

Guiding Principles for Developing Assessments at Athabasca University

These guiding principles for assessment at Athabasca University are aspirational, developed in alignment with AU's *Imagine Learning Framework* and its stated priority of "Reimagining Assessment." The six principles provide guideposts for developing innovative practices that recognize our unique position as an open and online university. They do not dictate a one-size-fits-all approach. They were developed through extensive consultation with the AU community—undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, tutors and academic experts, learning designers, and others—and reflect the diversity of our institution, our programs, and our students.

Amongst the principles are some that reflect current commitments of the university, while others are provided as aspirational guideposts. This mix reflects the fact that assessment activities serve multiple objectives, for multiple stakeholders. There can and will be tension between areas such as academic integrity, legal duty to accommodate, and academic freedom. There are often no easy answers. We can meet this complex design challenge by seeking always for a balance among principles that best support student success.

These six principles also recognize that the affordances and limitations of assessment practices are not distributed equally, and that there is a history of bias that must be consciously considered when developing assessments. At AU we recognize the need to construct pathways (and accommodations) for students with disabilities, Indigenous students, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, homeless students, and other marginalized students and/or students with material circumstances that affect how they engage in their education.

1. Assessment activities are designed to create opportunities for students to learn and succeed. They are flexible enough to support the requirements of varied academic disciplines, while also supporting the needs of AU's diverse learners.

In Practice:

- Support student self-efficacy and motivation; minimize anxiety.
- Embrace student cultural and individual diversity.
- Offer choice to maximize student engagement.
- Be accessible by design.
- Encourage autonomy and student control where possible.
- Be appropriate to level of study.
- Support students to respond to and value what they learn, as well as provide intellectual challenge.

2. Assessment is recognized as a valuable learning experience by our students, providing meaningful opportunities to put knowledge into practice, receive feedback that can be acted upon, reflect upon learning, and learn to make judgements about one's own work.

In Practice:

- Design assessments that have intrinsic value for the student and are authentic to the discipline.
- Afford prompt formative feedback, recognizing that feedback can be an emotional process.
- Help students to learn how to learn.
- Focus on improvement, not on judgment, closing out the gap between where a student is and where they would like to be.
- Successful completion of an assessment should provide a sense of achievement.
- Design assessment as a continuous process of learning rather than a final task; to the extent possible, create frequent and iterative opportunities for assessment and feedback.
- Be repeatable until students succeed.
- Feedback should be about the work, not about the student.
- Develop practical skills for students where possible
- Support the development of students as scholars and knowledge producers, as well as thoughtful knowledge consumers.
- Reveal all learning, not just what matches the intended outcomes.

3. Assessment activities should strengthen our academic community, supporting the student/teacher relationship and where possible helping other students to learn.

In Practice:

- Create opportunity for dialog between student and teacher.
- Help teachers to learn about their students' knowledge and skills, and how they learn.
- Engage students as full participants (and even designers) of their own assessments.
- Make space for students to be teachers.

4. Assessments are aligned to learning outcomes and integrated into the overall pedagogical design of courses and programs.

In Practice:

- Focus assessment on the essential or critical components of learning outcomes.
- Demonstrate achievement of all learning outcomes where assessment is for the award of credentials.
- Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to achieve the best results.

5. Assessments are designed to uphold academic standards and regulations (internal and external).

In Practice:

- Be both reliable and sustainable.
- Be valid (i.e., assess intended learning outcomes).
- Be resistant to cheating.
- Be resistant to gaming.
- Be fair, recognizing that not all students must be assessed in the same way.
- Be cost-effective.

6. Assessment supports a culture of ongoing teaching improvement; we routinely use information about assessment in practice when designing new assessment strategies.

In Practice:

- Helps teachers to learn about their own teaching.
- Supports continuous improvement/refreshment over time.
- Supports innovation, particularly in digital / online pedagogy.
- Can provide insight into the effectiveness of the course design.
- Makes learning – and not just the final products of learning - visible

Examples From Other Institutions / Organizations

- <https://www.washington.edu/assessment/academic-assess/principles/>
- [https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/Guiding Principles for Assessment of Student Learning FINAL.pdf](https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/Guiding_Principles_for_Assessment_of_Student_Learning_FINAL.pdf)
- <https://www.dur.ac.uk/learningandteaching.handbook/6/principles/>
- <https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/policy-guidance/assessment/assessment-principles/>
- <https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/learning-teaching/staff/assessment>
- https://www.queensu.ca/teachingandlearning/modules/assessments/23_s3_01_intro_section.html
- <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/assessing-student-learning/index.html>
- <https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/instructors/class-disruption/strategies/assessment#evaluation>
- <https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/instructors/assessment/strategies-mcgill-instructors>
- <http://assessmentcommons.org/view-all-resources/>

References

David J. Nicol & Debra Macfarlane-Dick (2006) Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31:2, 199-218, DOI: 10.1080/03075070600572090

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