Assessment and feedback

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project

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1. Introduction

Many teachers find international students less problematic to assess than UK students and more than a few say they are 'a joy to teach'. On the other hand, many have concerns linked to students' varied language skills, background knowledge, and familiarity with UK assessment methods. This section concentrates on how teachers can assess students' work, using practices that are fair, reliable and efficient. It also considers feedback, which is an aspect of assessment crucial to all students but especially so for international students who may be unfamiliar with assessment requirements and with marking criteria. Feedback helps students to check if they are on track for success and to reorient their efforts if they are not.

Whilst the focus of this section is on teachers' actions, external factors also influence assessment. Assessment decisions might reflect disciplinary priorities, students' future employment possibilities, recruitment and reputation. Sometimes, teachers report they even think about financial matters such as the departmental budget if teachers' actions mean that many students fail. This complex context can make addressing assessment issues problematic.

In other sections, you will find additional guidance on issues associated with assessment such as group work, plagiarism and critical thinking.

2. The main issues: getting started

Teachers' concerns when assessing international students often include:

Time. In a diverse student group, it can take longer to teach necessary skills, to provide practice opportunities, and to offer feedback (especially formative feedback). It can take longer, sometimes much longer, to mark student submissions. Substantial tasks such as dissertations often require more drafting, editing and review time from supervisors.

Standards. It can be more difficult, compared with home students, to apply assessment criteria to determine a grade. This is especially true where forms of expression or organisation are unfamiliar (see the next point). Decisions about standards are especially acute when judging between a minimal pass and a failure. Some teachers describe a 'pressure to pass' when failure means loss of students' fees (though others strongly deny they experience this).

What to mark. Where the student's English is grammatically inaccurate and/ or where the student has structured the work in an unexpected or nonstandard way, teachers ask themselves, 'What should I be marking?' Many struggle to see beyond the language in order to judge ideas and insights; they wonder how to ensure the grade reflects the relative importance of different elements.

Fairness. Many teachers are unsure how to be fair to all students whilst recognising that some have specific needs. UK law mandates that reasonable adjustments be made for students with disabilities so, for example, dyslexic students have extra time yet those who read more slowly because their English is still developing do not. Further, because the international student group is not homogeneous, teachers are unsure whether it is appropriate to make adjustments for certain international students and not for others.

Students' underpinning knowledge. Teachers often go to great lengths to create a task or assignment that draws equitably on all students' past experiences and assumed understanding. Alternatively, teachers might set an assignment that is only familiar to some. For example, asking students to simulate a public enquiry probably challenges all of them but some may be from countries with no such tradition and for the latter, both the requirement and the context are mysteries. As in the previous point, when seeking to compensate for students' lack of knowledge, teachers worry about how much additional information and support is feasible and whether it allows them to be fair to all.

Concerns about group work, plagiarism and critical thinking, all of which also generate their own specific issues, are covered elsewhere.

3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

Some solutions lie with individual teachers such as developing ways to 'peer through' the language to judge a student's ideas.
Some are best addressed at the level of the programme. An example would be ensuring students have sufficient opportunities to practise unfamiliar assessment methods such as extended independent writing. Individual modules generally do not offer sufficient scope for practice and feedback so developing these complex skills needs to be designed into the programme as a whole.

Some solutions are linked to institutional decisions and priorities. Decisions on assessment by individuals and at the programme level will be affected by admission requirements; by provision or absence of support and referral services; and by the institutional mission.

3.1 Actions at individual teacher level

Teachers will help their students be successful if they:

• are aware of differences in students' previous experiences with assessment

• provide detailed guidance on what is expected

• show examples of how students have tackled or might tackle the task

• develop strategies for balancing the relative importance of language and content when grading. These need to be reflected in the stated assessment criteria.

• create tasks which all students have an equitable chance of achieving.

• devise alternative or negotiated tasks where possible which allow students to demonstrate their abilities and strengths in a range of areas.

3.2 Students' prior experiences of assessment

When one UK teacher asked her postgraduate students about their expectations of UK study, most said they expected things to be the same as 'back home'. Then, once in the UK, they found demands confusing and when trying to decode their marks, this was more confusing still (Pointon, 2009). Assessment and grading practices vary within and between different national education systems and may differ from UK assessment practices. Expectations also differ across and between disciplines plus universities have their own 'micro-cultures'.

Students' previous experiences do not always equate with nationality or even language group but some previous experiences with assessment are common enough that UK teachers can expect them to be present in most student cohorts. For example, looking at students' pre-UK study, these are likely:

• Some students will have been assessed only through timed, closed book examinations and ungraded 'homework'.

- Exam questions for many would have been drawn from a predictable range of topics all of which are listed in the syllabus. Learn them and students will pass.

- Marks in students' previous studies were often norm referenced to assign individuals a place in a ranked class list ('I am 23 out of 35').

- Many students will have done no independent writing before embarking on UK postgraduate study and a large number, as undergraduates, only wrote short answers to test their memory.

- Many have had no experience of group work, presentations, or writing reports.

Students may find changes in the UK are challenging but welcome. One student wrote:

"During my studies in Romania I had to memorise things, which was not tested and nobody cared if the following day you remembered nothing. However, during my Masters degree [in the UK] I had to write 4,000 word assignments and read many articles from dissimilar positions. I also had the chance to write about topics that I was interested in, which made the tasks more personal and enjoyable."

By asking your students about their experiences with tests, or about the kind of writing they have done, you can simultaneously inform yourself and alert them to possible differences. Take care to explore students' descriptions. For example, one group of students assured their teacher they had done 'plenty of writing using many sources for a dissertation' which meant they had collected relevant information from four textbooks and compiled the results (often word for word) into a 10,000-word document. In this case, assumptions about their readiness to tackle a dissertation, as defined in the UK context, could lead to frustration on both sides.

3.3 Provide detailed guidance on what is expected.

You could provide information about assessment in a course handbook, in a detailed assessment brief or even via a podcast or structured seminar; all would tell students what they must do and why they must do it. In examinations, attention to language issues and clear instructions are helpful for all students but may be crucial for those who are working in a second language. Schmitt (2007) justifies taking extra care:

"to minimize any potential bias… The goal is to ensure that differences between students' performances on exams are not due to language proficiency or lack of understanding of exam procedure, but rather due to differences in their discipline-related skills, abilities and knowledge. (See "Sitting exams in a second language: minimising bias, maximising potential" for detailed guidance on writing examination questions)

Explicit statements in coursework usually require teachers to spell out requirements in detail rather than relying on students' understanding of statements such as 'construct a logical argument'. More detail is crucial since a shared understanding of such a phrase rests on a shared understanding of many underlying ideas. So, instead of a requirement to 'use a wide range of sources', you might state the expected range ('10 to 15') and point to examples of what the sources might be ('peer-reviewed academic journals').

3.4 Provide a range of examples

Sample answers at different levels of achievement (poor, mid-range and high) help students build their implicit understanding of assessment requirements, especially if coupled with opportunities for interacting with the samples. Teachers might create an on line exemplar bank with an interactive facility for posting comments when students access them. Time could be used in a seminar for discussion, perhaps asking whether examples are 'good work' and why. The next section suggests ways to ensure judgements which teachers make in one context are consistent with those made by others.

3.5 Assessment issues at the level of the programme

Briefly, programme-level solutions require:

- a shared understanding of standards and marking criteria

- formative feedback as an integral part of programme design

- opportunities for practising new skills

- a range of assessment formats and tasks

3.6 A shared understanding of criteria

One international student wrote:

"Despite having earned almost exclusively very high marks, handing-in always feels like a trip to the casino to me".

This statement could mean many things – perhaps the student is unclear about why he is successful and perhaps it shows that he is unsure if his teachers' views are the same as his own. This student (and his teachers) were provided with stated criteria, but a shared understanding of what is expected can only develop through interactive application of explicit statements (for example, of assessment criteria, learning outcomes, assignment briefs etc). Students and teachers, probably in their own cohort groups, need to discuss the standards. 'What is needed for a pass grade?' 'For a first class grade?' etc. Once this is agreed, students and teachers then need to practise applying the standard to student work and comparing how others have done the same. A detailed description of how this can be done may be found on the The ASKe Centre for Excellence website.

Any discussion of standards is likely to be complex. Students themselves see standards as important since they validate the significance of their success – they want teachers to judge them fairly and firmly. Yet this can be difficult. When applying standards, teachers must balance the need to support students' developing capabilities with the need to maintain minimal requirements. They are also trying to assess what the student has learnt within a unit of study, not what they have 'brought with them' into the unit. Sometimes, taking all these factors into account, students fall below an acceptable standard, and they must fail. Equity requires that when students fail, they are given guidance on how and why their performance was not good enough, and what they must do to meet the standard. Equity also requires that decisions on failure are not delayed until a final assessment hurdle such as a thesis or dissertation.

Threshold standards for passing are easier to maintain in programmes which have developed them interactively ('what do we consider to be a minimal pass?'). A rationale for awarding failure grades is easier to defend when they are shared within the programme.

3.7 Marking language or marking content?

Untangling questions about the relative importance of language and content can be difficult. It may be that interactive sharing of standards also generates guidelines for marking work where the language is inaccurate or difficult to understand and yet the student clearly meets the learning outcomes for other aspects. Explicit and stated guidelines are usually very helpful if they can be developed.

Markers can learn to be less distracted by aspects of secondary significance when awarding a grade. Typically, with non-native writers, this means refocusing away from accurate language. One strategy is to read quickly, looking for the ideas and underpinning structure. Others say they have found reading for content easier once they accept that correcting students' English can mean the marker loses focus. It can also leave the student to assume that an edited text is 'problem solved' since someone else has 'done all the work'. Another reaction to many corrections might be confusion ('which are important?') and/or feeling demoralised. Alternative suggestions are offered for feedback below.

Before teachers have copy edited students' work, the language remains an issue. This information needs to be clearly given to students, even where the mark is not lowered. Feedback by classroom teachers needs to say, 'keep improving' and leave students feeling sufficiently confident and informed to act on the message. Language support professionals report their frustration with trying to get students to attend to the additional effort required without the explicit feedback from teachers saying this is needed, even where grades are not impacted by the students' developing English. Of course, this point is as true for home students' developing writing skills as it is of their international peers. See also the Language section of the resource bank.

3.8 Designing opportunities for practise, practise, practise

It is common to hear 'but I told them about xxx...' yet a student has failed to take the information into account in their assignment. The suggestions about interactive discussion can help students to build their own understanding and skill. They are likely to have more impact than a 'telling' approach. Practise and feedback needs to happen at the modular/course level but needs programme-level coordination to ensure sufficient opportunities. Where the student's grade is a pass (albeit one which is lower than expected) or where the student is reported for unacceptable practice such as plagiarism, then expectations for future improvement remain.

3.9 Efficient feedback strategies

International students are especially dependent on feedback to identify whether or not they are on the right track and if not, what steps to take to get there. Feedback on what has been done well is also useful. Feedback must be carefully worded to target key messages and designed to trigger future action. Feedback is more likely to be useful if it links to examples of good work, suggests sources for additional language/ skill support (where necessary), models other ways in which the student might have addressed an issue, and/ or provides specific criticism on one aspect of the work (along with a suggestion for its improvement).

When asked for examples of less useful feedback, teachers tend to hold contrasting views. Some say it is unhelpful if feedback involves:

- correcting the student's English

- rhetorical questions

- commenting on everything

- abbreviated prompts ('Source?' or 'No!')

Teachers also warn against using feedback to avoid referral to appropriate support services. So, for example, in an early piece of work (say, within the first few months of a student's UK studies), rather than explaining in detail in the feedback how a student has misused sources and what she should have done to comply with referencing conventions, feedback could note the plagiarism and direct the student to further guidance. An alternative is to have detailed printed guidance on predictable problems and to attach this generic advice to her assignment.

Others disagree on the above points about not correcting language and/ or referring the problem elsewhere. They are keen to avoid the student thinking that work with few or no grammar corrections is of an acceptable standard and therefore that no additional effort is required. One middle way is to underline or note errors on the first page then say that they continue throughout.

As feedback is one of the most time consuming aspects of assessment, this element offers a rich range of ways to lower the time demand without losing the student benefit. Teachers describe using taped oral feedback;

using templates and prewritten formats for the common and predictable messages or structured peer review. Group feedback strategies which identify common themes or shared difficulties can be useful, 'students who scored highly did this...', 'students who scored lower did this...'. Some courses now redirect teacher time to formative feedback only. This means they need only give the [redrafted] summative assignments a grade plus brief justification of the grade for quality assurance purposes. This readjustment of workload has the benefit of offering feedback when students can apply it/learn.

Duhs (2008), in an unpublished review of assessment and international students, argues:
"Feedback is central to the learning of international students. A dialogic feedback system ... is helpful, as it puts students at the centre of learning, providing them with a series of opportunities to act on feedback. Students write and re-write their worked based on self and peer assessment and produce an outline of how they plan to act on tutor feedback. Dialogue ensures that students understand feedback so that it informs future work."

4. Top Tip:

Set tasks which give all students a chance to succeed.

Trying to be more inclusive in assessment might mean reducing the demand for language proficiency by accepting alternative formats. For example, asking for a video of a presentation rather than a 'live' performance or allowing students a range of formats (perhaps requiring a radio play rather than an academic essay in appropriate contexts).

Another approach is to rethink the task to provide the same level of challenge for all. Here is how teachers at one university achieved this:

"In Design, undergraduate students were engaged in a project with industry where the task was to design a 'handheld device' for the mobile phone company 'Motorola'. UK students were linked virtually with students in Korea. Students worked online in mixed UK-Korea groups to develop a design brief" (Bohemia, Harman and Lauche, 2009).

Post-graduate students, who were from a wide range of nationalities, were required to research a building (the Guildhall) local to the university, its history and its status in the local community. They worked with staff from the council and other stakeholders to develop a design for the building and then presented it at a public exhibition.

Undergraduate students in the second year of an International Business degree collaboratively worked on risk analyses of setting up businesses in a specific country. The country chosen for the task was Brazil, particularly selected as none of the students involved in the activity were originally from this country, thus ensuring that all students began as far as was possible with equal knowledge of the context being studied. It was felt that this greatly assisted the development of positive peer learning and collaboration.
(From 'Assessment for learning environments: two case studies of the experience of international students', by Montgomery, C. and McDowell, L.).

5. What is the evidence?

5.1 Top resources

Carroll, J. (2008). 'Assessment issues for international students and their teachers' in Enhancing the International learning experience in Business, and management, hospitality, leisure, sport , tourism, eds Atfield,

R. and Kemp, P. Threshold Press: Newbury, Berks.
This covers the key issues and addresses questions of plagiarism in some detail. See the Related link on the download page for this resource.

Dolan, M. and Machias, I. (2009). Assessment and feedback' in Motivating International Students: a practical guide to aspects of learning and teaching
This is practical and useful beyond the Economics students it specifically considers.

Schmitt, D. (2007) Sitting exams in a second language: minimising bias, maximising potential
Combines practical and theoretical information which teachers need to think about when designing examinations.

5.2 Further reading

Some of these sources are derived from an unpublished review by Duhs (2008).

Abel, C. F. (2002). "Academic Success and the International Student: Research and Recommendations." *New Directions for Higher Education* 117: 13-20.

Andrade, M. S. (2006). "International students in English-speaking universities: adjustment factors." *Journal of Research in International Education* 5(2): 131-154.

Bartoli, A. (2011) Assessment and International Students black African Social Work students in *Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education* Vol. 3, (1) 45-58

De Vita, G. (2002). "Cultural equivalence in the assessment of home and international business management students: a UK exploratory study." *Studies in Higher Education* 27(2): 211-231.

Gaspar, M. (2001), Assessment using multiple choice: implications for testing international students in an undergraduate commerce subject. In *Sources of confusion : refereed proceedings of the national language and academic skills conference held at La Trobe University*, November 27-28, 2000' edited by K Chanock, pages 187-198.

Gibbs, G. & C. Simpson. (2005) Conditions under which assessment supports students learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, Issue 1, 2004-5.

Kingston, E. and H. Forland (2008). "Bridging the Gap in Expectations between International Students and Academic Staff." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 12(2): 204-221.

McClure, J. W. (2007). *International Graduates' Cross-cultural Adjustment: experiences, coping strategies, and suggested programmatic responses*, Routledge. 12: 199 - 217.

Robson, S., Leat, D., Wall, K. & Lofthouse, K. (2013) Feedback or feed forward? Supporting Master's students through effective assessment to enhance future learning. In J. Ryan (Ed) *Cross-cultural teaching and learning for home and international students: Internationalisation of pedagogy and curriculum in higher education*. London: Routledge. pp. 53-68.

Rust, C., M. Price, et al. (2003). "Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 28(2): 147-164.

Sovic, S. (2008) *Lost in Transition? The International Students' Experience Project. Creative Learning in Practice*: Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. London, University of the Arts.

6. Staff case story

Chuah, Swee-Hoon (2010) Teaching East-Asian students: Some observations. Higher Education Academy Economics Network

7. Related resources

Oxford Brookes resource website on guidance for writing examination questions

Improving your students' performance in 90 minutes: Assessment Standards and Knowledge exchange - Oxford Brookes University (PDF 526KB)

Clarifying assessment criteria and setting expectations - Azi Etire et al. University of Nottingham

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