

Surveying the Foundations: The Purposes of Assessment at Foundation Level and How Best to Achieve Them

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Assessment is central to university study and is a key aspect of how students experience higher education. It is a significant source of worry and stress to students, and this is arguably particularly so for non-traditional Foundation Year students. The purpose of assessment in most contexts is to test and/or demonstrate knowledge and/or competence, which conflicts with the key Foundation Year aim of developing skills in undertaking assessment. Drawing on the literature, alongside case studies from the University of Sheffield's Foundation Year, this article explores ways in which these tensions can be lessened, and assessment deployed effectively to better meet the needs of Foundation Year students.

Assessment is central to university study, and is a key aspect of how students experience higher education. For many – arguably especially mature and non-traditional – students, it is a cause of worry, anxiety, and even distress. Therefore, we want to use assessment wisely; we want to achieve its objectives whilst minimising collateral damage.

This article sets out to explore, firstly, why we assess at Foundation Level, arguing that there are two purposes of assessment that are fundamentally in conflict. It then goes on to consider the kinds, timing, and contextualising of assessment that could best serve the interests of Foundation Year students. Its focus is squarely on Foundation Years that are geared to widening participation, and targeted at students – often mature, often without traditional qualifications, and frequently with previous negative experiences of education – from low participation neighbourhoods and backgrounds, rather than those whose focus is subject conversion or international recruitment.

These students are particularly vulnerable to ‘imposter syndrome’ (Chapman 2017); in many institutions, Foundation Year students have far higher levels of disabilities, mental health problems, specific learning disabilities and ill health than the wider student population – frequently the reason that they did not follow a standard path from school to university – and will bring with them lower levels of social capital and its concomitant confidence and self-esteem than their more ‘conventional’ peers. People who are accustomed to being criticised, to being judged and ‘found wanting’, even simply as members of the working class in contemporary

Britain (Reay 2017:17 and ch. 4), are more likely to experience assessment as a threat to their self-esteem, and as a verdict on their worth as a person. Nonetheless, if our aim is to prepare such students to succeed, to not only survive but to thrive, on a degree programme (which this article assumes it is), then assessment is something that neither we nor our students can dodge.

Assessment at Foundation Level is required to fulfil two different functions, which tend to pull in opposing directions. The familiar distinction between formative and summative assessment (see for example Wiliam and Black 1996) captures this conflict to some extent, but not entirely. Summative assessment is the assessment that passes final judgement on a piece of work and by extension on a student's learning and (explicitly or otherwise) their competence. This kind of assessment is naturally frightening – pass or fail; meet a progression threshold or not – and the stakes are high. Yet this kind of high stakes assessment is unavoidable when the departments and institutions to which students wish to progress, understandably, want to be assured of their potential to succeed, and a grade threshold is the accepted metric for making admissions decisions. The stakes at Foundation Level are in fact higher than they are at Level 1 (FHEQ Level 4), when the grade does not normally count towards the degree classification and a bare pass is all that is required.

Formative assessment, on the other hand, is generally understood as being developmental, and part of the learning process. This does not necessarily mean that it is not for credit (and indeed, attaching credit to an element of assessment is often seen as the only way of getting time-pressed and occasionally instrumentally motivated students to do it). Formative assessment can be about identifying gaps in a student's subject knowledge or skills in order to address them, and providing feedback on how they can improve future work, as well as reinforcing and consolidating learning. On Foundation Years, however, there is a greater emphasis on assessment *as preparation for assessment*, which it might be helpful to categorise separately as *preparatory* assessment. The purpose of this is explicitly to develop students' skills and confidence at assessment. The most obvious way of doing this is by giving them lots of opportunities to practise – i.e. lots of assessments – but building confidence and resilience in other ways could also have a significant role.

By definition, students spend just one year on a Foundation Year: 24-30 weeks of teaching. In order to fulfil its formative, diagnostic and preparatory functions, and to provide plenty of practice, assessment has to begin almost immediately – at a point when the students are still almost complete novices. Yet marks based on these as yet undeveloped capabilities are carried through into the final, summative, grade.

There is, then, an inevitable conflict inherent in using the same piece of assessment both to develop knowledge and skills (including skills at assessment) and at the same time to pass judgement on that knowledge and those skills, because by definition judgement is being passed on a process which is not yet complete. This would be less harmful if it were explicitly acknowledged, but frequently it is not – not least by students' potential destination departments.

Given this inherent conflict, what can we do, in the circumstances, to make assessment work best for Foundation Year students? Having looked at what we assess, and why – and the constraints inherent in this – we can turn our attention to *when* and *how* we assess it. Examples are drawn from a case study of an academic skills module within the University of Sheffield's Foundation Year programme. Whilst there will be elements of this that are not universally applicable, this model is sufficiently widespread that this should have a degree of wider relevance and interest, and many of the issues which it seeks to address will be familiar to other Foundation Year practitioners.

Having established full time Foundation Year provision for mature and 'widening participation' routes only in 2014, the University of Sheffield now offers around thirty degrees – across the fields of arts and humanities, social sciences, biomedical sciences and health – with an integrated Foundation Year. The Foundation Year is provided by a single department with a

dedicated team of academics, and utilises different combinations of a relatively small number of modules (around fifteen) to offer a subject-appropriate Foundation Year for each degree pathway. Central to this, and core for all students, is the 20-credit module *Academic Literacy and Communication Skills* (ALCS). While academic skills are, to an extent, embedded in all modules, this is more true of things like essay structuring, referencing and use of sources; less so of time management and reflection on learning, for example. Even the skills which are constantly being honed in the more subject-specific modules are usually introduced in ALCS. It is arguable that this is not the best model for introducing academic skills across a Foundation Year pro-gramme – not least because of students’ tendency not to engage with it – but it is still a common approach and as such makes a good starting point for discussing assessment. As student numbers increased (to around 150 currently) the delivery of ALCS had to be restructured, and this provided the opportunity, *inter alia*, to review assessment and enhance integration with other modules on the programme.

As universities have moved to modular structures, assessment has effectively become a continuous process rather than a discrete event – so the answer to the question of when assessment takes place is ‘pretty much all the time’. Within the concentrated learning of a Foundation Year this is highlighted. A modular structure to an extent militates against the progressive development and expansion of assessment tasks that could be of particular benefit to Foundation Year students, increasingly so the more discrete and self-contained the modules are. Every module from the first to the last has to deliver – and thus assess for – the same credit per hours of learning, and the only progression allowed in the standards expected is from year to year.

Chapman, in her work on ‘imposter syndrome’ in mature students, notes that ‘[a]n early low-stakes assessment can be used to enhance confidence and self-efficacy’ (2017:13) – and the converse presumably is also true, suggesting that assessments earlier in the Foundation Year should carry less credit weighting. The possibility of starting with assessments that are lower stake because they carry less credit weighting, and building up to bigger, more significant ones, is clearly greater in a module which is spread over the entire academic year than a single semester one. The downside of this is that then the later assessments which deliberately carry more weight, will be more stressful, and there will be a concentration of work at the end of the year. This balance will be hard to strike for as long as the allocation of credit is based on learning hours and the standards expected are fixed across the entire year.

If the volume of work required for a certain amount of credit cannot be changed, and nor can the standard, then that leaves only the type of assessment done, and this may be where scope can be found to lower the stakes. On *Academic Literacy and Communication Skills* we made a start on this by changing the first assignment from an essay to an annotated bibliography. Feedback from students on previous iterations of the module indicated that they did not feel prepared to undertake an essay task at this early stage of the programme. This reflects Chapman’s findings that mature students initially viewed academic writing as ‘a mysterious and elusive skill’ (2017:114). Chapman notes that traditionally students get feedback only after the ‘final’ version of their essay has been handed in, at which point it is ‘irretrievable’ – in contrast to the writing process experienced by academics who are able to draft and redraft their work with the benefit of feedback from reviewers. ‘This finality’, she claims, ‘increases the fear factor at precisely the time when students are still learning about academic writing and acquiring the requisite literacy skills’ (2017:114) and also ‘increases the pressure and anxiety surrounding the assessment process.’ (2017:115) Students on ALCS quite fairly pointed out that they were being expected to write an essay, and being assessed on it, before they had had the ‘training’ and support in the skill that the module purported to offer.

The replacement assignment of an annotated bibliography offered a number of advantages over the essay. Firstly, it was considerably shorter than the essay, and therefore less

intimidating and less time-consuming. Normally this would also mean that it would carry less credit weighting, lowering the stakes still further. Secondly, it ties in very closely with what students are doing in the first two weeks of the module – learning how to find and evaluate sources. They can therefore compile the material for the assignment whilst practising and even whilst being guided through the relevant processes.

A third advantage of an annotated bibliography is that it gets students using referencing conventions at an early stage, but without having to assimilate them all at once, and, importantly, without having to worry about plagiarism. There is sometimes a danger that we represent referencing primarily as a means of ‘avoiding plagiarism’ rather than presenting the positive reasons we do it. New students are often very worried about plagiarism, which at this stage is a frightening unknown, and this can lead to a reluctance to use sources or, at the other extreme, an over-reliance on quotation. The other key skill exercised in the annotated bibliography is evaluating sources, as students write a few brief sentences on each source. Importantly, then, this assignment now only assesses skills and material that students have already covered, even at this early stage of the programme. It also, hopefully, consolidates the skills they are learning by giving them the opportunity to put them into practice as they develop them.

Part of the additional support offered with this assessment was in the form of a detailed assignment brief, written in ‘Plain English’ and showing, step by step, examples of firstly, a bibliography, and then the same one, annotated. This was informed by the importance placed by Tett *et al* (2012:256) on being clear about what is expected, and what good work looks like. It is all too easy for academics to think that they (we) are writing in Plain English, overlooking the deep-seated cultural and educational capital, which we take for granted, informing that assumption. The previous essay assignment brief for ALCS, for example, included the terms ‘particular requirements and conventions’, ‘objective perspective’, ‘clear and concise synopses’, ‘citation’, ‘paraphrase’, and ‘plagiarism’ – all arguably academic terms of art which new students, who may have had no post-sixteen education and were possibly disengaged long before that, would find completely unfamiliar and intimidating. The Plain English brief took as its model government websites and publications, which have made enormous strides in this area in recent years. It is written in the first person and addresses the student directly in the second person (‘for this assignment, we would like you to...’) rather than being written in the passive third person – again, something which comes as second nature to seasoned academics but is not in common use in the world at large. In the year it was introduced, marks for the annotated bibliography were on average eleven points higher than for the previous year’s essay, taking (along with a slight improvement in the grades for a presentation assignment) average module marks, after weighting, up by nearly five points. This suggests that a better tailored – although no less rigorous – assignment can not only lower students’ stress levels and increase engagement, but also deliver a better result for them to demonstrate to their destination departments or institutions.

The annotated bibliography was a more scaffolded assessment than the essay had been, in that it was built from the platform of work being done in the module on finding and evaluating sources, albeit this was material that would have been covered anyway, and was not there solely to support the assessment. McNaught and Benson (2015) explicitly consider ‘scaffolded assessment’ on the Australian equivalent of a Foundation Year. They note that Foundation Year students ‘are typically underprepared for the demands of academic writing tasks’ and that academic staff felt it was essential to break the tasks down to make them more manageable’ (76). They note both the importance of formative feedback, and the difficulty in providing it in the context of highly structured modules.

They conceive of scaffolding as a compromise between a rigid module specification, and teaching that is highly responsive to the diagnostic outcomes of formative assessment (76-77).

McNaught and Benson describe a process in which students ‘submit an essay outline (plan) prior to commencing their essay work’ (77). This, the authors claim, not only gives students the opportunity to have feedback before proceeding to the next stage, but can also help with time management issues – an essay, especially when still an unknown quantity, can be procrastinated either because it is so dauntingly large, or because the student has little realistic idea of how long it will take. They note the importance – and potential challenge – of providing the timely feedback that makes this exercise worthwhile, but interestingly, also claim that if successful, ‘the marking of the final product (an essay) should be less time-demanding’ (77).

Building on the annotated bibliography, which is scaffolded by the guided process of finding and evaluating sources, the next step towards writing their first essay would be for students to produce an essay plan. This is where the integration of the academic skills module with other modules on the Foundation Year becomes important. Students need to write essays for other modules – the example used here will be the University of Sheffield’s Semester 1, Level 0 module *Introduction to the Social Sciences* which is core for all students on social science degree pathways (there are equivalents for Humanities, Natural Sciences and Health) – therefore it makes sense to work with these to develop those skills. The importance of planning an essay is stressed throughout a student’s academic career, but the skills and tools for doing so are not always taught, and often this important stage in the process is not used to best effect, or omitted entirely. Attaching credit to the process of planning, at this early stage, could help to inculcate a valuable habit as well as forming a step on the way to writing a successful and satisfying first essay.

The concept of ‘scaffolding’ is one we frequently use, without necessarily articulating the underlying assumptions we have about what it means. As someone who has been married to a former scaffolder I perhaps have a greater than usual interest among academics in the various types and purposes of scaffolding, and what these might mean as metaphor for supporting and developing students’ learning. A scaffold is by its nature a temporary structure (although some do stay in place for years), but it can fulfil a range of different functions. Erecting and ‘striking’ (taking down) a scaffold is a specific skill in its own right: scaffolders are a specialist sub-group with their own language and values.

Some of the most common forms or uses of scaffolding include ‘progressive’ – the scaffold that goes up stage by stage with a new building, to provide a platform for bricklaying, etc; ‘access’ – when a scaffold is attached to an existing building for cleaning, painting or repairs; and the ‘shore’ – when scaffolding is used to support a building (or wall, etc.), either because the building has become unstable, or during works on a building when structural walls or supports have been removed. Thinking about what sort of scaffold we are envisaging for our teaching and assessments could be a helpful process in clarifying what we are trying to achieve, and how we view our students. Are we providing a platform from which to build their own learning, or shoring up defective or missing knowledge and skills while they are being repaired? Maybe the shore is needed because we have demolished their previous certainties, and they are slowly building new knowledge. Or perhaps it is just an access platform, to enable them to polish and display what is already there.

McNaught and Benson found also that the use of scaffolded assessment led to students being more willing to respond to feedback, and to them perceiving the feedback as part of ‘a more open dialogue between themselves and their lecturer’ (2015:83). Feedback – and its cousin ‘feed forward’ – is of course absolutely central to the development of academic skills. Whilst students are often seen to expect a large quantity of feedback, too much can be counterproductive, and ‘can swamp’ them (Chapman 2017:118). A number of studies (Tett *et al* 2012; Chapman 2017; McNaught and Benson 2015) highlight the particular importance of feedback to mature students, and this is arguably even more applicable to mature *foundation* students, who may have even less experience of A Level or college study. Other research (Carless

2015; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Sadler 2010) focuses on the definition/differentiation (William and Black 1996; McNaught and Benson 2015:82) and importance of *formative* feedback. This is a term we have generally loosely used to refer to feedback on work that is not for credit (for example, practice essays, mock exams); however, it can be taken to encompass any feedback that is developmental for the student, especially if it can be used to improve the piece of work that the feedback relates to. There is clearly a tension here between the need to undertake assessment for credit, and for the purpose of demonstrating attainment, and doing work in order to learn and improve, magnified in the case of students who often have less time available to devote to their studies.

Taken together, this suggests, on an academic skills module at least, that breaking up assessment into a series of smaller, iterative, tasks and giving feedback along the way – but also giving credit, in small, low-stakes increments (Chapman 2017:113; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006:213), will be beneficial in terms of skills development, confidence building, and the ability to engage with and respond to feedback. On the face of it, this might look like more work for students and academics alike, but this need not be the case. Regular small assignments for students can help build working routines and habits, and the amount of feedback required at each stage will be proportionately smaller.

A further innovation that might be considered for Foundation Year in particular is the introduction of an element of ipsative assessment. Whereas assessment and feedback traditionally focus on the gap between the student's achievement and the requirements of the assignment – an ideal piece of work – ipsative assessment looks at the progress between the student's current level of achievement and their earlier work. This would seem to sit well with scaffolded assessment in which students progress from one relatively small element of a larger task to the next. As Hughes (2011:354) points out, among other advantages this provides one way of the student seeing the results of their engagement with feedback made explicit. This could work particularly well within a Foundation Year where a number of the assessments are marked according to the same criteria and subject-specific requirements do not have a firm hold (Hughes 2011:362), as it makes it possible to carry feedback forward from one assignment to another across modules.

Although by no means exhaustive, this article has presented a survey of some key literature as it relates to the use of assessment within widening participation Foundation Years, and some ideas and case studies which will hopefully provide a basis for further debate and even experimentation. Assessment on such Foundation Years performs a number of functions that can differ from the conventional understanding of what assessment is for, and is doing so within a student cohort which is particularly vulnerable to imposter syndrome and to being judged. Reducing the stakes and offering appropriate support (which can be in the form of scaffolding) and encouragement go part of the way to addressing this, but the timing and the very design of assessment are also fundamental to achieving our aim as Foundation Year practitioners of equipping students from non-traditional backgrounds to not only survive, but to thrive, on degree programmes.

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