

# A UQ Assessment Brief on “Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning”

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Gibbs, G. and Simpson, C. (2004), Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 1, pp 3-31.

Available at <http://www2.glos.ac.uk/offload/tli/lets/lathe/issue1/articles/simpson.pdf>

## Key words

assessment, feedback, assessment effectiveness

## Abstract

*Much evaluation of teaching focuses on what teachers do in class. This article focuses on the evaluation of assessment arrangements and the way they affect student learning out of class. It is assumed that assessment has an overwhelming influence on what, how and how much students study. The article proposes a set of ‘conditions under which assessment supports learning’ and justifies these with reference to theory, empirical evidence and practical experience. These conditions are offered as a framework for teachers to review the effectiveness of their own assessment practice.*

- 1. Sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time**
- 2. These tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course**

Assessment influences the amount of ‘out of class’ time students spend studying in a particular course. Frequent small assessment tasks (short problem sheets or computer-based quizzes) are likely ways of engaging student study effort throughout a semester. Infrequent tasks (extended essays or final examinations) intensify effort during short periods of time, often at the end of semester.

Social pressure is another influence on study time and effort. For example, students may work to avoid embarrassment when:

- assessment outputs are available to an audience – seminar presentations or posters
- faced with peer approbation for failing to contribute to group work.

- 3. Tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind**

A good assessment task is a good learning task. Assessment signals to students the types of learning behaviours that are valued by the institution. Students are therefore most likely to engage in demanding tasks if they are assessed.

- 4. Sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail**

Feedback is most effective when it is regular, delivered in manageable chunks and specific in terms of suggestions for improvement.

#### **5. The feedback focuses on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under the students' control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics**

Feedback should be worded so that it clearly refers to student performance and tells students what they have done well or poorly and also suggests options for action. Students can interpret grades or marks alone as comments on themselves. This is demotivating when marks or grades are low and can negatively affect students' 'self-efficacy' or sense of competence.

#### **6. The feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance**

When feedback is unduly delayed, students will be less interested in reading it or applying it to their ongoing studies. Imperfect feedback from a peer provided almost immediately after a task has been completed may have much more impact than detailed or precise feedback from academic staff several weeks later.

#### **7. Feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success**

#### **8. Feedback is appropriate, in relation to students' understanding of what they are supposed to be doing**

Feedback needs to be directly related to the purpose of the task. Students need to be clear about the purposes of assessment tasks, for example through the provision of criteria and standards and exemplars of 'good' (and perhaps also 'poor') performance. When criteria and standards are clear and understood by students, feedback is much more likely to be successful in helping them understand (and accept) assigned grades.

#### **9. Feedback is received and attended to**

It is not unusual to hear that students either fail to collect assignments (including feedback) or, having received returned work, that they glance at only the mark before discarding it.

Suggestions for engaging students with feedback include:

- asking students to specify in advance the type of feedback they are seeking and giving feedback on this and nothing else
- providing feedback but no marks so that students have to read the feedback to get any idea how they are progressing
- requiring students to submit self-assessment with completed assignments (without any marks being involved) so that students pay attention to whether teachers' assessments correspond with their own.

#### **10. Feedback is acted upon by the student**

Even when feedback provides accurate information on performance errors, it may still have little impact on student learning if it is:

- too late to be acted on by students
- backward looking — addressing issues that will not be studied again
- unrealistic or unspecific in the suggestions provided
- asking the student to do something they do not know how to do (e.g. 'express yourself more clearly')

- applicable only to the particular assignment rather than generic issues such as study skills or approaches that generalise across assignments
- discouraging and erodes existing motivation
- able to be ignored without consequence.

Teaching students to monitor their own performance is the ultimate goal of feedback. The most effective impact of feedback is therefore not on the learning of specific content but on student capacity to gain control over their own learning. This is unlikely to happen unless students are taught how to use feedback.

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*This series of briefs on assessment topics has been prepared by the UQ Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) for UQ teaching academics. "UQ ASSESSMENT BRIEFS" of journal articles, book chapters, reviews, websites, reports etc are distributed to Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Chairs in a form designed to encourage wider distribution.*

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