Good Practice Principles in Practice:
Teaching Across Cultures

A Quick Guide to Assessment

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Introduction

This guide on assessment is intended for teaching staff and for those who support the learning of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Cultural diversity in the student population is now the norm rather than the exception in Australian universities. Culture is not only defined by nationality or ethnicity. The term culture is a very broad concept that encompasses the lifestyle, traditions, knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms and values shared by a group of people. Cultures are most often recognised by shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understandings. These are learned through a process of socialization. However, within different cultural groups, individuals are unique. Meaning is continuously constructed through human interaction and communication within and across cultural groups. Cultural learning is a dynamic, developmental and ongoing process for students and teachers. Cultural diversity in the student population has a significant impact on teaching and learning.

This guide draws on current literature on learning and teaching across cultures, on findings from relevant projects funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council from 2006-2012. You can find full summaries of these projects in the Good Practice Report Learning and Teaching Across Cultures available at http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-learning-and-teaching-across-cultures-2011.

This guide is one of a suite of Quick Guides on topics of particular relevance to learning and teaching across cultures. Other guides are available from ieaa.org.au/ltac.

The Good Practice Principles: Teaching Across Cultures

This guide is organised around six principles of good practice for teaching across cultures. Each guide interprets the principle in practice.

Principle 1:   Good teaching across cultures will **focus on students as learners**

Principle 2:   Good teaching across cultures will **respect and adjust for diversity**

Principle 3:   Good teaching across cultures will **provide context-specific information and support**

Principle 4:   Good teaching across cultures will **enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement**

Principle 5:   Good teaching across cultures will be **adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence**

Principle 6:   Good teaching across cultures will **prepare students for life in a globalised world**

You can find a detailed description of each Principle at ieaa.org.au/ltac.

In this guide, good practice principles are interpreted for assessment. The focus is on catering for cultural and linguistic diversity in university classrooms. This guide may be used to evaluate current activities and identify areas for improvement as well as examples of best practice.

1

Principles into practice: assessment

Principle 1: Focus on students as learners

Assessment tests what students have learned (assessment of learning) and it drives students' learning (assessment for learning). It checks their discipline-specific knowledge and skills (with the latter often the primary object of the assessment). Assessment also confirms students' understanding of what they are required to do to meet the assessment requirements. Students 'assessment literacy' is often overlooked as a significant part of learning to master assessment in university.

Assessment is challenging for all students. For those from culturally diverse backgrounds, mastering assessment strategies and approaches can present particular issues. Methods and standards may differ from those they have previously encountered in their prior studies in Australia or overseas. Some students will have had little, if any, experience of being assessed in English. How can assessors focus on diverse students as learners of content and learners of assessment skills?

What to look for

Teachers are using recognised good practice in discipline-specific teaching	See A Quick Guide for Teachers
Programs are designed so that learners are taught and practise necessary skills before they are needed for assessment *"Clearly articulate to students, in written form, the requirements of the task, provide explicit definitions of generic skills being developed and assessed, provide templates indicating weightings and details of assessment for each task, provide specific, formative feedback"* **(PPS-43, p. 81).***	Assessment tasks are structurally aligned with what students are doing and learning in class. Skills such as critical reading and writing, application of theory in practice, use of examples as evidence and structuring an argument are not presumed to be present at enrolment. Students are given specific guidance on how to structure an 'essay', a 'position paper', or a 'case study' in the discipline. Teachers who need assistance with providing this type of guidance look for resources and guidance from specialists within the university, such as academic language and learning staff. There is guidance on referencing protocols. Expectations for citation and source use are embedded within assessment task descriptions and/or course materials. Students for whom English is an additional language are provided with specific feedback on and support in the development of their use of discipline-specific and academic language. *"Use a planning tool to link intended learning outcomes, graduate attributes, learning activities and assessment tasks and weightings"* **(See example in CG6-37, p. 72).**
The connection between what is taught and what is assessed is made clear	Whilst all students report the paramount importance of assessment, only some will see how lecture material, seminar activities and personal research are linked to assessment via examinations or coursework. Links need to be made frequently and explicitly. One way is by stating connections in lectures; another is by providing a rationale for readings that explain their use in subsequent examinations. Strategies for revision are discussed and explained. Revision stresses the use and application of knowledge and students' capacity to evaluate its significance, rather than the reproduction of memorised facts.
Program-level assessment tasks and standards keep pace with students' evolving levels of competence and understanding throughout the program	As students become more familiar with the discipline and are more competent users of English, standards and expectations are also modified. Most changes include higher demands and expectations of more accurate and complex language use.

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Principle 2: Respect and adjust for diversity

Students' diverse previous experiences, their varied underpinning knowledge and developing language skills will pose particular challenges for fairness to all and for maintaining standards. What adjustments to assessment might ensure that all have a chance for success?

What to look for

Teachers and program designers recognise that assessment methods differ in various academic cultures *It is sometimes difficult to understand the "… cultural, moral and ethical differences in academic writing"* **(CG8-766, p. 22).***	Teachers are aware of forms of assessment in their students' previous educational settings; they know that the range, purpose and timing of assessments varies in different cultural contexts. Students are provided with opportunities to seek clarification around all aspects of assessment requirements early in the course. Group work is likely to be particularly novel for some groups of students. For example, students who studied outside Australia before starting university may have never used this method and some Australian learning environments seldom if ever ask students to collaborate for an assessed task. Group work will need careful management (See A Quick Guide to Managing Group Work).
Teachers anticipate and manage commonly occurring problems *"Students want teachers to provide examples, models and culturally specific illustrations"* **(CG8-766, p. 7).*** *Early in the course give students an ungraded task with a focus on formative feedback, advise those needing it of the support available* **(PPS-43, p. 82).***	Teachers provide examples of coursework questions along with sample answers of variable quality to clarify what is expected. These exemplars are specifically designed to help students understand what is required as well as grade threshold standards. The program includes a range of assessment tasks (such as portfolios, simulations, case-based evaluations, presentations and self and peer assessment). The benefits of this are that students can demonstrate what they have learned in different ways using a range of language and communication skills. The problem of unfamiliarity amongst some students needs careful management. Care is needed to introduce novel formats slowly, to provide exemplars, give time for opportunities to practise and avoid higher-order complex methods towards the beginning of programs. Formative feedback on academic writing stresses correct ways to acknowledge sources and how to use referencing systems. Teachers provide pre-exam practice and feedback, especially in the early stages of the program. Teachers stress the value of starting promptly on coursework which is due in weeks or months. A sample time line is provided to assist those students who have had little or no experience of self managing multiple assessment tasks.

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Principle 3: Provide context-specific information and support

The ways in which teachers describe, discuss and design assessment briefs can be crucial in ensuring students are clear on what is expected. Context-specific information also helps all students meet expectations when completing assessment tasks but may be especially helpful for those with little or no previous experience of commonly used assessment tasks in Australian universities.

What to look for

Guidance is clear, specific and appropriate to the learning context	Structural aspects such as word count, referencing system and use of sub headings are stated. When feedback is given, it refers frequently and specifically to assessment criteria. Formative feedback concentrates on what needs to be done rather than what is wrong. Information and instructions are provided using a variety of forms and media. *Assessment does not have to be identical in different locations but must be comparable, linked to the learning objectives and assess the same knowledge and skills* **(PP8-906, p. 23).***

3

What to look for

Programs provide opportunities for checking understanding of assessment requirements	Students know when and how they can ask questions. Academic writing skills include tips on decoding questions. What is the assessor looking for? Class tasks prepare for and reflect on assessment items. Early assessment(s) are both formative or summative. They alert students to specific gaps and strengths and highlight what is expected. Feedback includes advice on plagiarism. See A Quick Guide for Teachers and A Quick Guide to Developing English Language Skills for more advice on avoiding plagiarism. *"There are different standards amongst academics on what constitutes plagiarism and academics need to be aware of the confusion this creates amongst students"* **(CG8-766, p. 22).*** *Consider providing student access to programs like 'Turnitin' to allow students to check their own work for plagiarism* **(PPS-43, p. 85).***
Information on assessment is sensitive to students' developing language skills	A percentage of the mark for all students is allocated to English language capability. The specific percentage and expectations in relation to use of English are clearly stated. The Quick Guide to Developing English Language Skills offers suggestions for reaching consistency in language standards and on assessing and providing feedback on language skills that support language development. In general, sentence level issues are not the most important. Feedback on paragraph structure, how ideas are organised and the overall structure of the text are more useful.

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Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement

Within assessment itself, especially in group tasks, intercultural dialogue is an implicit and at times, an explicit goal. It may be taught, supported and assessed as a specific course and program requirement. Staff and students' ability to engage in intercultural dialogue facilitates most aspects of assessment involving culturally diverse students. It is important that teachers support and manage dialogue amongst culturally diverse groups of students with care.

What to look for

The teacher creates a supportive learning environment for interaction *"A lot of my students do not really know how to start talking to other students in their first class. I see that as part of my work to break down that barrier among students from the very first class"* **(Academic, CG8-725, p. 13).***	Interaction is a frequent and normal aspect of teaching, learning and assessment. See A Quick Guide for Teachers for suggestions on how to encourage and manage interaction in the classroom. All students are required to complete a minimum amount of assessed group work as part of their degree program. For assessment, all students are prepared for and supported in the process of working in culturally diverse groups before they are required to work in such groups to create assessed work (See A Quick Guide to Managing Group Work). Intercultural skills are taught and assessed at different year levels in the program (See A Quick Guide for Teachers and A Quick Guide to Manging Group Work). Programs, provide multiple opportunities for practice in a safe environment and feedback is given so that students progressively develop their skills as they progress through the course of study.
Assessment tasks are set so as to develop cultural sensitivity and awareness amongst students	Assessment tasks are not culturally context-specific. For example, a question in a sociology examination would not assume knowledge about how Australians generally resolve arguments unless this has been specifically taught. A question in a sociology examination about adoption laws would only assume this occurred within an Australian context if this had been stated in the course syllabus. Tasks draw upon intercultural wisdom in the group. For example, students might be asked to compare and reflect on various ways they have seen a particular problem addressed. Who takes the lead in seeking a solution and why was that person the most appropriate? Where appropriate, tasks allow students to be provide each other with information on their cultural perspectives and to utilise previous knowledge and experiences to complete the assessment task.

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Principle 5: Be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence

As with all other aspects of teaching, teachers need to monitor the impact of assessment on students' learning. Learning tasks can be designed to gauge the effectiveness of teaching approaches on students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers can then compare student performance on these deliberately designed tasks. Where evidence suggests that students from particular backgrounds are disadvantaged by an assessment approach, it may be appropriate to provide additional support; it might also prompt changes in teaching and/or assessment practices.

What to look for

Teachers critically reflect on their teaching and assessment practices	Feedback from students on teaching approaches specifically invites comments on approaches to assessment. Teachers keep abreast of research and participate in staff development on matters related to teaching and assessment.
At the program level, there are opportunities for reaching consensus on standards	Teaching staff discuss at what stages in the program 'reading through' awkward language is appropriate and when students will be required to correct and/or seek assistance from academic language and learning staff. Moderation includes discussion of real and/or simulated work. It is a regular part of course team discussions prior to critical assessment points in courses. *"Where programs are taught in multiple locations, including offshore, a moderation process is used to ensure the assessment is "fair, valid and reliable"* **(PP8-906, p. 17).*** Staff avoid practices such as penalising students once for poor language, then a second time for weak structure, when a student's lack of academic vocabulary has meant the reader cannot discern the student's organisation of the work.

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Principle 6: Preparing students for life in a globalised world

When designing assessment tasks teachers encourage students to consider the global application and impact of course content and the impact of culture and language on disciplinary knowledge and professional practice.

What to look for

Assessment encourages global awareness The program teaches skills for global citizenship The program accredits students' capabilities for life in a globalised world	Program documentation states the knowledge, skills and attributes graduates will demonstrate. In professional accreditation programs, skills and knowledge are specific to working within the profession. Students are taught to be reflective and use this ability in assessment tasks. The program develops and assesses students' global awareness and citizenship. All students are assumed to leave with the necessary capabilities to exercise global citizenship responsibilities.
Assessment items are designed to shape students' global awareness and intercultural skills	Assessment items are culturally inclusive and where appropriate, have a global perspective. Tasks use and value students' experiences before and after study in an Australian university. Assessment tasks test students' ability to gather and apply knowledge in and across disciplines in a globalised world. Assessment items promote learning and skills beyond the task itself. They are intrinsically useful and encourage life-long learning.
Programs explicitly aim to create students who are reflective about and able to move between different systems	Some assessment tasks in the program test actions and decisions where context is important. Students must show they deal with multiple competing national, cultural and/or linguistic perspectives. *"Use reflective written tasks to (get students to) analyse critically and reflect on their own assumptions, values and beliefs..."* **(CG8-725, p. 19).***

Related OLT Projects

CG8-766, *Investigating the efficacy of culturally specific academic literacy and academic honesty resources for Chinese students*,
<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-efficacy-culturally-specific-academic-literacy-vu-2010>.

PP8-906, *Moderation for fair assessment in transnational teaching and learning*,
<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-moderation-fair-assessment-unisa-2008>.

CG8-725, *Finding common ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students*,
<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-enhancing-domestic-international-melbourne-2008>.

PPS-43, *Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian universities*,
<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-assessing-students-unfamiliar-rmit-2005>.

Key References

Boud D 2009, 'Reframing assessment as if learning were important' in D Boud & N Falchikov (eds), *Rethinking assessment in higher education: learning for the longer term*, Routledge, London, pp. 14-26.

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Nicol D 2007, 'Principles of assessment design and feedback: theory and practice', *Assessment design for learner responsibility*, <http://www.reap.ac.uk>, pp. 1-9.