

# Principles for Assessing Student Learning – An Environmental Scan

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## **Background and Introduction**

Increased attention has been focused on the assessment of student learning, especially as it relates to what we have learned through our experiences of teaching and learning during the global pandemic. In March 2023, a group of leaders from academic units, the student experience portfolio, Registrar's office, Taylor Institute, Secretariat's office and Legal/Student Appeals met to identify pressing issues related to assessment of student learning, and potential actions to be taken. One of the key recommendations from the group was to develop a set of principles to guide student assessment practices at the University of Calgary over the 2023-24 academic year.

To learn more about the development and implementation of the assessment principles for student learning at the institutional level, we conducted an environmental scan of Canadian U15 universities – a group of research-intensive universities across Canada (U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, n.d.). The objective was to develop a high-level understanding of what assessment principles for student learning are in place at leading research universities in Canada, and to learn how and where these principles were identified or discussed on their respective websites.

The data were generated by exploring the websites of Canadian U15 universities (excluding UCalgary) during July 2023. We focused our search on institutions where this documentation was posted in English. This resulted in data from 12 Canadian universities including: the University of Alberta, Dalhousie University, the University of Manitoba, McGill University, McMaster University, the University of Ottawa, Queen's University, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Toronto, the University of Waterloo, and Western University.

We used the search fields in the homepage of university websites to search for the following keywords: assessment principles, assessment policy, and assessment procedures. For each keyword, we focused on the first 20 results and scanned them for information that explicitly identified assessment principles for student learning. We also explored any relevant subpages that were linked within the original results. In cases where the results generated were less than 20, we only reviewed the results that were available. In cases where the institutional academic calendar pages did not appear in the search results for the keywords, we specifically searched for the institutional academic calendars and reviewed them to locate relevant information about assessment principles. The following questions were used as a guide to conduct the review:

- Are there any principles that may guide the assessment for student learning at the institution? If yes, what are these principles?

- How are assessment principles for student learning shared and described by the institution?
- Where are the assessment principles identified on the institution website?

**Findings**

Based on our guiding questions, we have organized our data and findings into the following three sections: principles guiding assessment practices, how assessment principles are shared and described, and where assessment principles are located on the institutional websites.

***Principles Guiding Assessment Practices***

Our review of U15 websites shows that most universities do not have a comprehensive list of assessment principles publicly accessible on their websites. Only four universities, out of the 12 reviewed, explicitly identified the principles that guide their assessment practices. Universities that have assessment principles shared publicly on their websites include the University of Alberta, McGill University, the University of Saskatchewan, and the University of Toronto.

The identified principles offer guidance and direction about various aspects of designing and conducting assessments for student learning. Table 1 outlines the assessment principles identified by the four universities.

**Table 1.** Principles Guiding the Assessment Practices for Student Learning

<b>University</b>	<b>Assessment Principles for Student Learning</b>
1 University of Alberta	1. Assessment should be integrated into and aligned with the learning experiences and stated objectives/outcomes of a course and program; 2. While this policy sets out the minimum expectations concerning the design and delivery of assessments, it does not limit the development of other, additional, innovative forms of effective assessment provided they are compatible with the principles stated in this policy; 3. General assessment methods and grading standards must be communicated clearly to students at the beginning of the course or program of study; 4. Clear and transparent assessment criteria should be provided to students throughout the course; 5. In assessment, the University is committed to providing reliable and valid information in which students, prospective employers and accrediting bodies can have confidence; 6. Where possible, assessment should be multifaceted (varied) and timely. Student achievement and performance should be assessed in a formative manner during a course and in a summative manner both during and at the end of a course and program;

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2	McGill University	<p>7. In the design, delivery and reporting of summative assessments, the University is committed to open, accountable and equitable processes. (University of Alberta, 2012, n.p.)</p>
		<p>The guiding principles are the foundation upon which PASL is built. The principles align with McGill’s mission and are consistent with international best practices in assessment. They also guide the creation of Faculty-level guidelines.</p>
		<p>4.1 Assessment practices are aligned with and reflective of the commitment to healthy teaching and learning environments underpinning a McGill education:</p>
		<p>a) Assessment practices are conducted in a fair, reasonable, and equitable manner.</p>
		<p>b) Expectations are clearly communicated to students.</p>
		<p>c) Reasonable student concerns are heard and responded to in a prompt and thoughtful manner.</p>
		<p>d) Provisions are made for reasonable scheduling of completion of assessment tasks.</p>
		<p>e) Assessment tasks are sufficiently inclusive and diverse to permit reliable judgements of individual students’ knowledge, understanding, and performance.</p>
		<p>f) In setting assessment tasks for the course, students’ workloads, task due dates, and the credit value of the course are taken into account.</p>
		<p>g) Provisions are made for reasonable accommodation of student needs.</p>
		<p>4.2 Assessment practices uphold high academic standards and promote academic integrity.</p>
		<p>a) Grades are determined based on high standards and are applied consistently.</p>
		<p>b) The instructor is ultimately responsible for the assessment of all students’ work, even if they are assisted by teaching assistants, graders, or external subject matter experts.</p>
		<p>c) Courses offered with multiple sections should have equivalent levels of workload and equivalent assessment tasks.</p>
		<p>d) Instructors are provided with support to develop effective and meaningful assessment and feedback strategies.</p>
		<p>4.3 Assessment practices are pedagogically sound.</p>

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- a) Assessment tasks are aligned with planned learning outcomes.
  - b) Assessment tasks may include individual and group work, with assessment criteria that explicitly address the basis for individual and group grades.
  - c) Students have the opportunity to receive timely and ongoing feedback they can use to improve (formative assessment), and feedback used to judge students' knowledge, understanding, and performance at the end of a unit, course, or program to determine if they have achieved the learning outcomes (summative assessment).

4.4 Assessment practices allow for valid and reliable judgments about individual student learning.

- a) The grading system is criterion-referenced: it is designed to indicate an individual student's achievement of clearly stated learning outcomes.
- b) Ranking students is not the primary goal of assessment.
- c) The average grade and/or distribution of grades for any course, examination, or other academic assessment task is not predetermined.
- d) Normally, each course should have more than one graded assessment task, with the exception of single-project courses such as undergraduate/graduate thesis courses, internships, and individual reading courses.

(McGill University, 2022)

3 University of Saskatchewan

One of the primary purposes of a university is to optimize learning opportunities for students. The University of Saskatchewan encourages and celebrates innovation in class delivery and student assessment.

Assessment of student learning should be an effective, fair and transparent process which follows university, college, and department regulations so that students across the institution are treated respectfully and impartially. This includes accommodation for students with disabilities, in accordance with university policies and provincial legislation.

As articulated in the University Learning Charter, students will be provided with a clear indication of what is expected in a course or learning activity, and what is required to be successful in achieving the expected learning outcomes as defined in the course outline.

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Students must therefore receive prompt and constructive feedback on their learning progress at regular intervals throughout the course. Educators will ensure that assessments of learning are transparent, applied consistently and are congruent with learning outcomes. Feedback will be designed to both assess and enable student learning. With these goals in mind, educators will solicit and reflect on feedback from students and peers and commit to building knowledge and skill in teaching practice for the purposes of continuous enhancement.

(University of Saskatchewan, 2023, p. 1-2)

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#### Effective assessment of students

1. Is aligned with learning outcomes and instructional strategies (assessment of learning).
2. Is inclusive and transparent, so students have equitable opportunities to demonstrate their learning.
3. Gives students multiple opportunities to learn through practice and feedback, so they have sufficient time and support to reflect and improve (assessment for learning).
4. Develops student's ability to learn effectively and prepares students to be self-directed, reflective, and engaged learners (assessment as learning).
5. Is designed so students apply disciplinary learning under authentic, or as close to authentic as possible, circumstances.
6. Is designed and sequenced to optimize students' success.

Effective assessment is embedded in departments, colleges/schools, and system-wide when it:

7. Provides a valid and trustworthy representation of student achievement that students, educators, disciplines, accrediting bodies, and employers can have confidence in.
8. Is manageable and sustainable for educators, and appropriately facilitated by policy and resourcing.
9. Provides useful information for ongoing course and program enhancement.
10. Forms an integral part of program design, aligning with what programs of study are aiming to achieve within disciplinary communities.

(University of Saskatchewan, n.d.-a, para. 2)

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- that assessment and grading practices across the University are consistent and reflect appropriate academic standards.
  - that student performance is evaluated in a manner that is fair, accurate, consistent, and objective and in compliance with these academic standards.
  - that the academic standing of every student can be accurately assessed even when conducted in different divisions of the University and evaluated according to different grading scales.

(University of Toronto, 2020, p. 2)

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### ***How Assessment Principles are Shared***

The assessment principles are most commonly shared and described as part of a comprehensive institutional assessment policy. Our environmental scan reveals that all the four universities that have outlined the principles for the assessment of student learning do so by including them in their institution-wide assessment policies. One such example is the recent development and approval of the new assessment policy, *Policy on Assessment of Student Learning (PASL)*, at the McGill university which outlines the underlying principles to guide the assessment practices at the university. McGill university (n.d.-b) states that “PASL will come into effect in Fall 2024” and will focus on “assessing student learning and not evaluating the student” (para, 1-2).

The University of Saskatchewan offers the most robust details on the development and use of their assessment principles. As stated on their website, “[t]he USask Assessment Principles describe assessment practices that are supportive of students’ learning and likely to generate trustworthy representations of how well students have learned” (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.-a, para. 1). The university, through their teaching and learning center, provides detailed support, resources, and examples on how instructors may use these assessment principles in their courses and programs ([Educatus, 2023](#)).

### ***Where Assessment Principles are Located on institutional websites***

From our review, it was evident that the universities may identify the assessment principles in more than one place on their websites. For example, the University of Alberta outlines the assessment principles as part of their institutional policy which is available on the University of Alberta Policies and Procedures Online website (Table 2). The assessment policy is also referenced in the Academic regulations on the university calendar website. Similarly, McGill University has a dedicated webpage (Table 2) where they have identified the assessment policy and principles along with the details on how they relate to different stakeholders, including the faculty and students. While this webpage serves as a central place to identify and communicate the institutional assessment policy and the underlying principles, the policy is also referenced on the university Secretariat website. Table 2 provides the university-wise links to assessment principles for student learning, where available.

**Table 2.** University Principles/Regulations for Assessing Student Learning.

	<b>University</b>	<b>Link(s) to Assessment Policies and Regulations</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Link to Assessment Principles for Student Learning</b>
<b>1</b>	University of Alberta	<a href="#">U of A Policies and Procedures On-Line (UAPPOL)</a>	<p>A policy document that outlines the assessment and grading policy along with principles and procedures.</p> <p>The policy is referenced frequently in other documentations (on the website) relating to assessment procedures and practices.</p>	<a href="https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/PoliciesProcedures/Policies/Assessment-and-Grading-Policy.pdf">https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/PoliciesProcedures/Policies/Assessment-and-Grading-Policy.pdf</a>
<b>2</b>	University of British Columbia	<a href="#">Policies/regulations for academic assessment, academic performance evaluations, and grading practices.</a>	The policies and regulations are identified on the UBC Academic Calendar.	
<b>3</b>	Dalhousie University	<a href="#">Official Examination Regulations, Policy for the Scheduling of Courses/Examinations</a>	The description of exam and grading regulations/procedures is outlined on the academic calendar webpage.	
<b>4</b>	University of Manitoba	<a href="#">Final Examination and Final Grades Policy</a>	The exam and grading regulations/procedures are provided on the <a href="#">Governing Documents: Academic and Academic Calendars</a> Webpages.	

5	McGill University	<a href="#">Policy on Assessment of Student Learning (PASL)</a>	A policy document that provides a set of principles to guide assessment practice. The policy will be in effect from Fall 2024.	<a href="https://www.mcgill.ca/assessment-for-learning/pasl/principles-and-key-concepts">https://www.mcgill.ca/assessment-for-learning/pasl/principles-and-key-concepts</a>
6	McMaster University	<a href="#">Policies for Undergraduate course Management, Graduate Course Management, undergraduate examination, graduate examination</a>	Policies related to assessments are embedded in the examination policy documents identified. No exclusive document for assessment policy or principles.	
7	University of Ottawa	<a href="#">Regulations for the student evaluation of learning</a>	Academic regulations regarding the evaluation of student learning.	
8	Queen's University	<a href="#">Exam-related policies</a>	Exam-related policies identified in the Student Policy Index.	
9	University of Saskatchewan	<a href="#">Policy on Class Delivery, Examinations, and Assessment of Student Learning</a> <a href="#">USask Assessment Principles</a>	A policy document that incorporates the principles, regulations, and procedures relating to class delivery and student assessment.	<a href="https://policies.usask.ca/documents/academic-courses-policy-approved-june-2023-clean.pdf">https://policies.usask.ca/documents/academic-courses-policy-approved-june-2023-clean.pdf</a> <a href="https://teaching.usask.ca/curriculum/assessment.php#USaskAssessmentPrinciples">https://teaching.usask.ca/curriculum/assessment.php#USaskAssessmentPrinciples</a>
10	University of Toronto	<a href="#">University Assessment and Grading practices Policy</a>	Identified on the UoT Secretariat webpage, the policy document outlines the assessment and grading procedures and practices.	<a href="https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/grading-practices-policy-university-assessment-and-january-1-2020">https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/grading-practices-policy-university-assessment-and-january-1-2020</a>



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11	University of Waterloo	<a href="#">University Policies, Guidelines, and Academic Regulations for Assignments, Tests, and Final Exams</a>	The regulations for assignments, tests, and final exams are outlined in the academic calendar.
12	Western University	<a href="#">Evaluation of Academic Performance</a> , and <a href="#">Scheduling of Examinations</a>	The examination and evaluation policies are identified on the university secretariat webpage.

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## Discussion

Only four U15 universities have outlined a list of principles related to the assessment of student learning. Since our environmental scan focused only on the university-wide identification of assessment, we recognize that we might have missed data on the departmental assessment principles and guidelines. Our environmental scan shows that while the university-wide assessment principles for student learning are not mentioned or identified on the websites of most universities, all universities reviewed have regulations for the conduct and distribution of examinations and grades (Table 2). It is interesting to note that the universities use a variety of different terminologies to refer to these regulations. A few frequently used (almost synonymously) terminologies include regulations, policies, and procedures.

When looking at the principles across the four Universities, they commonly focussed on areas such as:

- Assessment reflects high academic standards.
- Course instructors are primarily responsible for the assessment of student learning in academic courses.
- Assessment practices provide provisions for the accommodation of student needs.
- Resources are available to support course instructors in developing expertise in student assessment, and to assess student learning in meaningful ways.
- Student assessments are intentionally designed and aligned with learning outcomes.
- Assessment strategies provide equitable opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning.
- Criteria, methods, and expectations for assessment are clearly communicated to students.
- Assessment practices emphasize the importance of feedback, progressive learning and practice, and both formative and summative assessment practices.

We noted that there are a few relevant gaps and missed opportunities in the identified assessment principles for student learning. For example, we have noted that there was little emphasis on issues related to the generative artificial intelligence (AI), student/educator well-being and mental health, Indigenous ways of knowing, equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility, graduate student assessment practices, and multiple instructional modalities (e.g., online/blended learning). We believe

there is opportunity for UCalgary to develop assessment principles which more fully consider these relevant pertinent trends and issues in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

Our preliminary scan of U15 university websites has provided a starting point for understanding the landscape of the development and identification of assessment principles for student learning at universities across Canada. We have been able to identify some of the focus areas of the principles as well as some current gaps. We have also identified how and where these assessment principles are shared on the university websites. We are aware of the limitation of relying solely on the exploration of the websites for an environmental scan and acknowledge that a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the landscape of assessment principles is needed.

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