

Assessment Principles

Assessment Principles set out the key aspects of assessment practice that should be reflected in all assessment practice and procedure. They help explain why we have assessment and guide our approach to assessment matters.

There can be circumstances in assessment practice where all the principles cannot be applied at the same time. For example, when choosing a particular method of assessment it may be that the principle of validity in assessment is over-ridden by the principle of reliability. The sacrifice of one principle for another is acceptable when there is clear justification. Overall, the principles should provide an underpinning and guiding framework that steers assessment practice.

The following list represents a set of principles for good practice in assessment.

1.1 Assessment should be an integral part of the curriculum

The design of assessment should not be separated from the design of the overall curriculum, which comprises aims, learning outcomes, teaching, learning and assessment activities and which is described in programme specifications. Therefore assessment strategies for individual modules should not be decided in isolation from other modules that make up the rest of the year, or that build incrementally year on year. Assessment tasks should relate to the learning outcomes of the module/level/programme.

1.2 Assessment should be an integral part of the students' approach to learning

Students' approaches to learning can both influence and inform assessment practices.

Therefore, assessment methods should be chosen so that they encourage a deep, rather than a surface approach to learning and assist the student in identifying appropriate priorities in learning. Wherever possible, students' approaches to learning should help to inform assessment design.

1.3 The purpose of assessment should be clearly understood by staff and students

There are a variety of purposes of assessment, e.g. to monitor learning, to assess competence, to provide a context for learning, and to provide feedback to staff and students. In deciding on the methods and timing of assessment for a module, it is necessary to clarify the purpose(s) for which the assessment is required, and consider the extent to which the method of assessment is fit for such purpose(s).

Students should be prepared for the assessment tasks they face. Rubrics should be published in advance of assessment taking place, and sample questions and materials be made available so that students know what is expected of them. Such assessment literacy increases student confidence in approaching assessment tasks, and improves performance. Peer assessment can also add to student understanding of assessment.

1.4 Assessment should be valid

To be valid, assessment tasks should be designed to ensure that they assess the learning outcomes. Where a module entails multiple learning outcomes, it may be necessary to design different assessment tasks to ensure that all outcomes are appropriately assessed.

1.5 Assessment should be reliable

In assessment, consistent standards of tutor assessment and fairness are important goals to aim for. Both are more likely to be achieved if clear task guidance, explicit assessment criteria and marking schemes are given to staff and students alike. The 'connoisseur' approach to assessment, 'I know it when I see it but I can't put it into words' is not acceptable.

1.6 Assessment should balance the formative and summative so as to provide meaningful feedback

Assessment tasks used for formative purposes should be designed to provide meaningful feedback to students which helps them to know how they are doing and how they can improve. An over-reliance on summative assessment at the conclusion of an element of study gives students a grade but provides very little feedback that will help them develop and improve before they reach the end of the module/programme. It is acknowledged that some methods of assessment can balance both a formative and summative function. Once a task becomes even partly summative there is a tendency for the student to focus on the mark achieved rather than the feedback itself – but on the other hand, it may be felt that incentives are needed to encourage students to participate. It is important to remain aware of this trade-off in designing assessment tasks.

1.7 Criteria for assessment should be transparent

Criteria for assessment should be as clear as possible to tutors, examiners and students to ensure equity, validity and reliability. Assessment criteria (grade descriptors) should be published and provided to all students, markers and examiners, including external examiners.

1.8 Assessment should be incremental and sufficiently demanding

Assessment tasks need to build on what was expected in previous study. Assessment tasks should be designed to challenge students considered capable of undertaking a module/programme to demonstrate the best level of attainment of which they are capable.

1.9 Assessment should be redeemable

Faculties must follow the regulations for the redeeming of failed assessments as detailed in the University Calendar. All students are permitted repeat opportunities during their programme. This is not only just but may help to avoid high drop-out or failure rates. It is recognised that the number of these may be limited by specific PRSB requirements.

The form of a repeat or referral may differ from the original assessment and it may be that multiple elements of the original assessment may be replaced where the learning outcomes can be assessed by a single form of assessment in referral or external repeat.

1.10 Assessment should be efficient

Systems of assessment should be managed so as to use academic and support staff time and resources in appropriate ways. However, efficiency in assessment should not override the preceding principles. In cases where there are trade-offs (losing reliability because of practicality issues for example) then these must be made explicit.

1.11 Assessment should be inclusive

Assessment tasks (including for referral assessments) should be selected with an awareness that different methods may be appropriate for different learning styles – therefore a variety of methods should be used to ensure that particular students are not disadvantaged.

Faculties should be aware of the range of possible variations to assessment methods that may be recommended for students with disabilities/specific learning difficulties.

Assessment tasks and documentation setting out marking criteria etc should be clear enough for students for whom English is not their first language to understand what is expected of them.

Where possible, a balance of different modes of assessment should be utilised in the core and compulsory modules that make up a programme.

Assessment tasks should be designed to cater for students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds following interdisciplinary modules or modules from outside of their home discipline.

1.12 Assessment outcomes should be monitored

Students' performance in different types of assessment tasks should be monitored, including monitoring performance by race, disability, gender and age, to ensure that assessment is not inadvertently culturally biased or otherwise disadvantaging particular groups.

1.13 Student assessment workload should be appropriate

Each Faculty is expected to publish details of what is expected of students.. In arriving at an appropriate workload Faculties should take account of the following suggestions:

- Spread assessment throughout the semester/year so as to minimise bunching. Several tasks can be set/assessed early on— e.g. literature searches, book reviews — to help ensure that tasks do not all come at the module end.
- Assess a little rather than a lot: focus on exactly what needs to be assessed and design tasks which measure this primarily. Don't measure the same things repeatedly.
- Adhere to deadlines firmly but avoid fixing assessment dates to coincide across several modules
- Assessment dates should be pre-planned and published at the beginning of the semester/year. Choose distributed hand-in deadlines appropriately.

In designing curriculum, staff need to ensure they are making sufficient and appropriate demands so that students are able to demonstrate the highest levels of attainment; this needs to be reflected in student workload requirements.

1.14 Assessment should be coordinated

Assessment design should be coordinated at programme level in order to achieve a balance between alternative modes of assessment, and to ensure that all programme learning outcomes are being assessed.

A variety of assessment types may be seen as desirable to ensure inclusivity, fairness and motivation, but unless this is coordinated at programme level there is a danger that the overall pattern of assessment will become unbalanced. For example, insisting on having an unseen written examination on every module may be unnecessary, but removing all examinations may not be wise. Such imbalance may arise when assessment design is only carried out at module level. The balance of modes of assessment across a programme could usefully be considered as part of programme validation and monitoring.