Assessment and feedback benchmarking tool

nus national union of **students**

Principle	First steps	Developing	Developed	Refining	Outstanding practice: Partnership
1 Diverse forms of assessment designed to assess a range of skills and knowledge	There is little variety in the forms of assessment used on each programme. Assessment is not clearly linked to learning objectives and little thought has been given to the skills and knowledge tested. Summative assessments may require different skills than those developed during the course.	Some thought has been given to how the mode of assessment is chosen to best demonstrate the learning outcomes of the course. Students are adequately prepared for summative assessments with the skills they learn on the course.	Assessment methods are chosen through a clear link to the learning outcomes of the course. Several different types of assessment are used throughout the course, e.g. exam, written essay, poster presentation, group presentation, reflective log.	Programmes are planned so that the diverse forms of assessment will cover skills that are desired in the wider world, e.g. by employers. Students have some choice in the assessment methods they are offered.	Students are empowered and given the tools and support to co-design their assessment methods in partnership with academic staff. Programmes are planned holistically to assess a broad range of skills and knowledge through a variety of forms of assessment. Students are able to articulate the skills they have developed through the various forms of assessment on their programme.
2 Assessment criteria	Assessment criteria are vague, confusing and often contradictory. They are hard to find and students are not directed to them.	Assessment criteria are mostly clear and detailed enough to be of use, but students may not know about them or use them.	Assessment criteria are clear and easy to understand, and students are aware of where to find them. They are clearly linked to the learning outcomes of the course.	Assessment criteria are linked to learning outcomes and referred to throughout the course. Students fully understand what is expected of them in order to achieve each grade.	Assessment criteria are clear, easily accessible and linked to learning outcomes. Students fully understand and are supported to use them. They are designed in partnership with students to ensure accessibility.
3 Submission processes	Submission procedures are inflexible, complex and inaccessible, usually involving a set date and time to return paper copies to the institution. There is no provision for students to submit their work in any other way, even if they are on a year abroad.	Submission procedures are relatively simple, although largely paper-based. Year abroad students may experience problems depending on which department they are in. There are some access issues that haven't been dealt with very well.	Submission is largely electronic, although some departments may do things differently. Feedback may or may not be provided online. There is provision for year abroad students to submit electronically in all departments.	Submission is electronic where possible, and feedback is provided online. Submission processes are the same across all departments.	Submission is simple and flexible, through an online system that confirms receipt and delivers online grades and feedback. Accessibility for students is the paramount concern. Processes are reviewed frequently in partnership with students.
4 Workload distribution	Deadlines are clustered together, often all at the end of the year. Students are poorly informed about deadline dates at the start of their course.	Deadlines are slightly more spread throughout the year, but there is little planning and clustering may occur depending on what modules students choose.	Assessments are planned within departments to avoid clustering. Deadline dates are made available to students at the start of their modules.	Assessments are planned across programmes to avoid clustering, including for joint honours students. Deadline dates are made available at module selection.	Assessments are planned so that all programmes have their workload spread fairly across the year. A calendar of deadlines is available before module selection. There are on-going discussions with students throughout the year, with the option to change deadlines if necessary.
5 Anonymity and externality	Summative work is routinely not anonymised. There is little externality in the process.	Practice on anonymity varies across departments, although the UK Quality Code requirements for externality are met.	The institution has a policy on anonymous marking that is mostly well implemented. Course reps are aware of the role of external examiners. Moderation or non-blind double marking is the norm.	All summative work is anonymous as far as is possible. There is a strong use of externality, with high use of blind double marking. Course reps refer to external examiners' reports in meetings.	Departments' approach to anonymity for formative work is agreed in partnership with students. Any centralised policies are based on principles and allow enough flexibility for Departments to work in partnership with students. All summative work is anonymous as far as is possible. There is a strong use of externality, with blind double marking as standard. Course reps have the ability to meet external examiners.
6 Marking consistency and distribution	Marking is not consistent within departments: some teachers are known to be "easy markers".	Marking is consistent within departments, but joint honours students within cognate disciplines may see disparities. Many subjects do not use the full range of marks.	Marking is consistent within departments and cognate subjects, but may differ across the institution. Active steps are being taken to encourage all markers to use the full range of marks.	Marking is broadly consistent across every student's programme of study. There is an expectation that all markers will use the full range of marks. Guidance and clear grade/classification descriptors are provided.	Marking is consistent across every student's programme of study. Use of the full range of marks is regularly reviewed, including students in the process, and support is provided for staff to ensure it happens.
7 Feedback timeliness	Students receive feedback too late to use it for improvement. Some students do not receive any feedback at all.	Students receive feedback that they can use to improve, but often not in time to complete a summative assessment.	There is an institutional policy in place that is mostly well implemented. Students receive at least one piece of feedback before they complete a summative assessment.	All students receive feedback in time to act on it in their next piece of work. Feedback is returned within three weeks, including on summative assessments.	Feedback timeliness above an institutional minimum standard is agreed in partnership between staff and students in departments. Students receive continuous verbal, written or email feedback throughout their course and understand that feedback encompasses more than just comments on assignments.
8 Feedback Quality	Feedback is poor and does not help students to improve. Often, only grades are provided, or comments such as "Good" with no explanation of why the mark has been awarded.	At least a sentence of feedback is given for each piece of work, with some justification of the mark awarded or areas for improvement. Feedback on exams is hard or impossible to get hold of.	Feedback quality varies across departments, although there is an institutional policy or guidance in place that is generally adhered to. Feedback, although not detailed, clearly identifies areas for improvement. There are mechanisms in place for feedback to be given on exams, although this may be generic or group feedback.	Individual feedback is provided on all forms of assessment, including exams. Feedback is detailed enough to clearly identify areas for improvement and examples of good practice. There are opportunities to discuss the feedback individually with a tutor, although this may not be the marker.	Detailed, constructive feedback is provided on all forms of assessment, including exams. The opportunities to receive feedback are clearly explained to students at the start of the course, and students can choose the format in which they would like to receive feedback. There are opportunities to discuss the feedback individually with the marker.
9 Formative assessment and feedback	There is no formative assessment, and little opportunity for informal formative feedback.	Most modules include formative feedback, although this may be informal and ad hoc. Students may be provided with past papers but they are unlikely to be marked.	Formative feedback is planned into every module. There is at least one opportunity for formative assessment before undertaking a summative assessment of the same type.	Formative assessment is a key aspect of learning and encourages students to reflect on their performance and develop their skills. Peer learning is part of formative feedback.	Formative feedback is considered holistically as part of students' personal development. There are opportunities for students to design their own formative exercises, in which criteria are linked to learning outcomes.
10 Self-reflection and peer learning	There are no opportunities for peer learning and no formal self-reflection.	There is some peer interaction, for example through seminars or discussion groups, available for most students. Self-reflection is mainly discussed by the careers service and has little formal role in students' academic lives.	Peer learning is encouraged and common within the institution, although it plays less of a role in formative assessment. Feedback encourages students to reflect on their performance in order to improve.	Formative feedback regularly includes peer input and self-reflection. Students are encouraged to reflect on the feedback they have been given by peers and tutors and to develop their skills holistically.	Peer learning and self-reflection are embedded in the curriculum. Students' personal development takes account of all the feedback they have received throughout their course. Discussions are regularly held between staff and students to ensure the balance of taught, peer and self-learning is accurate.

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This benchmarking tool is the latest in a series of resources NUS has produced to help you to improve the quality of feedback and assessment at your institution. You can use it in conjunction with the Feedback and Assessment Campaign Toolkit and other resources available on NUS Connect.

The tool is based on ten principles of effective feedback. In 2010, as part of the Student Feedback Project, NUS produced a Charter on Feedback and Assessment. This benchmarking tool is based on the principles of this charter, but the principles have been updated to reflect the priorities and needs of a new cohort of students.

How to use the tool

You can use the tool at a course, departmental, faculty or whole institution level. Read each of the principles, and decide which of the boxes best describes where you think your institution is. Once you've mapped out your current level, you may wish to choose a couple of priority areas to work towards achieving the next level. The tool is a good starting point for discussions between staff and students about how you can work together to improve feedback and assessment.

You could also share practice with other willing unions, perhaps on a regional basis or by mission group. You can learn from unions that place their institutions higher than yours: what good practice could you borrow and adapt? If they've recently made changes, what were the challenges they faced?

Things to bear in mind

- Each of the "outstanding" practices involve staff and students working in partnership. This partnership needs to be meaningful in order to work, which means that both groups must listen and be willing to compromise. Some of the principles may be mutually incompatible in some institutions: for example, it may not be possible to achieve "outstanding" in both feedback timeliness and feedback quality if the institution cannot afford more staff time for marking. Have honest conversations with institutional staff about what is and isn't possible.

- You may not be able to achieve "outstanding" in everything at once. Decide where best to target your resources: do you want to work hard to get one particular area to "outstanding", or do you want to spend that time getting three or four areas up one level from their current position? Are there specific departments you want to work with, or is a central minimum standard what is required?

- It is also worth bearing in mind that many of the people who mark coursework and exams are postgraduate students: you may wish to discuss the benchmarking tool with your postgraduate reps to make sure that your campaign is inclusive of all your members. This may mean ensuring that any additional work is incorporated into markers' work plans, or campaigning for better pay and conditions for graduate teaching assistants alongside your feedback campaign.

- Your union may disagree with some of the levels in the benchmarking tool – and that's OK! The tool was created collaboratively by student officers, based on principles put together from research into what students value from feedback. This doesn't mean it will work at every institution. Feel free to tweak it or build on it to make it more relevant to the context of your institution. You could use it to start a conversation with institutional staff – what can you take from the tool and use to enhance the quality of feedback and assessment at your institution?

If you have any questions, please contact: nss@nus.org.uk

10 Principles of Effective Feedback and Assessment

1 Diverse forms of assessment at a variety of appropriate times

There should be a range of assessment mechanisms that are linked to learning outcomes and test competencies that graduates will need. Students should be involved in designing or choosing these assessment mechanisms.

2 Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria should be clear, linked to learning outcomes and easily accessible to students. Students should be supported to understand them and to understand what constitutes academic misconduct.

3 Submission processes

Submission processes should be simple for the student and electronic where possible. Processes should be appropriate to the assessment and accessible to all students.

4 Workload distribution

Students should have their workload fairly distributed throughout the year, rather than clustering deadlines together.

5 Anonymity and externality

Approaches to anonymity should be decided in partnership between staff and students, with the assumption that, unless decided otherwise, all summative assessments should be anonymous (as far as is possible). Appropriate external input is sought during assessment to ensure fairness and comparability.

6 Marking consistency and distribution

Marks should be consistent across programmes, and the full range of marks should be used across the institution.

7 Feedback timeliness

Feedback should be given in time for students to act on it in their next piece of work.

8 Feedback quality

Feedback should be constructive, helpful and detailed, to enable a student to understand why they received the mark they got and what to do to improve for next time.

9 Formative assessment and feedback

There should be opportunities for feedback on work that doesn't contribute to the overall degree mark, in order to facilitate learning.

10 Self-reflection and peer learning

Opportunities for peer learning and self-reflective exercises should be embedded in the curriculum.