

# Designing First-Year Assessment and Feedback



A guide for university staff



*"Fe Fi Fo Fun:  
Do I smell success at the end of year one?"*

This short guide to designing first-year assessment and feedback has been produced by the First Level Assessment and Feedback Project (FLAP) to provide staff with assistance in developing their assessment practices and to help them reduce their workload by cutting down on marking and the overheads associated with assessing first-year students.

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### INTRODUCTION

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 that 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.

So what can we, as academic staff, do about this?

**When designing first-year assessment and feedback focus on 'Fe Fi Fo Fun':**

- **F**eelings
- **F**it
- **F**ormative activity
- **F**un

**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
2. **Self-belief:** providing feedback in a way that encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem

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.

So what can we, as academic staff, do about this?

**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 and criteria and flexibility in the timing of feedback and assessments

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 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 build directly 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?

So what can we, as academic staff, do about this?

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

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 while it is sometimes a temptation to spoon-feed them, it is so much better to have students take responsibility for their own learning; 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 should strive to make first-year assessment more exciting. Develop assessment practice that breeds success and the buzz that accompanies that success for both students and staff!

So what can we, as academic staff, do about this?

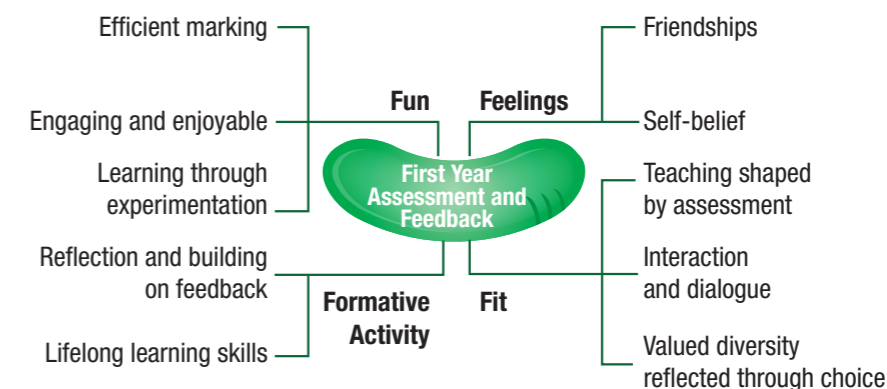
**Fun:** Designing assessment and feedback to excite and engage students in learning and to reduce the burden of marking and administration:

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 to learn through their mistakes

*"By introducing real relevance at the beginning of their studies you can engage students. Once they are involved they are more likely to stay even if they are having problems in other areas such as family or money problems."* (Diane Nutt, *Times Higher Education* 21 February 2008)

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



The ten principles of successful first level assessment and feedback which comprise the FE FI FO FUN Model can be represented and remembered using a simple **FIRST LEVEL** principles list. The basic premise of the First Level Assessment and Feedback Project (FLAP) is that through engaging with these ten principles in our assessment and feedback practice we can positively influence the first level learning experience. First level assessment and feedback practice should be designed to support:

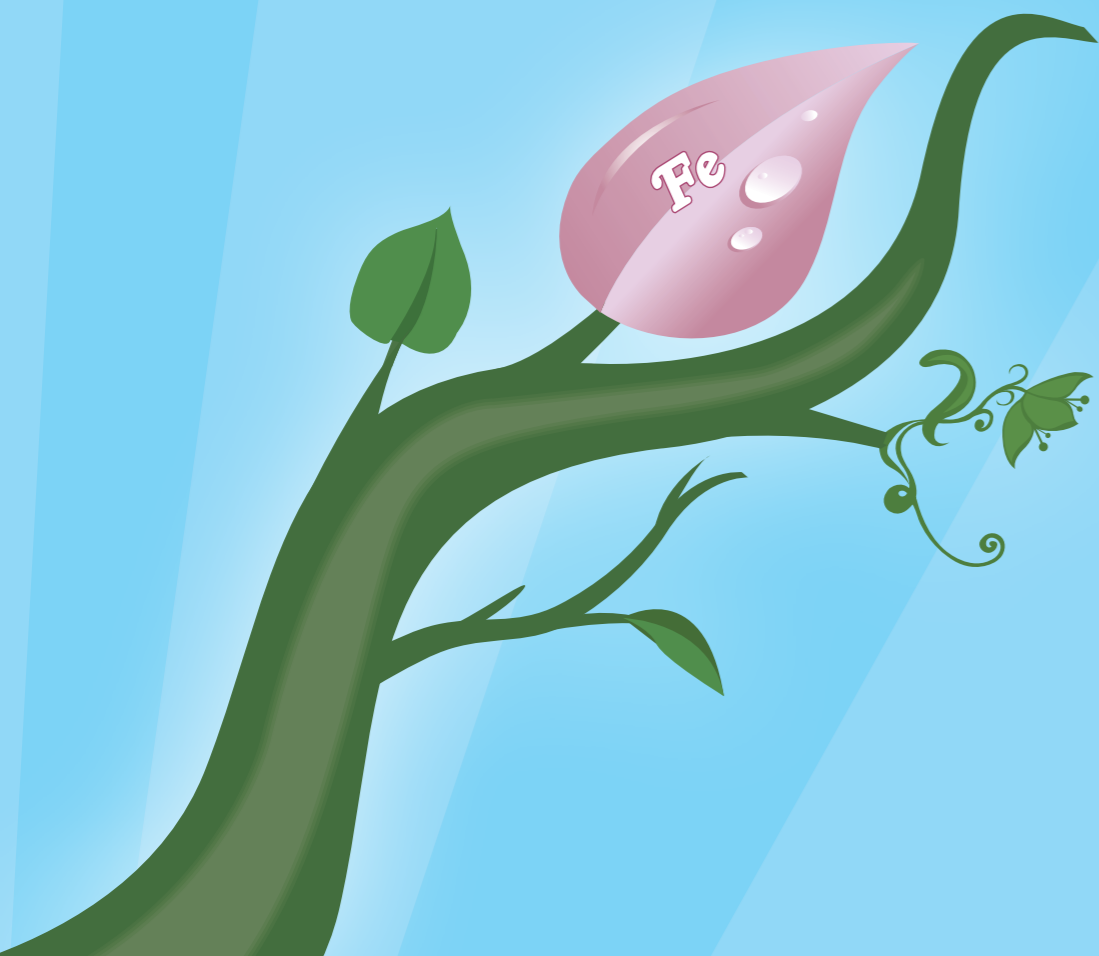
- F Friendships
- I Interaction and dialogue
- R Reflection and building on feedback
- S Self-belief
- T Teaching shaped by assessment
- L Lifelong learning skills
- E Efficient, value-added marking
- V Valued diversity reflected through choice
- E Engaging and enjoyable learning experiences
- L Learning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

This booklet provides 50 suggestions for staff to consider in the design of their first level assessment and feedback.

**FEELINGS:** Designing assessment and feedback to provide appropriate social experiences to instil a sense of belonging.

**Friendships:** Designing assessments that provide opportunities to develop peer friendships, student-tutor relationships and learning communities.

**Self-belief:** Providing feedback in a way that encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.



**1. Friendships: Designing assessments that provide opportunities to develop peer friendships, student-tutor relationships and learning communities (Topping, 2005; Boud, 2001).**

As academics we can, as a first step, try to ensure that we provide opportunities within the curriculum for students to get to know one another and to get to know us. It's important to remember that not all students live locally in student communities but that some commute from home, and for them it can be even harder to make friends. We need to think about how we can design assessment and feedback to get students mixing with each other and with us. Large class sizes in the first year can mean that if we don't deliberately design in opportunities to see students in small groups and individually then it may not happen, and students may feel very lost.

Group projects and assignments are a useful way of encouraging students to study together when they first arrive at university. Online environments are also worth considering as valuable tools to support bonding and collaboration, and are particularly handy for including students who have external commitments. Early assessment tasks that require students to work in teams and collaborate with one another can encourage and support student bonding.

**Have you considered how assessment in the first few weeks could be used to establish friendships in your first-year groups?**

1. Design delivery in the first few weeks that requires students to be together for long periods of time (Yorke, 1999). You may consider a residential experience or some other arrangement that takes students outside the classroom together. The STAR (student transition and retention) project has some useful examples of case studies: <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/index.htm>
2. Consider designing programmes with core

first-year curricula that keep students together so that friendships may have the chance to develop.

3. Consider involving students from later years to mentor first-year students academically in a 'buddying' system.
4. Ask students to comment on each other's work and encourage them to provide positive feedback to peers.
5. Include a number of group tasks early in the first year so that students have opportunities to make friends. Ensure that students are not stuck in one small group but have the opportunity to work with a number of other students. Consider designing in intragroup and intergroup collaboration.

**2. Self-belief: Providing feedback in a way that encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.**

Being assessed can deeply affect students, and the way that we give feedback to students can also have a significant impact on their motivation and self-belief. Building in time to share individual oral feedback with our students can be enormously beneficial to them in their first few weeks, encouraging and motivating them to engage in their studies. If students believe in their ability to succeed on a course they are more likely to stay on that course, so it is a good idea to build in early experiences of success (Bandura, 1997).

**Are you happy that your assessment and feedback practice builds your students' self-belief and motivates them to learn?**

6. Comment little and often on student work so that students can see what progress they are making and modify their learning. In particular, schedule short one-to-one meetings with students in the first few weeks and use this opportunity to discuss small pieces of work.



You could ask students to compile a portfolio to collect the work so that they can see what progress they make over a period of time.

7. Design authentic tasks so that students may visualise themselves in a professional role. Consider using simulations based on real life scenarios (Pickford and Brown, 2006).
8. Stretch students early on and design assessments so that they become progressively more difficult, so that weaker students can have

some success but more able students can progress more quickly.

9. Build in encouragement and opportunities for students to assess their own work. For example you could provide online tests where students are able to practise and assess their understanding in private.
10. When giving early feedback focus on students' successes rather than their mistakes.

**FIT**: Using assessment and feedback to empower students to develop a sense of control over their own learning.

**Teaching shaped by diagnostic assessment**: Using assessment diagnostically to shape teaching.

**Interaction and dialogue**: Regularly giving and receiving individual feedback to clarify what good performance is and what student perceptions of their learning experience are.

**Valued diversity reflected through choice**: Working in partnership with students to design assessments, giving choice in the topic, method and criteria and flexibility in the timing of feedback and assessments.



### 3. Teaching shaped by diagnostic assessment: Using assessment diagnostically to shape teaching.

Many of us are concerned that students don't take sufficient notice of the feedback we have painstakingly put together for them and are frustrated when it seems that they keep making the same mistakes. But do we reciprocally take notice of the feedback the students give us to change our teaching practice? Used appropriately, assessment can inform teaching, and we ourselves need regular formative assessment opportunities and feedback in the same way that first-year students do. It gives an indication of our students' progress and should highlight problems that we can then address by shaping our teaching. Being reactive to students' needs can help us to build a sense of community and shared learning in the classroom.

#### Do you reflect on feedback from students and use it to check their level of understanding?

11. Incorporate frequent 'low stakes' assessment tasks so that you have a good idea of how each student is progressing. For example, give your students online tests before a lecture to get a picture of where they are up to before you deliver it.
12. In a lecture build in checkpoints where you can assess how students are following, e.g. use coloured cards in class as a traffic light system: green for understanding, yellow for not sure and red for "Can you please explain again?"
13. Ask students to complete a short assessment task in class and hand it in at the end of the class so that you can use this to identify what you need to cover in your next session.
14. Ask students to walk you through their work so that you can ask questions and give immediate feedback.

15. Start each lecture with feedback to students on something you have done to demonstrate that you are reacting to their needs.

### 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.

Sharing worries and problems and celebrating successes with others can be a liberating experience; it can help students see a way forward where previously they had found it difficult to know what to do next. Many students are afraid to admit they don't know something in front of a large group, so providing opportunities for students to explore issues with a tutor or in small peer groups can overcome these fears and build students' confidence. Designing regular small peer group interactions that encourage students to ask and answer questions can help them to reflect on their understanding and provide each other with feedback in a language they understand. Equally important is the dialogue between a tutor and a student, which helps students to establish learning objectives and points them towards support networks as well as allowing students and tutors to understand students' individual strengths and weaknesses.

16. Ask students at the end of a class to write down the main thing they have learned and to identify one area they have questions about.
17. Use simple systems to make lectures more interactive: for example, ask multiple choice questions at the front of the class and ask students to answer using coloured cards etc. This allows you to check their understanding immediately.
18. Consider using a 'goldfish bowl' technique: a small group of students may discuss a topic and the rest of the student group take on the role of observers watching the discussion.

After the discussion is over the observers are allowed to ask questions, seek clarification, or make comment. The tutor subsequently facilitates a discussion e.g. asking the observers: "Did you hear anything from the fishbowl that surprised you?" To the fishbowl students: "How did it feel to share your feelings about the topic, knowing that these observers were listening closely?"

19. 'Paper showers' where students write questions on paper and then throw them to the front of the class are a good way of allowing them to contribute anonymously to a discussion.
  20. Give out short papers to small groups of students in a large lecture and ask them to read one each and explain the gist to the others in the group.
- ### 5. Valued diversity reflected through choice: Working in partnership with students to design assessments, giving choice in the topic, method and criteria and flexibility in the timing of feedback and assessments.

We all learn in different ways (Vark is a good example of different learning styles: <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp>) and we all value something more if we have been given the opportunity to choose it for ourselves rather than having it imposed on us. Many students have such preferences and know that they work better on their own or with their peer group; some know they work better at different times of the day. Choosing both the assessment topic and the task in the first year can motivate and empower students as well as enhancing their decision-making skills and fostering ownership of their learning.

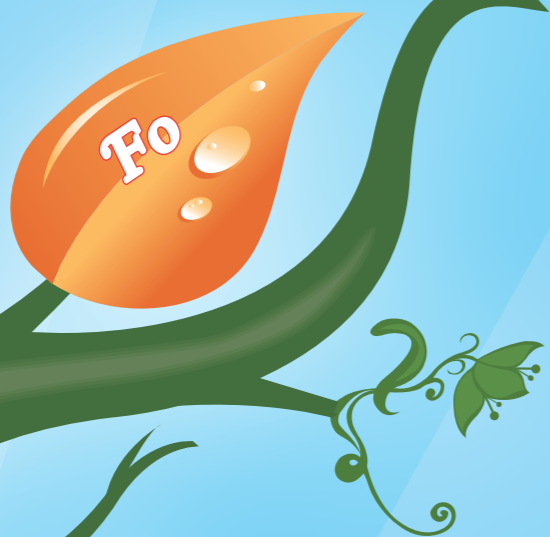
### Do your first-year students have a say in the timing, topics, or criteria for assessment tasks on your module?

21. To encourage more ownership consider whether it is feasible to allow students to negotiate their assignment, for example by selecting their topic (after all, we often have to provide alternative assessments to students whose disabilities prevent them from completing the set task, so why not build in alternative assignments from the outset?).
22. Consider whether it is possible to offer students some choice from a list of scheduled times when they hand in (or present) assignments.
23. Encourage students to consider assessment criteria and perhaps allow them sometimes to generate assessment criteria themselves.
24. Consider whether you can involve students in contributing to the setting of assessments; for example, get students thinking about a topic by asking them to write multiple choice questions and feedback for the correct and incorrect answers.
25. Consider allowing students to choose whom they work with in groups and allow them to work alone if they prefer.

**FORMATIVE ACTIVITY**: Exploiting assessment and feedback to support learning and the development of academic skills.

**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.

**Lifelong learning skills**: Designing assessments that develop underpinning skills for lifelong learning.



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.

First-year students need to be encouraged at the outset to engage with feedback and to reflect on the meaning it has for them so that they understand how to use it and to move forward in their learning. Feedback helps students to build their self-confidence and ensures that their perceptions of the assessment requirements are the same as yours. In many instances it also gives students a reason to celebrate their achievements and to learn from what they did well in addition to identifying areas for improvement. As educators we need to be able to provide opportunities for feedback early in the first year so that students are reassured of the level at which they are working and also to highlight what they need to focus on in subsequent tasks (Yorke, 2001). Feedback can range from the informal to the formal, from feedback from tutors to feedback from self and peers.

**To what extent is feedback built into, and acted upon by students on, your course?**

26. Ask students to assess each other's work. For example, ask them to produce a short piece of work and upload to the institution's VLE. Encourage peers to give feedback on this, which students can then use to produce a longer piece of work.
27. Use interactive cover sheets that permit students to indicate what two aspects of their work they would like to receive feedback about, as this may make it more likely that they will read and engage with the feedback.

28. Ask students to reflect on their feedback in their final submission and to tell you what they did with it in order to improve their work. Give the reflection a small percentage of the mark for their work.

29. Try giving feedback without a mark. You could ask students to guess the mark they will get based on the feedback or choose not to release the mark until they have evidenced that they have acted upon the feedback (Race and Pickford, 2007).

30. Deconstruct assignments into smaller components so that feedback can be provided in stages and acted upon in subsequent sections.

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

Lifelong learning is about looking after your own development independently, actively reflecting and being able to identify the steps you need to take to progress towards your personal goals. At level 1 we need to help those students who require it at the beginning of their transition towards becoming successful independent learners. For those students who already have those study skills, we need to encourage them to continue to grow in their learning and to develop higher level academic skills to stretch them further. Students ultimately need to be able to work out for themselves what constitutes quality and how to evaluate both themselves and others. They need to be able to self-regulate, managing time and tasks appropriately. They can only be successful at these activities if we give them formal opportunities to self-assess and peer assess against criteria and standards: this includes giving them time to explore what criteria and standards actually mean to them.



Are there are opportunities on your module for students to develop skills for learning such as making their own judgements and regulating their own learning, making evaluative judgements and giving feedback?

31. Ask students to reformulate in their own words the documented criteria for an assessment task before they start to undertake it. This reformulation could be submitted with the final piece of work or used as a formative activity to ensure they are on the right track.
32. Build into your assessment schedule opportunities for peers to assess and provide feedback on each other's work, using criteria.

33. Give students computer-based multiple choice tests where they have not only to indicate their answer but also their level of confidence in their answer being right. This forces students to reflect on their reasoning and how they derived the answer.
34. Ask students to estimate the mark they expect to get for a piece of work and to say why.
35. Before students submit their assignment, allow them to see examples of assignments from previous years. Give them model answers so that they can see what quality is and compare their own work with that concept of quality.

**FUN:** Designing assessment and feedback to excite and engage students in learning and to reduce the burden of marking and administration.

**Efficient, value-added marking:** Designing assessments that are non-onerous to mark and manage and that have a positive impact on learning.

**Engaging and enjoyable:** Focusing on engaging students through enjoyable assessment tasks.

**Learning through experimentation:** Designing assessments that are challenging and that encourage students to take risks in a non-threatening environment and to learn through their mistakes.

Fun



**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**

Summative assessment is concerned with making judgements in its role as assessment of learning, rather than formative in its role as assessment for learning. The requirements of summative assessment strongly influence where students concentrate their effort and where we as staff spend most of our time evaluating their performance. We need to ask ourselves if the time we spend marking students' first-year work contributes to their learning. Perhaps alternatively it would be better to reduce summative assessment and concentrate our efforts on providing formative opportunities for students?

**Does summative assessment actively engage your students with feedback, encourage them to learn to evaluate their own work and support each other's learning?**

- 36. Design assessments that are not too onerous to mark. Word length is not a proxy for quality. Shorter assignments may actually be more challenging for students while reducing staff workload. For example, a 500-word critique may be more demanding than a 5,000-word essay.
- 37. Consider the advantages of computer-aided assessment and technology to reduce the amount of time you spend marking.
- 38. Design your assessments so that tasks are aligned to both the learning outcomes and the content of the module and so that students have opportunities to practise before their work is marked.
- 39. Give students small, regular summative tasks at the beginning of a module that carry few marks but involve regular feedback. Increase marks towards the end of the module once students have had the chance to practise.

- 40. Consider involving other people in assessment, e.g. clients and other external stakeholders.

**9. Engaging and enjoyable: Focusing on engaging students through enjoyable assessment tasks.**

Put yourself in the shoes of your students and consider whether or not you would enjoy completing the assessments you have set them. Consider using real life and authentic activities that would engage the students. After all, when students graduate there are not many who will have to write an unseen essay on a regular basis in their employment. Consider designing assessments that mimic the challenge of working in professional environments.

**Would you be excited by the prospect of your assessment if you were a student?**

- 41. Give students the opportunity to really get their teeth into something authentic – a big project, a challenge, something that emulates the kinds of things they will encounter in their chosen professions on graduation.
- 42. Try to relate what students are asked to do to the real world; for example, some courses use actors to role-play scenarios for assessment purposes to bring a sense of reality into the students' world.
- 43. Design assessments to stretch all students so that highly able students can excel while those who have less knowledge or capability can also stretch themselves without being overstretched and left behind.
- 44. Design assessments that require students not only to give answers but to ask questions. This can work particularly well if students are working in groups.
- 45. Require study in and out of class. Design surface learning out and deep learning in by ensuring you reward application over regurgitation.

**10. Learning through experimentation: Designing assessments that are challenging and that encourage students to take risks in a non-threatening environment and to learn through their mistakes.**

We should consider designing assessments using active, experiential, problem-based and project-based learning, encouraging students to explore, to try out different approaches and develop their own ideas. We should set high expectations and strive to inspire by stretching students through academically challenging assessments which encourage them to experiment in a safe environment, and by rewarding students for learning from their mistakes.

**Do you allow your first-years to be creative in their assessments?**

- 46. Stretch and empower students. Ask them to draw up their own project plan for a complex assessment task by identifying their own terms of reference, milestones and deliverables before they begin.
- 47. Design 'patchwork' assessments which involve using small assignments of different types, each of which is complete in itself but which can then be 'stitched together' through a final integrative or 'capstone' assessment. Students can provide feedback to one another throughout. If the final assessment alone is marked then students can revise or edit their earlier work and choose which patches to include in the final piece of work.
- 48. Design assessment tasks that are not too restrictive in scope and reward students for being creative. Ask the students to negotiate their own criteria for the task.
- 49. Consider how technology could be used in assessment so students could experiment with recording a simple podcast, using digital stories or creating a webpage, even in subject areas unrelated to technology.

- 50. Use learning contracts where students are able to design their own assessment through negotiation with the tutor (Anderson et al, 1996).



### SELF-ASSESSMENT GRID FOR TUTORS WORKING WITH FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Use this grid to audit your own first-year module to consider how it meets the ten principles.

F	Friendships	In the first two weeks have first-year students worked on a formal or informal assessment task that requires collaboration with other students?
I	Interaction and dialogue	In the first six weeks have you spoken individually with each student in your tutor group?
R	Reflection and building on feedback	Do your first-year students have to use the feedback that you give them, shortly after receiving it, to improve future performance?
S	Self-belief	What do you do in the first six weeks of the first semester to reassure students that they are on the right course and to encourage their self-belief in their academic abilities?
T	Teaching shaped by diagnostic assessment	Do you know by week 6 what each of your students' abilities and knowledge are?

Continued....

Yes	No	Your thoughts on how you can improve this aspect

### SELF-ASSESSMENT GRID FOR TUTORS WORKING WITH FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

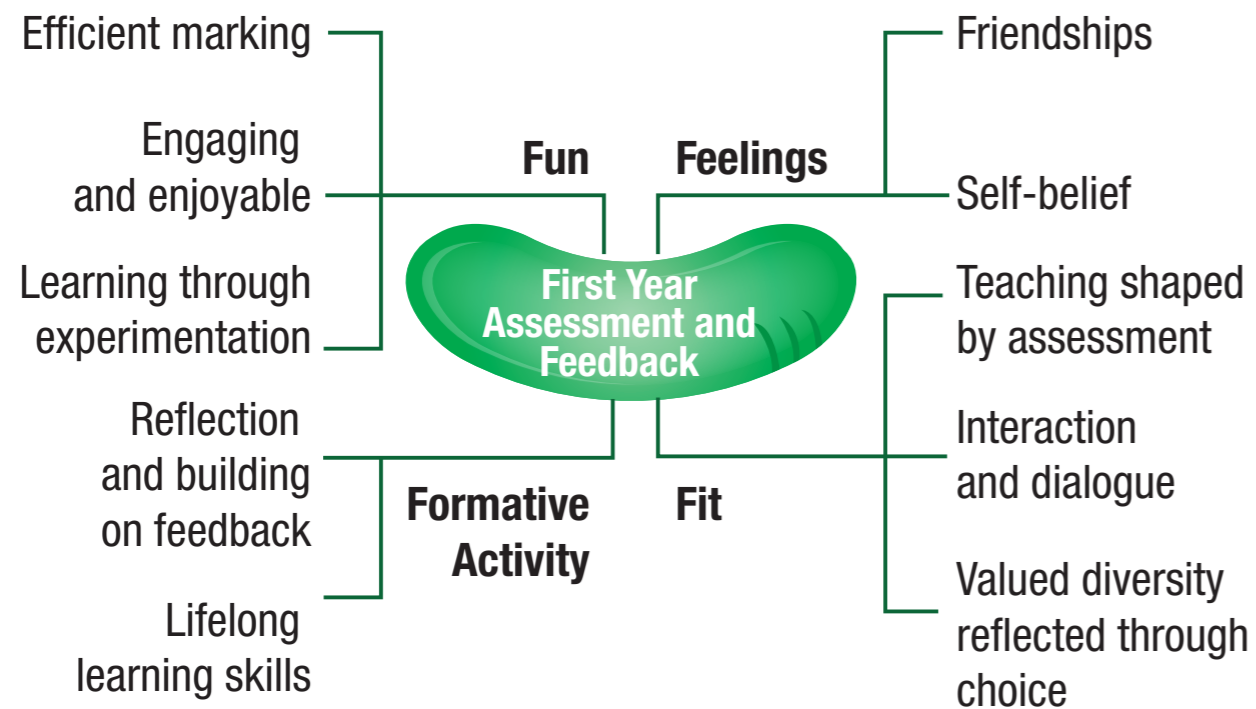
Use this grid to audit your own first-year module to consider how it meets the ten principles.

L	Lifelong learning skills	Do your first-year assessments require students to develop high level study skills?
E	Efficient, value-added marking	Does all the time you spend marking contribute in some way to your first-year students' learning?
V	Valued diversity through choice	Do you give first-year students any choice whatsoever in their assessments?
E	Engaging and enjoyable	If you were a student would you enjoy completing the assessments you set?
L	Learning through experimentation	Are your first-year assignments challenging students (perhaps giving them opportunities to work on real projects)?

**What single prioritised action do you think you could do to improve the first-year learning experience for your students?**

Yes	No	Your thoughts on how you can improve this aspect

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



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