



ZEST! Essentials:

Principles of Student Assessment

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1 Who is this guide for?

This guide is primarily intended as a practical introduction to the huge and complex subject of student assessment in higher education. It is not an attempt to make a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on the subject. Instead it will introduce issues of current concern to all lecturers in higher education.

It is not recommended that new lecturers attempt to research all of these issues in detail. However, all staff should be aware of these academic debates or conversations as they are referred to in the 2003/04 Assessment enhancement theme¹. Some of the issues are best tackled at school, department/division or programme level eg plagiarism; others need to be dealt with at module level eg student feedback.

More experienced staff may wish to dip into this guide to find up to date sources of information on the latest debates about why and how students' learning is assessed.

With the exception of section 2.1, where bold print is used in this guide it denotes the author's emphasis in the source documents.

¹ The enhancement themes are a key element of the enhancement-led and student-centred approach to quality and standards, developed in Scotland jointly by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (now amalgamated into the Scottish Funding Council or SFC), the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA) Scotland.

2 Why do lecturers assess students' learning?

This is a question which can be addressed on many different levels. Within the university, assessment is part of the students' learning experiences. It can be used to motivate students and encourage them to become more proactive in taking responsibility for their learning, for example if they are aiming for a specific grade. For lecturers the results of student assessment give them information on what students are learning and how well they are performing. Assessment also gives lecturers feedback on whether their modules and programmes are operating as intended. This information becomes part of the quality assurance and enhancement processes which ensure accountability to the funding bodies.

In the wider context, assessment allows lecturers to evaluate student achievement against national standards eg SCQF levels and subject benchmark statements. Assessment may be required by a professional body eg to gain membership of that professional body, or to qualify for a licence to practise.

On a philosophical level, Lines (2005) expresses concern "that the assessment **of** education has become so pervasive in a world of competitive league tables, that assessment **for** education is increasingly crowded out". He then goes on to argue that "if we take a step back and examine how learning takes place, we can quickly see that assessment **for** education can also provide an assessment **of** education".

2.1 Activity

The **SCQF descriptors** should be applied at each **level** of a programme and the **QAA benchmark statements** to the standards the students should achieve on **completion of the programme**. Look up the levels descriptors and benchmark statements for the programme(s) that you teach on. Consider how the assessment tasks used on your module(s) allow students to demonstrate their progress towards achievement of these standards?

2.2 Sources of information:

[The Quality Assurance Agency for higher education](#)

[Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#)

3. What happens in the assessment process?

The term assessment is used to cover those tasks which students are required to complete to fulfill one or more of the purposes outlined in section 2 of this guide. The key principles of effective assessment and the common weaknesses of assessment systems are primarily concerned with linkages between outcomes, the design of the assessment tasks, criteria, marking procedures and feedback (Knight, 2001).

There is general agreement that modularisation in the HE curriculum has led to an increase in the assessment load on students and staff accompanied by an increased tendency for students to see learning in bite-sized chunks. While this, in some respects, makes the students' learning easier, it can be detrimental to deep learning and a holistic understanding of the subject being studied.

3.1 Formative and summative assessment

Assessment tasks may be formative or summative. The primary purpose of **formative** assessment is assessment **for** education. Having completed the set task the student receives feedback from the lecturer on how well he or she has performed and, often, also feedforward on how to improve future performance.

Summative assessment, on the other hand, is primarily about assessment **of** education and the student is awarded a mark or grade to reflect how well he or she has performed in the set task. A classic approach to summative assessment is the end of module exam. Students are awarded marks but may not receive qualitative feedback from the marker.

However the distinction between formative and summative assessment is not always clear cut. As Yorke (2005) says

"Some assessments (eg in-course assignments) are deliberately designed to be simultaneously formative and summative – formative because the student is expected to learn from whatever feedback is provided, and summative because the grade awarded contributes to the overall grade at the end of the study unit. Summative assessments in relation to a curricular component (the student passes or fails a module, for example) can act formatively if the student learns from them".

In the summary of the findings of the enhancement theme on Assessment, Lines and Mason (2005) point out that, although formative assessment improves student learning, the reality is that students tend not value anything that 'does not count'. Strategies are proposed to redress the balance between summative and formative assessment and more fully developed by other authors

who contributed to the Assessment enhancement theme, for example:

- Progressive 'weighting' of formative and summative assignments that still 'count'
- Computer-aided assessment to provide instant, high-quality feedback
- Self and peer assessment
- Personal development planning activities.

See section 4.4 of this guide for more information on innovative methods.

3.2 Criterion-referencing and norm-referencing

Criterion-referencing is widely used in the assessment of competence. It is based on the notion that levels of attainment can be specified and criteria used to judge achievement. Thus it is possible that all students in a cohort could fail or all students could achieve marks in the top band. This is the approach used in SCQF level descriptors and benchmark statements.

Norm-referencing adopts a different approach which does not compare students' achievements against each other directly but seeks to place students in rank order, frequently applying a normal distribution. This system can ensure that the same proportion of students in the cohort will receive, for example, a first class Honours classification every year. Knight (2001) gives a detailed discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

3.3 Feedback

Knight (2001) also gives an interesting typology of where students receive feedback from, and how. Lecturers tend to assume that they are the ones who give students feedback but there are other sources of useful feedback eg other students. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2005) argue:

"Any model of feedback must take account of the way students make sense of, and use, feedback information. More importantly, however, is Sadler's argument that for students to be able to compare actual performance with a standard, and take action to close the gap, then they **must already possess some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher**".

Hence it is good practice to ensure transparency in assessment design and marking criteria. The paper goes on to present:

- A conceptual model of the formative assessment/feedback cycle
- Seven principles of good feedback practice

- Some examples of good practice strategies related to each principle.

3.4 Plagiarism

There are several difficulties in trying to arrive at a satisfactory definition of what constitutes plagiarism. Most lecturers agree that plagiarism is about cheating and passing someone else's work off as your own but, unless students have been given clear guidance on what is expected, apparent plagiarism may be an unintended outcome of poor academic practice. There are also issues about what is expected from students at different levels in their studies. Stefani and Carroll (2001) suggest that discussing the issues with peers and colleagues in the context of a specific discipline makes for easier agreement on a definition.

3.5 Quality Assurance framework for student assessment

There are four sections of the QAA Code of Practice which are relevant here. First there is one on Assessment of Students which sets out all the general principles of good practice and processes to ensure that these principles are adhered to. The second one deals with External Examining which covers the roles, appointment and preparation of External Examiners as well as the required processes of external examining. The third relevant Code of Practice is on Students with Disabilities which includes a section on examination, assessment and progression. The final one deals with Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters

Within GCU we have the University Assessment Regulations and their appendices which interpret these QAA Codes of Practice into our own quality assurance and enhancement framework. The regulations are updated from time to time using appendices, for example on plagiarism and cheating in 2005. The easiest way to find all this information is from the quick links on the right hand side of the Student Exams Guide web page accessed from the Student Home Page under the heading Study. There is a link to the Student Home Page from the Staff Home Page

In May 2005 GCU adopted a number of policies on feedback to students. At the time of writing these are:

- 1 At programme level, details of the practice of Student Performance Feedback must be provided in Student Programme Handbooks.
- 2 All modules will have a published student feedback strategy.

- 3 All Schools/GAPS will adopt the Principles of Student Feedback practice (see page 2)².
- 4 Student feedback will be given on **all** forms of assessed work and on any other group or individual contributions to a module.
- 5 All modules will provide generic assessment feedback using Blackboard or some other appropriate method.
- 6 All modules will set up "bulletin boards" which include the facility for students to pose questions.
- 7 All programmes will have a programme portal through which feedback can be provided on meetings of SSCGs and Programme Boards.

These policies must be in place by the end of session 2005-06 and a report on progress in Schools will be considered by the Academic Policy Committee in May 2006.

3.6 Activities

- 1 Consider the balance between formative and summative assessment in your module(s). How useful are the strategies proposed by Lines and Mason (2005) for altering the balance in favour of formative assessment?
- 2 To what extent do you use criterion-referenced assessment in your module(s)?
- 3 How could you apply Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's conceptual model of the formative assessment/feedback cycle in your module(s)?
- 4 How is plagiarism defined in the Appendix to the University Assessment Regulations?
- 5 How could you ensure that your students understand the difference between plagiarism and poor academic practice?
- 6 What are the principles of good assessment practice set out in the QAA Code of Practice on Assessment of Students?
- 7 What is the policy on feedback to students in your module(s)?

² The full text of the policy can be found on the university intranet at <http://www.gcal.ac.uk/student/about/regulations/index.html> in the section headed "Other things you need to know about"

3.7 Sources of information:

GCU Assessment Regulations

Knight, P (2001) "A Briefing on Key Concepts" LTSN Assessment Series no 7 pub. LTSN

Lines, D and Mason, C (2005) "Enhancing practice: Assessment" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA

Nicol, D and Macfarlane-Dick, D (2005) "Rethinking formative assessment in higher education: a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for higher education

Stefani, L and Carroll, J (2001) "A briefing on plagiarism" LTSN Assessment Series no 10 pub. LTSN

4 How can lecturers ensure their assessment practice is good?

Suskie (2005) expounds on six principles of good practice in assessment, saying that "Good assessments

- Give us **useful** information
- Give us **reasonably accurate, truthful** information
- Are **fair** to all students
- Are **ethical** and protect the privacy and dignity of those involved
- Are **systemised**
- Are **cost-effective**, yielding value that justifies the time and expense we put into them".

She then gives lots of practical advice about how each of these principles can be demonstrated.

4.1 Validity, reliability and fairness

These are key criteria in the design of any assessment task. Does the task measure what it is intended to measure? How consistent are the results of the task over time? Is there any bias in the design of the assessment task? Many authors have contributed to the literature on these issues. For example:

- Knight (2001) discusses validity, reliability, affordability and usability
- Carroll (2005) expands the discussion to take in transparency and the fair treatment of plagiarism
- McCarthy and Hurst (2001) and Robson (2005) write about assessments for disabled students.

4.2 Constructive alignment

One of the most difficult areas of student assessment is deciding what to assess. Frequently students are assessed on the basis of what is easy or cost-effective to assess, rather than on achievement of intended learning outcomes. Good assessment tasks are aligned with the outcomes and teaching methods (Brown, 2001). Biggs (2003) explains that good academic development takes place when the learning outcomes, teaching and assessment are aligned, encouraging students to construct their learning. Thus he coins the term constructive alignment. As Osbourne (2005) puts it:

"In essence the notion of constructive alignment derives from **constructivist** theory, which suggests that learners actively construct their own knowledge and understanding. Within the constructivist paradigm considerable stress is given to meaning, reflection and context, and teaching is about the provision of a context that allows the facilitation of desirable learning outcomes."

This approach requires the student to engage with the learning outcomes and is designed to promote deep learning, which students can demonstrate as they carry out the required assessment tasks.

4.3 Methods of assessment

Brown (2001), Knight (2001) and Wakeford (2003) all set out quite comprehensive lists of assessment tasks, criterion-referenced and norm-referenced, and formative and summative, that can be used, along with a critique of their advantages and disadvantages. Choice of the most appropriate assessment tasks will depend on the intended learning outcomes, required levels of achievement and purpose of the assessment and subject discipline. It is important to ensure that, whatever the choice of assessment method, it does not discriminate against any individual or group of students. You may wish to cross refer to the ZEST! Essentials guide on Equality and Diversity for more details on antidiscriminatory practices.

A useful source of practical advice on a wide range of assessment methods in the context of specific disciplines is *The ASSHE Inventory: changing assessment practices in Scottish higher education* edited by Hounsell et al (2002).

4.4 Innovative assessment methods

As noted, two of the major findings of the Assessment enhancement theme are that we need to reduce the assessment load and redress the balance between formative and summative assessment towards the former (Lines and Mason, 2005). A number of innovative approaches to assessment which might achieve these objectives have been proposed, for example

- Self, peer and group assessment (Race, 2001; Lines, 2005; Smith, 2005; "Developing a variety of assessment methods, including self and peer assessment", the theme of workshop 4, Assessment enhancement theme, 2005)
- Computer aided assessment (Cook, 2005; "Assessing online", the theme of workshop 5, Assessment enhancement theme, 2005)
- Key skills (Murphy, 2001) and personal transferable skills, including personal development planning and employability ("Assessing personal transferable skills", the theme of workshop 8, Assessment enhancement theme, 2005)

All of these approaches are claimed to enhance student learning through improved interaction and feedback. If you wish to explore the issues around innovative approaches to assessment the papers can be accessed from the enhancement themes website. The topic is regarded as of such importance that the SFC allocated funds for a

continuation enhancement theme on Integrative Assessment in 2005/06.

4.5 Deterring and detecting plagiarism

Stefani and Carroll (2001) advocate involving students in discussions of what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. Students need to be made aware of the relative seriousness of the various forms of plagiarism and the penalties that can be imposed. Lecturers can help students avoid plagiarism by designing their assessments in such a way that makes it difficult for students to cheat. This can be relatively simple eg not using the same essay topics every year, placing greater emphasis on the skills of analysing and evaluating information rather than just finding it.

Carroll (2005) gives examples of good and bad practice and discusses electronic detection of plagiarism, all in the context of fairness. GCU has a policy on plagiarism as an Appendix to the University Assessment Regulations and subscribes to the TurnitinUK plagiarism detection software. Your ADQ can provide you with a login to use this software.

4.6 Marking and moderation

Brown (2001) discusses marking of a wide variety of assessment methods for reliability and validity. Wakeford (2003) examines a number of assessment methods, looking at the advantages and drawbacks of each. He also gives some interesting case studies to illustrate current issues in assessment and the requirement for more transparency in the assessment process. This is particularly important given the legal challenges which have already succeeded in the USA. There is a need to:

- avoid bias against an individual student eg by anonymous marking (as practised in marking of formal exams).
- avoid bias against groups of students by ensuring that the assessment tasks are fair to all.
- ensure that marking is consistent across all markers eg by using specimen answers, double marking and moderation of marks.

4.7 Quality Assurance processes

The activities outlined in the preceding paragraph mainly take place at module, programme, department/division and school levels, although there may be some involvement of External Assessors in approving assessment tasks before students undertake them.

Thereafter it is the role of the External Assessor to ensure that appropriate standards are met (ie subject benchmark statements, SCQF levels, Honours classifications, conduct of Assessment Board meetings) and thereby GCU's qualifications are consistent with and

equivalent to those from other higher education institutions. External Assessors report to the Quality Office on their findings. The processes for consideration of these reports and subsequent actions for programme or subject teams are given in the university's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook.

4.8 Activities

- 1 What are the most important aspects of validity, reliability and fairness of the assessment tasks in the contexts of your module(s) and student population?
- 2 Reflect on the intended learning outcomes and assessment tasks in your module(s). How closely are they aligned?
- 3 From the critiques of a variety of assessment methods presented by Brown (2001), Knight (2001) and Wakeford (2003), consider which methods might be most appropriate in your modules.
- 4 Reflect on the extent to which self, peer and group assessment, computer-aided assessment or assessment of personal development planning and employability skills are, or should be, used in your module(s).
- 5 Reflect on Carroll's (2005) approach to fairness in deterring and punishing plagiarism. How can you put this into practice in your module(s)?
- 6 If you have not already done so, ask your ADQ to register you as an instructor on TurnitinUK. Try it out on some pieces of work you know are and are not plagiarised. How useful is this software?
- 7 What do Appendices 4 and 14 to University Assessment Regulations say about moderation of marks and anonymous marking of exam papers? Consider your school, department/division and programme policies on marking and moderation. How transparent is the process?
- 8 In the QAA Code of Practice on External Examining what is the role of the External Examiner?

4.9 Sources of information:

"Assessing online" (2005) Workshop 5 in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II Pub. QAA

"Assessing personal transferable skills" (2005) Workshop 8 in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II Pub. QAA

Biggs, J (2003) "Constructing learning by aligning teaching: constructive alignment" in *Teaching for Quality Learning 2nd ed* Pub Open University Press

Brown, G (2001) "A Guide for Lecturers" LTSN Assessment Series no 3 pub. LTSN

Carroll, J (2005) "Fair assessment, fair policing and fair punishment: building on reliability and validity" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA

"Developing a variety of assessment methods, including self and peer assessment" (2005) Workshop 4 in Reflections on Assessment: Volume I pub. QAA

GCU Appendices to Assessment Regulations

Knight, P (2001) "A Briefing on Key Concepts" LTSN Assessment Series no 7 pub. LTSN

The Quality Assurance Agency for higher education

Suskie, L (2005) "What are good assessment practices?" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA

Wakeford, R (2003) "Principles of student assessment" in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S (eds) *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education 2nd ed* Pub RoutledgeFalmer

5 Professional Development

It is clear from current literature that many of the challenges to good teaching, learning and assessment practice stem from the increasingly diverse student population and their level of engagement with the learning process. For the purposes of this guide there are three key issues:

- ensuring that assessment tasks are valid, reliable and fair to all students.
- putting into practice the principles of constructive alignment. Biggs (2003) is the seminal author on this subject.
- deterring academic misconduct.

For students on the PgC LTHE, the activities in this guide may contribute to achievement of Learning Outcomes 2 and 7 and fulfilment of Assessment Criterion 10 for Goal B.

5.1 Activities

- 1 Reflect on what you have read by Knight (2001), Suskie (2005) and Wakeford (2003).
- 2 Read and reflect on the first two chapters of Biggs' (2003) book.
- 3 Look into the articles in the "Plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policy" special edition of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (2006). Reflect on the implications for your approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

5.2 Sources of information:

Biggs, J (2003) "Constructing learning by aligning teaching: constructive alignment" in Teaching for Quality Learning, 2nd ed, Open University Press

[Knight, P \(2001\) "A Briefing on Key Concepts" LTSN Assessment Series no 7 pub. LTSN](#)

"Plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policy" (2006) Special edition of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education Vol 31 no 2, Taylor and Francis, available online through TDNet.

[Suskie, L \(2005\) "What are good assessment practices?" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA](#)

Wakeford, R (2003) "Principles of student assessment" in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S (eds) A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education, 2nd ed, RoutledgeFalmer

6 Where can I get more information?

"Assessing online" (2005) Workshop 5 in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II Pub. QAA also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_5FINAL.pdf

"Assessing personal transferable skills" (2005) Workshop 8 in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II Pub. QAA also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_8FINAL.pdf

Biggs, J (2003) "Constructing learning by aligning teaching: constructive alignment" in *Teaching for Quality Learning 2nd* ed Pub Open University Press

Brown, G (2001) "A Guide for Lecturers" LTSN Assessment Series no 3 pub. LTSN also available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=73

Carroll, J (2005) "Fair assessment, fair policing and fair punishment: building on reliability and validity" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_6FINAL.pdf

Cook, J (2005) "Assessment driven learning" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume I pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_2FINAL.pdf

GCU Student Exams Guide
<http://www.gcal.ac.uk/student/exams/>

"Developing a variety of assessment methods, including self and peer assessment" (2005) in Reflections on Assessment: Volume I pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_4FINAL.pdf

Hounsell, D, McCulloch, M and Scott, M (eds) (2002) "The ASSHE Inventory: Changing assessment practices in Scottish higher education" available online at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/asshe/>

Knight, P (2001) "A Briefing on Key Concepts" LTSN Assessment Series no 7 pub. LTSN also available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=7

Lines, D (2005) "A powerful learning environment" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_6FINAL.pdf

Lines, D and Mason, C (2005) "Enhancing practice: Assessment" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_A5_booklet.pdf

McCarthy, D and Hurst, A (2001) "A Briefing on Assessing Disabled Students" LTSN Assessment Series no 8 pub. LTSN also available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=8

Murphy, R (2001) "A Briefing on Key Skills in Higher Education" LTSN Assessment Series no 5 pub. LTSN also available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=5

Nicol, D and Macfarlane-Dick, D (2005) "Rethinking formative assessment in higher education: a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_7FINAL.pdf

Osbourne, M (2005) "Constructive alignment of learning outcomes to assessment methods – An overview" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume I pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_3FINAL.pdf

"Plagiarism: Prevention, Practice and Policy" (2006) Special edition of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education Vol 31 no 2 Pub Taylor and Francis, available online through TDNet.

QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

Quality Office @ GCU
<http://www.gcal.ac.uk/quality/index.html>

Race, P (2001) "A Briefing on Self, Peer and Group Assessment" LTSN Assessment Series no 9 pub. LTSN also available online at

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&action=generic&id=59

Robson, K (2005) "Assessment - The final frontier – Just how valid, reliable and fair are assessments of disabled students" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_6FINAL.pdf

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
<http://www.scqf.org.uk/>

Smith, I (2005) "Motivating students through group project and open-notes examination" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume I pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_2FINAL.pdf

Stefani, L and Carroll, J (2001) "A briefing on plagiarism" LTSN Assessment Series no 10 pub. LTSN also available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&action=generic&id=10

Suskie, L (2005) "What are good assessment practices?" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_6FINAL.pdf

Wakeford, R (2003) "Principles of student assessment" in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S (eds) *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education* 2nd ed Pub RoutledgeFalmer

Yorke, M (2005) "Formative assessment and student success" in Reflections on Assessment: Volume II pub. QAA, also available online at http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/uploads/documents/Assessment_Workshop_7FINAL.pdf