

## Streamlining Assessment

Since the onset of the pandemic, the average number of assignments per term/semester in UK HE has increased by 29% (formative) and 14% (summative) – an increase also attributed to modularisation (Neves and Hewitt, 2021 and Elkington, 2020, p.5). When combined with other pressures, this has led to students and staff encountering difficulties with workloads and subsequent student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback (Aristovnik et al, 2020 and Neves and Hewitt, 2021, pp.46-7). Higher education should facilitate critical thinking, independence and problem solving (Biggs, 1996; Nightingale et al., 1996; Watkins, 1998, QAA descriptors), however excessive assessment can result in ‘teaching to the test’ or students focusing their limited energies only on assignment topics. Streamlining assessment involves deploying best pedagogic practice, building sensible assessment loads and schedules. Following the inherently inclusive principles and practices outlined here will facilitate assessment as and for learning, without putting students under unnecessary duress.

### Principle 1: Assessment is ‘efficient and manageable’ (QAA 2018)

Assessment should take up a proportionate and equitable amount of validated study hours across a programme of study. Carefully planned and aligned formative and summative assessment creates efficiencies, scaffolds learning and allows for evenly distributed feedback loops.

- As a guide, 15 credits often equates to around 3000 words (or equivalent) and 30 credits often equates to around 6000 words (or equivalent). This includes both formative and summative assignments.
- The time to research and undertake assignments should be counted within the study hours for each module. Notionally, there are 10 learning hours per credit, allow some flexibility with this.
- Module learning outcomes need only be assessed once (module learning outcomes serve, and need not exceed, programme learning outcomes).
- Use formative assessment as first drafts for summative work
- Distribute formative and summative assessment evenly across the semester, scaffolding learning and facilitating progression through regular feedback, reflection and discussion.

- Avoid the temptation to use assessment to promote engagement. Engagement and deep learning can be encouraged through active learning and pedagogic innovation.

## Principle 2: Each assessment is considered in the context of the programme

Programme-wide constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) and assessment scheduling considers the students' learning journey in a holistic way (Jessop et al, 2014 and Elkington, 2020, p.7, QAA Assessment Principle 3), can eliminate unnecessary duplication and encourages students to achieve intended programme outcomes (Price et al, 2010).

- Check the programme assessment map (found in programme specifications). If yours is out of date, create one with the wider programme team. An assessment map charts assessment activities across modules then the programme at each level of study, allowing you to see at a glance where there is potential assessment overload and duplication. Look to Brookes' guidance on producing a study map, useful to [Programme Leaders](#) or [Module Leaders](#)
- Ensure assessment load is distributed fairly and evenly across both semesters, and across programme learning outcomes and modules.
- Use a marking rubric to help balance and weight specific outcomes. You can find guidance on designing and using rubrics on the [Brookes Briefings](#) page.
- Weight assessment on high-order academic skills: conceptual understanding or deep learning (Newstead, 2002, p.3 , Watkins & Hattie, 1985; and Zhang & Watkins, 2001) and only on knowledge acquisition if stipulated by validating bodies/benchmark statements.

## Principle 3: Assessment is for learning

Assessment can be seen as a process, not an end product (e.g. Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2021; Knight, 2002; Rust, 2000; Price et al, 2010; Sambell et al, 2013; Jessop and Tomas, 2017). As such, it can be embedded in teaching and learning activity and contact time.

- [Authentic assessment](#) facilitates personalised learning, advantageous to students historically excluded from HE, is engaging (Villarroel et al, 2018 and Sambell and Brown, 2021) whilst also presenting a streamlined teaching, learning and assessment process. For inspiration, look to a compendium of [discipline-specific examples of authentic online assessment \(Brown and Samball, 2021\)](#).
- Introduce student-peer review of formative assessment.
- Discuss the assignment brief and assessment criteria as the course proceeds to build student understanding of the task (Sadler, 2007; O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008).

## Principle 4: Assessment is 'explicit and transparent' (QAA, 2018)

Students are often unclear about what lecturers are looking for (Jessop et al, 2014, p.82) and seek help wherever they can find it. Explicit assignment briefs ensure everyone involved in the assessment process (academic staff teaching and marking work, academic advisors, student support colleagues and students) have a shared understanding and can offer consistent steer.

- Use an assessment rubric and make that available to students as the course commences.
- Write clear assignment briefs:
  - Align assignment questions to learning outcomes. For example, use 'describe' as an instruction to test knowledge; 'discuss' or 'evaluate' for analysis.
  - Mixing instruction words or asking questions within questions can lead to confusion, anxiety and increase queries.
  - Words like 'not', 'no' and 'none', as well as prefixes such as 'a', 'un' and 'dis' change the meaning of the question / assignment tasks and double negatives such as 'not atypical' and 'not false' can obscure meaning, increase student confusion, queries and the necessity for lengthy or detailed feedback (Wallbank, 2022).
- Explain assessment expectations, process and practice at the earliest opportunity (Sadler, 2007; O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008) and throughout the course.

## Principle 5: Use digital assessment and feedback tools

Technology affords efficiencies in setting assignments, marking and feedback (See our [Brookes Briefing](#) on Feedback for Learning )

- For knowledge testing assignments where there are clearly right or wrong answers, use automatically marked assessments. These involve considerable work to set up questions and feedback, but once running workload is minimal. Brookes currently uses Moodle Quiz and MCQs (guidance on using these can be found [here](#)), whilst STACK and Numbas are used in Mathematics.
- Quickmarks in Turnitin provide surface level feedback. Turnitin can devise an array of Quickmarks which may take a bit of time to set up (guidance on this is available [here](#)), but can then be deployed rapidly for every assignment and module. N.B – ensure feedback embedded into the Quickmarks is as specific, understandable, scaffolded and supportive as possible.

For example:

1) instead of 'grammar error', write 'grammar error – incorrect article use. For more help with grammar, see the Centre for Academic Development's Grammar Guide: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/students/academic-development/online-resources/grammar/>

2) Instead of 'lack of analysis', write 'stronger analysis needed here – analysis requires you to interrogate why, how, who, what and consider the implications of what is being said or what the facts are telling us. Dig deeper – depth of analysis usually generates more marks than description (see the marking scheme for this module). For more help with critical thinking, see the Centre for Academic Development's guide here: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/students/academic-development/online-resources/critical-thinking/>

- The Quickmark Manager function can help you to organise QuickMarks into sets and shared with the programme team.
- Consider using audio feedback. It's faster and more personal than typing, just as accessible in most cases (Jessop and El Hakim, 2010), and can provide higher feedback quality than written feedback (Voelkel and Mello, 2014). For guidance on providing audio feedback can be found [here](#).

Cite this article: Wallbank, A. (2022). Streamlining Assessment. Brookes Briefing: Oxford Brookes

## References, resources and further reading

- QAA Quality Code, Advice and Guidance: Assessment: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/assessment>
- HSS Assessment Toolkit <https://sites.google.com/brookes.ac.uk/hssassessmentsandskills>
- IDEAS: The Brookes Inclusive Curriculum Model: <https://sites.google.com/brookes.ac.uk/ideals/home>
- For inspiration, look to a compendium of [discipline-specific examples of authentic online assessment \(Brown and Samball, 2021\)](#).

Aristovnik, A, Keržič, D, Ravšelj, D, Tomažević, N and Umek, L (2020) 'Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective', *Sustainability*, 12 (20), p.8438.

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, UK.

Elkington, Sam, (2020) 'Essential Frameworks for Enhancing Student Success: Transforming Assessment in Higher Education', AdvanceHE, Available from: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/essential-frameworks-enhancing-student-success-transforming-assessment>

Jessop, Tansy, and El Hakim, Yaz, (2010) 'Nine Ideas for Feedback Week: An Evidence-based Guide', *Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA)* National Teaching Fellowship Project. Available at: [www.testa.ac.uk](http://www.testa.ac.uk)

Jessop, Tansy, El Hakim, Yassein, and Gibbs, Graham, (2014) 'The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts: A Large-scale Study of Student s' Learning in Response to Different Programme Assessment Patterns', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39:1, pp.73-88.

Jessop, Tansy and Tomas, C., (2017) 'The Implications of Programme Assessment Patterns for Student Learning', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42 (6), pp. 990-999.

Knight, P., (2002) 'Summative Assessment in Higher Education: Practices in Disarray', *Studies in Higher Education*, 27 (3), pp. 275-286.

Newstead, S., (2002) 'Examining the Examiners: Why are we so Bad at Assessing Students?', *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, 2 (2), pp.70-75.

O'Donovan, Berry , Price, Margaret and Rust, Chris, (2008) 'Developing Student Understanding of Assessment Standards: A Nested Hierarchy of Approaches', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13: 2, pp.205 — 217.

Price, M, Carroll, J, O'Donovan, B and Rust, C., (2010) 'If I was Going there I Wouldn't Start from Here: A Critical Commentary on Current Assessment Practices', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36 (4), pp.479-492.

Rust, C., (2000) 'Opinion Piece: A Possible Student-centred Assessment Solution to Some of the Current Problems of Modular Degree Programmes', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 1 (2), pp. 126-131.

Rust, Chris, O'Donovan, Berry, and Price, Margaret, (2021) 'Fairness and the Maintenance of Academic Standards during the Pandemic: A Position Paper', *Assessment and Feedback in a Post-Pandemic Era: A Time for Learning and Inclusion*, ed by Patrick Baughan, AdvanceHE, pp.40-46.

Sadler, Royce, D., (2007) 'Perils in the Meticulous Specification of Goals and Assessment Criteria', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 14: 3, pp.387 — 392.

Sambell, Kay, and Brown, Sally, (2021) 'Changing Assessment for Good: Building on the Emergency Switch to Promote Future-orientated Assessment and Feedback Designs', *Assessment and Feedback in a Post-Pandemic Era: A Time for Learning and Inclusion*, ed by Patrick Baughan, AdvanceHE, pp.11-21.

Sambell, K, McDowell, L and Montgomery, C., (2013) *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Villarroel, V, Bloxham, S, Bruna, D, Bruna, C and Herrera-Seda, C., (2018) 'Authentic Assessment: Creating a Blueprint for Course Design', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43 (5), pp. 840-854.

Voelkel, S. & Mello, L. 2014. 'Audio Feedback – Better Feedback?' in *Bioscience Education*. 22: 1, pp.16-30.

Wallbank, Adrian J., (2022) *Academic Writing and Dyslexia: A Visual Guide to Writing at University*. London: Routledge.

Watkins, D., and Hattie, J., (1985) 'A Longitudinal Study of the Approaches to Learning of Australian Tertiary Students', *Human Learning*, 4, pp.127-41.

Zhang, L. F. & Watkins, D., (2001) 'Cognitive Development and Student Approaches to Learning: An Investigation of Perry's Theory with Chinese and US University Students', *Higher Education*, 41, pp.236-261.