

Developed for the HASS Faculty by Peter Rutherford, November 2021.

Early semester assessment and feedback

Too few students arrive at Census date having received feedback from their course coordinators. These students have little to work with, other than uncertainty, when they need to make the time-critical decision to continue study or withdraw from their course. Many of these students may be those least equipped to deal with a decision of this nature; the first in family, those needing to do extensive paid work to make ends meet, those lacking in cultural capital, the isolated and others just struggling with their course work.

While early warning systems are still being explored by the university, our current show-cause interventions only trigger a face-to-face support conversation with a student after they have failed the equivalent of three semesters. With new legislation arriving, these students will have already lost their Commonwealth funding and have no alternative but to withdraw. Others may struggle, lose confidence and disengage, only to withdraw from courses or the program when it may be that they could have completed successfully, but make the decision early to avoid incurring financial penalty.

We can support our students by signposting their course progress early in the semester. Early assessment and feedback can help generate the confidence needed to continue with study, or provide the evidence needed for students to make an informed decision for the prospect of withdrawing.

Early assessment

Advantages for students

Setting an assessment task in the first weeks is a valuable strategy to engage students with the course early in the semester. The assessment should be such that it can be completed, marked and feedback returned with time to spare before Census, so that as the date approaches your students are not just engaged, but have a developing sense of what is required of them to be successful with the course load, and understand the effort and level of engagement they need to learn effectively in your course.

An early-semester assessment task should also cause students to:

- identify where to concentrate their study attention (before and after the assessment task)
- spend more time studying
- develop a better understanding of what they know and don't know
- reduce assessment anxiety if early low stakes tasks are used
- engage with your feedback.

Advantages for course coordinators

For course coordinators, early assessment can inform your teaching and learning decision-making through knowledge of how the class content is being received and understood, the strengths of the class cohort, which students are not engaged and which may need extra support with their learning.

Also, early assessment of your students can help you to:

- engage them in productive learning
- become more familiar with your learners early in the semester
- increase student attendance and the attention students pay during class
- improve students' independent study
- provide them with feedback to guide improvement, boost resilience and develop confidence in their ability to succeed.

Formative or summative?

The assessment may be formative or summative. Formative assessment is valuable in that it provides both the student and course co-ordinator with information about the student's learning and course progress, but it can be difficult to get students to complete it when they know the exercise won't contribute to their overall grades.

If summative assessment is used in the first weeks, it should be low risk/low stakes; enough to warrant students' best effort, but not enough to be a make-or-break deal if the learner is unsuccessful. The purpose of the assessment task should be to get your students to begin to immerse themselves in the course materials through reading, thinking and responding.

Managing impact on your time

Assessment this early in the semester can be designed to be less demanding of your time in terms of preparation, marking and providing feedback.

The assessment task could be an in-class, at home or an online activity. Online activities could be an automatically marked quiz (e.g. [MCQ](#) or [fill in the blank](#)), or marked more quickly with a short-answer analysis tool like [Semant](#). Instructive [feedback can be timed](#) to minimise misconduct. Rich interactive content (e.g. drag and drop, quiz, timeline, fill in the blanks) can be easily created with [H5P](#) and used to [practice concepts or test knowledge](#). You might also consider setting a task that allows students to learn by providing feedback to their peers, using a form to guide their response.

See [Assessment tools](#) to learn more about online assignment submission and marking tools.

If you choose to use a written or practical task, you can minimise your marking and feedback time by structuring it using strategies such as:

- providing rubrics to guide the student efforts and to ease your marking
- distributing well-defined task sheets to scaffold the task
- sharing and discussing exemplars and less successful examples of completed work
- providing feedback in-person, by [video](#) or [voice](#).

Suitable early semester assessment pieces currently used by HASS colleagues

Written

- In class quiz
- Book review
- Reflection /Journal
- Literature review
- Laboratory report

Practical

- Tutorial exercise
- Oral presentation
- Practical /Demonstration
- Field notes
- Group work participation

Online

- Online quiz
- Diagnostic quiz
- Plan /Project plan
- Computer exercise
- Blog

- Case study
- Synopsis
- Research proposal
- Annotated bibliography
- Performance
- Interview
- Internship Plan
- Project proposal
- Padlet
- Discussion board

Additional ideas for successful assessment practices can be located at the [UQ Assessment Ideas Factory](#).

Course coordinators who would like to discuss developing early assessment items may contact their School or Faculty learning designer.

Early feedback

Purpose

This early assessment is critical so you can provide your students with feedback early in the semester to give them the opportunity to develop a sense of self within the course. Effective feedback can help them address the essential questions for them to experience success:

- Where am I going?
- How am I going?
- Where to next?

(Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

Consider what is important about the task you have set and what are the key learning outcomes you are looking for. You may choose to focus your feedback on the process, the output, how the learner participated in the task or a mixture of all three.

This feedback can alert students to their strengths and weaknesses, how they are progressing and what changes they need to make to succeed with subsequent tasks and summative assessment (i.e. the '[feedforward](#)' principle).

The feedback you provide for an early assessment piece should:

- be sufficient to provide the students with a good feel for their learning and early progress
- allow students to reflect on the level of effort they have expended for the result achieved
- affirm their early engagement with the course materials has been productive (or otherwise)
- provide evidence to help students' decision making about their capacity to complete the course successfully at their existing level of effort.

Positive feedback

Positive feedback can help students develop resiliency when you communicate to them in a way that helps them develop the belief that they belong, and their chance of success is strong. It can help students facilitate their own learning and develop agency as they begin to take ownership for their learning, an important factor in getting students to stay the distance.

For more information about feedback visit [Feedback for learning](#).