Good Practice Guide on Assessment and Feedback to Students
Introduction

This is the first of a series of Good Practice Guides which will be produced and distributed by Educational and Staff Development.

These guides are not statements of College policy, rather they are collections of good practice in areas of teaching, learning, supervision and assessment informed by the research literature and the teaching experience of staff in the College. They aim to help new staff with issues which they may not have encountered before, and to give experienced staff new perspectives on issues with which they may already be familiar.

This Guide aims to supplement the College Code of Practice on Assessment and Feedback, which was approved by Council in the 2007/08 academic year. The Code of Practice sets out the principles which the College considers to be essential in ensuring high quality assessment and feedback mechanisms and processes. This Guide gives examples of ways in which the principles may be applied and ideas for improving current practice. The objective of this Guide is to help staff develop their assessment methods so that assessment becomes a tool to drive student learning, rather than a hurdle which students must overcome in order to progress through their studies. Whilst there are circumstances in which a hurdle to be passed is necessary, assessment and feedback need to be seen as an integral part of the learning process for both staff and students and which helps students develop skills and knowledge for future study or employment, and not just something which comes at the end of a course of study and which is simply retrospective.

In this guide, the numbered sections are the principles outlined in the Code of Practice, which is included at the beginning of this Guide. The full Code of Practice is available in hard copy from ESD, or via the ESD website.
Principles of the Queen Mary Code of Practice on Assessment and Feedback

The principles below are those which should underpin all assessment and feedback given through courses/units and programmes.

**Queen Mary Principles of Academic Assessment**

1. Assessment will be designed to aid the students’ learning.
2. Assessment tasks and processes will be fair.
3. Assessment criteria will normally be published for all units/modules.
4. Assessment will align with the requirements of relevant professional bodies.
5. Assessment methods and content will be reviewed periodically to ensure continuing fitness for purpose.
6. Summative assessment will be designed to mark the work submitted and not the student submitting it.
7. Marking consistency will be checked and, where appropriate, double marking undertaken for summative assessment.
8. A diverse range of assessment methods will be used, where possible, to ensure that assessment is inclusive for all learners.
9. Marking will be undertaken professionally and in appropriate settings.
10. Assessment will be criterion referenced (except where disciplinary requirements render this inappropriate).
11. Grade-related assessment criteria will be used where appropriate to ensure use of the full mark scale.
Principles of the Queen Mary Code of Practice on Assessment and Feedback (cont)

Queen Mary Principles of Feedback on Student Learning

1. Feedback will be given in ways that promote students’ learning

2. Feedback will be given on all assessed work, both formative and summative, for continuing students

3. Feedback will be available on all assessed work to all completing students on request

4. Curriculum design will be informed by a requirement to integrate opportunities for giving and receiving feedback

5. Feedback will be relevant, informative and fit for purpose

6. Feedback will be timely, and will be given within a reasonable timescale determined by departmental policy and agreed with students

7. Feedback will be efficient and use a range of approaches as deemed best practice in each discipline

8. Feedback will provide academic staff with information that can be used in curriculum development

9. Members of a course team should be informed of the progress of the students and their areas of success or lack of understanding

10. Feedback will be appropriate to the nature of the assessment task
1. Assessment will be designed to aid the students’ learning.

Assessment fulfils a number of functions and its major function in HE is often seen as being to grade students and to make judgements on their progress. Assessment should also sustain and encourage student learning. Issues to be considered should include:

**Form of assessment**
Assessment methods should be chosen explicitly. The form of assessment will affect how students approach it, and different forms will require the use of different skills and styles. Assessment methods should, therefore, be appropriate to the students, the level and the material to be tested. Well-structured assessment can actively drive learning, and encourage students to work on relevant material at the right point in a course or programme.

**Amount of assessment**
There have been concerns expressed among the HE community that students can tend to be over-assessed. The move towards explicit learning outcomes has been seen as a driver for this, as there has been a misunderstanding about the level to which all intended learning outcomes need to be assessed. At the very least, thought should be given to whether students are being assessed on the same material more than once and, if so, whether this is appropriate.
2. Assessment will be fit for purpose and have the following characteristics:

**Validity**
A valid assessment measures what it is supposed to measure. For instance, a test which is intended to measure application of knowledge which only tests recall would not be valid. Another good example is the assessment of oral presentation, in which only content and not presentation skills are assessed.

**Reliability**
A reliable assessment is one which would produce the same results on re-test and would produce similar results with a different, but similar, group of students.

**Feasibility**
Assessment must be both achievable (in that all students should have the capability to do the work) and ‘doable’ (in that all students have the capacity or the opportunity to do the work) for students. This does not mean that assessment should be ‘dumbed down’ or made passable by all. What it does mean, for instance, is that all students should have had the opportunity to develop the skills they are being asked to demonstrate or to acquire the knowledge they need to display. Feasibility is also an issue for staff – the most appropriate method of assessment may not be feasible for staff due to time constraints, equipment availability or other restrictions. Feasibility ought also to be considered across a programme of study – five individually feasible assessments can easily add up to an unfeasible load for an individual student.
Consistency
It is important that the diet of assessment methods for a single unit/module is consistent for the whole class. This is most often a problem in formal examinations where a paper may have a range of questions. If a student can satisfy the requirements by only answering MCQs and short answers, whilst another could do MCQs and long answers, then the assessment methods for those two students on the same course are not the same and, therefore, may not be comparable. This can also be an issue where Distance or Flexible Learners study the same courses as students taught in College. Assessments developed for students who attend College may not be appropriate for DI students, and vice versa.

Efficiency
Efficiency is primarily a staff issue. It may be a feedback issue (for instance, the giving of group feedback may be more efficient than individual feedback), but it may also be an assessment issue (for instance, ensuring that similar assessments are not happening in multiple units, or re-developing assessment methods when student numbers rise). Efficiency of assessment should not be used as the sole reason for not improving or diversifying assessment to improve student learning.

Justifiable
The choice of methods and content of the assessment should be justified, detailed and relevant.

Assessment should not be arbitrary, nor should it be vaguely described. For assessment to develop student learning (rather simply being a hurdle to be passed) students need to understand why they are being assessed, what is being tested, and why it is being done using this method. This is particularly important if assessment is being used to develop or test transferable skills as well as subject-specific skills and knowledge. In some disciplines, blueprinting may be considered.
3. Assessment will be fair.

To this end the following issues should be taken into account:

**It should assess what the students have been required to learn.**

Assessment must be linked to the learning which students should have undertaken on the course. It is recommended that high-stakes, summative assessments do not depend heavily on students having undertaken extra work above the syllabus requirements. Linking assessment to learning is particularly important where more than one member of staff is involved in teaching yet only one sets and/or marks assessment tasks.

**The student workload should be appropriate**

Workloads for students on the same programme should be broadly similar, even where they are taking different units/modules as part of that programme. Programme teams should ensure that some parity exists between the demands of different areas of the programme.

**Workload on different but similar programmes should be comparable**

In order to ensure equity between students on different programmes, the assessment loads should be harmonised.

**Appeal procedures should be published and standardised**

The College has detailed appeals procedures. These should be made explicit to all students, and explained in more detail by departments where necessary.

**Disabilities must be catered for.**

The College has a duty, under SENDA 2001, to make reasonable adjustment for disabled students. More information can be obtained from Advice and Counselling.
Regulations should be the same, where possible, on all units/modules that form part of a programme

This is a particular issue for joint or combined honours programmes. Students ought to have a clear set of regulations covering issues such as late work, extensions to deadlines, extenuating circumstances and retakes. They should not be expected to understand two different regulatory systems for units/modules from two different departments or schools.

4. Assessment criteria will be published for all units/modules.

All assessed tasks should, where have explicit assessment criteria

It is important that the criteria used when marking work are articulated (and made public to all students in the course) in advance of the assessment being carried out. It is considered good practice if feedback is linked to these assessment criteria and, where appropriate, indicative gradings for each of the criteria are given to aid students’ understanding of the marking process.

Academic staff should ensure that students understand the assessment criteria

Staff involved in assessment should not simply present criteria for students to digest, they should seek to actively engage the students, with the aim that the criteria (and how they should be used in completing...
assessment) are understood by students. Students who understand criteria are more likely to use assessment to drive their learning, rather than seeing it as a hurdle which needs to be overcome.

**Exemplars of good practice or model solutions should be provided where possible or appropriate**

Either before submission as guidance, or after submission as part of the feedback process, examples of good practice or model solutions should be provided for students.

5. **Assessment will adhere to the requirements of relevant professional bodies.**

Departments for which there exist guidelines or requirements from professional bodies must ensure that the assessment undertaken meets these guidelines or requirements. The existence of such guidelines should not be used as the sole reason for not improving or diversifying assessment (unless such regulations specify precisely the modes of assessment allowed for particular elements of study).
6. Assessment methods and content will be reviewed periodically

It is important that assessment design is not seen as a ‘once in a lifetime’ undertaking. Too often, academics review and revise the content, structure and teaching methods of a course, whilst leaving assessment unchanged. The methods and content of assessment should form a core part of the review and revision of courses. Review of assessment should not be seen as only to be undertaken if something has ‘gone wrong’ in the past.

7. Summative assessment will be designed to mark the work submitted and not the student submitting it.

Where possible, anonymous marking should be the norm for summative assessment. However, some work does not lend itself to anonymous marking, such as presentations, group work or some work submitted electronically and a mechanism must exists in these cases to ensure impartiality of marking.

8. Marking consistency will be checked and, where appropriate, double marking undertaken for summative assessment.

Double marking is normally not recommended for formative assessment. For summative assessment, College policy that all work should be double marked is under review. Where marking is undertaken by those who have not set the assessment task, appropriate moderation must be undertaken.
9. A diverse range of assessment methods will be used where possible.

Academic staff should examine (at both unit/module and programme levels) the range of assessment that students are required to undertake. Research shows that a range of assessment methods facilitates student learning and allows students with varying learning approaches and styles to perform better. If all the assessment in a course or a programme is identical (for instance, 100% unseen examination), this can overly benefit those students who are good at that form, and overly disadvantage those students for whom that form is difficult. A varied assessment diet also helps the development of key and transferable skills – a student who has never been assessed, or received feedback, on a presentation may well not be very confident on using this skill on graduation, for instance.

That said, a varied diet of assessment should not be developed simply because it is felt to be a good thing. All assessment tasks should be designed to maximise learning, and to ensure that students are tested on both knowledge and skills appropriate to the course of study on which they are engaged/

There are good reasons for students to be encouraged to become involved in the assessment process. This could be through assessment tutorials, choosing their own essay questions and projects, having opportunities for part-way formative comments on summative work and many other ways. Student involvement can help ensure that there is a clear rationale and purpose for assessment, and help students to overcome the ‘assessment for assessment’s sake’ mentality.
Student involvement in assessment can:
• aid their understanding of the process;
• help them build self-assessment skills, so that they can better critically examine their work;
• aid their understanding of feedback, as involvement in the assessment process can mean that feedback can be more easily assimilated and responded to;
• introduce them to the concept of feedback which can be used in other contexts, including employment.

10. Marking will be undertaken professionally and in appropriate settings.

Whilst it may be appropriate in some circumstances for reading of assessments to be done in a public or semi-public place (on a train, or in a park, for example), the College stipulates that writing feedback and awarding marks must not be done in public.

11. Assessment will normally be criterion referenced (except where disciplinary requirements render this inappropriate).

A norm-referenced scheme is seen as unfair, unstable and unreliable, as it can significantly disadvantage able students and can give an advantage to less able ones, depending on the make-up of the units in which they study.
12. Grade-related criteria will normally be used to ensure use of the full mark scale

Schemes using grades of A*, A+, A, A-, B+, B, B- and so on are common across the HE sector, and also are in use in the College and different schemes exist to convert grades into percentage points. The advantage of such schemes include: the ability to award a grade, rather than justifying whether a piece of work is worth 66% or 65%; ease of calculation of marks, as the inputs are fewer; better student understanding of marking, leading to fewer queries using grade-related criteria, since students with 65% and 66% will not be comparing work to see why one got more than the other.
1. Feedback should aid students learning:

Feedback should be given in ways that enable students to benefit from it

This can mean as simple a strategy as having feedback typed, rather than hand-written, as students often report an inability to read tutors’ handwriting, and can show a reluctance to seek out staff for clarification of illegible comments. Similarly, simply highlighting sections of the text, or adding exclamation marks, ticks, question marks or similar in margins are not helpful to students in using the feedback to improve their work.

Feedback should encourage student reflection through self-assessment

Feedback should encourage students to think about their work and how it might be improved. For feedback to be most effective, students need to be encouraged to act upon it. There are a number of ways in which this can be encouraged. For instance, some institutions now have a section on their feedback forms for students to write their reactions to, and actions resulting from, the feedback they have received. This could be used as part of a personal development planner, or a journal. Another way in which this could be done is to develop strategies which reward students for responding to feedback. One institution has a first year course where students submit work early in the semester, receive feedback, re-work the assessment and re-submit it. The final mark is based on both the work and the degree to which the student has acted upon the feedback received for the first attempt.
Feedback should encourage dialogue between students and peers and between students and academics. Ideally, students will act on feedback, rather than receive it, read it and forget about it. Good feedback will encourage students to discuss work amongst themselves and could be used to facilitate discussions between staff and students.

Feedback should clarify what a good performance is/would be. As well as commenting on students’ own work, feedback should show what good performance in an assessment task would be. This may be through the use of model solutions or model essays, or it could be through comments on work.

Students should be encouraged to receive, engage with, and reflect on feedback. Feedback processes should be designed to engage students with the feedback that they receive. Where students are expected to reflect on and implement feedback, mechanisms to assist them in doing this should be developed.

2. Feedback will be given on all assessed work, both formative and summative, except in exceptional circumstances.

It is important that students receive developmental feedback on all possible occasions. This is particularly true for students in their first and second years at university. Formative feedback can be used by students to develop academic and transferable skills even from summative assessment where detailed subject feedback may not be appropriate.
3. A process for the giving and receiving of feedback will be an integral part of curriculum design.

As many opportunities as possible should be made available for feedback on a one-to-one basis or in groups. This should include opportunities for discussion around personal oral feedback with academic staff which students greatly value and has a positive effect on their future assessment behaviour. Responsibility for giving feedback rests with staff setting the assessment tasks. Where academic staff delegate this, those staff giving feedback must be appropriately trained. Students also need to be made aware of when they are being given feedback. This may sound obvious, but students say that they don’t always recognise feedback when it is given in an informal setting.

4. Feedback should be relevant and informative. Issues to be considered include:

Feedback should identify, and praise good performance as well as identifying areas that need further development.

Whist feedback on areas in which students have failed to understand or not achieved well is useful for students, it is also important for them to know where they have done well, so that they can transfer this success into other areas. Good feedback and praise can motivate students, helping them to use assessment to drive their learning.
Feedback should focus on what the student can actually do in future to meet standards or correct wrong approaches. Feedback must be honest, realistic and specific to the piece of work being marked, and not set the student inappropriate standards for the level of the course. It is also important to focus on areas in which the student can achieve, and to identify what these areas are. Comments on areas beyond the students’ control are unhelpful (for instance, suggesting use of an IT package which is not available to students) and can be demoralising.

The focus should be on the work being assessed, not on the student. Comments such as ‘not enough effort has gone into this piece of work’ are not comments on the work, but assumptions about the student. A student may well have worked incredibly hard on the work and such a comment could be de-motivating.

Opportunities should be provided to close the gap between current and required performance. Where possible, feedback should be forward-looking. Comments which merely point out weaknesses rather than identifying how these might be overcome are not useful to a student’s learning. For example, This essay is poorly structured is far less helpful than You need to look at how you structure your work, and consider how you can ensure that each point leads to the next in a coherent way.
Opportunities for students to understand the status of their progress.
It is helpful for students to be given some idea of how they are progressing in their academic development. Feedback can do this through looking forward and telling students whether they have improved. If it is not possible to track a student’s progress (a problem with anonymous marking), it is useful for students to know whether their work shows that they are at the appropriate stage of development for their stage in the course, and whether the work is at an appropriate level.

Provision of model solutions on their own is not feedback.
There can be a view that by issuing a mark and a set of model solutions, an academic has fulfilled his/her obligations to give students feedback on their work. Good practice would suggest that this is not an adequate method of feedback. If students do not understand a method, a model solution may not help them at all in understanding why they have gone wrong if it is not clear where marks are awarded. It is important that model solutions are seen as being only part of a feedback package, along with appropriate direction to students about their individual or group performance.

Feedback should encourage students to think about transferable skills and knowledge
In a modular system, there can be a tendency on the part of students to think that feedback on work in one module is not transferable to other modules in a course. Thought should be given to ways in which the links between courses, and the ways in which skills are transferable between them, are made clearer. This could be done by framing a feedback sheet to make comments on transferable skills (such as structure, writing, referencing, etc.) explicit and separate from comments on content and knowledge. In some circumstances, it would be appropriate to do the same with knowledge, particularly with foundational knowledge or basic concepts which will be important in other courses of a student’s programme.
5. Feedback will be timely:

Each department must publish a return date for feedback on assessed work when issuing an assignment

This should be adhered to, except in exceptional circumstances. The period of time between submission and return may vary from department to department and for different types of assessment. Depending on volume and complexity, it may be possible to agree a return date of five working days. In other cases, a longer period would be appropriate. A common figure across the sector is fifteen working days. Whatever timescale is agreed for giving feedback, this must be notified to students when the assignment is set. In all cases, assessed course work with feedback must be returned to the student before the date of any examination for that unit/module. This may mean returning work with provisional marks.

Timescales should be published and deviations from timescales announced with an explanation.

The timescales should be publicised to students and if, for exceptional reasons, the timescale needs to be extended, the affected students should be informed of the new date and the general reason for the alteration.

6. Feedback should be efficient

A range of forms of feedback are available:

There are a number of different ways in which feedback may be given to students. These include:

Traditional written comments on a feedback sheet; In a seminar or tutorial session; Using WebCT or a similar online environment; Via podcast, with comments on work recorded for each student and then emailed; In class, particularly for group feedback
Group feedback

One way in which giving feedback can be streamlined is through the use of group feedback. Common problems can be identified (sometimes in advance from knowledge of previous experience of the assessment) and then written or verbal feedback can be given to an entire cohort or class. This can help weaker students, as they can be reassured that they are not only ones making mistakes and it means that staff don’t need to write the same comments over and over again on student work. This also aids staff, as they do not have to write the same comments over and over again on student work.

Feedback should be manageable and focussed.

Whilst high volumes of feedback on student work can be seen as good practice, it can be that this is inefficient in two ways: it is time-consuming for a staff member to achieve and it can be daunting for a student to process. Rather than writing large amounts of comments, staff could think about particular areas of strength and weakness and give focussed feedback on these.

Comment/statement banks

For some types of assessment, it may be possible to develop comment banks to give feedback. This works particularly well in assessment of laboratory and practical work. This can be quite a time-consuming task, but it significantly reduces the amount of time taken to assess work on receipt (in effect it can shift the assessment burden for staff from after to before students hand-in work).
7. Feedback should provide academic staff with information that can be used in curriculum development.

Feedback should not just be seen as a process to aid student learning. It can also be useful for academic staff. Feedback, particularly group feedback, can be useful in aiding staff to evaluate teaching and to plan for the future.

8. Those involved in the teaching should be informed of the progress of the students and the areas of success or lack of understanding.

It is important that feedback is disseminated to other academic staff as well to students. Seminar leaders, Teaching Assistants, and PBL tutors, for instance, should be kept informed of general comments and student progress where possible, to aid them in evaluating their own performance. This is particularly necessary where a subset of teaching staff on a unit undertake marking of assessments.

9. Feedback should reflect the demands of the form of assessment

Some forms of assessment have particular feedback needs. These include:
Writing on scripts
Academic staff should be cautious about writing comments directly on student work. If these are well-written they can be helpful, but they are often written in haste and in brief. They can, especially if they are not discussed in the formal feedback, confuse and de-motivate students. Comments given should be coherent and structured where possible, and it is recommended that feedback forms (examples of which can be found at the back of this Code) should be developed by all Schools, Departments and Institutes and used by all staff where possible and appropriate.

Feedback on Exams
Formal examinations present a particular problem for students with regard to feedback. Rarely are papers returned to students, and because of the highly summative nature of examinations, formative comments are often considered inappropriate. At the minimum level, unit/module convenors should consider preparing a written summary statement of common misconceptions, things that worked well and that didn’t work so well for each examination for advisors to discuss with students at the end of each year before graduation. Feedback given formatively on formal examinations can help students and staff make and maintain links between separate sections of a programme, and reduce the compartmentalisation of subjects which is a possible side effect of a modular scheme.

Feedback on final year projects
It is useful for students to receive feedback on final year projects. Even though students may not be continuing to study at QM, they may wish to undertake further study elsewhere, and feedback on projects can be invaluable. It can also be useful for CPD purposes once they enter employment.

Educational and Staff Development
August 2008
Useful definitions

Academic staff
In this Guide, academic staff refers to anyone involved in the assessment process from the staff side. This could be lecturing staff, GTAs, teaching fellows, PhD students, clinical staff – anyone who is involved in the setting and marking of assessments and giving feedback.

Assessment criteria
This is important for students – for whom such criteria can be useful in framing and developing their assessment tasks; and for staff – for whom a shared understanding of the criteria can ease marking and lessen confusion (particularly where there are multiple markers, or double marking is done). Marking criteria may, as described above, be task-specific, or generic grade descriptors may be used. It is also possible for a combination of both to be used (for example, task-specific criteria could outline area expected to be covered or methods used, whilst generic descriptors outline the skills or competences needed to be demonstrated for specific grades).

Blueprinting
This is a method by which assessment is evaluated to ensure that all objectives in a course or unit have been assessed. This is an important issue in the medical and some science curricula, but may not be as crucial in some arts disciplines.

Comment banks
These could be in the form of pre-developed banks, where feedback for graded criteria are developed and work is allocated grades which then refer to this bank. Or it could be through using common errors (failure to label axes on graphs, for instance), which you refer to on a feedback form (if lack of labelling were comment three in the bank, you would merely need to write ‘See comment 3’ on each occasion that a student fails to do this).
Criterion-referenced assessment
Work which is marked according to a set of pre-defined criteria. These criteria could be specific to the piece of work itself (marking criteria) or to the grade awarded (grade-related criteria). In this method of assessment, it should be possible for all students to gain an A (or to fail) depending on their grasp of the subject.

Diagnostic assessment
Work which is undertaken at the beginning of a course of programme of study, the primary aim of which is to identify students initial abilities in a subject, technique or procedure. The feedback on this type of assessment is important for both student and staff. It is likely to be used to define additional learning, if necessary for students, and it may be undertaken purely formatively, or the marks could be used as part of an overall grade.

Formative assessment
Work which does not ultimately count towards the final mark for the course unit. In some cases, formative assessment could be plans, drafts or sections of work which will be summatively assessed, on which feedback is given so that the student can improve or alter their performance. The most important point about formative assessment is that its purpose is primarily developmental, rather than judgemental.

MCQs
Multiple Choice Questions
Useful definitions

**Norm-referenced assessment**
Work which is marked according to the position of the individual within the group. In this approach, there is no objective definition of grades, rather the top X% gain an A, the next Y% a B, and so on. Using this method of assessment means that it is difficult (if not impossible) to compare performance across courses, as a course unit with strong, high performing students will have the same proportion of A grades as a course unit made up of weaker, poorer performing students. A good example of norm-referencing is TV quiz shows, where the highest score (mark) in an edition will get a contestant through to the next round, even if that score would not have been high enough to win another, comparable, edition.

**Peer assessment**
Peer assessment is when students undertaking the marking and feedback of each other’s work and this method of assessment is used some areas of the College already, and is more widespread in other institutions.

**Summative assessment**
Work for which the mark counts toward the student’s final mark for the course unit or module.
Further reading

**Websites:**
The Higher Education Academy’s project on good practice in assessment and feedback:
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/assessment/seenlef/principles

Effective Assessment Strategies:

Giving good feedback:
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/osmhn/he-fe-staff/give.html

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section6/COP_AOS.pdf

**Books:**


This guide was written by Dr Matthew Williamson and Dr Giles Martin for Educational and Staff Development at Queen Mary, University of London.

This is the first in a series of QM Good Practice Guides. Guides in preparation cover topics including:

• Improving student revision and exam preparation
• Deterring, detecting and dealing with plagiarism
• Observation of teaching
• Dealing with disruptive behaviour in teaching

If you have any suggestions for titles in the series, do contact Dr Matthew Williamson, Education Adviser in ESD (m.williamson@qmul.ac.uk).

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