

# Staff guide

## Principles for effective assessment

### Background

Around the University, there are numerous examples of positive and / or innovative, learning-based assessments in operation. However, we aim to ensure that, as a University, all our programmes and modules feature high quality, authentic, learning based assessment.

### Purpose of this document

Reviewing and changing assessments might be a cause of concern for staff who do not have experience of this area, and similarly, for staff that do, but are time-pressed. This document provides an introduction to steps that can be taken and identifies principles and checks that you can work through to develop appropriate assessment tasks - these are summarised below. Consider your existing assessments, those that you are responsible for planning and implementing as part of your programme and module – against this list. You will find that some principles are more relevant than others, depending on the context of your work.

### Additional support and information

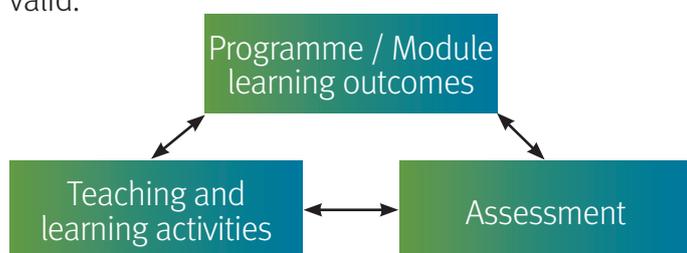
More bespoke help and advice is available through staff at LEaD who support individual Schools. Whilst all the support you need to review and develop assessment tasks is available within the University, there are many other, external sources of information too. We will make recommendations about these on a bespoke basis, but as a starting point, some of you might find information provided by the Higher Education Academy useful: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/individuals/student-success/toolkits/assessment>

### Principles for effective assessment – summary guide

We now outline key principles for effective assessment practice, which we encourage staff involved in assessment to use, when checking and modifying existing assessments. What do we mean by ‘effective’ assessment? This will be revealed by the principles themselves, but includes the need for assessment to be proportionate (at the right amount and level), learning-based (assessment should promote learning) and varied (students should be assessed using a range of different methods, to broaden their learning processes and experiences).

## Principle 1: Constructive alignment

This is a model which purports that the various different elements of the teaching and learning process, such as curriculum design, teaching, assessment and feedback, should all be planned in conjunction with one another. The model is normally attributed to the work of Biggs (2003) and Biggs and Tang (2011). To provide an example of constructive alignment, a lecturer who has responsibility for a particular module will typically need to undertake a mix of activities such as: writing learning outcomes; periodic review of the curriculum; planning and timetabling lectures and tutorials; developing assessments; providing feedback. There are dangers that these activities may not always be undertaken in conjunction with one another; a busy teacher may quickly devise or refresh an assessment task without reminding themselves of the learning outcomes; rushed feedback to students may not address assessment criteria. If this occurs, students may reduce attendance or become less involved in teaching, because they come to view assessment as 'something to be done' as opposed to seeing it as something that links to their earlier learning. Students will learn more effectively if assessment tasks are aligned to earlier learning and teaching, and if feedback is also clearly aligned to the assessment task. Constructive alignment also applies within the assessment process itself, necessitating us to ensure that assessment tasks are mapped against assessment criteria and grade related criteria: these specific issues will be taken up as part of the assessment project. The overall point here is that we need to ensure that our assessments always link to the rest of the learning and teaching process. Achieving constructive alignment is also crucial to ensure that assessments we set are authentic and valid.



## Principle 2: Assessing at the right level

Following on from the above, we need to link all our assessments closely to the module specification document for the module which is being assessed. The module specification document identifies the level of the module (undergraduate, postgraduate, or other - and does so by a simple numeric level 4, 5 or 6 for Undergraduate, 7 for Postgraduate and 8 for Doctoral Studies).

## Principle 3: Assessing using the right volume

In addition to the above, we need to link all our assessments to the number of credits associated with the module. For example, a 15 credit module should notionally equate to 150 student learning hours, and those learning hours should cover all aspects of student activity related to the module: teaching, private study, time on assessment. It is important to reflect on the volume of student effort an assessment requires and ensure this is compatible with the students learning hours available.

## Principle 4: Assessment for learning (afl)

Assessment for learning refers to the development of assessment which contributes to the learning process. It can be distinguished from assessment of learning, which is about testing for completion of a module or programme. In reality, most summative assessments should do both. Many assessments achieve the latter (measurement) but not the former (learning). Arguments about assessment for learning have their origins in the model of the same name, and this model and its benefits have been discussed in many sources, a useful example being Sambell et al (2013). The model is guided by the key principle that 'all assessment... should contribute to helping students to learn and to succeed' (p. 3). At City, we want to see this model and approach in action in all assessments. In practice, there are many ways to promote learning through assessment, many of which are alluded to in the other principles explained in this document. We will help staff develop assessments which actually enhance the student learning process.

## Principle 5: Assessment diversity

We have become much better at diversifying the range of assessment methods we use in our programmes, but in some cases, we are still conservative. 'Traditional' assessment methods involve students being assessed through essays, exams, a dissertation or project, and often, nothing more. Although there is nothing wrong with these assessment methods, what can become problematic is their repeated use. It also advantages some students (those that enjoy or are good at responding to particular assessment methods) and disadvantages others (those that are less good at adopting a particular assessment method). It is far better, therefore, to incorporate a range of assessment methods, at least in most programmes. There are numerous assessment methods to choose from, many of which involve students undertaking activities. In some cases, it might be possible to give students a greater 'hand' in the overall assessment process, and, therefore, increased ownership of and belonging to it. Students are likely to remain more motivated and develop a broader suite of skills.

## Principle 6: Assessment enables feedback and feedforward

The outcomes of assessment – student marks and feedback they receive – also represent a key, end product of the assessment process. Therefore, we will share advice, where needed, about good feedback practice. We will address issues including quality and quantity of feedback, individualising feedback, and, especially, the important principle of feedforward. This involves looking towards performance on future work, rather than only (back) on previous assignments. It involves providing comments and advice to students about improving and developing their learning and so makes the overall feedback process far more valuable to students. It means also that feedback you write or give is far more likely to be read or listened to.

## Principle 7: Assessment clearly linked to learning outcomes for effective learning

Learning outcomes are statements that indicate expectations of achievement and knowledge once a programme or module is completed. In order for assessment to be effective, the tasks should be based on these clear and explicit objectives. This mechanism allows for performance and demonstration of abilities to be judged by both students and tutors. Learning outcomes allow for students to clearly understand what standards of work are expected of them, what they are working towards achieving and what they will be assessed on. In order for learning outcomes to be effective, they should be outlined and communicated at the start of a programme. Students should be informed as to what they are being assessed on and the purpose of assessment. The assessment process becomes more transparent when students are able to understand how feedback aligns with learning outcomes, and whether they have met these outcomes. A key principle to good assessment is making sure that students are able to recognise how each assessment clearly corresponds to intended learning goals. Teaching, learning outcomes and assessment criteria should be created in conjunction and with relevance to each other to ensure that students see assessment tasks as feeding into earlier learning.

## Principle 8: Ensuring assessments are valid

Validity occurs when the assessment is able to provide truthful information about what the students have actually learned. The task itself should be assessing what you intend it to assess. An example would be that if you intend to assess student's ability to scrutinise information, but the test only assessed student's recall of facts, then this lacks validity. Valid assessments are able to measure the depth of understanding from learning outcomes. Ensuring that students are equipped with the skills needed to do an assessment task through teaching what you will assess them on, is the most effective method of achieving this outcome.

## Principle 9: Ensuring assessments are reliable

Reliability ensures that a consistent result is produced irrespective of the marker or when an assessment is carried out. Through acting independently on the same task (for marking or review purposes) but producing the same judgement on a student's piece of work ensures fairness to all students.

Regularly conducting assessments can be a method of measuring whether the course has improved, and ensuring that performance levels have increased. This enforces reliability as staff are able to assess whether marking is consistent.

## Principle 10: Fairness in assessment

Fair assessment means that students are able to be treated equitably as opposed to equally to maximise the prospect of demonstrating a range of abilities. Having a range of assessment methods respects diverse talents and ways of learning, which can support how students learn best and increase accessibility to all students. This can be achieved through linking one assignment to another, allowing students to explicitly reflect on previous feedback. To increase fairness of assessment, students should be made aware of the requirements of an assessment task. This increase in transparency gives students the opportunity to seek help for tasks that they are less sure about, allowing a feedback dialogue to be created between tutors and students. Additionally, fairness can be optimised through remembering not to overlook another form of assessment that may be more appropriate.

## Principle 11: Assessment is authentic and stimulating

The assessments you use should be stimulating for the students to engage in and should be as authentic as possible so that students can see the link with their studies and their future employment. The assessments should be linked where possible to 'real-world' tasks and enable students to apply their new learning.

## Principle 12: Assessments should promote good academic practice

When designing your assessments you should be promoting good academic practice students and so you should encourage students to draw on their own experiences and learning. The assessments should use a range of approaches not just traditional essays so that students can see they have to engage with these. The assessments should be reviewed regularly to ensure they are still appropriate to the programme and change titles and focus annually so students do need to undertake need to engage in looking for evidence to support their work.

## Conclusion

We hope this document is useful in providing first ideas about how to enhance assessment at City. It should be pointed out that there are some excellent, innovative assessment strategies already used throughout the University, but we want to encourage the use of sound assessment throughout the whole institution. Some of the ideas for this document were taken from previous publications by the authors about assessment practice, as well literature.

## References

- Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education / Open University Press, 2nd edition.
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- Sambell, K., McDowell, L. & Montgomery, C. (2013). *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- This has been developed by Hazera Ali, Patrick Baughan and Professor Pam Parker for the Undergraduate Assessment Project