

Authentic Assessment



Associated Academic Enhancement Framework (Hybrid) Matrix Principles:

- ❖ **Student Success:** Course-wide emphasis on assessment for learning providing information about student achievement through active and student-led approaches.

Associated Assessment and Feedback Principles:

- ❖ **AD1:** Assessments are explicitly aligned to learning outcomes and set at an appropriate academic level.
- ❖ **AD4:** Assessment approaches value student diversity by enabling appropriate opportunities to personalise the learning journey.
- ❖ **AF4:** Feedback promotes the development of students' ability to self-evaluate (including self-monitoring / self-assessment and critical reflection skills).

What do we know? Contemporary perspectives

Assessment is an integral component of the education process, supporting learning by providing learners with opportunities to demonstrate acquired skills and knowledge, as well as determining their professional, vocational, and academic achievement ([Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014](#)).

In seeking to align learning and teaching outcomes with industry expectations, 'authenticity' has been identified as a key characteristic of assessment design which promotes learning (i.e. Sambell, et al. 2013) where competence is perceived not in terms of skill mastery, but as situational and personal. Authentic assessment aims to replicate the tasks and performance standards typically found in the world of work and has been found to have a positive impact on student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation, and meta-cognition.

Such abilities are highly related to graduate employability for to becoming a good professional, it is not only necessary to master the knowledge and technical skills of the discipline ([Guzzomi, Male, & Miller, 2015](#)). Other competencies are also required, such as critical thinking and problem solving, decision-making, communication, collaboration, and coping with uncertainty.

[Jackson \(2013\)](#) notes that to improve non-technical employability characteristics in graduates, the learning context should involve 'authentic activities', 'learning whole tasks rather than component skills in isolation', 'performance feedback', 'setting learning goals and objectives', and 'collaborative learning, scrutinising, and building on the learning of others'.

[Vallerroel et al. \(2018\)](#) usefully distinguish three dimensions of authentic assessment design: realism, cognitive challenge, and evaluative judgement:

Realism: The assessment context is realistic when information about the described situation-problem comes from real and/or professional life, involving pertinent and relevant questions to solve, applicable to realistic situations. A second way to create realism is through performance-based tasks, where students produce work or demonstrate knowledge, understanding and skills in activities that demand a true representation of performance in that field of employment.

Cognitive challenge: Authentic assessment aims to generate processes of problem solving, application of knowledge and decision-making which correspond to the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills. Being able to reproduce knowledge in a decontextualised examination does not guarantee that knowledge can be used in a real-life environment. Students need to be challenged to practice these applications and knowledge transfer skills to solve real problems.

Evaluative Judgement: Authentic assessment also asks students to develop an understanding of criteria and standards about what a good performance means, in order that they can judge their own performance and regulate their own learning. Students need to build a precise judgement about the quality of their work and calibrate these judgements in the light of evidence. Thus, students can identify areas that need improvement and see changes over time, developing a growing understanding of acceptable standards of performance.

Studies indicate that authentic assessment has an impact on the quality and depth of learning achieved by the student and the development of higher-order cognitive skills (i.e. Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown, 2014). Moreover, it has been shown to improve learner autonomy, commitment and motivation for learning, self-regulation capacity, metacognition and self-reflection.

A chief component of developing any authentic assessment strategy is the use of **integrated formative assessment**. Students need to be exposed to a variety of tasks with diverse performance requirements and have the experience of learning about judging quality work and seeking and receiving feedback. Recent developments in feedback research stress its potential to nurture students' capacity for independent judgement as well as problem-solving, self-appraisal and reflection (see Winstone and Carless, 2019). Studies increasingly emphasise the use of feedback dialogues to engage students with disciplinary problems and to develop their self-regulation ([Carless and Boud, 2018](#)).

When formative assessment is incorporated into the assessment process, it adds to the authenticity by, firstly, helping students understand and work with the concept of 'quality' and what it means for a task to be 'of excellence' ([Sadler, 2016](#)), and, secondly, developing the lifelong capability to assess and regulate their learning and performance. The intention is that students gradually become able to make judgements about their own performance, a crucial element of professional work. Therefore, it is important that students presented with ample space and support to learn how to gather, recognise and use feedback in the absence of a teacher.

What can we do? Reviewing practice

Course teams are encouraged to think about the authenticity of the assessment context(s) and tasks created and how together they come to frame and enable desired learning outcomes.

Devising an authentic assessment context

A key step in designing authentic assessment is to consider the fidelity of the environment within which the assessment is to occur and the use of any digital tools that would be considered appropriate to this environment. As educators our pedagogical decisions regarding the assessment process need to reflect the challenges that professionals of a discipline face in work. This can be captured in three decision areas: (a) decisions about the conditions in which the assessment is taken (for example, should it be individual or group-based? Do all students have access to the necessary tools and resources? Is the planned work realistic in the time available?); (b) decisions about the assessment formats (for example, is it primarily online, blended or classroom-based? Does the task require the development of disciplinary knowledge or deployment of professional performance?); (c) decisions about the kind of problem to which students will apply knowledge (for example, will it be derived from employers, former students or students' experience in professional placements?).

Designing worthwhile tasks

In creating a problem situation, we place the student in a real context that encourages them to make decisions about what they need to do to complete a task. In this way, it is not a matter of the student reproducing course content but of discriminating what aspects of their learning are needed to solve the problem, encouraging the use of higher order cognitive skills related to using, modifying or rebuilding knowledge into something new. When designing authentic assessment tasks, it is important we take steps to ensure that the methods we choose are not restricted to conventional academic formats and have value beyond a singular activity or task. One way of achieving this is to encourage the participation of third parties in the design of authentic assessment tasks in the form of clients, employers, and/or colleagues from different professions, who might also then go on to review and evaluate the performance of the students. This strategy gives a real-life purpose to student learning, making it worthwhile and meaningful.

Key considerations when reviewing the authenticity of assessment processes include:

An authentic assessment should be challenging. The degree of challenge set is appropriate to the level of study and is a reflection of real-world situations and tasks.

To what extent does your planned assessment activity provide a meaningful and realistic level of challenge for students?

Authentic assessment design should ensure transfer of knowledge. The skills, knowledge and attitude being assessed have meaning beyond the confines of a single content area or task.

Is a performance, or product, best suited as a final assessment outcome?

Critical reflection and self-evaluation should be a core component of authentic assessment. Student assessment experiences are connected and grounded through a process of active (critical) reflection supporting their ability to learn from and re-apply the acquired knowledge.

To what extent does your planned assessment activity require that metacognition is demonstrated through critical reflection, self-assessment and/or evaluation?

An authentic assessment should simulate the real-world application of ability. Making clear the alignment between the task and the conditions under which it is assessed ensures that students understand this connection and also perceive the assessment as valuable.

Does the assessment require a product or performance that could be recognised as authentic by a client or stakeholder?

The assessment environment and the tools used to deliver the assessment task should reflect the professional context. As a 'real world' environment might be sometimes hard to recreate in an educational setting, the extent of simulation required to accommodate the assessment has to be determined.

Is true fidelity required in the assessment environment and the assessment tools used (actual or simulated) to achieve the desired outcomes?

It is important to formally 'design in' regular opportunities to discuss and provide feedback. The ability to discuss and give and receive feedback is critical to workplace performance and should therefore be included in an authentic assessment activity.

To what extent does your planned assessment activity include the requirement for regular discussion and feedback?

Making use of digital learning technologies to support scalable authentic assessment

A range of learning technologies and tools can be used to support authentic assessment activities, promoting student engagement and motivation, and productive formative assessment processes.

Multimedia sharing tools enable users to create, share, and comment on digital content and provide students with a platform for peer feedback exchanges. Connecting students through common activities and shared experiences using different forums (i.e. discussion boards and blogs) and tools can provide flexible, timely and accessible opportunities for learners to interact online in real time around topics relevant to assessment tasks in ways that are often more accessible and personally meaningful to them.

Collaborative tools such as smart editing software such as Google Docs and Microsoft OneNote can help facilitate the co-construction of knowledge and understanding and student interaction around self- and peer assessment. Embedding such tools in the assessment processes can improve the effectiveness of feedback via enabling timely, just-in-time, feedback dialogue from multiple sources, including tutors, students and external professional stakeholders. When used for self-assessment, collaborative tools can record students' performances, self-assessment entries throughout the assessment process.

Useful Resources

Bearman, M., Dawson, P., Ajjawi, R., Tai, J. and Boud (2020). *Re-imagining University Assessment in a Digital World*. Springer Publications.

Winstone, N., & Carless, D. (2019). *Designing effective feedback processes in higher education: A learning-focused approach*. London: Routledge.