

ENHANCING STUDENT ASSESSMENT LITERACY



**FUTURE
FACING
LEARNING**

Associated TU Assessment and Feedback Policy Principles:

AD1: Assessments are explicitly aligned to learning outcomes and set at an appropriate academic level

AF1: Assessment and feedback approaches are transparent and clearly communicated.

AF4: Feedback promotes the development of students' ability to self-evaluate.

AS1: Approaches to assessment actively foster development of student assessment literacy

Focus Questions

- Why is it important that students become assessment literate?
- What are the key considerations for effectively developing student assessment literacy?
- How can assessment practices and processes be designed to develop a working appreciation of standards and criteria for students?

What do we know? Contemporary perspectives

It is generally acknowledged that there is more to assessment than providing helpful information to improve student performance in a task or module and generating grades. In order for students to be able to fully engage in their learning in higher education (HE), they need to have a good understanding of the requirements and processes of assessment ([Sadler, 2010](#)). Evidence tells us that students' performance is likely improved when they have a better understanding of the purpose of an assessment task and the standard of work expected ([Smith et al.; 2013](#)). It is important that steps are taken to ensure that assessment is explicitly positioned to develop students' 'assessment literacy' as part of an interactive process in and through which they acquire understanding of assessment practices, processes, and criteria, ([Deeley and Bovil, 2017](#))

In their book-length treatment of assessment literacy in HE, [Price et al. \(2012\)](#) identify three foundational aspects of effective practice: 1) building a conceptual understanding of assessment (the basic principles of valid assessment and feedback practices); 2) familiarity with the different technical approaches to assessment within a discipline (including assessment feedback skills and techniques); 3) a sound grasp of the nature, meaning and level of assessment criteria and standards, including the ability to select and apply appropriate approaches and techniques to assessed tasks.

It seems obvious that the more students know about what is being asked of them in their assessments, the more effectively they will be able to meet those requirements. Students' capacity to become successful self-regulated learners is after all itself contingent on them understanding what constitutes 'good' or 'quality' in their discipline, and how to make judgements about their own work, as well as that of their peers ([Carless and Boud, 2018](#)). This is, of course, a vital element of being able to work, learn and improve in any context.

Engaging students with assessment processes and criteria is identified in the literature as an effective way of clarifying learning outcomes, particularly when utilised in the early stages of a programme of study, stating clearly what we as educators are looking for ([Smith et al. 2013](#)). This can bring a degree of transparency and openness to the assessment experience and is a major means of enhancing student perceptions of fairness in assessment processes ([Evans, 2016](#)). Price and colleagues suggest assessment literacy is most effectively developed through a course-wide assessment strategy that includes intentionally structured approaches designed in ways that, in addition to achieving an understanding of assessment criteria, help students to hone and develop their own, internalised conceptions of recognised standards ([Price et al. 2012](#)). Such practices also nurture students' ability to make judgements about the quality and effectiveness of their own learning practices ([Sadler, 2010](#)).

What can we do? Reviewing practice

Enhancement of assessment literacy can occur at different levels and at different stages of the assessment process. In addition to sound assessment task design that integrates formative processes and appropriate and effective feedback 'during' assessment, Price et al. (2012) outline the importance of pre- and post-assessment activity for improving student learning by developing student understanding of assessment criteria and processes.

Pre-assessment activities include those exercises or activities in which tutors engage students prior to them undertaking assessed tasks in order to increase their understanding of the nature of assessment, the criteria and standards, as well as key detail relating to the assessment process. This enables students to see the purpose of assessment tasks, as well as helping to direct their effort and attention in productive ways at an early stage. Using 'rubrics' to encourage early student engagement with and dialogue around assessment criteria is held up in the literature as an effective way of clarifying learning expectations. [Panadero et al. \(2011\)](#) demonstrate how rubrics can be an effective means of specifying how certain aspects of a student's performance are to be assessed and their relationship to student learning development, particularly when used to promote student self-assessment.

Making use of 'exemplar work' is also supported in the literature as an effective strategy to support students' understanding of quality and how to enact feedback so as to improve their work. [Carless and Chan \(2017\)](#) have shown regular, shared discussion of exemplars to be a particularly powerful way of helping students learn to develop evaluative judgments because exemplars are tangible rather than abstract and allow for tacit knowledge to be derived from shared understandings.

Post-assessment activities includes those exercises and activities designed to carry learning forward via feedback. It is well established in the literature that formative feedback is perhaps the most significant aspect of the assessment process, due mainly to its potential to affect future student learning and achievement. It follows, therefore, that effective feedback is essential for learning development and for developing assessment literacy. Peer review as a way of engaging students actively with feedback processes is gaining wide recognition ([Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin, 2015](#)).

With peer review, students in effect both produce feedback reviews on others' work, as well as receive feedback on their own work. An example of how this might work in practice is a staged assessment task. Through such a task students might be required to produce a draft (outline or section of a written task), opportunities are then provided for them to receive feedback from peers on that draft and then rework before resubmitting a final version as part of a summative assessment process. When student engagement with criteria for learning is facilitated through activities such as peer-review, self-assessment and the analysis of exemplar work, there is potential for positive impacts on their learning, helping to develop what Carless (2015) refers to as 'evaluative expertise'. The challenge for us as educators is how students' evaluative skills can be purposefully developed by creating 'authentic evaluative experiences' that are an integrated features of the assessment process. Consider the following prompts:

Nurture a practical understanding of what constitutes 'good' work in an assessment task.

How is what constitutes good academic practice consistently shared and supported in relation to assessment course-wide?

Scaffold for self-regulation of learning by making clear to students how the overall assessment design and elements of assessment fit together. *Are we consistent and clear in how we communicate the rationale for how the assessment elements fit together clear for students?*

Promote the active role of students in the assessment process and clarify where support is available to them. *What steps are being taken to ensure staff and student roles and expectations in assessment are understood?*

Useful Resources

ASKe Oxford Brookes (2008) [Assessment Literacy Guide](#). Oxford Brooke University

Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Panadero, E. (2017). [Developing evaluative judgement: enabling students to make decisions about the quality of work](#), Higher Education, Vol. 76, Issue 3, pp. 467-481.

Carless, D. (2015). Excellence in University Assessment: Learning from award-winning practice. London: Routledge.

Price, M. (2016). Promoting students' assessment literacy. Wise Assessment Briefing No. 7, [Wise Assessment Forum](#).

Sadler, R. (2016). Ah! ... So that's 'quality'. Wise Assessment Briefing No. 8. [Wise Assessment Forum](#).