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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Welcome to this guide to assessment in higher education.

### Why a Guide on Assessment

Assessment is a high-risk activity. Quality assurance procedures, the employability agenda and equality and diversity concerns all affect assessment practices. Governments, employers, funders, professional bodies and parents are all concerned stakeholders, and this makes assessment a high-risk, pressurised activity for both students and teachers.

Teachers spend a lot of time on assessment and feedback, but often have very little professional development in how to design assessments and make reliable assessment judgements. Teachers grapple with issues such as unreliable marking and grade inflation. Inexperienced teachers can be asked to design courses and assessments with little pedagogical support. Greater access to higher education has resulted in a much more diverse student body and an increased need for inclusive assessment practices. Professional development is often done on the job, with variable amounts of guidance from more experienced colleagues.

Assessment dominates students' thinking in higher education and determines what they will focus on in their studies. Students entering higher education may face unfamiliar assessment processes and tasks. They may lack or have different understandings of academic standards and teacher expectations. They may misunderstand plagiarism guidance and encounter the perils of contract cheating and essay mills. Perhaps

it is not surprising that student surveys report dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback (Office for Students 2019; Advance HE 2019a).

However, there are existing solutions, or partial solutions, to these problems. Research on assessment in higher education and evidence from practice suggest many helpful strategies and activities that have been shown to be effective in creating less pressurised, more constructive assessment environments which benefit both learners and teachers. This guide to current research, theoretical and practical thinking on assessment in higher education aims to help you design more valid, inclusive assessments and develop strategies for ensuring more reliable assessment judgements.

## Academic Standards

A key concept in the guide is the importance of academic standards, defined as ‘fixed reference levels of attainment’ (Sadler 2005, 193). Both students and teachers need to develop an understanding of academic standards for the particular modules and programmes they are involved in. Shared understanding of academic standards is key to ensuring assessment is reliable; reliable assessment promotes student satisfaction with their programme of study, as students better understand what they are aiming for and how they can better direct their own learning (Sadler 2010). Sadler (2010) argues that to move forward in their learning, students must conceptualise the gap between their current level, and the level they want to reach. They gain an understanding of how to bridge this gap through studying exemplars of their peers’ work and being guided to make judgements about the quality of these. In this way, students come to understand what makes good quality work in their discipline and can better peer- and self-assess. In Boud et al.’s (2018) terms, through this process students develop evaluative judgement and are better able to judge the quality of their own and others’ work and so direct their learning.

This book proposes that curriculum and assessment design need to focus on helping students (and teachers) develop and share an understanding of academic standards on their programmes of study. Practical ways of developing this understanding are suggested, e.g. through the use of exemplars (see [Chapter 7](#) on Guided Marking), dialogic feedback ([Chapter 8](#)), and self-, peer- and collaborative assessment ([Chapter 7](#)).

## Linking Theory and Practice

Like many professions, there is a gap in education between theoretical thinking and research work and educational practice. Ideas that are commonly discussed in the literature, such as dialogic feedback, collaborative assessment and inclusive assessment, may not be reflected in educational practice in a programme of study. This guide offers a review of key ideas in the literature followed by illustrations which demonstrate how these ideas can be put into practice. Perspectives from theoretical and research literature are discussed, narratives of evidence-informed practice are presented in case studies and practical teaching ideas are suggested. The case studies and teaching ideas illustrate how you can draw on current perspectives in designing programmes of study and assessment. Each chapter ends with guidance on follow-up activities, such as further reading, links to assessment resources and ideas for small-scale investigations to help you better understand your educational context, your students and your assessment practices.

## Investigating Your Practice (and Why It is Important)

This guide is aimed at academic teaching staff in higher education, both early career and experienced academics. I aim to give an overview of current issues in assessment, review theoretical and research literature, and show how practice can be informed by key perspectives so that theoretical ideas and research literature are linked with the practice of teaching and learning. This may seem an obvious statement, but often educational practice does not connect with research findings and theoretical thinking.

There is a complex relationship between, on the one hand, research into education (which may be carried out by non-practitioners) and, on the other hand, the vast store of practical knowledge (Elbaz [1983] 2019) which teachers acquire through their educational experience. Practical knowledge is rich, tacit and vague. Practical knowledge strongly influences practice; research on teacher beliefs and academic conceptions shows that previous learning and teaching experiences have a profound impact on a teachers' practice (Elbaz 2019/1983; Borg 2015; Samuelowicz and Bain 2001; Kember 1997). Teachers have deep and valuable knowledge about their discipline(s) and how best to learn and assess fundamental concepts. This valuable practical knowledge is often not connected, or not fully connected, with current educational research and theoretical thinking. Similarly, research findings from one

educational environment may not be applicable to another. Teachers need to make judgements about what will work in their context and with their diverse groups of learners.

Teachers' practical knowledge (see [Chapter 2](#) for a detailed discussion) is a rich and powerful influence but is often not scrutinised. We know, or think we know what works; we might not know why it works. Small-scale action research and other methodologies are useful in helping academics explore practical knowledge, challenge assumptions and develop a reflective stance (Schön 2017). The follow-up activities in this guide suggest ways of exploring your own conceptions of teaching and learning, thinking about how these influence your teaching and assessment practices and what you might need to challenge. It is the premise of this book to try to bring together accounts of practice and theoretical and research work to offer academics a rich tapestry of ideas for supporting and assessing learning, to suggest ways of investigating your practice and of collecting evidence of effectiveness.

Each learner is unique with a range of characteristics (e.g. age, disabilities, race, sexuality, access to wealth), prior learning experiences and diverse needs, and each teacher is equally unique. To investigate teaching and learning, it is important to choose a methodology that recognises and explores this uniqueness. Case study research is frequently used in education as it is suitable for small-scale research, is context specific and rich in detail (Simons 2014; Bassey 2003; Stake 1995). There are different traditions within case study research; Stake's (1995) seminal work sets out a vision of case study research as an exploration of a unique phenomenon. He argues that generalisation is not the aim of case study research, instead it is the responsibility of the researcher to collect rich data on the case and come to know it well (Stake 1995, 8). Case studies may be designed to investigate a range of phenomena, for example, aspects of a degree programme, a group of learners, an individual learner and educational practices and beliefs of teachers. The type of data collected can range from interviews, observations, surveys, reflective journals (audio or written), analysis of students' work and an enquiry into procedures and processes through the analysis of documentation (e.g. syllabi, module handbooks, assessment briefs and criteria, marking and moderation procedures).

This approach to case study research fits well with an interpretivist research paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1985). An interpretivist approach acknowledges the role of the researcher as constructor and interpreter of the research. As an investigator of your practice you will devise the study and interpret the data. The interpretation is yours, but through

working in collaboration with students and colleagues, you can collect and reflect on alternative perspectives. Co-operating with colleagues and working in a community of practice (see [Chapter 2](#)) is key to developing as a practitioner. Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) explain the importance of belonging to a community of practice:

You trust practitioners like your doctor to help you both for their experience and personal characteristics, and also because their actions reflect a competence defined by their community. Connection, engagement, status and a legitimacy in that community are all part of what makes someone a trustworthy practitioner. (2015, 14)

Engagement with a professional community, with educational research, with investigation and reflection on one's own knowledge and practice creates trustworthy teachers.

## How to Use this Guide

This guide presents current issues in assessment, research and theoretical thinking in these areas and proposes principles of good practice. These principles are illustrated in cases studies and embodied in teaching ideas (see the tables below). However, what works in one context with one student cohort may not work with another. Teachers need to consider their own context and learner diversity and make judgements about how to adapt these principles to fit their context. A key principle in this book is that teachers and students work together to develop consensual understandings of academic standards (this entails improving assessment literacy for both staff and students) and how programme design and learning activities can facilitate this.

[Chapter 2](#) gives an overview of key educational ideas and theories. These ideas are then explored further in each chapter. [Chapter 2](#) covers:

- how adults learn
- academic standards
- the role of exemplars
- academic literacies
- research-based learning
- validity and reliability in assessment.

A key idea in this guide is that teachers and students require a shared understanding of academic standards. Without this understanding, teachers cannot make reliable judgements about the quality of students' work, and students cannot judge their peers' and their own work. Students who understand academic standards on their programme of study, can reliably self-assess and determine how to develop their work.

Chapters 3 to 5 explore assessment design: Chapter 3 considers ways of ensuring validity in assessment through backward design of assessment, authentic assessment and preparing students for assessment. Chapter 4 focuses on assessment design across a programme; it discusses the problem of modularisation and the importance of connecting assessments across a programme. Authentic assessment is discussed in Chapter 3; this topic is then taken up and explored in detail in Chapter 5, which covers ways of reaching out to groups and organisations beyond higher education institutions and involving partners and students in research-based learning.

While Chapters 3 to 5 focus on designing valid assessments, Chapters 6 to 8 problematise making reliable judgements. In Chapter 6 the thorny issue of reliability in assessment is explored in conjunction with both teacher and student understanding of academic standards. Ways of ensuring more reliable assessment judgements are proposed. Chapter 7 focuses on students as assessors and explores the benefits and problems of involving students in assessment through peer and collaborative assessment. Finally, feedback, and helping students to understand, construct and use feedback, is discussed in Chapter 8. Throughout this guide, I stress the importance of ensuring that assessment and feedback practices are inclusive; Chapter 9 deals in detail with inclusive practice, arguing that good assessment practices are inclusive practices. I consider the benefits and challenges of offering choice in assessment. Chapter 10 concludes the guide.

If you want to dip into parts of the guide that are relevant for you, then you can use the assessment and feedback troubleshooting guide (Table 1.1) to find solutions to common assessment and feedback issues. If you are looking for practical ideas, Tables 1.2 and 1.3 will direct you to case studies and teaching ideas presented in the guide. Finally, if you want help with designing or reviewing aspects of assessment, Table 1.4 will direct you to the design and review tools.

**Table 1.1:** Assessment and feedback troubleshooting guide

This troubleshooting guide suggests solutions to some common assessment issues

Issue	Action
Inconsistent feedback from a team of markers Differences in quantity and quality of feedback given	Involve the team in peer review of feedback (Chapter 6). Use the feedback profiling tool to analyse feedback and improve the quality of feedback. Develop guidelines for the team of markers, standardising the format and amount of feedback. Use a feedback form to guide teachers' comments.
Inconsistent marking Lack of marker reliability Large team of inexperienced teaching assistants (TAs)	Organise harmonisation/ pre-moderation sessions before any marking (Chapter 6). Get involved in calibration activities across a department or across a discipline (Chapter 6).
Too many assessments No connections between assessments Students cannot use learning from one assessment in the next	Carry out a Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA). Focus on reducing assessments and ensuring links between assessments (Chapter 4).
Late feedback or students do not receive feedback	Use a tracking system for student submission of assignments and issue deadline reminders to markers. Flag any late return of feedback and take immediate action. Tell students why their feedback is late and when they will receive feedback.
Students do not understand the assessment task and/or the standard they are required to reach and/or the feedback they receive	Help students understand assessment and feedback by organising guided marking at the beginning of a module and introducing dialogic feedback (Chapter 7).



Students do not collect or open feedback and/or do not use it to improve their next assignment	Ensure assessments are connected and show progressions so students need to take account of feedback (Chapter 4). Use a submission cover sheet that asks students to explain how they have used feedback from their last assignment to develop their submitted work. Remind students when grades and feedback have been returned and send a further reminder if they have not opened or collected their feedback within a week.
Assessments do not test the knowledge, skills and competencies students are expected to learn Students do not perceive assessments as valid	Use backward design (Chapter 4). Ensure that the syllabus links to the assessment and covers appropriate knowledge and skills. Provide opportunities for formative tasks that practise the knowledge and skills needed for the final assessment.

**Table 1.2:** Illustrative case studies

Topic	Level	Discipline	Chapter
Research-based learning Meet the Researcher	Undergraduate	Psychology and language sciences	2
Research-based learning Mystery specimen	Undergraduate	Biology and zoology	5
Research-based learning Creating a community of researchers	Undergraduate	History of science	5
Calibration of academic standards	Undergraduate	Accountancy (Australia)	6
Collaborative assessment on an online masters programme	Postgraduate	Education	7
Feedback and peer assessment Learning from composing peer feedback	Undergraduate	Engineering	8

**Table 1.3:** Teaching ideas

Topic	Chapter
Writing-to-learn (WtL) tasks	2
Paraphrasing assessment criteria	7
How to set up guided marking	7
How to create a marker's commentary	7
Helping students understand assessment criteria (paraphrasing)	7
Helping students understand feedback (paraphrasing)	8

**Table 1.4:** Design and review tools and questionnaires

Tool	Chapter
Module assessment design questionnaire	3
Programme assessment design questionnaire	4
Feedback profiling tool	8

## Follow-Up

If you are interested in following up some of the ideas in this chapter, you might like to explore these resources. But you don't have to! This isn't a programme of study and this book is designed so that you can dip into sections that are relevant to your needs at any moment. I hope you will come back and explore further as your thinking develops.

### Reading

Action research is suited to small-scale investigations of your practice. Jean McNiff's (2013) guide explains the theory and practice of action research.

McNiff, Jean. *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013.

Hutchings et al.'s (2011) guide to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) considers how teaching colleagues can work together with students to improve higher education.

Hutchings, Pat, Mary Taylor Huber and Anthony Ciccone. *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

## Thinking

Think about your disciplinary research practices. How do they differ from practices used in education, such as action research and case study research?

## Investigating Your Practice

Investigate a learner. Meet informally with a learner (a current student on your programme, a past student, or a prospective student). Find out about their prior learning experiences, learning needs, concerns and ambitions.

Discuss your findings with students and colleagues. What have you learned about teaching and learning on your programme and what changes would you advise?

Investigate the learning environment. Shadow a student for a day. Find out how their day is organised, what pressures they are dealing with and what helps them study effectively. Are there aspects of the learning environment that hamper effective learning? What are they and how can they be improved?

Investigate assessment documentation, e.g. assessment information in module handbooks. What do staff and students think of the information presented? Could the information be presented more clearly? Read more about designing assessment in [Chapters 3 and 4](#).