

MAKING THE MOST OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK: A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

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While the main aim for most students is to get a good degree, it's also important to develop the knowledge, skills, mindset and attributes that will equip you for the future, both here at Heriot-Watt and after graduation. Assessment and feedback have an important role to play in this, so it's well worth thinking carefully about how you can make the most of the opportunities on offer by using assessments, and the feedback you get on your performance, to improve and develop as you go through your programme. This resource aims to help you do just that by explaining some of the more hidden features of university assessment.

PRINCIPLE 1: AS WELL AS MEASURING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED, ASSESSMENT CAN ALSO HELP YOU TO LEARN

Did you know?

- 1. Did you know that, for the most part, your assignments at Heriot-Watt are designed by your own staff especially for use in this university?** Unlike the public exams and other assessments you are likely to have experienced before coming to study with us, assessments in universities are largely designed by the university staff who teach you. Your university assessments are tailored to the highly specialised learning outcomes and bespoke nature of the programmes on offer at Heriot-Watt. The exceptions tend to be exams set externally by Professional, Regulatory and Subject Bodies in subjects like Law and Accountancy.
- 2. Did you know that Heriot-Watt staff want to make it possible for students to achieve their best, so they design assessments to focus your attention on tasks, activities and content that will stand you in good stead in the longer term?** Wherever they can, Heriot-Watt staff are trying hard to link their assessments to meaningful and engaging tasks which, for instance: mirror realistic work and life contexts; give you chances to follow your personal enthusiasms; or develop your ability to apply knowledge. Research tells us that these approaches to assessment design are a crucial key to your future success, developing your confidence and skills to specialise and thrive in your chosen fields and professions.
- 3. Did you know that group work is one of the most highly regarded skills employers seek?** This is why it plays an important part in many courses, and why group skills are frequently assessed. While not everyone enjoys doing it at the time, interestingly after graduation, when students are asked which part of the assessed work they found most useful later on, few mention exams but many mention group work.

- 4. Did you know that students who have experienced a range of assessment types, and who have thought carefully about their own strengths, qualities and areas for improvement, are well-placed to answer questions in job interviews when candidates are asked questions that begin "Can you tell us about an occasion when...."?** You can then talk about working for example in groups, with incomplete data, on your own initiative and so on. This is why it's important to avoid seeing assessments as hurdles to jump (and forget about) or as a simple matter of getting as many marks as you can 'in the bag.' Instead, as you progress, make a mental note of the different knowledge, skills and personal attributes you are developing when preparing for each assessment, thinking especially about how you might 'pitch' these as evidence of achievement at a future interview. That way, when several candidates have good marks, you can use these experiences to stand out and shine.

PRINCIPLE 2: FEEDBACK CAN BE REALLY USEFUL, BUT ONLY IF YOU USE IT

Did you know?

- 1. Did you know that feedback can have lots of different purposes?** Feedback is not just about 'correcting' what you have done, but can be used to motivate you, or give you confidence; to develop your strategies for learning and help you change direction; to help you think about how you're going; to clarify the level of your understanding and what's expected. It is useful, then, to think about the purpose of any feedback information you receive from others, as well as how you might use it to transform your thinking or your approach.
- 2. Did you know that formative assessment activities where you get feedback,** can help you gauge the quality of your own work so that you have time and opportunity to hone your work before you submit it for marking? Formative assessment is typically associated with assignments or tasks that lecturers set but which

don't count towards your final mark or grade. But they certainly count in terms of learning, so it's wise to take these opportunities seriously and make the most of them! Formative tasks and assignments are your chance to find out how you're doing, and where you still need to place more effort. They also give you a chance to learn (as we all do) by making some mistakes or taking some risks and experimenting with new ideas – without the worry that your marks will suffer while you experiment and practice.

- 3. Did you know that there are many and varied ways of getting feedback?** Often students think of feedback just as the comments that teachers give them on a piece of work they have handed in. This kind of feedback information is important, but it's only one piece in the overall jigsaw when it comes to improving your learning! For comments like these to make any difference to your work, you need to **think** about them, **make sense** of them and **apply them** to future tasks. You could try discussing your feedback with others or collating all the comments on your assessed work, so you can notice patterns which can help you improve. But if you start to think more broadly about feedback, as a **process** which relies, to a large extent, on your actions, you're more likely to be able to develop a richer, more usable sense of feedback which **you actively seek out and apply** to improve the quality of your work and study patterns. This kind of feedback might be, for instance, discussions in a seminar or tutorial, comments in a lecture, FAQs on a discussion board, generic feedback to the whole-class, conversations with peers, or comparisons you make between your own work and learning resources which help you take the next step.
- 4. Did you know that viewing feedback as an active process will really help you learn?** Taking a proactive role in the feedback process is a key graduate skill you can hone, making you more capable of judging the quality of your own work while you are producing it rather than relying on someone else to tell you what you need to do. So, you need to practise, using a whole range of strategies and contextual factors to gauge how well you are doing, including informal feedback by participating informally in a range of activities. Again, this is a skill you will need and will use time and again in your future career - it's how it works in most graduate-level professional and working environments!
- 5. Did you realise that a lot of the feedback comments, which often staff take considerable time and effort to produce, are ignored by many students?** For example: some students assume it is too late to impact on the particular assignment they've had marked and don't recognise how the advice feeds forward to future work; some find the information they receive is so specific to that assignment it's tricky to transfer to subsequent tasks; some struggle to interpret the intended message; or to appreciate what they should do to implement the advice. There is also a very real emotional side to receiving

critical feedback from somebody else, and this can act as a barrier, because it can feel tough to take on board. So, if you simply see feedback as comments on your finally-assessed work, this can limit the learning value of the whole feedback processes. Feedback processes are as much part-and-parcel of teaching environments and formative assessment.

PRINCIPLE 3: THE UNIVERSITY HAS RIGOROUS SYSTEMS IN PLACE TO MAKE SURE THAT ASSESSMENTS ARE FAIR

Did you know?

Although university staff have much autonomy in designing assignments, there are a complex set of regulations and 'quality assurance' processes that govern how they are implemented.

- 1. Did you know there is a robust system underlying the process to make sure you are assessed fairly and consistently?** For example, subject-specialist External Examiners are appointed to provide each degree with impartial, independent comment on Heriot-Watt standards and students' achievement; Exam Boards carefully review and oversee progression and awards in each programme; moderation policies and processes are in place at HWU to ensure peer scrutiny of all our assessment, including assessment design and marking processes; the sector-wide Quality Assurance Agency plays a key role in safeguarding standards and improving the quality of our provision?
- 2. Did you know that all Schools operate a system of assessment moderation,** meaning that a proportion of assessment submissions will be marked by a second member of staff?
- 3. Did you know that many new academic members of staff are required to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning,** which includes a course focused on effective assessment and feedback?
- 4. Did you know that in Heriot-Watt it is not down to the discretion of individual staff members to allow you to submit work late?** Individual extensions are only permitted as part of reasonable adjustments for students with declared disabilities.
- 5. Did you know that there is an established system you can use if you feel there has been an error in the assessment process?** The **academic appeal** process can be used if you feel that an assessment process has not been appropriately followed (though it can't be used to challenge a particular academic judgement).
- 6. Did you know there is a Global Code of Practice governing all assessment processes?** This means that the same academic standards and marking criteria apply to assessments across all of HWU's campuses, partners and online.



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