

## Early Formative Assessment

Practice Guide

### What is Formative Assessment?



Many definitions of formative assessment exist. The definition adopted by Notre Dame is:

*“Formative assessment means any assessment task that assists in monitoring student progress against intended learning outcomes, and provides feedback comparing their progress towards the outcomes, with a view to helping students to achieve the outcomes. The intention behind formative assessment is to promote student learning during a course by eliciting information on students’ progress, helping students become aware of the strengths and gaps in their abilities, provide constructive feedback to the students to improve their quality of work and to staff to adjust their teaching. Formative assessments are generally low stakes, which means that they have low or no point value.”*

[\(Policy: Assessment in Higher Education Coursework, ELICOS and Enabling Courses - Definitions, Section 8\)](#)

Formative assessment and feedback are crucial elements of good teaching practice. There is much evidence in the literature that formative feedback assists students to independently evaluate and regulate their own learning (Boud, Ajjawi, Dawson & Tai, 2018) and that the earlier this feedback is provided the better able students are to absorb it and act accordingly (Molloy and Boud, 2013). At Notre Dame it is considered important to provide the first instance of feedback before the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) census date.

### Why early assessment?

Early formative assessment is important not only for giving students some guidance in how well they are engaging with the concepts and content in the course but also in giving them a chance to rehearse the critical thinking and analytical skills they will need in their studies (Nicol, 2019). It is also vital in giving students a clear indication of what is expected of them in terms of tertiary study, academic language and discourse. This is particularly relevant for first year students in the first few weeks of semester who may be encountering the culture of the University for the first time and need support in adapting to the new environment and taking control of their own learning.

All students, however, commonly encounter a transition or preparation phase. Lizzio calls this the ‘transition through’ phase for continuing students who are reoriented to the new rules and expectations of middle and later year Courses (2011). Formative assessment and feedback are important in this phase as they help build confidence and give students a chance to practice their time and task management abilities which are a key but often overlooked aspect of successful study. They also provide students with feedback on their readiness for

study and their grasp of assumed entry-level knowledge in the light of the expectations of the Course, the year-level and the discipline. Effective feedback given early, helps students clarify what it takes to do well in a course and encourages them to aim for excellence by making it clear what good performance could look like.

TEQSA identifies that early formative assessment can support academic integrity by providing an early indicator of “students at risk of failure so that learning and language support can be offered” ([paragraph 13, 2015](#)). However, early formative assessment is not only about preparing students and setting expectations. Early formative assessment can also assist to address students’ over-confidence, allowing students to develop a more realistic perception of their preparation and the standard of their work before they are summatively assessed.

## What should early assessment look like?

Some authors (Boud, Ajjawi, Dawson and Tai, 2018; Yorke 2003) caution that an over reliance on teacher-generated feedback can promote dependency in students and undermine their capacity for autonomous judgement. They argue that formative assessment should, wherever possible, include space for students to exercise their own judgements through self-assessment or peer assessment of others’ works. Effective formative assessment actively engages students in their learning by making them genuine participants and collaborators in the assessment process rather than expecting that assessment is only something that is done to them.

In keeping with this, it is important to see formative assessment as more than giving students detailed comments on drafts or early exams. Early formative assessment covers a range of activities which may include:

- Feedback integrated into weekly classroom activities, specifically designed to enable individual students to improve their learning.
- Early diagnostic feedback from educators either written, verbal or through automated processes such as online quizzes.
- Benchmarking or peer assessment with other students.
- Self-assessment.
- Collaborative work in which students, lecturers and tutors give each other feedback on various aspects of the learning situation including reviewing the purposes, processes and criteria of later assessment tasks.

## Specific examples of early formative assessment tasks

### Testing comprehension

- Checking for understanding during a lecture with a student response system such as [Polls in Zoom](#) for online classes or instant quiz activities such as [Kahoot](#) or [Socrative](#)

### Sharing expectations

- Students discuss their understanding of typical words used in an assessment tasks in your Course – words such as “analyse”, “evaluate” and “interpret” ([van Schalkwyk, 2010](#)).

### Breaking larger tasks into sections

- Students complete an essay plan or some preliminary research early in the semester and are given quick pointers on whether they are on the right track or not.
- In a large Education subject at QUT, the major assessment is broken down into smaller parts which build specific academic literacies (e.g. annotated bibliography, design proposal), with staggered due dates beginning early in the semester (week three). This approach enables clear and early feedback on, and scaffolded development of, individual academic literacies (Healy, 2008).

#### Encourage group accountability

- Conduct a 'Strength Finder Exercise' where students individually identify their strengths, share these in small groups and reflect on how the diversity, experiences and views of the group will prepare them for the collaborative tasks in the Course ([UCL, 2020](#)).

#### Assessing exemplars

- In groups students discuss and mark exemplars using the Courses' criteria and standards. Students form a group consensus on the grade they would give the exemplars, and benchmark their decisions with other groups ([Guideline: Good Practice in Assessment](#)).

#### Post-class online quiz

- Set up an online quiz with automated feedback. This doesn't have to be a lengthy set of multiple-choice questions it could simply be a question such as "What were two key points from today's seminar?" with a set of options which each have automated feedback.

#### Pre-class online survey

- Ask students to justify their reasoning through peer discussion. For example, ask students to individually complete a pre-class quiz of two questions. Question 1 is multiple-choice and requires them to apply a Course concept by choosing a single best answer. Question 2 is paragraph response and asks them to explain their reasoning for their answer. In-class, you reveal students' individual answers and they work in groups to commit to a consensus response through peer discussion/peer teaching, before you reveal the correct response.

#### Small tasks that emulate larger tasks

- In the first four weeks students complete small group mini-projects, which reflect the major assessment due in the second half of the semester. The marking criteria is negotiated and generated by the class as a whole, and the mini-projects are peer assessed (Healy, 2008).

#### Gradual build up

- Start students with a simple recognisable task or activity and then, through a series of steps, increase the degree of complexity as they move into increasingly unfamiliar territory. For example, start by asking them to write a blog post, then write a letter, then create a formal report and finally an action plan based on the report. Formative feedback is provided (either by staff or peers) at each step and, as tasks increase in complexity, provide templates and models to scaffold the student's learning (Radbourne and LeRossignol, 2008, Westcott, 2008).

### Useful sites containing formative assessment activities you can build on

1. Barkley and Major's (2016) [Learning Assessment Techniques](#) details formative assessments for different domains of learning – knowledge, application, integration, human, caring and learning to learn. See the activities at the end of chapters 7-12 for some very timely guidance.
2. Angelo and Cross's text, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, provides many examples of fast formative activities that have been tested by teachers worldwide. Although the book is not available in Notre Dame's library, the following two resources contain many of the activities.
3. A short list of the original Classroom Assessment Techniques is available here: [http://sloat.essex.edu/sloat/delete/contentforthewebsite/classroom\\_assessment\\_techniques.pdf](http://sloat.essex.edu/sloat/delete/contentforthewebsite/classroom_assessment_techniques.pdf)
4. An updated collection of the techniques is available at the K. Patricia Cross Academy. See for example the activities associated with [checking for understanding](#).

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