

# Brookes Briefing: Assessment and learning

This Brookes Briefing addresses one of the elements of the IDEAS inclusive curriculum model

‘Assessment defines for students what is important, what counts, how they will spend their time and how they will see themselves as learners. If you want to change student learning, then change the methods of assessment’ (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997, p.6).

This quote may be over 25 years old, but it’s as relevant today as it was then. However, the ‘assessment objective’ driven nature of assessment on ‘A’ level, Access and BTEC courses has made attitudes towards assessment even more entrenched and problematic, with students often adopting an instrumentalist, strategic approach to ongoing assessment rather than learning purely for the sake of learning. The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Edexcel Maths paper scandal of 2019, and the recent use of teacher-assessed grades has arguably exacerbated these issues. However, to compound matters, since the onset of the pandemic, the average number of assignments per term/semester in UK Higher Education has increased by 29% (formative) and 14% (summative) – an increase partly attributed to modularisation (Neves and Hewitt, 2021 and Elkington, 2020, p.5). We know that following the pandemic, student engagement and attendance has declined markedly (Williams, 2022, Rowen and Neves, 2021), and it appears that assessment has increased as a means of trying to drive up engagement. As Gibbs and Simpson (2005) have argued, there is often a sense ‘that you have to assess everything that moves in order to capture students’ time and energy’ (p.8). But where does all this leave learning?

Most assessment shouldn’t be just a ‘product’ (often a commodified encapsulation of, and measure of attainment), but a process that involves critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, judgement, synthesis, the selection and prioritisation of knowledge, and its articulation to an intended or actual audience. This process also fosters self-reflection and self-efficacy. Writing, for instance, requires the organisation of one’s thoughts, actions and time. This is because whilst thought is non-linear, academic texts require structure and logical argumentation (Game and Metcalfe, 1996). Assessment also entails putting on the line one’s own agency and academic ‘voice’ (Wallbank, 2022). As such, assessment is not just a measure or product of learning, another hurdle for students to jump through, or a mechanism to drive engagement, but is a key site for the development of critical self-awareness, personal literacy and independent learning - all of which are encapsulated within the Brookes Graduate Attributes and are a key plank in many of the QAA’s subject benchmark statements.

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## Principle 1: Ensure assessment is inclusive

If we design and promote the use of assessment as a tool for learning, not just as a means of measuring performance, assessment becomes inclusive almost by default. Assessment which is fostered as an integral part of learning itself means processing and engaging with subject content at an individual, personalised, dialogic and often holistic level, and thus enables an individualised learning journey, especially if choice, support and dialogic reflection is built in from the outset. The **QAA Embedding Inclusive Assessment: A Reflective Toolkit** (2022) recommends the following attributes to enable assessment to be inclusive:

- Embeds support (academic and wellbeing)
- Develops assessment literacy
- Provides formative opportunities
- Communicates meaningfully (constructive, accessible, timely dialogue)
- Enables personalisation
- Fosters digital capabilities
- Promotes authenticity
- Assumes considerate policies and processes
- Requires continuous reflection

Many of these attributes intersect with the principles below to create a coherent package for promoting assessments as a vehicle for facilitating learning.

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## Principle 2: Scaffold assessment to promote learning

It's worth remembering and appreciating that most students, having entered Higher Education via 'A' Levels, Access Courses or BTECs, have fine-tuned an approach to assessment that is entirely geared towards enabling them to demonstrate the attainment of 'assessment objectives' (set by OFQUAL). Students are often taught, coached and mentored towards fulfilling these very precise criteria in order to enjoy success. However, this is not necessarily learning. It inculcates a strategic, instrumentalist, surface-level approach to learning and assessment which students often try to imitate when they start their courses at university. However, assessment criteria at university are considerably vaguer, more holistic, and more focussed on evaluation, analysis and critical engagement rather than simply demonstrating knowledge - especially in genres of assessment such as discursive essay writing. As such, students need support to transition into a mindset of assessment as learning, rather than assessment as purely a measure of attainment or a necessary evil in order to pass the course. The following principles help us achieve this goal.

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## Principle 3: Make assessment dialogic

Ideally, assessment should create as many opportunities as possible for dialogue. This should be encouraged at two levels:

1. As an integral part of the academic context and community. Encourage students to think of their ideas and responses to assignment tasks / questions as entering into an intellectual conversation with the work of others, and that their own ideas are informed by, or challenge that work.

Assignment responses are thus dialogic, and even the marker is integral to that dialogue.

- Promote assessment as a form of dialogic learning in which, through engagement with others, we facilitate ‘learning to think’ (Forsman, 1985). By engaging with, reframing, summarising, synthesising and constructing an argument, students are encouraged to not just reproduce, demonstrate or transact knowledge, but learn through representing / articulating their understanding.
- Fostering this dialogue will require working with students to develop their academic literacy and research skills (two of the core Brookes Graduate Attributes) so that they can engage in critical thinking effectively (especially in the case of international students). The Centre for Academic Development runs workshops on these skills, and they prove to be most effective when embedded into the curriculum (Wingate, 2015).

## 2. Assessment ought to encourage dialogue with the marker.

- Feedback should encourage opportunities for the student to seek additional feedback / clarifications or advice via office hours or drop-in sessions. Research has shown that whilst written feedback, annotations and highlighted criteria grids can be effective, the highest scoring feedback method in terms of effectiveness is the one-to-one tutorial (Murtagh & Baker, 2009).
- Try to ensure your feedback encourages dialogue - use language which is personalised, specific to the student’s response, facilitates dialogic reflection through the use of questioning, and / or makes use of oral feedback.
- If you feel students need additional, one-to-one help with their writing, the Centre for Academic Development offer one-to-one study skills tutorials and drop-in, including tutorials on mathematics and statistics.

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## Principle 4: Use assessment to encourage reflection

Encouraging students to reflect is a key component of learning (think Kolb’s learning cycle), but it also facilitates self-efficacy. If students are encouraged to take ownership of their own research, literacy, decision making skills through reflection, it fosters autonomy as they are able to evaluate their own work before it’s even submitted. This can be encouraged by:

- Encouraging self-marking / self-evaluation through peer or tutor led marking activities. If you can encourage students to ‘self-assess’ before submitting a piece of work, they reflect and evaluate their own performance and understanding, which fosters deeper learning
- If assessment is conceived of, and is designed to encourage dialogue, it can also lend itself to encouraging reflection. Back in the eighteenth century, Lord Shaftesbury advocated self-assessment as a sort of dialogic, ‘gymnastic method’, through which ideas are ‘taken to pieces, compared together and examined from head to foot...before they are brought to the field’ (in our case being submitted for marking). This form of self-reflection and critique, Shaftesbury contended, makes one a ‘good thinker’ - precisely what we want to achieve, firstly as educators, and secondly through our Graduate Attributes and QAA descriptors.
- A further way of encouraging reflection of course is through the judicious and timely use of formative assignments. Use formative assessment as a means of fostering reflection through dialogue and feedback.

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## Principle 5: Use assessment as a way of embedding employability skills

Unfortunately, employers commonly lament the lack of ‘basic skills’ such as writing cogently, grammar and spelling, communication skills, teamwork and problem-solving skills (O’Brien, 2021). Even just writing an email requires proficiency in writing, and many of the skills honed through completing assignments at university are directly transferable to the workplace. Thinking about employability skills can help make assessments authentic, meaningful and relevant.

- Wherever possible align the final dissertation or project topic to a key, discipline-specific employability skill (e.g. computer science or architecture).
- Some of the ways you can encourage students to engage with assessment as a tool for learning is by explicitly mapping assessment types / genres onto learning employability skills. See the Brookes Graduate Outcomes and the **Skills 4.0 model** for examples.

## References, resources and further reading

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