Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education

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Chapter 3

Designing Assessment for a Course Unit/Module

This chapter will help you think through the process of assessment design for your course unit or module. A course unit or module is a discrete unit of study, involving teaching time (either face-to-face or online), individual study, possibly group work and typically at least one summative assessment. In the UK the size of modules vary, some may run throughout the academic year while others may be short, one-week intensive courses. Regulations stipulate how many hours of learning (and thus how many modules) need to be completed for a degree programme. Learning hours are measured in credits; in the UK, fifteen credits are equivalent to 150 notional hours of learning (this includes taught sessions, self-study time and time spent on assessments). A bachelor’s degree with honours is typically equivalent to 360 credits and a master’s degree, 180 credits in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (see QAA 2014). Modules are combined to make a degree programme. There can be considerable flexibility in how modules are combined and a wide range of choice for students in some programmes. In other programmes of study, typically professional programmes, there may be many compulsory core modules with very little choice. Whether you are working in a modular system or not, you will be involved in designing course units and appropriate assessments. Early career teachers are often asked to design new course units/modules, and once they gain more experience, may be involved in programme design. For this reason, the chapter on course unit/module design comes before the chapter on programme design (Chapter 4) though you are encouraged to read both chapters. This chapter covers the following.
• Backward design to help you think about what you want students to learn from the course unit/module and how the course unit/module aligns with others in the programme (see Chapter 4 for programme-level assessment design). This chapter proposes that you begin by thinking about what you want students to know, do and become as a result of the course unit/module and to consider how the course unit/module fits in with and supports student learning across the programme.

• The concept of validity, ensuring that the assessment tasks test the aims of the course unit/module, is discussed and strengths and weaknesses of different task types are compared.

• Ways of developing clear assessment guidance and communicating these to students are discussed.

• An introduction to designing authentic assessment tasks and tasks that involve external participants (more detail can be found in Chapter 5).

• Assessment design should include setting formative tasks which help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to tackle summative assessments. This involves developing writing and speaking and designing opportunities, which give students practice in the assessment genre and appropriate rhetorical conventions (see Chapter 2 for more on academic literacies).

What Should you Assess and How Should you Assess It?

Start with a clear idea of what you want students to learn in your course unit/module and how their learning links with learning in the programme. In many fields, content dominates, and syllabi are often packed full of content that students are expected to learn and memorise. Assessment of this learning then becomes a matter of checking that students have a good knowledge of all this content; typically, in content heavy programmes this is done through multiple-choice questions or short answer questions, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. However, these methods are limited when it comes to assessing higher order thinking and complex learning, and the construction of valid multiple-choice questions requires expertise.

In Chapter 2, complex learning was discussed. In higher education, learners are concerned with critically evaluating theoretical papers and research findings, with constructing coherent arguments and
understanding professional practice protocols. Crucially, learners are expected to become part of a disciplinary and professional community (Sambell 2013; Barnett 2009), understand ways of thinking and practising (WTP) within a discipline (Entwistle 2005) and understand the rhetorical conventions used to express that thinking in spoken and written language (Bean 2011). Barnett expresses the belief that higher education can be transformational; learning in higher education is not a matter of memorising content, acquiring knowledge and skills; it is a ‘… vehicle for effecting changes in human beings …’ (2009, 432). He views the curriculum, not as a series of content to be learned, but as transformational. Knowledge in the modern world is not static; knowledge is contested and open to change. Barnett describes the world as ‘super-complex’, open to manifold interpretations which create uncertainty and insecurity (2009, 439). Having knowledge and skills does not help an individual cope with this supercomplexity, but, through personal development and reflection, students’ world view can be transformed. As they become members of a professional or knowledge community they develop their sense of being in the world and their understanding of their profession becomes based on ‘well-founded claims’ (Barnett 2009, 432) arrived at through a critical stance.

Entwistle comments on the importance of recognising the limitations of learning outcomes and designing open-ended assessments (or ill-structured tasks, Voss and Post 1988), to capture complex learning.

While WTPs, by their very nature, are more difficult to assess, limiting the assessed outcomes to more precisely defined outcomes is potentially damaging to students’ understanding of the subject itself. The broader understanding of the subject can be encouraged through more open-ended forms of assessment and through ensuring that students cover general or problem-based questions or assignments. (Entwistle 2005, 79)

A syllabus cannot be a description of course unit/module content. In some fields, such as medicine, the content to be covered has increased exponentially; adding more content to a saturated syllabus is not an option. Focusing on developing the learners’ capacity to understand how members of the academic and/or professional community think and how knowledge is created within that discipline, enables students to critique and deconstruct knowledge. Learners are enabled to independently explore areas of interest in the discipline, equipped with the tools needed to understand, question and construct new knowledge. They
become a part of the disciplinary community, contributing to knowledge building in the discipline and/or in professional practice.

**Backward Design**

Assessment is a fundamental part of learning and has more impact on student learning than teaching. Assessment ‘... directs attention to what is important. It acts as an incentive for study. And it has a powerful effect on what students do and how they do it’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 3). But often assessment is the last item to be considered in course unit/module design. Backward design ensures better connections between assessments by starting with the last assessment task and planning teaching activities around assessments. The earlier assessments are ‘scaffolding assignments’ (Bean 2011, 96) providing students opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed for the final assessment. Assessment tasks need to be motivating, relevant and create opportunities for learning. As Graham explains:

> With this approach to planning, teachers begin with a clear statement of goals and design assessments to determine student progress toward those goals. The selection and organization of activities, texts, and materials into daily plans come last in the teacher’s thinking process. Through this lens, assessment provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in productive ways, including, but not exclusive to, final performances based on complex learning goals. (2005, 609)

The planning process starts with an ‘overarching question’, and assessment is designed to explore this question. The overarching question and learning activities need to be appropriate for the level of study. Teaching and learning activities support learners to complete the assessments. Backward design aims to ensure that assessment is fully integrated into the course unit/module and programme.

Having worked out what you want students to learn, the next step is to design a syllabus to support that learning, thinking and communicating, with valid assessment tasks that enable students to further their learning and share what they have learned. For example, in a first year undergraduate political analysis course unit/module, the goal was to help students understand the fundamentals of political analysis and to prepare them to write a fine-grained analysis of political texts. The
overarching question was ‘What is Politics?’. Assessment was through an essay. Learning activities involved analysing papers presenting contrasting views of politics, discussing these views in seminars, writing summaries of key papers and writing-to-learn activities (Chapter 2). To gain an understanding of standards on the course unit/module, students marked three essays from a previous year and discussed grades and comments. Writing activities, including synthesising ideas from a range of sources using a reading grid, prepared students for expressing their ideas in appropriate disciplinary discourse. A draft essay, drawing on the texts studied in seminars, was submitted and feedback provided by the seminar leader. Students had the opportunity to ask questions about the feedback and areas for development before submitting their essay for summative assessment at the end of the first term. (This video shows the course unit/module leader talking about fine-grained analysis and using an exemplar student text to illustrate his talk: http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/node/196.)

Scaffolding tasks guide students’ thinking and help initiate students into ways of thinking in the discipline. Thinking Writing provide a series of worksheets guiding students’ reading of literature in geography (see below). The first worksheet, reproduced in the following box (Thinking Writing 2019), requires students to identify key sentences in an article and also sentences they cannot understand. The worksheet gives practice in paraphrasing and citing references; students practise expressing their opinion of the article in disciplinary discourse.

### Geographical Ideas in Practice
#### Worksheet 1: Reading and discussion

**Theme:** ........................................................................................................

**Due date:** ......................................................................................................

**Reading(s):** ................................................................................................

Read the article suggested by your tutor and complete the following activities.

1. Make a list of the key terms in the field; make sure you know what they mean as you will be discussing them in the next tutorial.

2. After/while reading the article, write down the following (your tutor will give you one or two of these):
the sentence/paragraph that you feel is most important in the article

the sentence/paragraph that you disagree with most, or feel has the most problems

the sentence/paragraph that you just cannot understand or see the significance of

the sentence/paragraph that you like the most

the sentence/paragraph that you feel has the most striking piece of data/information in it.

In addition to this, include the citation and the full reference for the article in the correct form.

3. Rewrite the sentence/paragraph in your own words, again using a citation in the text. You do not have to repeat everything from the original, but you do have to cover the main points.

For example:

Watson (1980, 357) believes that the majority of people find writing hard.

or

The majority of people appear to find writing hard (Watson 1980, 357).

4. Write a paragraph of five to six sentences that explain why you chose this section, and why you feel it is most important/has problems/is most striking/etc. If you can, try not to use the words ‘I think ...’.

‘Writing – in the sense of producing texts composed of written words – seems to be difficult for most of us.’ (Watson 1980, 357)

References


Source: Worksheet from Thinking Writing.

www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk
The Trouble with Intended Learning Outcomes

Intended learning outcomes (ILOs) describe the knowledge, skills and competencies which are to be learnt in the course unit/module. They attempt to describe what the student will be able to know and do, and to what level by the end of the course unit/module. The allure of ILOs is the assumption that learning can be precisely described, and assessment tasks designed to measure to what extent students have achieved the outcomes. But, from what we have discussed about the nature of learning in higher education (Chapter 2) and the nature of students’ performance and judgements about the quality of that performance (see Chapters 2 and 5), such precise ‘codifications’ (Sadler 2014) and specification of learning and student achievement appears to be limiting and impossible. Hussey and Smith (2008) point out that ILOs have become part of a process of monitoring and evaluating higher education. However, the nature of learning in higher education, the complex learning that students are involved in and the ill-structured tasks (Voss and Post 1988) that are necessarily set, make precise specifications of learning outcomes difficult. Hussey and Smith (2008) argue that ILOs are part of a process that tends towards the commodification of knowledge (2008, 221), but contend that learning in higher education cannot be neatly commodified and specified. Similarly, Rotthoff argues that in medical education, competency-based education which depends on ILOs is inappropriate because it is, ‘... poorly suited to highly skilled professions [...] such as doctors because they require highly complex skills such as analysis, judgment and reflection, professionalism and empathy. These [...] cannot be adequately achieved with the predominant methods of didactic learning objectives’ (2018, 1). A narrow focus on competencies is detrimental as medical students need ill-structured assignments in order to develop these complex skills.

Motivating Learners Through Authentic Assessment

‘Authentic assessment’ has been coined to describe assessment tasks which link knowledge with the kind of problems we face in society (Villarroel et al. 2018). Authentic assessment aims to help students develop strategies for applying knowledge and solving problems. Authentic tasks may take the form of scenario-based learning, case studies, research-based learning, object-based learning and problem-based learning (see Chapter 5). Authentic tasks may be carried out in
groups to replicate teamwork in professional and community contexts. Authentic assessment tasks, when well-designed, are ‘inherently meaningful and relevant’ (Sambell et al. 2013, 12) and have long-term value fitting Boud and Falchikov’s (2007) description of sustainable assessment. Authentic tasks may involve students producing work which is not viewed as academic but has a clear link with professional practice, such as information leaflets for patients on health care issues, videos of case studies for psychiatric practice, briefing reports for charities and non-governmental organisations and mathematical teaching resources for teaching maths in schools. Other tasks may involve students in more typical academic work, such as creating annotated bibliographies, collaborating in writing articles for journal publication, or a book chapter or edited book. Chapter 5 has a full discussion of ways of involving external bodies in assessment and further examples of authentic assessment.

These innovative assessment tasks can be hugely motivating for students but can also cause stress. New forms of assessment (new genres) which are unfamiliar to students can cause anxiety. Students prefer familiar assessments; Iannone and Simpson (2017) discuss the influence of discipline and institutional contexts on students’ perceptions of summative assessment. In a mixed-methods study of education and mathematics students in the UK they found that mathematics students preferred closed-book exams over projects, while education students preferred projects and dissertations, which they considered to be better at distinguishing ‘those who are good at academic studies in education from those who are poor at academic studies in education’ (Iannone and Simpson 2017, 789). Both mathematics and education students thought multiple-choice exams to be a poor discriminator of ability. They concluded, ‘In short, students in our studies have distinct epistemic beliefs and these appear to be one of the factors influencing their perceptions of assessment, and these are grounded in disciplinary differences’ (Iannone and Simpson 2017, 798).

Table 3.1 sets out some common assessment methods and their advantages, disadvantages and disciplinary match. In choosing an appropriate assessment, you need to think about:

- the time taken to plan and design the assessment
- the knowledge, skills and competencies you want learners to develop
- the disciplinary epistemic beliefs which influence assessment
- the familiarity of the assessment to students
- the ease of administration
- the workload for both students and teachers
- the amount of preparation and practice students need (this increases with lack of familiarity)
- the validity of the tasks
- marking reliability (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of academic standards and marker reliability).

Table 3.1: Advantages and disadvantages of types of assessment (adapted from Epstein 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment type</th>
<th>Marker reliability</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Typically used in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-choice questions/ Single best answer questions</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Has potential to assess analysis and problem-solving but often used to assess memorisation of ‘facts’. Quick to mark. Can use software to mark and set question. Can build up a question bank. Provides fast feedback and can be done formatively online with feedback.</td>
<td>Difficult to write good quality stems and distractors. Encourages guessing. Difficult to assess complex learning.</td>
<td>Medicine, health, law and the sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral exam (viva)</td>
<td>Low unless markers engage in calibration activities (see Chapter 5)</td>
<td>Good for checking knowledge and clinical reasoning. Often used to deter plagiarism. Can be good for synoptic assessment, connecting several modules. Can record and review to moderate and check on standards.</td>
<td>Can be time consuming and difficult to organize, especially with large classes. Risk of hidden bias (gender, race etc.). Examiners need professional development; often two examiners required. Can be extremely stressful for learners.</td>
<td>All disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment type</td>
<td>Marker reliability</td>
<td>Advantages</td>
<td>Disadvantages</td>
<td>Typically used in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>Low, unless markers engage in calibration activities (see Chapter 5)</td>
<td>Depending on type – explanation, argument, expository. Good for testing analysis, synthesis, argument, criticality. Essay questions can be quick to set. Some students may be familiar with the genre.</td>
<td>‘Essayist literacy’ (Lillis 2001) may disadvantage students from marginalised groups. An essay is far removed from professional practices – reports may have more validity.</td>
<td>Arts, humanities, social sciences, some sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab report</td>
<td>Low, unless markers engage in calibration activities (see Chapter 5)</td>
<td>Can provide practice in devising/understanding a research question, collecting and analysing data, writing a discussion section.</td>
<td>Can be difficult to set up with large groups. Time in laboratory is expensive.</td>
<td>Engineering, sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE)</td>
<td>Low unless markers engage in calibration activities (see Chapter 5)</td>
<td>Examining how learners apply skills in professional/clinical settings. Good for observing communication skills. Can be quick to mark.</td>
<td>Can be time consuming and expensive to set up. Requires several examiners. Can be stressful for some learners.</td>
<td>Professional fields – medicine, legal practice, social work, psychology and management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenarios, problem-based learning and case studies</td>
<td>Low unless markers engage in calibration activities (see Chapter 5)</td>
<td>Allows learners to show application of knowledge, teamworking and problem-solving skills. Can be good for synoptic assessment, connecting several modules.</td>
<td>Can be difficult to design authentically. Learners need support and practice if the genre is unfamiliar. Can be complex and time consuming to set up and run. Can involve multiple assessors so high workload for staff and potentially low marking reliability.</td>
<td>Engineering, medicine, education, social work – most professional fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment type</td>
<td>Marker reliability</td>
<td>Advantages</td>
<td>Disadvantages</td>
<td>Typically used in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td>Low unless markers engage in calibration activities (see Chapter 5)</td>
<td>Allows students to collect and curate learning experiences. Good for showing attainment of professional and clinical competencies. Allows assessment choice so good for inclusivity. Can be good for synoptic assessment, connecting several modules.</td>
<td>Can be very time-consuming for both learner and marker. Can involve learners in a variety of assessment tasks – this may be bewildering for some learners who will need support with new genres. Potential for plagiarism but can be combined with an oral examination.</td>
<td>Used in most professional fields</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preparing Students for Assessment**

When introducing new varieties of assessment, it is important to prepare students and provide them with practice in any new variety so that they have, as Gibbs and Simpson (2005) state, a chance to get good at a particular variety before they are summatively assessed. Think about where, in your programme, students will have opportunities to practise assessment tasks and written genres as an integral part of their learning. With the massification of higher education in many countries worldwide, and the increasing mobility of students, the higher education teacher cannot assume that their diverse student cohort has previous knowledge of any form of assessment, or any clear understanding of the academic standards on a course unit/module. Even if students have had experience of oral presentations or writing lab reports and essays at school, the format and expectations at higher education institutions may be completely different. So, the first stage is to prepare students, especially first year students, for assessment. For an example, see the description of the political analysis first year course unit/module earlier in this chapter.

Students need a good understanding of assessment processes, and especially of academic standards on the course, in order to evaluate and direct their learning. In Chapter 2, I discussed assessment literacy.
(and see also Chapter 7), in this section I want to focus on one aspect of assessment literacy: understanding academic standards. An effective way of helping students understand the standard of work they need to produce is through the analysis of exemplars (Hendry and Tomitsch 2014; Carter et al. 2018; Boud et al. 2018).

Teachers develop an understanding of academic standards in their discipline through seeing the range of work that students produce; Sadler (1989, 2009, 2010) proposes that students need to be given similar experiences to develop their understanding of standards. When teachers see a range of work, they begin to develop an understanding of what students can produce and what good quality work looks like. Discussing student work with colleagues can help teachers to develop consensual understanding of what good quality work looks like (Sadler, 2010). Academic standards are held to be socially constructed, constructed and held by the disciplinary community (Sadler 2014). As discussion of a range of exemplars helps teachers understand the academic standard for their programme, it is proposed that exposing students to a similar process will help them develop an understanding of academic standards (Sadler 2010). But the use of exemplars is not standard practice on academic programmes. Model answers may be given to students, but exemplars of similar assignments from a previous year, showing a range of students’ work (and the range is important) is less common. Some students report not seeing examples of their peers’ work during their studies. In these cases, the student is in the dark about what good quality work looks like; explicit ways of conveying standards, such as explicit assessment criteria have been shown to be ineffective (see Chapter 5). Students need to see examples of a range of their peers’ work, in order to gain an understanding of standards on their programme. In large, diverse classes, where students come from a range of backgrounds, some non-traditional, exemplars are especially useful in helping students understand academic standards. For example, health care professionals who return to education after a break of many years, may find academic tasks, such as short answer questions, report writing, oral presentations and literature reviews, unfamiliar and may be uncertain about the quality of work they need to produce. Similarly, students from non-traditional backgrounds, and mature students, may have experienced a limited range of assessment types – for example, multiple-choice questions – and may struggle with other forms of assessment, especially the essay (Lillis 2001).
The essay has been extensively used in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Academic literacies researchers have criticised the prolific use of the essay in assessment in higher education as it disadvantages students entering universities from non-traditional backgrounds. Lillis and Tuck explain that ‘academic literacies researchers have argued that the entrenched privileging of essayist literacy perpetuates inequalities in the academy, closing down diversity in knowledge-making, working against policy goals of widening access’ (2016, 6).

**Diversity and Inclusion**

Widening participation has created greater diversity in student cohorts; many more students are the first in their families to participate in higher education. Dymond-Green (2018) reports on Henderson and Shure’s tracking of entrants to higher education; their data suggests:

[…] that nearly 15 per cent of the English population born in 1990 are first in the family university graduates. This means that they comprise more than half of university graduates for this cohort (graduates who match their parents with a degree comprise nearly 12 per cent of the population). There is some suggestion from our early analyses that this is driven by increased participation by women and black and minority ethnic groups.

A greater variety of assessment types that link more with professional practice and better preparation of students for assessment is needed, to create more of a level playing field and allow students to demonstrate what they can do. However, there needs to be a balance as too much variety in assessment can bewilder students; they need practice in the selected range of assessments used on the programme.

**Reflective Writing (and Oral Reflection)**

In some disciplines, especially professional fields such as social and health care, the use of reflective statements has become widespread. Linked with the idea of reflective practice (Schön 1983; Moon 2004; Brookfield 2017), the reflective statement provides an opportunity for students to review their practice, often focusing on an incident and
analysing what happened, how they responded to the incident, how they felt about their response and what they learnt. The analysis acts as a springboard to self-assessing development needs and planning future learning to meet those needs. Reflection and reflective writing are widely advocated in professional development courses. However, assessment of reflection is more contentious (Bolton, 2010; Boud, 1999; Rai, 2006; Ross, 2014); reflective writing is seen as performative, lacking in authenticity, confessional and emotionally problematic, as students write about themselves and their emotions. Assessing this writing as unsatisfactory can seem to imply criticism of the person. When reflective writing is compulsory and summatively assessed, students tend to be strategic in producing what they think the assessor wants, rather than authentic reflection. Reflective writing assignments can ‘normalise surveillance of students’ emotional and developmental expression and produce rituals of confession and compliance’ (Ross 2011, 113).

**Validity**

In designing assessment, the teacher needs to have a clear idea of what they expect students to learn and what level of knowledge and skills students are expected to achieve. This needs to be matched with an appropriate assessment task that will enable students to demonstrate their learning. The task needs to have validity, connect with the aims of the course unit/module and be feasible within the time restraints and practicalities of the course (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion).

**Writing Clear Assessment Briefs**

To learn effectively from assessment, students need a thorough understanding of the assessment method(s). Developing a clear assessment brief, preferably with students, helps them to gain this understanding. An assessment brief details the task and gives students helpful guidance. It is important that the assessment method does not assume knowledge, skills and competencies that have not been covered in the syllabus; this would disadvantage some groups of students and give others an advantage. For example, do not assume that students have expertise in video production, oral presentations or writing genres such as reports or
essays. If this expertise is important, then learning how to make a video or write an essay needs to be part of the course unit/module and students need practice to acquire these skills. Co-constructing assessment tasks with students is an excellent way to ensure they have a thorough understanding of the task (see Chapter 7 for more on co-construction of tasks and assessment criteria).

Setting the same task each year invites plagiarism (Carroll 2002). To design out plagiarism, teachers should devise authentic tasks which enable students to carry out similar tasks with different topics or give students, or groups of students, different scenarios or data sets to work with. For example, in the first year of a three-year undergraduate programme in biology, students worked in groups to discuss a key concept, namely, structure and function in biology. They began discussing the concept online, then in groups prepared a short presentation on structure and function of a group of organisms or single organelle (each group researched a different organism/organelle). This task involved literature searching and inclusion of a small number of references in the presentation. The group presentation was given in a seminar to the teacher and other group members. The presentation was not summatively assessed; the group received formative feedback from peers and the teacher. Following this, students were tasked with preparing a poster on structure and function in different organisms or an organelle. Posters were displayed and uploaded online; students peer reviewed and voted on the best poster. The next assessment task was to individually write a short essay on structure and function, choosing again a different group of organisms or organelle and including a short literature review. The draft essay was submitted for teacher feedback which was used to improve the final essay on structure and function. The final essay was assessed by the teacher as part of the summative assessment for the course unit/module (see STEM Wishees 2019 http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/wishees/collections/queenmary/biologyundergraduateposter/55580.html for sample posters and teacher commentary).

The group presentations, literature review, posters and draft essay prepared students for writing the final, summatively-assessed essay. They also provided practice in developing research skills, team working and exploring existing knowledge; students could draw on this learning to tackle more extensive research projects in subsequent course unit/modules. Each group chose different groups of organisms or single organelle for each task. This demonstrates how different topics for each
task and each group, as well as thorough preparation, can help reduce plagiarism (Carroll 2002).

Assessment Briefs

Clear instructions for assessments are provided in an assessment brief. An assessment brief needs to provide all the information that students require in order to successfully tackle the assignment. Typically, assessment briefs will provide information on (adapted from Bean 2011; University of Suffolk 2019; University of Plymouth 2019):

- workload and time allowance
- weighting of the assessment, i.e. percentage of course unit/module assessment
- word count
- accessibility and inclusivity (access to resources; field trips etc.; adaptations for statements of reasonable adjustments (SoRas), e.g. if the student cannot do fieldwork what alternative method will be provided?)
- choice in assessment (can students choose to present their work in a presentation, video or essay? See Chapter 9)
- clear description of the tasks and modes of working (e.g. in teams), if applicable
- an explanation of how the task fits with the learning aim of the course unit/module, to establish validity
- an explanation of how the task will be assessed
- a link to work on exemplars to develop student understanding of assessment standards (see the description of guided marking in Chapter 7)
- assessment criteria (but see the discussion on the limitations of assessment criteria in Chapter 5)
- links between this assessment and others in this course unit/module and subsequent course unit/modules across the programme of study
- information on resources – access to equipment (laboratories, video equipment etc.)
- bibliographies and access to set texts
- contact details of external facilitators (industry partners, non-governmental organisation partners)
- contact details for help and guidance – drop in help, online FAQs, technical support (e.g. video technicians or web design support)
- links to an online discussion forum for questions to peers and the teacher
- submission dates and arrangements for drafts and feedback
- submission date(s) when marks and feedback will be available
- date and location of follow-up feedback workshops.

Reviewing an Assessment Brief

The questionnaire in Table 3.2 highlights the areas you need to think about when designing assessments and writing an assessment brief for students. Use this questionnaire to design a new assessment or to review the existing assessment brief for your course unit/module.

**Table 3.2:** Assessment brief review questionnaire (sources: adapted from Bean 2011; University of Suffolk 2019; University of Plymouth 2019)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task design: validity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Is the assessment valid? Does it link to the aims of the module?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action required:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Does the assessment task(s) enable students to demonstrate that they have met these aims?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action required:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is the assessment task clearly explained? What opportunity is there for students to check their understandings of the task (e.g. virtual learning environment forum discussion, FAQs, exemplars of student work for similar tasks)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action required:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academic standards**

| 4. Do students understand assessment standards on the module? How do you know? Have you discussed exemplars of previous students’ work or organised guided marking (see Chapter 7)? |  |
5. Are academic standards on the module in line with ‘sector recognised standards’ (Quality Assurance Agency 2019)? Have you checked appropriate national documentation (e.g. the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, QAA 2014, and Subject Benchmark Statements, see QAA 2019a)?

Comment:
Action required:

6. Do students understand the assessment criteria? Is their understanding the same as yours? How do you know? (See Chapter 6.)

Comment:
Action required:

7. Are students involved in designing the assessment or grading and giving feedback? Are they competent to take on these tasks? How do you know? (See Chapter 7.)

Comment:
Action required:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Have the knowledge and skills required for this assessment been practised in formative tasks?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment:
Action required:

9. Is there any aspect of the assessment that requires knowledge and skills that haven’t been covered in the curriculum (either in this module or a previous one)? If yes, what are they, e.g. results need to be presented in Excel®? Can this aspect be removed from the task or can students be given an alternative way of presenting data or can additional classes (e.g. Excel® classes) be included in preparation activities?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment:</th>
<th>Action required:</th>
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</table>

10. **How does this assessment link to assessments in previous and future modules? What skills and knowledge from previous modules can students use to tackle this assignment?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment:</th>
<th>Action required:</th>
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</table>

**Inclusivity**

11. **Does the assessment brief explain what support is available to students (e.g. office hours, virtual learning environment forum, student mentors, writing support etc.)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment:</th>
<th>Action required:</th>
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</table>

12. **Does any element of the assessment exclude groups of learners, e.g. are field trips accessible? Do scheduling arrangements respect religious observances?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment:</th>
<th>Action required:</th>
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</table>

13. **Does the assessment brief explain what choice is available (e.g. choice of assessment tasks such as an essay or presentation, see Chapter 9)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment:</th>
<th>Action required:</th>
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</table>

14. **Does the assessment brief explain any necessary alternative arrangements for students with SoRAs? [N.B. it is better to design assessment in an inclusive way so that no alternative arrangements are necessary. See Chapter 9 for a full discussion.]**

<p>| Comment:                              | Action required: |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Assessment genre</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15. Does the assessment brief explain the audience for the task, e.g. public information leaflet, briefing report for local charity managers? Have students had practice in communicating with this audience? (See Chapter 5.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
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<td>Action required:</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Have students had experience in your module or a previous module of the assessment genre, e.g. writing an essay, giving an oral presentation, presenting a case or mooting? If not, how can they get this experience? How can they get good at communicating in this genre before they are assessed (e.g. writing-to-learn tasks, see Chapter 2)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
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<td>Action required:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Are the mechanics of the assessment clearly stated, e.g. submission date, word/page count (if appropriate), font size, presentation guidelines (if appropriate)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action required:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Do students have time to do the assignment? Are assessments 'bunched' or evenly distributed across the module and programme?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action required:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Is plagiarism designed out of the assessment? Are tasks changed regularly? Are students prepared for tasks? Are they over-assessed, leading to stress and the impulse to plagiarise?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action required:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. When will students receive grades and feedback? Will they have time to act on this feedback to improve their next assignment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comment:

Action required:

21. What kind of feedback will students receive (see Chapter 8)?

Comment:

Action required:

**For teachers: reliability**

How will you ensure that feedback judgements (grades and feedback comments) are fair and consistent with the academic standards on the module (see Chapter 6)?

Comment:

Action required:

**Follow-Up**

**Reading**

The University of Suffolk have produced useful guidance on assessment briefs and moderation of marking:

https://www.uos.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assessment-overview.pdf

The University of Plymouth has excellent resources on inclusivity, including guides and videos on inclusive assessment (and see Chapter 9 in this guide for a detailed consideration of inclusive assessment):


**Investigating Your Practice**

Work with a colleague(s) to review your course unit/module assessment guidance. Use the assessment review questionnaire to review the assessment brief and identify changes you would like to make.
Alternatively, work with some students to review the course unit/module assessment guidance. These could be final year students who have an understanding of the structure of the course unit/module and/or first year students (entry year students) who are new to the course unit/module and can give feedback on what they need clarified. Check their understanding is the same as yours by asking them to paraphrase key instructions in the brief.