

ACCESS TO LEARNING: DESIGNING FIRST YEAR ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

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INTRODUCTION

UK National Student Surveys indicate that assessment and feedback across the HE sector are perceived as significantly less satisfactory than all other areas of the student experience. Student experiences of assessment and feedback in their first year are also critical for retention. A HEFCE funded £200,000 First Level Assessment Project (FLAP) was launched in 2008 to improve assessment for first-year students at Leeds Metropolitan University. The project aims to close the gap between students' pre-entry expectations and their perceptions of assessment and feedback during their first year and raise student and staff awareness of the purposes of assessment and feedback; disseminate techniques to help staff achieve better student engagement with assessment and feedback; and elicit student and staff perceptions of assessment and feedback before, during and after the first year to inform the redesign of practice.

FLAP Aims

The aims of the project are to:

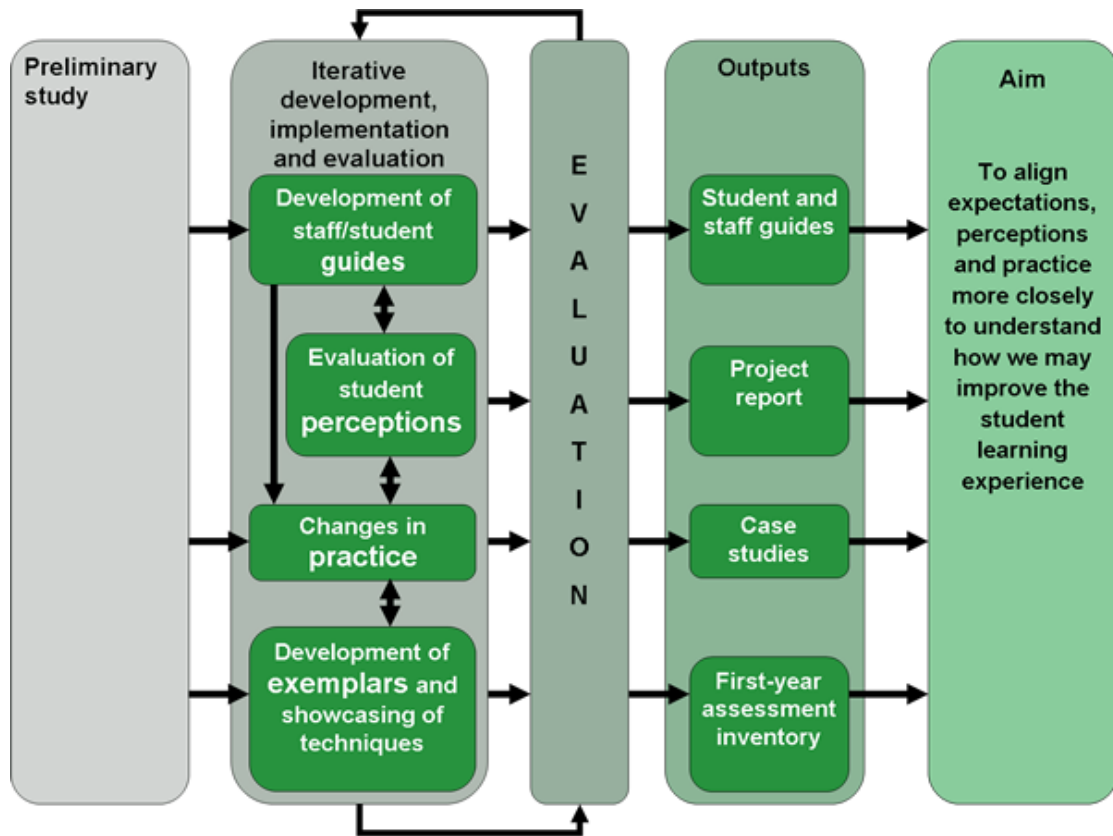
1. Redesign first-year assessment and feedback practice in courses in each faculty by:
 - a. focusing on the role assessment plays in supporting first-year student learning
 - b. progressively targeting critical core courses for improvement and producing resources based on good practice to help other courses and other universities to do the same.
2. Achieve better alignment between student expectations (pre-entry) and perceptions of how assessment and feedback and practice are experienced.
3. Benefit the learning experience post-project, by enabling better staff and student understanding of how first-year assessment and feedback can enhance

the student learning experience, and by promoting techniques through which this can be achieved.

FLAP Methodology

The study is adopting a co-ordinated, informed, university-wide response to the issues (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Methodology



FIRST LEVEL Principles

FLAP proposes ten principles for designing assessment and feedback for first year students entering higher education. The FIRST LEVEL principles were piloted in an individual UK National Teaching Fellowship project at Leeds Metropolitan University between 2005 and 2008 and draw on general principles of good practice developed by Chickering and Gamson (1987) and principles specifically addressing first year assessment and feedback developed by Nicol (2008), building on findings of

the Re-Engineering Assessment Practices project (REAP, 2007). The principles also align well with more recent work including Assessment 2020 (Boud, D. and Associates, 2010).

These FIRST LEVEL principles explicitly focus on four key considerations:

- **Feelings**
- **Fit**
- **Formative activity**
- **Fun**

Feelings

The first two principles of assessment and feedback design relate to feelings; designing assessment and feedback to provide appropriate social experiences to instil a sense of belonging:

- 1. Friendships:** designing assessments that provide opportunities to develop peer friendships, student-tutor relationships and learning communities (Topping, 2005; Boud, 2001);
- 2. Self-belief:** providing feedback in a way that encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem (Pickford & Brown, 2006; Bandura, 1997).

The first few weeks at university can be emotionally traumatising and lonely. Many students drop out of university in the first few weeks and while for some this may be the right thing to do, for others it is a personal and professional disaster.

How successful students are can depend very much on their peer support networks and the extent to which they feel they belong to a cohort. The amount and quality of contact students have with academic staff can also have a bearing on whether they feel they can approach staff with problems. By looking to integrate students socially we can expect to see improved engagement.

Although we can offer freshers' fairs and other extra-curricular opportunities for students to get to know one another some students, particularly those studying part-time, may not be able to attend events or engage with anything outside their curriculum. Students are diverse in their attendance patterns with student fees increasing the likelihood that they will have to work or balance other external commitments alongside their studies or commute to and from campus. Other students may feel that they don't really fit in or belong at university and because of this may choose not to take part in extra-curricular activities.

Fit

Three principles of assessment and feedback design relate to fit; using assessment and feedback to empower students to develop a sense of control over their own learning:

3. **Teaching shaped by diagnostic assessment:** using assessment diagnostically to shape teaching;
4. **Interaction and dialogue:** regularly giving and receiving individual feedback to clarify what good performance is and what student perceptions of their learning experience are;
5. **Valued diversity reflected through choice:** working in partnership with students to design assessments, giving choice in the topic, method, criteria and flexibility in the timing of feedback and assessments.

We have a diverse range of first-year students who are fitting their studies around multiple commitments and complex lives. However, sometimes the first year tends to be treated as a mass, somewhat impersonal, experience. Unfortunately, anything that depersonalises the first-year experience can negatively impact upon student learning and often most significantly on those students with greatest need.

An effective way to personalise the first year is through assessment and feedback.

By assessing what each student knows and what they can and cannot do, we can tailor provision to the requirements of the individual; in other words, using assessment diagnostically to enable us to teach the students we have. The time we currently spend marking would be better spent in regular dialogue with students sharing perceptions and expectations so that we can ensure appropriateness of tasks and deadlines, and negotiate topics, titles and criteria with students to make assessments more relevant to their lives. Only by working in partnership with students may we find the best fit and increase their chances of success.

Formative activity

Two further principles of assessment and feedback design apply to assessment for learning through formative activity; exploiting assessment and feedback to support learning and the development of academic skills:

6. **Reflection and building on feedback:** building in opportunities for students to use feedback shortly after receiving it, to reflect on learning and to close the gap between current and desired performance (Sadler, 1989; Yorke, 2001, Race & Pickford, 2007);

- 7. Lifelong learning skills:** designing assessments that develop underpinning skills for lifelong learning.

We need to equip first-year students as early as possible with the skills to study effectively and to be successful. If we don't discourage them from doing so, many students will quickly adopt strategies early in their first year to pass summative assessments, rather than engaging fully with their study, and developing as independent learners. We need to try to help students to understand assessment requirements by breaking tasks down. This will help them to focus on meeting the elements of an assessment task that relate to individual assessment criteria.

“The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself, and has a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw at any given point. In other words, students have to be able to judge the quality of what they are producing and be able to regulate what they are doing during the doing of it”. (Sadler, 1989).

When designing first-year assessments we should aim to ensure that they are authentic assessments and do not enable students to adopt strategies that bypass learning. We need to encourage students to focus on understanding what quality is and how to achieve it. We should design assessment tasks to directly build on previous, timely, formative feedback. This need for feedback helps to ensure that students will be more likely to seek feedback and use it. A good way to think about assessment in the first year is as assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning. If an assessment is not contributing directly to first-year learning, why are we doing it?

Fun

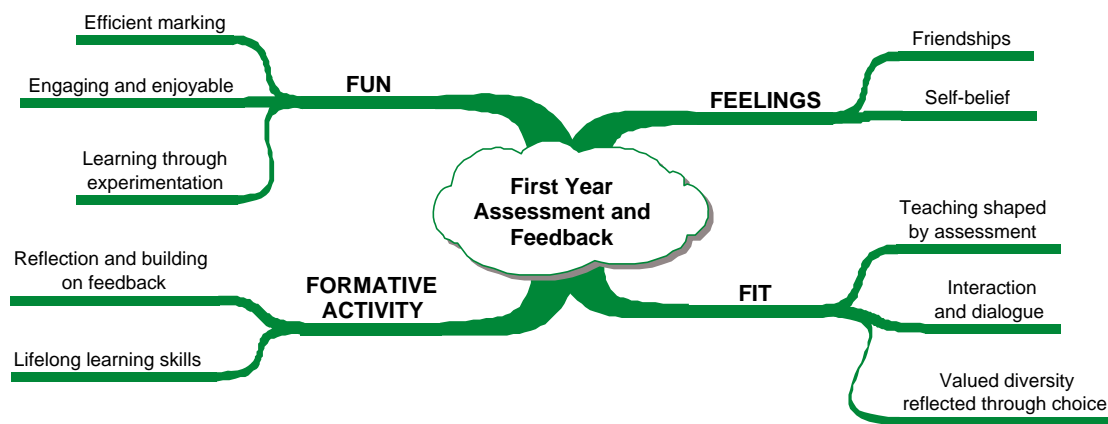
The three final principles of assessment and feedback design relate to fun; designing assessment and feedback to excite and engage students in learning and to reduce the burden of marking and administration.

- 8. Efficient value added marking:** designing assessments that are non-onerous to mark and manage - making assessment more fun for staff! - and that have a positive impact on learning;
- 9. Engaging and enjoyable:** focusing on engaging students through enjoyable assessment tasks;
- 10. Learning through experimentation:** designing assessments that are challenging and that encourage students to take risks in a non-threatening environment and learn through their mistakes (Anderson et al., 1996).

When people talk about the ‘first-year experience’ they almost exclusively refer to the student experience and little consideration is given to staff’s experiences of working

with first-year students. It can be very hard work to help first-year students stay on course, and whilst it is sometimes a temptation to spoon feed them, it is so much better to have students take responsibility for their own learning and we can do this best by making use of assessment and feedback. One of the well-meaning mistakes we can make when trying to accommodate a diverse range of first-year student abilities is to teach to the level of the weakest student. However, this can result in unchallenging, non-engaging learning experiences for students. We should aim to engage students in their studies and in their subject as early as possible, not least because students who are not engaged lack commitment and motivated students are easier and more fun to teach. In other words, we need to strive to make first-year assessment more exciting, developing assessment practice that breeds success and the buzz that accompanies that success for both students and staff.

The FE FI FO FUN Model of First Level Assessment and Feedback Design



The ten principles of successful First level assessment which comprise the FE FI FO FUN Model can be represented and remembered using a simple **FIRST LEVEL** principles list. Through engaging with these ten principles in our assessment and feedback practice we can positively influence the first level learning experience.

First level assessment practice should be designed to support:

F	Friendships
I	Interaction and dialogue
R	Reflection and building on feedback
S	Self-belief
T	Teaching shaped by assessment
L	Lifelong learning skills
E	Efficient, value-added marking
V	Valued diversity reflected through choice
E	Engaging and enjoyable learning experiences
L	Learning through experimentation

Use of the FIRST LEVEL principles

The FIRST LEVEL principles are being used as the basic framework for:

- Developing staff and student resources produced as part of this project;
- Discussing first year assessment with Leeds Met students and staff;
- Changing Leeds Met practice;
- Developing a framework to evaluate the impact on the first-year student learning experience.

The integration of first year assessment into Leeds Metropolitan University's assessment, learning and teaching strategy has been very helpful in promoting discussion about the project at senior levels.

Project website

In accordance with the Higher Education Academy funding requirements, a project website has been established to disseminate information about the project. The site contains details of the project aims and also has reflections from students about assessment.

A project evaluation will be published at <http://flap.teams.leedsmet.ac.uk/>

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