Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education

Helping students understand assessment expectations

Australian higher education has assessment practices that are quite different from assessment practices in some other international settings. The following suggestions will particularly benefit international students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian universities and may also assist local students to adjust to this higher education’s new expectations.

There is an accompanying guide, ‘Advice for students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education’, that teaching staff are encouraged to freely reproduce and distribute to students.

An ‘assessment briefing’ to communicate requirements

The first lecture would be the appropriate time to incorporate a short, verbal briefing on the basic assessment requirements. Ideally, all tutors and casual marking staff should be present for this session. Here, you would provide a general orientation to the regime in place for the subject, make the objectives of each task clear, outline your broad assessment-related expectations of students and communicate the criteria on which students will be marked. Accompanying written guidelines should contain explicit, unambiguous instructions and exemplars that model the appropriate discipline-based thinking, writing and/or performance to guide student efforts in completing assignments and studying for exams.

The department policy and practice on extensions and special consideration should also be outlined and the relevant resources and support defined. As well as advising students of when you are available for one-to-one consultations, you should also encourage all students to make use of the language and learning support services available on campus and through the university website as soon as possible.

“The process for arriving at a grade is a mystery for many international students”

Excerpt from James, R., McInnis, C. and Devlin, M. (2002) Assessing Learning in Australian Universities. This section was prepared by Marcia Devlin.
The demystification of grading nomenclature in the briefing will be of particular value to international students. Many international (and local) students find the grades given for pieces of work and for whole subjects different to those they may have experienced elsewhere. Specifically, the names of the grades (‘A’, ‘B’ or ‘High Distinction’, ‘Distinction’ and so on) are often different to those to which they are accustomed. It is therefore helpful to provide students with university policy that outlines grade nomenclature and the criteria for deriving grades, either through its inclusion in handbooks or the provision of the website location. Once this is done, an overview of the process of attributing proportional marks to particular tasks and then combining or averaging marks to arrive at particular grades will be helpful for students, particularly those newly arrived in Australia. This information on what will be rewarded in assessment can directly improve student learning by helping students to focus their study habits.

The issue of plagiarism must also be mentioned in this briefing. This is a highly complex concept, particularly for students from educational settings where the practices for using the work or words of a master or expert in a field are quite different from those used in Australia. This issue is discussed later in the section ‘Unintentional cheating’ and is also covered in the accompanying student guide.

At the end of the assessment briefing, ask students, in their own time, to consider what they have learnt from the briefing, to examine the written guidelines closely and to then formulate any related questions and concerns and bring these to the assessment debriefing session to follow.

An ‘assessment debriefing’ to clarify requirements

This session is best held in a lecture about one week after the briefing session, when students have had time to consider the requirements and at least some may have commenced work on the assignment or study for the exam. Once again, the presence of all teaching and assessment staff will be beneficial. This session should be structured so that student questions and concerns are directly addressed. It may be helpful to ask students to work very briefly in groups of two or three students to summarise their main questions. Alternatively, you may ask students to write down their questions and to hand them in. Lecturers experienced with these debriefing sessions normally find that the range of questions for a well-designed assessment regime is narrow. The small amount of time spent addressing student queries during a lecture avoids much greater time spent repeating oneself in one-to-one appointments later — and all students at the lecture can benefit from the advice.

In relation to international students, it is helpful to avoid assuming any difficulties these students may have with understanding assessment requirements are necessarily related to language. Many international students have a high level of language proficiency but a low level of cultural knowledge. The use of Australian jargon in instructions can affect international students’ understanding of the task. It is therefore advisable to avoid the use of jargon and Australian idioms as much as possible.

International students (like local students) can become disheartened if they do not do as well as they thought they might have in assignments or exams. Often it is helpful to gently alert students that it may take time to adjust to the requirements of assessment in universities in Australia and that many students do not get perfect or very high marks for assignments and exams, even if they have done so prior to entering university. Reminding students of the importance of continuing to try to improve as they learn more about assessment practices and about the course material may also be helpful.
Providing feedback

Feedback is critical to the learning process. When most international students receive their assignments, tests or exams back, they carefully check for marks, comments or other feedback. This is to be encouraged — the provision of as much helpful feedback as possible in writing and redirection to support resources and services as appropriate is likely to greatly assist learning. Consistency between markers is essential and the use of marking guides can help achieve this, as well as provide an outline for students of what is required. For assessment tasks held early in the semester, a brief assessment feedback session where common strengths and weaknesses in student efforts are shared during a lecture may be appropriate. A summary of these strengths and weaknesses might also be published on the subject homepage.

Overcoming six assessment challenges for students unfamiliar with assessment practices

1. Lack of local cultural knowledge

Setting assignments and readings based exclusively on local content or issues or the application of theory or concepts to local situations and scenarios is likely to seriously and unfairly disadvantage many international students. International students should have the option to use their knowledge of their own local context in at least some assignments. Including the choice of culturally diverse assignment topics, texts and exemplars to all students will not only help international students demonstrate their understandings of concepts but will also offer the opportunity for local students to broaden their horizons.

2. Unintentional cheating

One of the most common issues for international students (and domestic students as well) is unintentional plagiarism. In some educational settings outside Australian higher education, the more closely a student can replicate the work or words of an expert, the greater the student’s learning or mastery of the subject is considered to be. Some students are unaware that this is not usually the case in Australian higher education and that, in sharp contrast to their previous experience, they may be penalised for such replication.

It is advisable to explain to students that learning to correctly use the words and ideas of others is, in most courses, essential for their success as a student in Australian higher education. Of course, it is equally advisable to provide the necessary resources and support so that students can develop the requisite skills. Pointing students to language, learning and library resources and programs will be helpful, as will the accompanying student guide ‘Advice for students unfamiliar with assessment in Australian higher education.’
3. Tutorial participation

A proportion of assessment is often made up of a participation requirement. Even if this proportion is very small, it is appropriate that all students have an equal opportunity to participate. It is often assumed that the apparent reluctance of some international students to participate in tutorials is caused by a lack of confidence, language skills or shyness. While these may be contributing factors in some instances, there is at least one other over-riding factor for many international students: being unsure of the implicit social conventions for turn-taking in group discussions and feeling hesitant to ‘interrupt’ another speaker and causing offence or embarrassment.

Teaching all students how to signal that they wish to make a comment (making eye contact with tutor, raising eyebrows, raising a finger, raising a hand, taking an audible breath) is likely to be useful for students unaccustomed to the conventions for group discussions between students and teachers. Alerting students to these simple devices will provide them with a socially acceptable mechanism for politely interrupting. Breaking students into smaller discussion groups within tutorials provides opportunities to practise such strategies in the relative informality a small group allows.

A few suggestions to encourage participation:

- Make the expectation of participation clear and unambiguous — let students know what, exactly, participation entails.
- Use ‘icebreakers’ for the first few weeks to get the students used to talking to each other and create a relaxed atmosphere.
- Learn the students’ names — this will personalise interactions and encourage communication.
- Use open-ended questions and explain that there is no right or wrong answer (where this is appropriate) — remember to give students time to answer, especially if they are from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- Ensure you show you value all answers. This can be done by non-verbal signals (for example, a nod or smile) as well as through verbal responses using students’ names.
- Use the ‘think-pair-share’ technique, which is also called the ‘pyramid’ technique. Set a problem, challenge or issue for discussion. Ask the students to think about and then record their thoughts on the issue (think); discuss their thoughts with another student (pair); the pair joins with another pair to discuss the issue further. One member of the group of four reports back to the whole group (share) (Barrington, 1998).
- Use ‘buzz groups’, so named because of the noise they create. Ask small groups of two or three students to undertake a mini-task or brief discussion that will take a few minutes only. Typical examples are reflecting on material covered or brainstorming questions about a topic in progress or thoughts about a new topic (Barrington, 1998).

Keep in mind that for many international students, being asked to formulate and articulate their opinions, especially if these are required to be analytical or critical, is a challenging experience. Doing so in front of others, including a highly respected teacher, while unaware of and unaccustomed to the conventions of group discussion and while using a non-native language makes this an uncomfortable and unsettling experience. The more international students can be supported in their attempts to participate, the more likely they are to do so.
4. Group work

Detailed guidelines on the design and management of effective group activities and assessment relevant to all students can be found at ‘Assessing Group Activities.’ Of particular relevance to international students is securing appropriate group membership. Where international students are left to their own devices in gaining membership of a group, there is a risk that they may have difficulty negotiating the subtleties in approaching and integrating into a group. Many international students find themselves excluded from the often mysterious processes Australian students move through to mutually select fellow group members. International students may end up in groups with no local students, with the result that no-one in the group has experience of group work or assessment and the group as a whole is puzzled about what to do.

Some international and local students may prefer to work with others from the same educational background but all students should be offered the opportunity to benefit from working with students from different backgrounds from their own. Some planning on the lecturer’s part will be necessary to facilitate the group membership appropriate for the task.

5. English language skills

Some international students find that even though they have high scores on IELTS or TOEFL or other English language tests, when they get to Australia they have some difficulty understanding spoken and written language. It may take some time for them to adjust to the Australian accent and use of English. To assist students to develop their listening and reading skills, it is useful to encourage them to read as much as they can in English, including newspapers and magazines as well as academic texts. Suggest they listen to the radio or television and to conversations around campus or home to familiarise themselves with the way English is used in Australia. Try to use an appropriate pace in your own speech and avoid colloquialisms and idioms as much as possible.

In terms of writing, many international students have little experience of writing essays or assignments in the particular way Australian university assessment demands they be written. Their early attempts to incorporate the appropriate conventions for written, compared with the more familiar oral, style and format, argument and genre in a non-native language, are accomplished in a very brief time span and often with little or no guidance or support. It may be helpful to encourage students to ask for help with their written language from the appropriate university service. It may also be helpful to assure international students that many local students from English speaking backgrounds need and seek help to develop and improve their written language skills.

The provision of exemplars, such as model reports, products or performances, illustrations of genres and worked solutions to problems are highly valued by all students but in particular by international students who may never have seen anything similar. As one staff member expressed it, “Without these, it’s the equivalent of trying to write a PhD without ever having seen one”.

Finally, paying careful attention to the wording of exam papers will be of great benefit to international students, especially those from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESBs). What may seem quite clear to a native speaker can be highly ambiguous to a non-native speaker. Some universities offer services where staff expert in this field read exam papers to check for such ambiguity. A critical colleague (preferably from another discipline so that content is not the focus) may also be able to assist in this type of review.
6. Oral presentations

Many international students find oral presentations a very difficult undertaking for some of the same reasons outlined in the section on tutorial participation. International and local students will be greatly assisted by the provision of as much information as possible on:

- what, exactly, staff require in the content of the presentation (for example, the scope, the amount of detail);
- what, exactly, staff require in the format of the presentation (for example, how long the presentation should be, whether or not students are required to use aids or props, and whether or not students are expected to prepare questions for the class); and
- how the presentation will be graded (for example, the criteria for a good presentation, how much each criterion is worth).

It is most important to emphasise the importance of careful and thorough preparation of a presentation, in particular the need for rehearsal. The accompanying student guide may be helpful in this regard.

The debate on compensatory grading for international students

There is little doubt that the development of the complex skills necessary to undertake a typical assessment task can take a substantial amount of time to master, despite the best intentions and commitment of an international student unfamiliar with both conventions and the language. The inherent disadvantage of international students in demonstrating their knowledge creates dilemmas for staff in designing fair assessment and fair ways of acknowledging academic achievement. Often the main challenge is in finding alternative ways to acknowledge the capabilities and knowledge of international students.

There is much debate about the pros and cons of compensatory assessment practices for international students. In short, there are two quite contrasting points of view. On the one hand, lack of familiarity with language is the basis of an argument for grading the work of international students whose first language is not English using special criteria or levels of performance that take into account their lower proficiency with the language. The key assumption of this argument is that it is possible in assessing student learning to separate language from analytical skills, argument and underlying knowledge. If this assumption is accepted, it may be appropriate and reasonable to use grading mechanisms that compensate for the poorer language skills of some NESB students. For example, while marks might not be removed for errors in language use, students’ work might be graded only in terms of a pass/fail distinction. Proponents of a compensatory approach such as this argue that the crucial intellectual development to be facilitated in university students is in the area of thinking and ideas, not in grammar and spelling.

On the other hand, there is the argument that a poor grasp of English inevitably leads, through the inability to express thoughts coherently, to poor argument or analysis: in this way of thinking, language and knowledge are inseparable. From this point of view, one way in which to manage the diversity of skills in a student body is to use a range of assessment tasks beyond the written essay or report. Such a range may be appropriate not only for international students, but also local non-native speakers, students with disabilities and students with a range of learning styles and preferences. Portfolio assessment (see below) provides one method for implementing a range of assessment tasks that allow both students and staff to monitor student progress. A progressive approach to the traditional essay or report might be appropriate. This is where, for example, the accuracy of content and format and the volume of research in the first essay or report receives proportionally more marks than expression, but that this balance shifts for later pieces of work when expression is expected to have improved.
Universities, faculties and departments may have policies that specify particular rules and regulations for the assessment and grading of international students in order to maintain academic rigour and appropriate standards.

Portfolio assessment: 
One method for mapping the development of skills

One way in which both a range of tasks and a development of skills might be explicitly monitored is through portfolio assessment. The potential for evidence-based assessment of international (and local) student work via a portfolio may be worth investigating in particular contexts. In principle, portfolios are useful in two major ways. The first is that they can demonstrate the student’s knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes relevant to the area of study. Secondly, they are likely to be learning experiences in themselves because the student learns from the construction of the portfolio.

A portfolio should include both agreed criteria that are aligned with the requirements of the subject and examples of work that demonstrate knowledge and understanding of that criteria. The lecturer judges student merit via portfolio components or the portfolio as a whole. Components might include, for example:

- a learning log or journal
- review(s)
- annotated bibliography
- posters
- visual art
- video or audio taped reflections
- written assignment(s)
- any evidence of the achievement of the set criteria.

The likely benefit for international students is that they can demonstrate their learning without principal reliance on the written word. However, assessing and grading portfolios can be time-consuming for staff, particularly with large student groups. The information provided by students is subjective and therefore may compromise reliability. However, assessment regimes that contain a portfolio component as well as other more traditional text based tasks might provide a workable balance in some contexts.

A companion resource that examines these issues from the student perspective, ‘Advice for students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education’, is available for free reproduction and distribution to students.
Recommended reading


References