

Best Practice Assessment Guidance for Part time, Commuter, Distance and Mature Students

A co-created guidance produced by
students from Warwick's Centre for
Lifelong Learning, Student Minds
Student Panel and the Positive Digital
Practices project team

Introduction

Effective assessments are an important part of the learning experience and can enable students to develop, evidence their learning and skills and build confidence. However, without careful and inclusive design, elements of assessments can have a negative impact on a students' wellbeing (Houghton & Anderson 2017, Hughes et al, 2022). For some students, lack of flexibility both in terms of type of assessment and rigid timings can generate stress and a sense of lack of control over workload. Additionally, the assessment process and emotional responses to assessment outcomes can impact on students' perceptions of achievement and their ongoing resilience (Lister et al, 2021). This is particularly true for students who have care giving and work commitments. This document outlines key considerations for *Wellbeing in Assessment* for part-time, mature, distance and commuter students in order to support their academic success.



This guidance forms part of the output from an Office for Students funded project on Positive Digital Practices. [Details of the wider project can be found in the project website.](#)

Methodology

Listening workshops were held with Warwick's Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) students. Warwick's Centre for Lifelong Learning is a dedicated centre enabling adult learners to achieve a Warwick education; the majority of the students are part-time, mature learners with work and caring responsibilities. They were asked how their wellbeing was affected by assessments. The workshops were recorded, and the transcripts analysed to identify key issues or recurring themes. A subsequent co-creation workshop was held with CLL students where they identified key concepts to support them with the challenges of assessments. The results of the co-creation workshop were presented to a Student Minds panel of target students for additional perspectives. The guidance in this document is a summary of best practice derived from the shared experience of all these students, written to support the wellbeing of all part-time, mature, distance and/or commuter students.

Both the collaborating students and the project team are mindful of time pressures and workloads for tutors and lecturers. We have therefore embedded into the guidance a variety of assessment methods and where possible have linked to strategies described in the [Warwick Wellbeing Pedagogies Library](#). We hope you will find this useful. If you have any feedback, please email: cllpdpresource@warwick.ac.uk.

Principles of Best Practice

Analysis of the listening workshop transcripts shows three main factors which impact the wellbeing of students relating to assessment. The three areas, are as follows:

- ▶ Assessment Design & Feedback
- ▶ Provision of Continuous Preparation and Scaffolded Instruction
- ▶ Peer Inclusion & Connection

Below we have outlined and elaborated on specific points for each of these three areas.

Assessment Design & Feedback

Our students tell us that they are short of time; they are often juggling caring and work responsibilities on top of study. These additional pressures create stress and impact on their wellbeing. Our students are also ambitious and do not want a less academically challenging experience compared to our traditional students. Key considerations for assessment design are:

Appropriate and authentic assessment: Our students enjoy developing and using new skills derived from completing different types of assessment. Ideally, the skills developed should have consideration for their

post-study plans as well as be relevant to their current course of study. Many of the students are working in part time roles alongside their studies, they have ambitions to change careers, or work for themselves once they have graduated, so the skills developed should, ideally, be transferable to their workplace. The [Student Devised Assessment](#) strategy in the Warwick Wellbeing Library is one approach that could be employed here. A variety of [examples](#) are also provided by Advanced HE.

Flexibility of assessment: Our students come from a variety of backgrounds and therefore enter university with different skills and experience. They tell us that allowing flexibility in how they apply what they have learnt, in a medium of their choosing, helps enhance their confidence and engagement. Our students also express concern for the wellbeing of their tutors and lecturers and recognise that increased flexibility in assessments may require more preparation and marking time. They acknowledge that this should be balanced with their desire for flexibility. The Warwick Wellbeing Pedagogies Library has some supporting guidance to facilitate flexible assessment and includes; [Student Devised Assessments](#), [Revised Essay Length](#) and [Variable Assessment Format](#). Introducing elements of co-production within formative and/or summative assessment experiences is another way of introducing greater flexibility. An example of this approach is [Co-Production](#).

Appropriate time taken/weighting ratio: Our students tell us that some assessments take more time than is justified by the allocation or weighting ratio of marks. This is particularly true when the assessment requires group work and/or a presentation. With time being a scarce resource, our students are keen that the time required for an assessment is appropriately reflected in the availability of marks or the weighting of the assessment within the module. The [Revised Essay Length](#) pedagogy could be used to support students in this way.

Feedback, grade clarity and link to assessment criteria: Feedback is important for the confidence and wellbeing of students - [Advanced HE Education for Mental Health Toolkit](#) (Hughes et al, 2022) provides a clear overview of the impact of feedback on students' wellbeing and supplies teachers with useful tips. Our students tell us the uncertainty they feel if their work is not allocated a mark associated with a degree classification, and that this causes them to lose confidence in their ability (Howard, 2020). Providing constructive feedback, together with a score linked to the assessment criteria, helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses, and helps them to focus on areas to improve in the future. An [Audio-Visual Assessment Brief](#) can be a simple way to help link the assessment with the assessment criteria and associated grades.

To Note: The [Education for Mental Health Toolkit](#) (Hughes, et al., 2022) provides some useful, general advice on wellbeing-positive assessment design; supporting and complementing this guidance.

Providing Continuous Preparation and Scaffolded Instruction

For some, this will be their first time in higher education, others will have been out of education for some time. When students are not clear on what is expected of them this has a negative impact on their confidence and their wellbeing. Our students tell us that they want assessment skills to be broken down into smaller, progressive chunks and they want instruction and safe-space practice to develop confidence in those skills.

Progressive skills building: Our students tell us that they do not want less challenging work; they want to be taught skills and to be supported to enable them to tackle challenging work more confidently. They feel better supported when a larger task is broken down into smaller challenges and it is clear what is expected of them (Titsworth & Mazer, 2016) and they are given instruction and support to organically reach their ultimate goal (Kirschner & Hendrick C, 2020). There is a wealth of research to back up this concept and Advance HE give full guidance in their [Education for Mental Health Toolkit](#) (Hughes et al, 2022).

Embedded skills: Digital literacy (IT skills) is essential to study and lack of it can have a real impact on the confidence of our target students. While some students are very competent, others will struggle. Our less confident students tell us that they want Digital Literacy training embedded into lectures and seminars, or

at least signposted. It is acknowledged that there is plenty of training available, but students tell us it is often not appropriate or it is not accessible (e.g. face to face during working hours). It is critical for engagement that the training is targeted appropriately to minimise the time needed for completion.

Presentation support: Presentations are a source of anxiety. Online there is an almost endless supply of guidance on presentations which leaves students overwhelmed with contradictory advice. There is also the stress of delivering the presentation. Students would like guidance on what a presentation should look like, including guidance on slide layout. Delivery of a presentation can also overwhelm a student. [Presentation Submission](#) in Warwick's Wellbeing Pedagogies library is a useful strategy to provide safe space practice for presentations. It can be used to breakdown this task, build a student's confidence and help them deliver. Students can also be signposted to [the positive digital practices resource page](#) which has material to support students tasked with presenting.



Safe space practice: To boost confidence our students want plenty of opportunity for safe space practice. They tell us this is important for them to feel secure and capable in their development. The practice could take the shape of a formative assessment (Irons & Elkington, 2021) or simple informal practice during a seminar or lecture. Other strategies to provide support of this nature are described in the Wellbeing pedagogies library and include [pre-holiday presentation of draft or resources](#) or [summary points](#).

Self-assessment: Self-assessment is a useful tool for students to develop awareness of the type and level of skill/knowledge they possess. This awareness helps students to build confidence and understand which skills they need to work on for future assessments. Mindful of the time pressures on tutors our students note that self-assessment can devolve some of the feedback process away from tutors and back to them. Our students observe that a reflective journal is also a supportive mechanism for maintaining wellbeing; the ability to review previous worries helps them recognise the extent of their development during their student journey. A [self-assessment process](#) can be found in the wellbeing pedagogy library.

“Co-timing” of the assessment journey: It is essential to include students in the development of their assessment journey. This is important as it allows the teacher to build an assessment preparation that is delivered at the right pace. It is therefore important that students have a clear idea of what all the steps in the journey entail; providing frequent, informal, snappy [Online Video Updates](#) will allow students to know what is coming next. In addition, the teacher should strive to feel the ‘pulse of the situation’, gathering feedback frequently. This removes uncertainty and helps students to feel confident about their assessment preparation. Informal methods such as [Polling](#) or [Accelerated Feedback](#) can provide a quick and easy way for feedback to be given.

Peer Inclusion & Connection

Our students tell us they miss informal interaction at the end of class as they need to leave to be elsewhere. This means they lack networking opportunities with their peers and therefore the chance to discuss ideas about current assessments. This leads to students feeling isolated when faced with assessments which increases their anxiety about how/when they are going to tackle them. When informal peer connections are facilitated within core study hours, students benefit from being able to talk through/check their ideas, leaving them feeling less isolated.

Facilitate peer support: Peer connection is a key factor in the wellbeing of our students. When they feel connected with one another they tell us they feel included and their wellbeing is improved. Tutor/lecturer support to facilitate this connection can be crucial particularly if the students are on a module which is part of a regular degree course (populated with traditional onsite UG students). The wellbeing pedagogies library contains strategies to support this connection and includes [Study Buddies](#), [Mentoring Scheme](#) and [Shared Learning/Case Studies](#). The informal connection between peers at stress points, for example close to an assessment deadline, helps improve wellbeing.

Consider and understand the student's personal circumstances: Our students come from diverse backgrounds and often have obligations beyond study, including work and caring responsibilities. This means they are frequently time-poor and must carefully manage themselves to meet commitments. Short assessment deadlines and last minute changes to lecture/tutor/seminar times can be problematic and should be avoided. A general appreciation of their other commitments when setting deadlines will allow them to perform at their best. The wellbeing pedagogy library has some simple, good practice guidance on [meeting with students](#) and [being accessible](#).

Group work support: Group work is challenging and often requires skills beyond those being assessed (Crawford et al., 2020). Despite this, our students recognise its value as a way to get to know their peers and decrease isolation. Our students tell us that recognising the difficulties of group work and providing support when it is required reduces stress and helps manage relationships between students within the group. Issues highlighted by students comprise lack of inclusion, difficulty deciding respective responsibilities and personality clashes. [The positive digital practices project has some co-created guidance on tackling group work](#). The [social contract](#) concept can also be used to support group working.

Peer review: Our students tell us feedback is important to them, however they also acknowledge this can mean an increase in workload for tutors. Peer review can help support student wellbeing by providing feedback without increasing tutor workload, and although initially daunting, it can help students connect with one another. The Warwick wellbeing pedagogies library has a description of a [peer review method](#) that can be followed to best manage this practice.

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Olvi Luur
Renato Torrinha Afonso
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