Overview

All students starting to learn at university, no matter what their background, need to be properly inducted into our distinctive assessment conventions. In any course you teach, clearly communicate to first year students your expectations and the course and University standards for learning and assessment. This is how they will discover the academic culture at UNSW and become engaged in learning here.

Assessment processes convey strong messages about our priorities. So do our management of and responses to students' learning achievements and performances.

Students in transition

First year students may be coming from:

- secondary schools in Australian cities, remote or rural environments, or overseas
- studying at TAFE or private colleges
- not having studied at all for many years because of commitments in the workplace or taking care of households and families.

Many first year students lack confidence and feel socially isolated. How they perceive the learning environment and the level of support academic staff offer influences their satisfaction with the learning community, and how much they feel they belong (Krause & Coates, 2010:501). Students need to feel that their intelligence and capabilities are respected, if they are to persist in the face of a learning problem.

You can use assessment and feedback (e.g. early feedback, self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies) to shape students' experiences, to encourage them to engage (Krause et al., 2005) and to see themselves constructively as learners.

When to use

Use appropriate assessment strategies for students in their first year of academic study. How they adapt to university study will strongly affect their self-image, success and engagement with their studies.
Benefits

The benefits of designing specific first year programs include

- opportunities for staff to actively engage students in discussion and activities to assess their skill set and needs
- supporting a student's transition into, and learning in, the higher education setting
- developing better alignment between the student's expectation and perceptions of assessment and the role of feedback
- promoting feedback and the role it plays in a student's self belief and learning experience
- providing opportunities for relationship and friendship development in group and team work
- improved engagement when a student feels that they have "successful" peer networks
- the ability to put in place where necessary the appropriate support mechanisms
- helping students to understand and be aware of quality in assessment

Challenges

Student diversity poses challenges for staff as they support students through the transition to university learning and help them participate effectively. Students:

- may expect a lot and be very enthusiastic about the university experience; unsupported, they can easily become disillusioned.
- are often employed 10 to 20 hours per week, or have demanding home carer and work responsibilities. They can spend much less time per week studying than is expected.
- are not always interested in participating in community building activities not directly related to their studies.
- are diverse culturally and linguistically, socio-economically, demographically and so on; they can easily experience culture shock, or feel that they don't belong.
- can be less savvy technically than you might expect.
- may have mobility, sensory and health issues. They may be timid about letting the university or their teachers know about these challenges; they may not even know that they should inform them.

Our students' diversity means that we have to design and implement assessment to give all students the best chance possible to succeed in their learning.

Well-designed, well-supported, authentic assessment and engagement in conversations about assessment can facilitate first year students' settling in.
Strategies
First year assessments must report on students' achievement and engage them.

Developing clear expectations for novices means setting explicit goals and aligning learning with stated outcomes. Some assessment strategies follow.

Acknowledge students' diverse backgrounds
First year students' rich diversity of life experience and prior learning may put them at odds with the unique learning expectations at university. When you induct these students into university methods, try to strike a balance between:

- acknowledging their experience and
- encouraging them to consider different ways to think and know.

Use early assessment to help engage students
Students frequently use assessment to define what is important in the curriculum. Set an assessment task early in the semester to help them engage with the material from the start. This is especially important for distance students who have little contact with staff or students (Taylor, 2008).

Begin with low-risk tasks
Reduce the stakes for assessment while you're helping new students establish good study habits. Get students reading, thinking and writing in the first weeks of their studies, using small-scale reading and summarising tasks, new terminology quizzes, and reflective exercises connecting new concepts with prior personal understanding. These assessment tasks will motivate and encourage first year students.

Provide context
Students bring all sorts of misconceptions to university. For example, they may think that delivering critique, or engaging in argument, means adopting a negative stance. First year courses should give enough context for students to be clear about what's expected of them in assessment tasks, if they are to have a reasonable chance of success. As students become more competent at assessment tasks, you can progressively withdraw this contextual support.

Develop students' capacity to self-assess
Students need experiences that help them develop self-awareness and a capacity to self-assess accurately and realistically. This is a long-term aim; it will not necessarily be accomplished in the first year.

Provide exemplars of completed assessment tasks. Invite students to critically review these and their own work. This builds assessment skills and encourages a dialogue about assessment criteria and standards.

Use both formative and summative assessment
• **Formative** assessment aims to improve performance on the current task or subsequent similar tasks.
• **Summative** assessment is primarily used to award a grade or to contribute towards the award of a grade at the end of a unit.

Most university assessments are both formative and summative, but usually one or the other predominates.

Feedback from *formative* assessment tasks helps students close the gap between their current performance and their goal. For this reason, formative assessments should predominate in the first part of a unit when students still have time to use the feedback to improve their performance.

**Plan for progressive learning development**

Set up assessment tasks and the marking criteria in a sequence to allow a progressive improvement in skills. Give students feedback that:

• is adequate
• is timely
• invites reflection and
• can be acted on well before the next piece of similar assessment is due.

Give first year students, in particular, opportunities to act on feedback. For example, require them to indicate explicitly how, in a subsequent effort, they have responded to the feedback they received.

**Develop independent approaches to academic work**

In a learner-centred curriculum, the aim is for students to develop self-management and to control their own learning. Design assessment to support self-regulation; contextualise and model the task and ensure that challenging problems are posed so as to develop critical thinking skills. The model of self-regulatory processes presented in Figure 1 outlines key elements in learning design that can inform the mixture of assessment strategies and support processes.

*Figure 1: Self-regulatory processes (McMahon & Oliver, 2001)*
Plan to assess in phases

You can conduct assessment in first year courses in phases to ease first year students' transition to university. The model outlined in Figure 2 identifies three overlapping phases in a semester-length course, each contributing a progressively larger proportion of the overall grade.

It shows a transition that incorporates approaches known to be beneficial in supporting first year students as they engage with learning through assessment, while not overloading staff with marking.

*Figure 2: Phased assessment plan (Taylor, 2008)*
Prepare students early to meet assessment requirements. For example:

- In class time, build in opportunities for students to get to know and interact with one another.
- Establish study, learning or enquiry teams within or outside of classes. Set group work tasks for assessment.
- Make sure students know about alternative assessments for students with special requirements, and where they can get support.
- Acknowledge the diversity of backgrounds by encouraging students to draw on them in assessment work where possible.
- Provide clear, explicit written guides to assessment expectations, standards, assessment criteria and procedures for group work, self and peer assessment, and assessment feedback and dialogue.
- Discuss with students the learning outcomes of the course, and engage them in giving critique of, or negotiating, assessment criteria and rubrics, so that they know what is expected of them before they receive any assessment feedback.
- Give timely feedback and allow students to respond to it, through group, online and individual discussion.
- Before you assess and grade a skill, give students a chance to practise it, receive formative feedback and have another attempt.
- Ensure that students know how to use the technologies used for assessment. Give them early opportunities to practise their use in low-stakes tasks where any technical or accessibility issues can be addressed.
- Explain the concepts of academic honesty and intellectual property. Let students explore the implications and examine the practicalities of scholarly practices by discussing specific cases and examples.
Ensure fairness

Effective assessment is critical in reducing student attrition and failure rates. Use inclusive design principles that recognise the special needs of first year students.

Attrition and failure are not always due to assessment, though. Many factors may be beyond the responsibility of individual teachers in individual units of study; a departmental approach may be necessary. First years' assessment problems are rarely unique; many can be anticipated and mitigated, or avoided completely. At department level, some useful strategies are:

- making specific courses responsible for developing and assessing particular generic skills, for example, time management, library research skills, citation and referencing skills, and oral presentation skills.
- creating a central website for first year students to induct them into the learning community, and to provide a forum for discussion about assessment.
- conducting feedback forums with students, encouraging them to identify their own learning and support needs so that the learning environment and assessment design can be adapted to suit.
- liaising with university services to optimise the support provided for students in an integrated way.

Use technology

You can harness technologies to build an online community of first year students. Departmental or course-level blogs and wikis can provide sites for first year students to engage with the dynamic social and intellectual life of a discipline community and the larger university. Online resources are particularly useful if students find it difficult to be on campus outside class time. Discussion forums in Moodle can keep them connected.

Because assessment is so central to students' concerns about learning, discussions about assessment that are mediated online provide powerful support for learning and teaching.

First year students also need help using a wide range of learning technologies that are involved in their learning and assessment. Ensure that you provide first years with early opportunities to practise these technologies.

Additional information

External resources

- Queensland University of Technology, First Year in Higher Education website—also, discipline-based case studies on intentional first year curriculum initiatives.
Further readings


Kift, S. (2009). Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student experience in Australian higher education. Final Report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program.


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