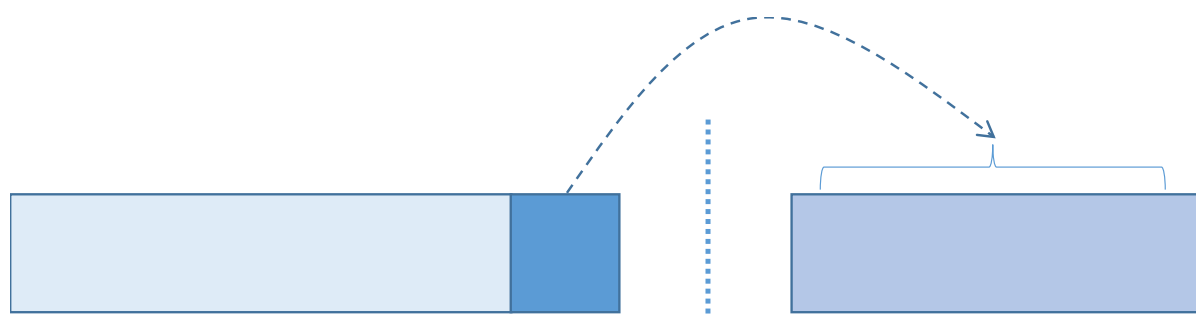
This involves the careful planning and sequencing of assessment tasks so that: students see the links between modules and are supported by staff to do so; assessment and feedback builds on previous experiences, looking for deliberate pathways by which students have the chance to experience key assessment types and carry forward the feedback from them to use in similar but increasingly sophisticated or demanding contexts.



Across levels/years: Summative to summative

Feedback is of most value when it focuses on work that is ongoing, so that students can act upon it to enhance the quality of their learning. If it comes at the end of a module, therefore, it should aim to have a future focus, looking beyond the current assessment task towards new challenges, so that students can see the reason to engage meaningfully with it, and are explicitly encouraged to do so by, for example, their Personal Development Tutor.

While this might involve looking ahead to tasks within the university, it might also, of course, look ahead to longer-term learning, after graduation, as illustrated below.



Beyond modules/programme: Summative to Professional Practice

Engaging students with feedback

Feedback, as information which helps students review what they know, understand and can do in their studies, and which helps them identify any areas they need to improve on, is the lifeblood of learning. However, it's also important to remember that 'traditional' feedback (which is typically viewed as tutor-produced comments on summative work) has its limitations, however well-crafted it is. While the quality of the comments are important, equally important is the quality of students' interactions with them and the subsequent actions that are taken. Learners need to make sense of tutor comments and use them to enhance the quality of their work or their learning strategies (Nicol, 2010; Boud and Molloy, 2013). In short, students need opportunities to identify gaps in their knowledge (Carless, 2015), but sometimes feedback is given to students in a form that can't be used and at a time that's not suitable for them to act upon it.

Students' engagement with feedback thrives when they experience it embedded in and threaded through the curriculum in a wide range of forms and settings. In an important sense, this means moving from seeing feedback as a product or message which is 'delivered' to students, towards a view of feedback as an iterative process which is threaded throughout good programme designs:

“where there is continuity, adaptivity and development over time, with both teacher commenting and teacher–student discussions linked to an overall goal.”

(Nicol, 2010)

This is discussed in more detail in the later section on formative assessment and feedback and most evidently takes place at a module level, but a coherent 'joined up' programme focus amplifies the benefits. There is growing recognition, too, that more can sometimes be done with a programme-focus to explicitly promote what Winstone and Nash (2017) call the 'proactive recipience' of feedback, such that students are primed to actively make use of feedback, rather than receive it passively.

Principles for Good Assessment and Feedback Practice

The following evidence-based principles are widely accepted as a useful means of helping staff to design good assessment and feedback practices in innovative and supportive ways. They are all addressed throughout the following guidelines.

According to Nicol (2008, 20) good assessment and feedback practice should:

1. help to clarify what good performance is (involving goals, criteria, standards)
2. encourage 'time and effort' on challenging learning tasks
3. deliver high-quality feedback information that helps learners to self-correct
4. provide opportunities to act on feedback (to close any gap between current and desired performance)
5. ensure that summative assessment has a positive impact on learning
6. encourage interaction and dialogue around learning (peer and tutor-student)
7. facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning
8. give assessment choice
9. involve students in decision making about assessment policy and practice
10. support the development of learning groups and communities
11. encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
12. provide information to academics that can be used to help shape their teaching.

Using assessment to promote learning

Overview

This section encourages module leaders and programme teams to take a fresh look at their practice to make sure that, as far as possible, they are addressing the fundamental principle that assessment promotes as well as measures learning (HEA, 2016). It draws on pedagogic research and key initiatives that have impacted significantly on how assessment has been viewed and enhanced in recent years (HEA, 2012, QAA, 2013, HEA, 2016).

“Assessment is at the heart of student learning. It drives the learning process, providing a focus for student attention and time”

(Pokorny, 2016: 70)

The section includes information relating to:

- Using assessment to promote learning
- What are the key features of assessment for learning?
- Illustrative examples of assessment for learning in practice.

Using assessment to promote learning

Assessment is widely recognised as one of the most significant influences on students' experiences of higher education (Boud and Associates, 2010). Whenever possible, we need to consider our current practices to ensure that they are fit-for-purpose (Brown, 2015), and, most importantly, that they support and stimulate learning, as well as measuring and quality assuring it.

“Assessment always defines the actual curriculum”

(Ramsden, 2008: 182)

Assessment tasks act as a powerful lever for student learning. Students usually look to assessment to define what it is the programme is all about and where they place their energy. Astute course designers make a virtue of this necessity, ensuring that, as far as possible, assessment regimes promote deep approaches to learning which will be valuable in the longer term, as well as the immediate context (Wang, 2013).

Assessment for learning is now almost universally accepted (Rhodes 2016) in the literature as an important approach which sets out to

- support and improve student learning, enabling students to realise their potential, persist and succeed
- encourage engagement in disciplinary ways of thinking and practising
- foster a student's sense of scholarship and belonging to a community of learners
- empower students as learners and active participants in higher education.

What are the key features of assessment for learning?

Learning-oriented assessment

Carless (2015: 964) has synthesised the key aspects of assessment for learning in higher education, drawing upon significant studies of assessment and distilling them into three core inter-related features. He uses the useful term 'learning-oriented assessment.'

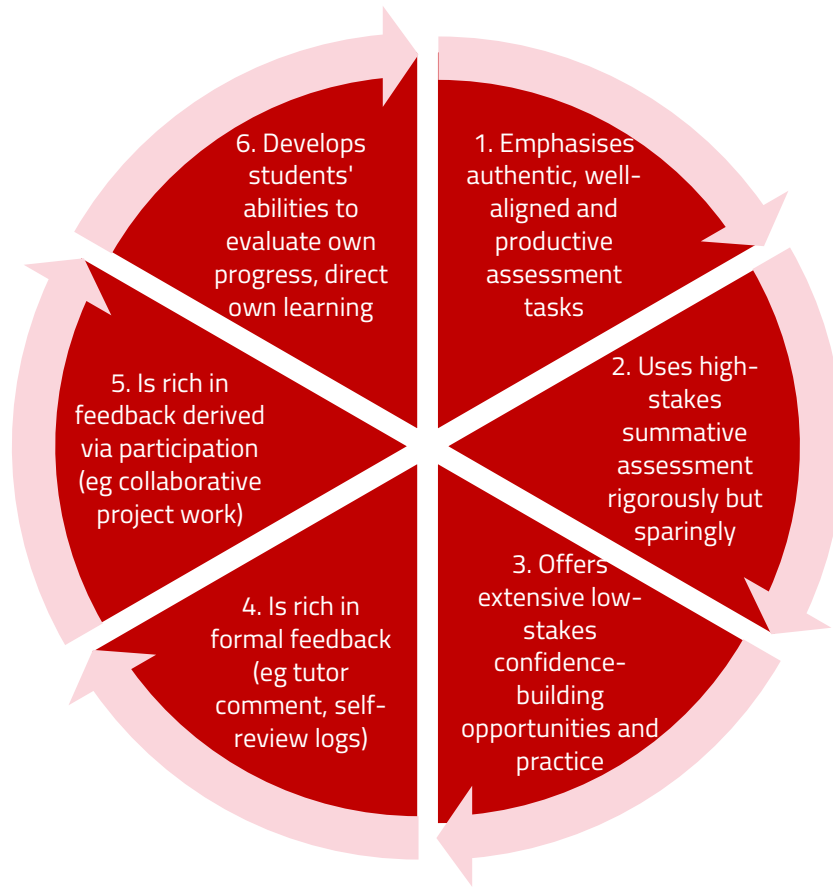
Key features of Assessment for Learning include

- **Learning-focused assessment tasks**, which stimulate productive student learning and the development of valued dispositions.
- **Student engagement with feedback**, with ample ongoing opportunities for interaction and dialogue around students' work.
- Explicit opportunities for students to develop their evaluative expertise, so that learners are gradually supported to better **understand what quality looks like** in their discipline. This helps them make informed evaluative judgments about the quality of their own work, which is critical for self-monitoring.

Assessment for Learning (AfL)

Another approach (Sambell et al., 2013), building on more than a decade of research into the impact of assessment on students' approaches to learning, proposes that assessment for learning environments (at module and programme level) are underpinned by six inter-related conditions.

Six conditions underpinning Assessment for Learning (AfL) environments in Higher Education



The six AfL conditions can be used as key areas for module leaders and programme design teams to consider as they review and enhance their approaches to assessment and feedback.

1. *How engaging, authentic and productive are your assessment tasks?*

Do your summative assessments make students feel like they're 'going through the motions' in a formulaic way, or do they enthuse and engage them, so they can see the point of doing them beyond just getting the marks? Using types of assessment that are much more like the 'real things' that academics or professionals in the field do can engage students in much more meaningful ways than those which students assume require them to regurgitate knowledge or 'fake good'.

A useful way to help you ascertain how authentic your assessment is could be, for instance, to ask yourself where in the programme do you help students answer questions in job interviews like 'Can you describe an occasion on your course when you have had to work pragmatically with incomplete information?', 'Can you talk about an experience of group work that didn't go well, and what you did to resolve the problems?' or 'Could you tell us about how you have used data from a diverse range of resources to help you solve a complex problem?'

2. *Do you achieve a good overall balance between summative and formative assessment?*

Summative assessment must be carried out effectively but not allowed to dominate and drive the whole of the teaching, learning and assessment process. An over-focus on marks and grades leads to student engagement which is qualitatively different to engagement in genuine learning. Time, space and energy must be found to infuse the student experience with formative assessment and, as far as possible, reduce the dominance of summative assessment. It's important to help students see the links between the two.

3. Do you create opportunities for practice and rehearsal?

Students benefit from having opportunities to try out their learning, practice and improve, building competence and confidence before they are summatively assessed. We should try to avoid the situation where the first opportunity students get to do something and receive feedback and guidance on it is in the high-stakes context of being marked. It is possible to build in a variety of formative group and individual low-stakes tasks and activities which give students chance to 'have a go' and learn by doing, rather than simply listening, within active and social learning environments. Where students are doing an assessment format that is (for them) unfamiliar, it's good practice to discuss and, ideally, try out the format before it 'counts' for marks.

4. Designing formal feedback to improve learning.

Well-designed and planned feedback is essential to students' learning. However, there are limitations in the conventional ways that universities provide feedback. Often it is in the form of tutor-written feedback on each individual student's work at the end of a module. We need to address the limitations of this approach by building in other kinds of formal feedback from tutors, more frequently and at earlier stages so that, for instance, comments are received before the fact and they can 'feed forward' (Hounsell et al, 2008) directly into refinements and revisions of future work. It is also important to draw on other sources of feedback including self and peer review and reflection (Carless et al., 2011; Carless, 2015).

5. *Designing opportunities for developmental feedback through participation.*

Active, collaborative and dialogic approaches to teaching, learning and assessment bring with them an intrinsic supply of feedback to benefit student learning. Students benefit from ample opportunity to enter into tutor-facilitated discussions and interactions around the work they're doing, so they can gauge their progress. As students work together, discuss ideas and methods, and interact with teachers they can test out their own ideas and skills, see how other students go about things and begin to absorb the standards and requirements of their subjects. This approach is very common in studio-based subjects and design subjects but students may need help to see this as 'feedback'. This type of feedback can also be generated through participation beyond the formal curriculum.

6. *Developing students as self-assessors and effective life-long learners*

If students are to be active agents in their own learning, they need to be able to make decisions for themselves, decide what approaches to take, reflect on what counts as quality and evaluate their own progress. There should be opportunities for students to be active participants in assessment and feedback processes and develop assessment literacy (Price et al, 2012). Ultimately, as graduates and professionals, students need to take over for themselves much of the assessment that lecturers currently do for them and become skilled at drawing on the resources of workplace colleagues and practice environments to support their ongoing development.

What might this look like in practice?

Examples of assessment that can support active student learning and meaningful engagement vary according to local context. Some illustrative vignettes of tactics lecturers have used to adopt assessment for learning approaches within a module are indicated below.

Learning-focused assessment tasks

The first two vignettes involved tutors setting authentic tasks or extended assignments that aimed to promote student engagement, over time, in meaningful activity with ongoing feedback which supported them to meet the learning outcomes.

In geography, a tutor wanted to involve his students in working with authentic data and producing work based on their research. He decided to establish a field trip to a local farm, where he helped the students to compile data about the soil animals. Supported by a series of formative exercises and activities which helped them work on the data, the students wrote up the details for an individual summative assessment. A report, collaboratively produced by staff and students, was also produced for the farm, so that the work had relevance both to the students and the farm.

Literature students studying modern American poetry were invited to work in groups to compile anthologies, as opposed to writing a traditional essay. Although the assessment was written and submitted individually, the approach aimed to give students the chance to work together, rather than in isolation, as they were traditionally accustomed to do when preparing their academic essays.

The task was scaffolded into two inter-related stages. The first task focused on the introduction to the anthology, with each student creating a section focussing on their selected theme. This was presented to the group for formative tutor and peer feedback. The final piece of submitted work was a reflective review of the anthology, focussing on evaluating the editorial decisions made, the necessary omissions, and the ways in which the student's section in the anthology's Introduction made a significant contribution to the overall collection.

Enhancing feedback

For assessment to promote learning, students need to receive appropriate feedback which they can 'feedforward' into future work. The following three vignettes focus on just some of the many ways staff have sought provide students with timely, forward-looking feedback which supports current and future learning.

“The change that has the greatest potential to improve student learning is a shift in the balance of summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment has important purposes in selection, certification and institutional accountability, but its dominance has distorted the potential of assessment to promote learning (assessment for learning).”
(HEA, 2012: 9)

In Electronic Engineering, second-year students were required to work on a design-and-build project. The tutor was keen to provide students with feedback at interim stages of the work, but was concerned that the process of taking in, reading and writing comments on students' progress reports in practice took too long, so his feedback was proving too slow to really benefit students as they progressed through the module.

As he redeveloped the module, he changed the overall assessment design to require his students to present their ideas about their project developments to him and the rest of the group. He structured the presentations to focus on particular stages of the design process, so that the students would gain vital feedback on their plans in time to alter them, if necessary, to improve their final outcomes.

At each progress report session, the tutor used a checklist of assessment criteria against which to structure the students' feedback. This involved giving students an indication of whether their work was satisfactory, unsatisfactory or outstanding in relation to the module learning outcomes, with the tutor circling each criterion and producing some comments about the strengths of the current work and areas to improve.

The tutor was pleased with the approach, as it meant he could focus his attention on interacting with the students and discussing their work, whilst simultaneously offering targeted feedback comments and ensuring that students realised whether they were on the right lines.

In the next example, staff wanted to reduce the number of summative assessment checkpoints throughout the module, as it seemed to be promoting a 'tick and go' mentality in students, who were over-focused on marks accumulation, rather than the integrated development of knowledge and skills.

In a History module on research methods, students were asked to undertake various tasks and exercises (e.g. primary document analysis) and document them in a personal portfolio. These pieces were not marked, although they were discussed in contact time with the lecturer and fellow students. Towards the end of the module students were asked to submit a concise summary of the work they had done, and sum up how they had met the module learning outcomes. The tutor felt pleased that the new strategy dissociated each small piece of work from summative assessment and provided good opportunities for formative assessment, engagement with feedback and improvement during the module.

The following vignette used online quizzes which combined formative assessment with the summative, enabling students to work at their own pace and in their own time, supported by plentiful feedback, in a way that stimulated time on task.

Gateway assessments use automatic feedback and marking to give instant feedback and repeated practice opportunities for students. Once a student is confident with their performance, they can pass through the gateway to a similar task which is credit-bearing.

Voelkel (2013) set an 80% gateway – students needed to pass the formative at 80% (which they could take as many times as they liked) before they were allowed to attempt the one-shot-only summative. Students got instant feedback on the formative, and then feedback on the summative once the test closed (therefore preventing collusion).

Engaging students with self-review and notions of quality work

Formative activities which help students start to build their appreciation of standards and develop a sense of quality in the discipline are needed if students are to regulate their work and make sense of and act upon feedback.

The following vignettes illustrate ways of helping students develop a better sense of what counts as quality work, so that students can learn to review their own progress and improve their performance in the next assessment.

A lecturer in Law used one class session for her first-year students to spend time reviewing the formative work they had handed in by comparing it to a model answer with a marking guide. Students were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of their own work and consider what mark it merited. After that the tutor handed out her feedback comments and the mark that she had awarded. This meant all the students were very interested to look at the teacher feedback and compare it to their own judgements, rather than filing it away or ignoring it. More importantly, the activity opened up fruitful discussions, facilitated by the lecturer, which started to orientate the new students to the standards she expected, the success criteria and the meanings of her feedback comments.

Learning through the process of applying criteria to someone else's work is extremely valuable. It encourages students to 'see' standards and criteria in concrete ways, evaluate and benchmark their own performance and to improve it (Sadler, 2010). The shared discussion of exemplars is a particularly powerful approach in helping students learn to develop this skill (Carless and Chan, 2015).

In a Humanities discipline, students were asked to undertake a 500 word task as directed study, and bring their work to the lecture. Tutors provided three exemplars of the task which typified excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory work. Individually, using agreed criteria, students were asked to place the examples in rank order and generate feedback which would improve each one. Next, they compared their evaluations and feedback comments with peers and staff. The lecturer carefully structured the session, with extended plenary discussions throughout, which allowed students to discuss and gain insight into the teaching team's perspectives on quality work and the meanings of the feedback comments they would offer to each example in relation to the criteria. Students were then required to self-assess their own work and submit an action-plan, based on their reflections, in the summative assignment for the module.

Focus on feedback

Overview

This section includes information relating to:

- What is good feedback?
- Common problems with feedback - research findings from across the sector
- Principles of good feedback
- Suggestions for facilitating student engagement with their assessment feedback
- Enhancing feedback practice.

What is good feedback?

Good feedback should be timely, relevant, clear, task-focused and motivational. There are numerous useful, highly practical resources devoted to diverse ways of giving feedback. See, for example, Race (2014) and Brown (2015).

The most usual way of viewing feedback is to see it as information which is provided to students on their performance. Teacher commenting is the most typical format. This might include, for example, comments that are written, word-

“Feedback is the life-blood of learning and it must be kept flowing.”

(Rowntree, 1987)

“Concentrating on giving students detailed and developmental feedback is the single most useful thing we can do for our students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, who may not understand the rules of the higher education game. The time we spend on giving detailed and developmental formative and summative feedback should not be skimmed: this is crucial to foster student learning and is the most time-consuming aspect of assessment but arguably the most important thing we do for learners.”

(Brown, 2015)

processed, delivered verbally, digitally recorded, posted online and so on.

As educators, we need to think carefully about the ways in which we construct these comments so that they are likely to make a positive difference to the quality of student learning. Hounsell (2015) has produced a useful briefing sheet on **commenting constructively**, which includes:

- 'new' ways of commenting (such as audio feedback, generic feedback)
- advice on how to make your feedback specific, clear and focussing on what matters most
- suggestions for personalising feedback without getting personal
- approaches which blend criticism with praise.

We also need to think carefully about **when** these comments are made available to students, so that they have a positive impact on future work. Students need opportunities to act on feedback and 'close the loop' (Carless, 2015).

The most effective approach to feedback, then, is to see it as a **process** which is designed into modules and programmes so that students activate it and use it in an ongoing and developmental way (Boud and Molloy, 2013).

This is to view feedback as an integral part of the curriculum. It is also about fostering a learning culture which enables students to monitor their own progress and **engage with feedback** to improve their performance. This idea underpins the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strand in the Academic Strategy which aligns closely with the principles of good feedback distilled from the literature by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). Some of these principles are indicated below.

Good feedback practice – helps clarify what good performance is

We can give students clear criteria by which they will be judged, but often academic tasks are complex and the criteria are tacit, or at least difficult to explain to new students using words alone. Model answers and exemplars can be particularly useful for this reason, as can activities which support students to engage productively with assessment criteria, as in the following vignette.

In the early stages of an Engineering module, the tutor wanted his students to think deeply about what the summative task (a poster presentation outlining their research project) would eventually entail. He got them to work in groups to develop appropriate criteria, focused on the LOs, and weightings which could be used to evaluate the poster. Each group presented their proposed marking scheme and criteria to their peers, and the tutor used them to construct the final version. This encouraged the students to engage much more deeply with the important dimensions of the task (the literature survey, evaluation, the use of evidence) rather than focusing too much attention on simple presentational issues.

Good feedback practice – facilitates the development of self-evaluation in learning

We can use peer- and self-review, perhaps supported by tutor feedback, and ask students to anticipate challenges before a task and then reflect on their performance afterwards.

In one module, students were required to produce a reflective essay, based on entries they had uploaded to an online reflective log, which the tutor had structured around the series of formative activities and tasks threaded throughout the module delivery.

On another module, a lecturer created a series of online objective tests and quizzes, with associated automated feedback, that learners could use to see how far they were developing their own understanding of a topic being studied.

Good feedback practice – delivers high quality information to students about their learning

We can make sure our feedback will help students self-correct by referring to clear criteria and providing corrective advice. We can also provide ample opportunities for students to work through problem sets in tutorials, where feedback is available when they get ‘stuck.’ Other approaches might include giving students plenty of guidance and insight in advance of learners attempting a summative task, such as a pre-emptive list of frequently occurring problems, or discussions of common mistakes people often make with, say, difficult disciplinary concepts.

Good feedback practice – encourages academics’ and peer dialogue around learning

We can encourage the idea that feedback is not just a transmission, but part of a learning dialogue. One way to do this is to use questions in written feedback, rather than only statements (e.g. ‘I’m not sure I understood this point – can you explain it to yourself or a friend?’ rather than ‘I don’t understand this’). Asking students to look at each other’s work and engaging them in peer review can help with this too.

Good feedback practice – encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem

The ‘feedback sandwich’ – starting with a positive comment, then critical feedback, then ending with something positive – is one approach to this. In general, we need to give feedback that is an evaluation of the task not the person. We need to think carefully about the language used in feedback, attempting to establish a learning relationship with the individual involved (Jonsson, 2013).

“It is essential for us to understand not only how best to design and send the feedback ‘message’, but also how to influence the way students receive that message – that is, what they do with it. This emphasis, Carless (2015) terms the ‘new paradigm’: one that frames feedback as a process of dialogue, wherein students’ involvement, engagement, and implementation of feedback is crucial.”

(Winstone et al, 2015: 7)

Good feedback practice – provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance

We need to '**close the feedback loop**' by giving opportunities for students to show they have learnt from and responded to our feedback. This is often difficult in a modular system in which feedback comes late in the module. We can use submission of drafts followed by feedback, two-stage assignments where feedback on stage one helps with stage two, and careful planning of programmes to involve gradual development of skills to help us with this.


Common problems with feedback to students: research findings

Despite the consensus on the merits of feedback and the many hours most of us commit to providing it, there is widespread evidence of student dissatisfaction. For example, in the National Student Survey results, feedback is consistently rated poorly in comparison with other measures of satisfaction (Russell et al, 2013). So what is going wrong?

Research has identified some common problems with the feedback students receive in higher education: slow feedback, late feedback, unclear feedback, feedback is summative rather than developmental, feedback is too critical, and feedback is not critical enough. Each of these areas will now be addressed from the student point of view.

My feedback is too slow - I have to wait too long to get it

A survey of over 6,000 UK first-year students at 23 higher education institutions reported that in one-third of subject areas students felt feedback was not sufficiently prompt (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Slow feedback causes frustration and means that students may struggle to remember the topics that it addresses.



*“Feedback is like fish:
it goes off very quickly.”*
(Brown, 2016)

At Edinburgh Napier University, the guideline is for feedback to be given within three working weeks of assessment submission.

My feedback is too late to be of any use to me

This differs from slow feedback in referring to the point in the module or programme when students receive the feedback. If teacher feedback is only provided at the end of a module, after all the relevant assessments have been completed, then it is hard for students to use that feedback to progressively develop their skills and knowledge. Good feedback engages students with the feedback, so it needs to involve them in activities which ‘look forward’ to the next similar task or assessment and helps students do better next time. This is why the focus should be on providing really good feedback after formative tasks which can feedforward to the summative ones.

Unclear feedback- my feedback doesn't help me understand

Comments made by tutors on work can be vague and cryptic (for example, “poor effort – more critical interpretation”). Students may not be able to understand quite how or where they went wrong, what they did well, or how to improve their situation from such comments (Jonsson, 2013). A related problem is that some students misunderstand guidance and feedback because they do not understand the professional assumptions and requirements (‘the academic discourse’) of a particular subject (Hounsell, 2003).

Glossaries can help, but often the solution is more dialogue and interaction (Richards & Pilcher, 2014) so that students can immediately raise questions, interrogate assumptions and see alternative (and better) ways of doing things. Additionally, problems occur when students do not understand the standards and criteria that are used at different levels. It is important to build in plentiful opportunities for discussion and activities which help students fully appreciate these (Price et al, 2012) so that they are able to activate feedback comments.

There is plenty of good advice about high impact commenting practices and commenting constructively (see, for example, Hounsell, 2015). However, it is important to realise that even if we manage to craft exceptionally fine teacher comments, providing them as if they are a gift or a product which somehow ‘stands alone’ is unlikely to be sufficient. We need to move from delivering comments in a uni-directional manner (Nicol, 2010) towards a process which involves students in interacting with feedback and, at best, learning to seek, generate and activate it (Nicol et al, 2014).

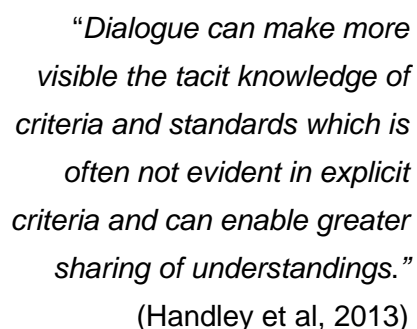
“When framed as a dialogue, the feedback process automatically becomes a two-way system in which the student occupies a central role. Engaging in dialogue might involve undertaking peer assessment, requesting feedback on specific aspects of one’s work, or receiving formative feedback on drafts; tasks such as these require “coordinated teacher-student and peer-to-peer interaction as well as active learner engagement.”
(Nicol, 2010: 503)

Feedback is summative rather than developmental

Good feedback should focus on the task that was assessed, rather than any summative mark. It should show the student how to perform a similar assessment better next time (and how to keep up good practice) rather than direct attention to a simple mark that can be read then forgotten. It should help students reflect. Lizzio and Wilson (2008) found from their mixed methods research study that student satisfaction surrounding their feedback was most strongly associated with the developmental dimension. A fundamental issue here is the requirement for much assessment to bear a 'double load' of both formative and summative functions: the former requires developmental communication to the student, the latter justificatory communication to peers and externals. These two modes are often conflicting, so it can be useful to separate them where possible.

Feedback is inconsistent- different tutors say different things

Students get confused and frustrated when they feel that tutors are not all looking for the same things (Flint & Johnson, 2010). It is valuable to hold as many team-based staff discussions as possible, especially with newcomers (Handley et al, 2013) around assessment tasks, associated guidance, criteria, marking schemes, and feedback protocols to address this. Dialogue based on concrete examples of sample work helps staff share their interpretations of standards.



“Dialogue can make more visible the tacit knowledge of criteria and standards which is often not evident in explicit criteria and can enable greater sharing of understandings.”
(Handley et al, 2013)

Feedback is too critical

Feedback needs to be constructive, not simply a catalogue of errors. Feedback can have a powerful backwash effect on students' desire and willingness to carry on with their studies (Pitt and Norton, 2017). There is a strong affective and interpersonal dimension to feedback (Winstone et al, 2015). Feedback that is overly negative may act as a powerful disincentive for student learning, particularly for those students who already have low self-esteem (Young, 2000).

Feedback is not critical enough

Because tutors want to avoid damaging students' self-esteem they sometimes praise work when it is not merited. Good feedback keeps focused on the task, rather than the individual, and is respectful but honest when serious problems need to be pointed out. Praise where it is not deserved may, paradoxically, actually reduce student performance (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Suggestions for facilitating student engagement with feedback processes

There are many reasons why giving feedback can be hard and frustrating, and why following the ideas listed above can be difficult. Some common issues are now discussed.

Students don't engage in my formative assessments

Requiring students to undertake non-credit bearing assessments can sometimes be difficult if students perceive that these activities 'don't count'. Encourage your students to engage by:

- Making the links between the formative and summative tasks explicit and communicating the benefits frequently. One of the key drivers for student interaction with feedback is the apparent immediacy of its use on similar tasks (Zimbardi et al, 2017).
- Being very clear in your expectations that all students will engage and the sound pedagogical reasons for this.
- Developing a personal habit and institutional culture of focusing feedback effort on formative assessments, so that students learn the benefits of engaging.
- Arranging formative assessments that are planned to require engagement (for example peer-reviewed or public displays, talks, face-to-face meetings).
- Requiring elements of the formative assessment as 'gateways' to the summative, such as including a reflective assessment of their formative performance as a part of the summative submission.

My students do not act on my feedback

Despite tutors committing hours of time providing feedback, it is a common experience for students to repeat the same mistakes or, worse, fail to pick up the feedback at all. We need to support learners' active engagement with feedback.

Some ideas that can help are:

- Students often look at the summative mark first, and may ignore written comments. So the comments can be given first. If the assessment is formative only, then a mark may not always be needed or appropriate.
- Require self-assessment in the light of feedback. For instance, students can be required to submit an assessment of their mark in the light of the formative feedback they have received. For example, 10% of the summative assignment might depend on students submitting a self-assessed mark with a brief justification.
- Invite students to request the feedback they would find most helpful.
- Make sure there are chances to improve on skills and knowledge. Students may make the same mistakes because they do not recognise that a new task requires the same skills. Building progressively on previous assessments by setting similar assignments, and making the similarities explicit, can help. Use assessment and feedback mapping at the programme level to make these links explicit to students and staff.
- Use time within personal development tutor sessions to engage in a dialogue with students to encourage them to identify the changes they need to make to improve their assessed work in the future.

There is growing recognition that more can sometimes be done with a programme-focus to explicitly promote what Winstone and Nash (2016) call the 'proactive recipience' of feedback, such that students are primed to actively make use of feedback, rather than receive it passively. Practical examples of feedback workshops programme teams might use with students can be found in the Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit (DEFT) available on the HEA website at <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-engagement-feedback-toolkit-deft>.

My classes are too large to provide good, rapid feedback to everyone

- **Build in the time**

Giving good feedback is often time consuming and intellectually demanding; but that is the case for most aspects of good teaching. Since good feedback lies at the heart of good teaching, we should make sure we commit plenty of time to it, if necessary at the expense of other aspects of teaching such as extra content or additional assessments.

- **Use model answers and exemplars**

Huxham (2007) experimentally compared student examination performances following model and 'conventional' written feedback; scores for the model feedback were significantly better. Hence model feedback can help student performance, and can be much quicker for large classes. However, students like to receive individualised feedback, so mixing elements of model and individual feedback might be optimal (Huxham, 2007).

- **Use peer review of 'mock' assessments**

Involve students in reviewing drafts or short versions of assessments, such as summaries or essay plans. These reviews can be informed by some general principles against the agreed assessment criteria.

- **Use technology**

Consider technology as a way to enhance feedback and possibly save staff time, e.g. by using audio or screencasting for individuals and small groups, or clickers with large classes.

My students are very diverse, with different cultural, learning styles and educational needs – this makes giving feedback difficult

- **Apply good principles generally**

Establishing a learning dialogue with students should imply attempting to give tailored feedback which meets with students' individual needs; hence applying good principles assumes a diverse student body.

- **Use technology**

Students with special educational needs may benefit from different types of feedback (such as spoken rather than written). The adaptive technology centre based in Merchiston Library can advise on appropriate technology that might help.

- **Enhancing feedback practice**

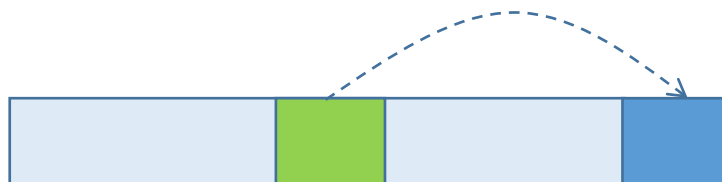
We operate a large and complex assessment quality audit and enhancement system, including boards of examiners, second marking, moderation and peer review. This is generally focused on the summative function of assessments. Yet assessment for learning, involving good feedback, is at least as important. Hence we should develop current, and create new, practices to help ensure good quality feedback. For example, why not ask external examiners for their comments on feedback, as well as on student performance? Why not invite peer review of feedback, as well as of teaching? Why not involve students in identifying more and less useful feedback practices in programme and module meetings?

Planning Formative Assessment and Feedback at Module Level

It is well established that good feedback is essential to good learning: evaluating how our students are doing and providing judicious and thoughtful guidance on how they can develop is perhaps the most important task we can do as educators (Bols & Wicklow, 2013; Brown, 2015). Students benefit from the opportunity to improve and learn from mistakes and engaging in formative tasks facilitates the development of responsibility and competency in their own learning (Marzano, 2001; Black & Wiliam, 1998). Yorke (2001) emphasises the value of formative assessment feedback on retention and its role in academic integration.

Planning formative tasks

In undergraduate and taught post-graduate programmes students often feel that feedback comes too late to be useful or useable (Orsmond et al, 2013). Moving feedback forward, such that students have time to engage with feedback and put it to good use typically entails **planning formative tasks for all students**, which provide feedback to learners on their current subject-related knowledge and skills so these can be developed in subsequent tasks, as illustrated below.



Within module: formative to summative

“... they look at a case study and then they have to do something and then they are asked to talk about it in class. From my point of view, I’m helping those students with how to prepare a case study and respond to a question in an exam situation”

(Business Lecturer)

In one sense this means spending teacher time in different ways. Scaife and Wellington (2010) suggest, for instance, “*by more time on formative assessment and less on summative assessment the tutor’s energy is used in a way that can make a difference*” (p148). They suggest that rebalancing tutor effort and energy might involve methods which front-load feedback commenting practices. For instance, in ‘two-stage submissions’ extensive teacher commenting is redistributed to focus on undergraduates’ work before the fact, with briefer commenting practices being offered on the final summative submission.

Examples of approaches to formative assessment might include ‘front loading’ teacher feedback

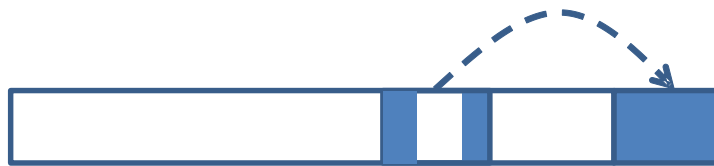
- Ask students to submit an ‘outline’ draft of an element of the assignment they are later required to submit as a summative assessment, with clear parameters which encourage students to focus down on the key issues in a skeletal outline and avoids you marking the same text twice. Give them feedback within a fortnight so they can use your feedback to inform their final draft.
- If your summative assessment is an examination, ask students to complete a typical question (perhaps a past paper question) as formative assessment and give them high quality feedback to help them prepare.
- Instead of plunging students straight into major essays, get them to write a 500–750 word report and use this to provide feedback and early identification of any learning issues.
- Use face-to-face feedback and marking. Require students to meet with you after a formative assessment and mark it alongside them, so that you can have a dialogue about how they have done. Make explicit time in the timetable for this.
- Use in-class contact time for interactive learning activities, such as problem-solving in groups, so your feedback can be offered in situ and in-the-moment. Make sure students are clear about the purposes you hope the feedback will serve in that particular instance.
- Configure teaching and learning activities to create much greater space for ‘real-time’ feedback loops on students’ understandings. For example, when working with large groups use clickers, perhaps combined with peer-instruction (Crouch and Mazur, 2001) to provide real-time feedback on students’ understandings.

- Embed feedback dialogues around module content or work-in-progress, with comments and guidance which help students monitor their progress.

Reviewing summative assessment patterns within a module

The use of multiple ‘low-stakes’ cumulative assessment tasks is an approach which is successfully used as a pedagogic tactic in some disciplines and can be wise when inducting ‘new’ students in the early stages of a programme or during project-work that involves meeting key milestones.

However, having multiple discrete, isolated summative assessments in a single module can disproportionately increase workload for students and staff. If each ‘stands alone’ (e.g. where there is an exam, a poster and an essay which are not linked in any way), this can also reduce opportunities for feedback from one to carry forward to the next. Might there be better ways to ensure all the LOs are summatively assessed in a phased or integrated manner?



Within module: Summative to summative

“They’ve got an assessment fairly regularly but they’re building their skills, so they do kind of just tick along in the background. Having implemented it and seen the students improve, I’ve never had a student say to me the tutorials [discussing their assessments] are a waste of time...”

(Biomedicine Lecturer)

Complementary approaches to feedback

Feedback comments from teachers cannot be expected to do all the work of scaffolding student learning unaided. Ideally, they work best when they are supported by other strategies which considerably boost their impact.

Many formative activities can and arguably should, therefore, be undertaken in 'normal' contact time based on Race's (2014) idea that we need to be making much more use of diverse, 'smarter' approaches to feedback which activate and engage students with valued subject matter. While these do not necessarily entail more 'marking', they do still need careful, systematic planning, with clear objectives and clear communication to students.

Examples of formative activities might include:

Formative Post-it notes (or similar)

This activity is ideal for larger cohorts of students and suitable for lectures as well as seminars. After presenting information, the lecturer asks students to summarise the concept of the lecture on post-it notes. Crucially, the summary should be approximately two sentences.

The lecturer checks over them during a short break/activity and selects a sample of responses.

Making sure they're anonymous, the lecturer then discuss a selected sample, gives a viewpoint and invites students to comment.

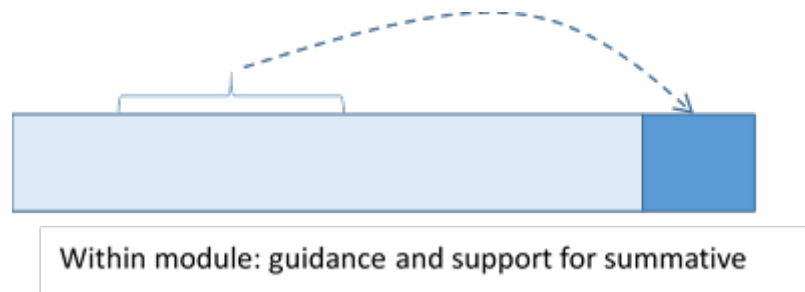
Students write exam questions (or similar)

In the middle of a module or programme, ask students to reflect on the content so far.

Invite them to design an exam paper that can be set for next year's students, which will pose a robust test of their learning on the module.

Ask them to justify and explain their choice of questions and provide some indication of what a good answer might look like.

Embedding feedback in a wider framework of guidance and support for learning



“We do revision lectures... they seem to appreciate things like lists of the topics that have been covered.”

(Biomedicine Lecturer)

While there may be much to be said for shifting the emphasis of tutor commenting to reduce the extent of end-point comments and invest them at a time which can make most difference, we also need to think about developing creative variations on this which are arguably more sustainable, both in terms of staff time, but also in helping learners to become less dependent on teacher-direction (Orsmond and Merry, 2009).

Helping students to clarify expectations

Approaches to high quality feedback in a module may also involve designing activities which are explicitly intended to help students be really clear about what is required of them and what standards of work are expected, so students can focus on learning rather than spending too much time and energy second-guessing what we want them to do (Brown, 2015).

While it is important for students to have the criteria and good assessment briefs, **activities** and **discussion** are needed to help develop students' **assessment and feedback literacy** (Price et al, 2012). This kind of guidance is known to be highly prized by students (Hendry, 2014; Carless, 2017), especially when planned carefully as part of an overall cycle of guidance and feedback (Hounsell and McCune, 2008).

A programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback

Why think about programmes when thinking about assessment and feedback?

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that assessment at the level of the programme determines student satisfaction and enhances learning. For example, measures of student satisfaction and understanding correlate positively with the amount and quality of feedback on a programme, whilst there tends to be a negative relationship between the amounts of summative and formative assessment in a course (Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2013).

“Assessment should be a primary consideration in course design and should be focused on student learning.”

(Carless 2007, 2015a, 2015b; Clements and Cord 2013)

Problems can occur when staff and students cannot see the links between elements of the programme, and treat modules and their assessments as a separate item, with no perceptible coherence within a fragmented curriculum (McDowell, 2012).

From a student perspective, assessment and feedback that are focused on modules alone can appear inconsistent and disorganised. Even if each module is excellent, with carefully designed opportunities for feedback which feeds forward to subsequent summative tasks, dialogue with students about criteria and standards, and authentic assessment tasks encouraging deep learning about the things that matter, from the student viewpoint there

may be no clear progression and coherence to the assessment experience across the board (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan and Rust, 2011).

Unfortunately working in module 'silos' can lead to other dilemmas. A pioneering enthusiast who innovates in a single module, without thinking how it links to the whole, might have unintended side-effects. It may, for instance, raise expectations and worsen student perceptions of a programme as a whole. Moreover, research has shown that failure to communicate and plan together across the board can even lead to perverse competition, whereby module leaders get into an assessment 'arms race' between modules, as each module leader feels compelled to escalate the demands of their own modules, so that students pay their material sufficient attention (Harland, McLean, Wass and Miller, 2015).

Given we work with the building blocks of modules, it takes regular communication to integrate assessment and feedback effectively. This can most usefully be called into play when teams are designing new programmes, but, on a smaller scale, useful conversations can happen at regular, scheduled events such as boards of study and programme reviews.

While, inevitably, there are disciplinary differences in what works, meaning that one size does not fit all, there are a few key aspects teams might usefully consider when reviewing and enhancing specific programmes. These are presented below.

Adopting a strategic approach to designing and implementing assessment and feedback across a programme

1. Enables teams to see if there is any scope for making assessment less labour intensive for staff and students

If we can accept that all assessment is a form of sampling, we might reduce the time taken up by summative assessment by improving and defending our methods of sampling. A good sample would address breadth of learning, such as coverage of subject matter or the range of skills required, and depth, that is use of the higher level skills needed in the subject such as, analysis, criticality, creativity or independent management of a project. This will work best if summative assessment is designed across the programme or stage of a programme rather than independently for each module (McDowell, 2012)

For students, a reduced summative assessment load frees up time and energy for other learning and formative assessment activities that develop students' capabilities but do not at the same time demand that they focus on demonstrating that capability and manage the process of acquiring marks that 'count'. For staff, the workload associated with summative assessment is also reduced, again allowing for time to engage with students in more productive ways.

2. Allows teams to check that the overall workload associated with assessment is manageable and realistic for students

What are students saying about their experiences of assessment?

It is not unusual to find that you are requiring students across a programme to undertake a lot of separate pieces of work, so they are spending most of their time 'churning stuff out' rather than really engaging, as they are forced to spend their time managing competing deadlines and demands. By looking at the whole picture rather than just building up piecemeal from module assessments, you may be able to reduce the dominance of summative assessment and save yourselves precious marking time into the bargain.

3. Enables teams to map assessment across the board, checking for over-assessment, bunching and pressure points

Mapping assessment might reveal some surprises, such as unnecessary duplication across a level, or erroneous staff assumptions about what assessment methods students are already familiar with.

Some sophisticated tools exist to help with this (such as Map My Programme), assisting teams to plan, discuss and communicate a clear assessment and feedback strategy.

In the Edinburgh Napier University programme handbook, programme teams are required to produce an assessment matrix which captures the pattern of assessment types, timings and feedback schedules over each trimester and over the programme as a whole. It shows when assessments are scheduled, enabling students to see the timings of assessment and offering a clear breakdown of their assessment and feedback scheduling across the trimester.

4. Helps teams design assessments in a sequenced way, allowing for the gradual development of complex achievements and high-order skills and attributes that take time and practice to develop

Some skills, literacies and conceptual understandings are 'slowly learnt' and need rehearsal throughout a programme (Yorke, 2001). How do your assessment tasks require progressively more from students in terms of breadth and depth? How do the tasks you set gradually scaffold their learning? Have you got the right mix of confidence-building but challenging tasks in the initial stages of your programme, to aid retention and progression, while providing a sound platform for students to build on? Are your tasks appropriate to the level of study, so they encourage students to engage in meaningful activity which helps them build confidence and competence in the discipline?

5. Helps teams think about how and where they help students to understand how assessment works and how marks will be awarded

How do students come to appreciate the standards and qualities which their grades and marks represent? Students need help to understand what makes for good work in their subject. This is not something that should just be addressed as part of induction but rather

throughout the whole programme. The ability to judge academic quality is a slowly developed skill requiring ongoing practice, guidance and development. Where in your programme are there opportunities for this?

For example, does anyone show first year students examples of work, discuss how they are marked and help students see what grade boundaries look like in practice? How do you help your students appreciate the difference between doing, say, a presentation in the first year, as opposed to the expectations of doing a presentation in their final year?

6. Helps review the balance struck between formative and summative assessment

What kinds of developmental activities are offered in the programme and how is this achieved? Where there are specific formative episodes built into the programme which enable learners to try things out, get feedback and improve, without worrying their grades will suffer? Do students also have opportunities to be active in their learning, generating further opportunities for embedded or extra-curricular formative assessment?

7. Enables clarity and linkages to be expressed and communicated

Students can be helped to see the bigger picture. Students benefit from seeing the links between successive tasks, both within and across trimesters and levels. If assessment tasks are deliberately designed to build from earlier tasks, and the links between the tasks are made explicit and clearly communicated to students, they are more likely to draw on and use feedback from preceding tasks. Have you considered using tools like Viewpoints to help with team planning of assessment and feedback across the programme? Mapping exercises can easily become an administrative procedures: part of validation and not much else. The map needs, ideally, to be debated, agreed and owned by module tutors and clearly reflected in their modules.

8. Enables a focus on feedback as a process (not product)

Building in cycles of feedback, reflection and action-planning across levels can help encourage students to engage with feedback, developing feedback literacy (Sutton, 2012).

Feedback, as information which helps students review what they know, understand and can do in their studies, and which helps them see what areas they need to improve on, is the

lifeblood of learning. Feedback helps students monitor their progress (Boud and Molloy, 2013), but often ‘traditional’ feedback is given to students in a form that is difficult to use and at a time that is unsuitable for them to act upon it. Students’ engagement with feedback thrives when they experience it embedded in and threaded through the curriculum in a wide range of forms and settings. In an important sense, this means moving from seeing feedback as a product or message which is ‘delivered’ to students, towards a view of feedback as an iterative process which is threaded throughout good programme designs.

Is there anything more you might do to help students perceive the links between one assignment and another? Are module tutors in a position to flag up where one module leads into another, for instance, providing feedforward? Do students understand and engage with feedback? What can you do to ensure students engage with and act on it? (See Winstone et al, 2015, for suggestions).

Do you do anything to try and make sure your students are aware of the cycles of feedback that are enabled across the programme? Do they always recognise the feedback-rich environments you enable them to participate in as ‘feedback’? Do they realise why feedback is important, for the immediate and longer term future? Is there anything you might do at programme-level to help them to pay sufficient attention to it, use it, actively seek it and generate it?

9. Allows teams to adequately prepare students for assessment, ensuring they have time, space and explicit support to develop their assessment and feedback literacy

How do you help students to understand how assessment works and how marks will be awarded? Are there opportunities for students to practice different types of assessment? How is this managed? How are students prepared to write in the style of the discipline for assessment? Have you considered how you might do this more

“Students come to higher education with great diversity in preparedness and understanding of what it involves. To ensure that all can engage equitably with assessment tasks, the implicit rules and expectations around what is required for success in any discipline need to be made accessible to students and opportunities provided for them to develop the academic skills they require to perform those tasks.”

(Boud and Associates, 2010: 2)

efficiently, for example, by identifying particular modules which take responsibility for general preparation, such as report-writing or essay-writing?

How does your programme help students to 'see' their own work from a different viewpoint so they can, if needs be, make changes to their habitual ways of working? Where on your programme do students have opportunity to develop the skills of self-evaluation and self-monitoring that are required in settings beyond the point of graduation, as well as being key to self-regulation within the discipline? Have you considered engaging them, for instance, in processes like peer review (Nicol et al, 2014)?

10. Allows teams to plan to shrewdly select different assessment types as part of an overall package

All forms of assessment disadvantage some students (Brown, 2015), so task diversity is important as part of the overall package. It is useful to offer students a range of assessment methods, as long as this is done within reason, so students are not expected to get to grips with a boggling array of different tasks and can be well prepared. Have your team discussed the issue of inclusivity when reviewing assessment across the board, checking that certain forms of assessment, which disadvantage some students, are not overly dominant? Have you reviewed the overall assessment diet, keeping an eye on selecting types of assessments which potentially benefit all students and reduce the need for making contingencies? Where on your programme are your students able to make choices about assessment tasks which allow them to develop their own interests and/or apply their disciplinary knowledge and skills to explore and address real-world problems or contemporary research issues?

Summary

In summary, adopting a programme-focused approach to assessment helps programme teams to balance the trade-offs which occur when assessment is required to fulfil multiple, often competing, purposes (Bloxham et al, 2015). Have you considered how a programme-wide approach might enable you to draw on different assessment and feedback methods to meet different assessment purposes?

Philosophies of programme design

A first step in achieving programme coherence, and in communicating the purposes of our assessment and feedback strategies to students, is to articulate a clear philosophy of programme design. Programme level achievements should be stated in the programme level outcomes: the job of the programme design philosophy is to understand how we aim to help our students achieve these outcomes through the structures of their programmes. O'Neill, Donnelly, & Fitzmaurice (2014) provide a useful summary of some of the main approaches:

1. Linear sequencing – simply arranging modules (and assessments) in order of increasing difficulty.
2. A spiral curriculum – different areas, skills and topics are covered more than once, at increasing depth, to allow re-enforcement and feedforward.
3. Thematic sequencing – core themes or skills provide a structure throughout a programme, and are re-visited and re-assessed repeatedly. For example, a programme team might aim to increase student participation and co-creation of learning throughout a programme and identify this as a core thread throughout it.
4. Threshold sequencing – programme teams identify 'threshold concepts' that are deemed essential portals to advanced disciplinary understanding and plan how these are emphasised and re-visited.

These approaches are clearly compatible and each has merits. The important point here is that inherent in 2-4 is the notion that curriculum design should identify what is important. It should then make sure that students have multiple and structured opportunities to learn these important skills, knowledge and aptitudes and be able to trace and understand their own development. This has to be supported by appropriate assessment.

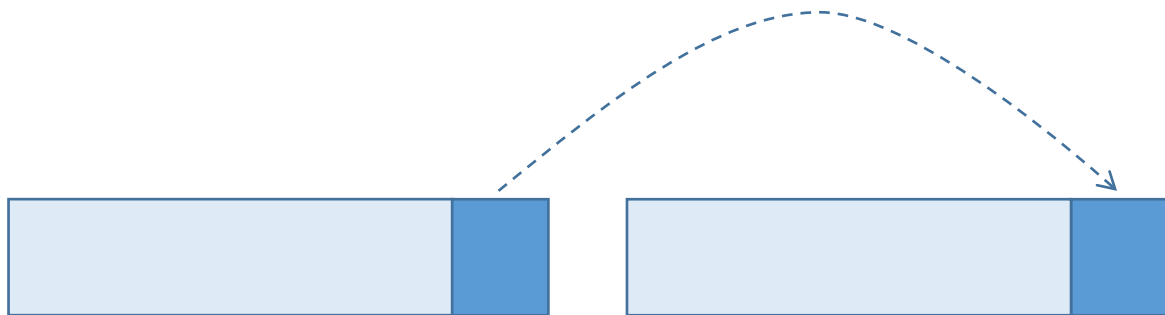
*“Learning and assessment
should be integrated and fully
aligned.”*
(HEA 2016: 19)

Module planning with a programme focus

This involves the careful planning and sequencing of assessment tasks so that:

- Students see the links between modules and are supported by staff to do so.
- Assessment and feedback builds on previous experiences, looking for deliberate pathways by which students have the chance to experience key assessment types and carry forward the feedback from them to use in similar but increasingly sophisticated or demanding contexts.

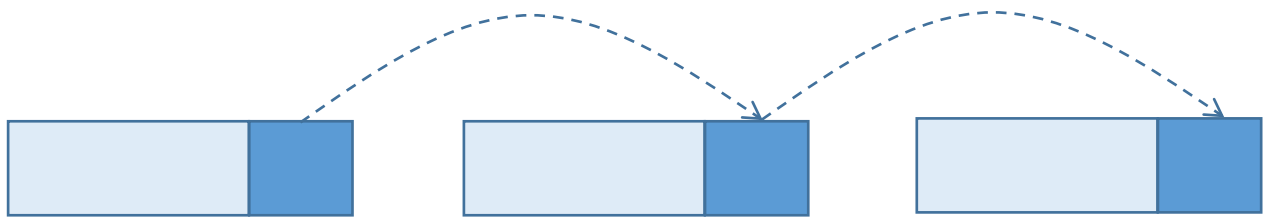
This also involves planning and designing the feedback/feedforward that flows from summative assessment in discussion with the whole team. Indicative approaches are represented in the following diagrams, with associated case study extracts.



Across modules: Summative to summative

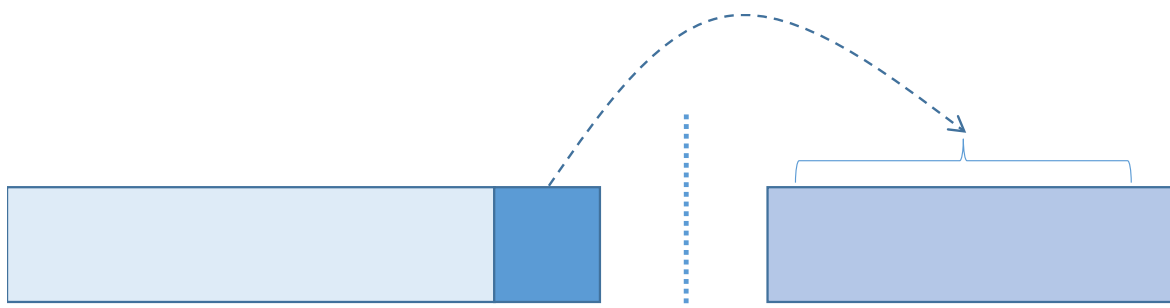
“Our students have to do a dissertation proposal which directly links to the dissertation that they write in semester two...I think in a piece of assessment like this, although it’s summative, it’s also got an inherent formative element...Our feedback in this is always going to be of a feedforward nature because it’s helping the students see what they need to address in their final dissertation.”

(Business Lecturer).



Across level/year: Summative to summative

“The idea with the key skills in the early years is to get them ready for the modules in the final year. In the final year they’ll do a research project where they’re using lots of these skills at a high level, where they need to read papers, they need to understand published data, they need to be able to write scientifically. All of those are embedded early on to get them ready, so the idea of this spiral curriculum is about them revisiting assessment types, or revisiting skill sets.”
(Biomedicine Lecturer).



Beyond modules/programme: Summative to Professional Practice

“This assessment task, and the peer feedback process, focuses on the fact that they’re going to be a registrant. They’re going to be the patient’s advocate and as a registered [Health Professional], you have certain obligations towards, not just the patient but also your colleagues. So if they see examples of poor practice, they must learn to act on them.”

(Allied Health Lecturer)

Things to consider when planning module assessment within a programme focus

1. Consider the student experience of assessment across a trimester, year and programme: take a programme-focused approach to assessment design. It is important to plan for diversity in assessment methods used as this gives the student increased opportunity to demonstrate their particular skills. See selecting methods of assessment (Oxford Brookes University, undated) for ideas.
2. Consider the module learning outcomes and the variety of methods available to you along with their relative advantages and disadvantages.
3. Consider the timing of assessments across the trimester – use assessment mapping to avoid bunching of assessments with the same deadline.
4. Consider how your module assessment aligns with the Programme Assessment Strategy and your school ethos for learning, teaching and assessment.
5. Take time-zone differences and cultural holidays into account when setting assessment submission deadlines.

Useful Resources, References & Further Reading

Useful Resources: Books

Bloxham, S., & Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Very relevant and accessible overview.

Boud, D., & Molloy, E. (2013). Rethinking models of feedback for learning: the challenge of design. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(6), 698-712. Makes the case for rethinking feedback.

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Merry, S., Price, M., Carless, D. & Taras, M. (Eds.) (2013). *Reconceptualising feedback in higher education: Developing dialogue with students*. London: Routledge. Readable chapters on various perspectives on feedback. Emphasises 'new' paradigms of feedback.

Price, M., Rust, C., O'Donovan, B., Handley, K., & Bryant, R. (2012). *Assessment literacy: The foundation for improving student learning*. ASKe, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development. Holistic overview of the case for developing students' assessment literacy.

Sambell, K., McDowell, L., & Montgomery, C. (2013). *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. Oxon, UK: Routledge. Practitioner's guide to main foundational principles and lots of examples from the chalk-face.

Useful resources: websites

WISE Assessment Community of Practice HKU <http://www.cetl.hku.hk/teaching-learning-cop/wise-assessment> (see especially the briefing sheets on 'High Impact Feedback')

Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) <http://www.reap.ac.uk/> (David Nicol's work on principles, plus useful material on peer review)

Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (AsKe) Centre for Excellence at Oxford Brookes. Lots of useful ideas and practical suggestions. <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/>

Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit (DEFT) <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/developing-engagement-feedback-toolkit-deft> (practical resources and workshops, including material for and by students).

Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) Best Practice Guides and Resources <http://testa.ac.uk/index.php/resources/best-practice-guides/category/7-best-practice-guides>

Transforming Assessment <http://transformingassessment.com/>. Free webinars and opportunities to chat about assessment-related topics.

Inclusion

Further information on the University's policies and systems for disability and inclusion may be found within the Student Wellbeing pages of the Student & Academic Services intranet pages and through the following my Napier link: <http://my.napier.ac.uk/Wellbeing-and-Support/Disability-and-Inclusion/Pages/Disability-and-Inclusion.aspx>

Staff can access modular information about supporting students by logging on to Moodle Community and the 'Supporting students with disabilities and additional learning needs' modules. Direct link: <http://moodlecommunity.napier.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=174>

The Disability & Inclusion Team can also provide further advice, information and guidance if staff have specific queries about supporting students.

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