



A student guide to University Assessment

Leeds Met First Level Assessment & Feedback Project





'Your first year at uni will be full of new experiences'

Your need to know guide to studying at university

What do you need to know about assessment at university?

If you are a student new to studying at university you might not know what to expect in the way of assessment at university level. All you ever see in films is students preparing lengthy term papers or dissertations or maybe sitting exams in huge terrifying exam halls. This guide is designed to inform you about what kinds of assignments you are likely to encounter in your first year of study at university, based on some of the most common questions (and worries!) that students ask before they enrol on courses.

Will there be lots of exams and assignments?

Most undergraduate courses at a typical university are made up of modules delivered across two semesters. Each module will usually have a separate assessment, although sometimes these are combined and assessed together.

Will I get an exam on my first day?

No. But most courses will give you some assessments reasonably early on in your course, within the first six weeks or so. The aim of these is mainly to help you see how you are doing, and to give you feedback so you can fine-tune your efforts where necessary.

Will they throw me out if I fail an assignment?

No. Assignments are designed to assess your progress - they're not designed to catch you out but are to reassure you that you are working on the right lines and to help you find out what you need to do next. There are likely to be short assignments, projects or classroom tests rather than full-scale exams.

Will they throw me out at the end of my first year if I fail?

Possibly. You may however have some opportunities to re-sit some exams – in many universities up to a maximum of two exams can be retaken. You may be given a deadline to hand in some further (or missing) assessed coursework.

Essentially, at most universities, you've got to succeed in your first year to get into the second year. That doesn't mean you've got to do brilliantly within the first year to survive – you've got to pass it. Most students pass it. Just about all students could pass it.

Will lecturers or tutors chase me if my work is poor, or if I don't hand in assessed coursework?

Probably not. Lecturers aren't the same as teachers were at school. Lecturers do their bit and then leave it to you to do your bit. When a class size can be hundreds of students, lecturers can't chase up individuals who are slipping behind. The responsibility for working towards your own success belongs to you. Essentially, at university you're a lot more 'on your own' than you might have been at school. However, if you have a problem there will be someone who you can talk to.



What about my terrible handwriting?

Handwriting is still important, not least in written exams – the examiners need to be able to make sense of what you write. You may have to practise writing more clearly and more slowly. However, it's probable that in essays and reports you'll be allowed (or required) to use computers, so legibility is no longer a problem.

Am I now competing against all the other students in my class?

Yes – and no!

Yes, the competition is much tougher than it may have been at school, as all of your classmates (perhaps hundreds of them in your first year) managed to meet the criteria to get into university in the first place.

But 'no' too – there's nothing to stop you working with at least some of your classmates. Not copying of course! It can be really useful to form an informal study group with a few friends to discuss the topics you're studying. You will find that:

- going over a lecture with a few classmates always means you make better sense of that lecture.
- it's often very comforting to find out that the things that worry you about a topic are exactly the same things that are worrying other classmates.
- four heads are better than one when it comes to trying to find out the answer to a difficult question.
- you can talk to your classmates about things that you are asked to do for coursework assignments, then you're much better able to put your best foot forward when you do the coursework on your own.

What kinds of assessment will I have to do?

There are a wide range of assessment methods used at university. You are likely to encounter some or all of the following:

Exams: You have a set time to complete them, on a fixed date and in an assigned place. Sometimes they are in your normal classroom, but they could be in a room somewhere else on the campus.

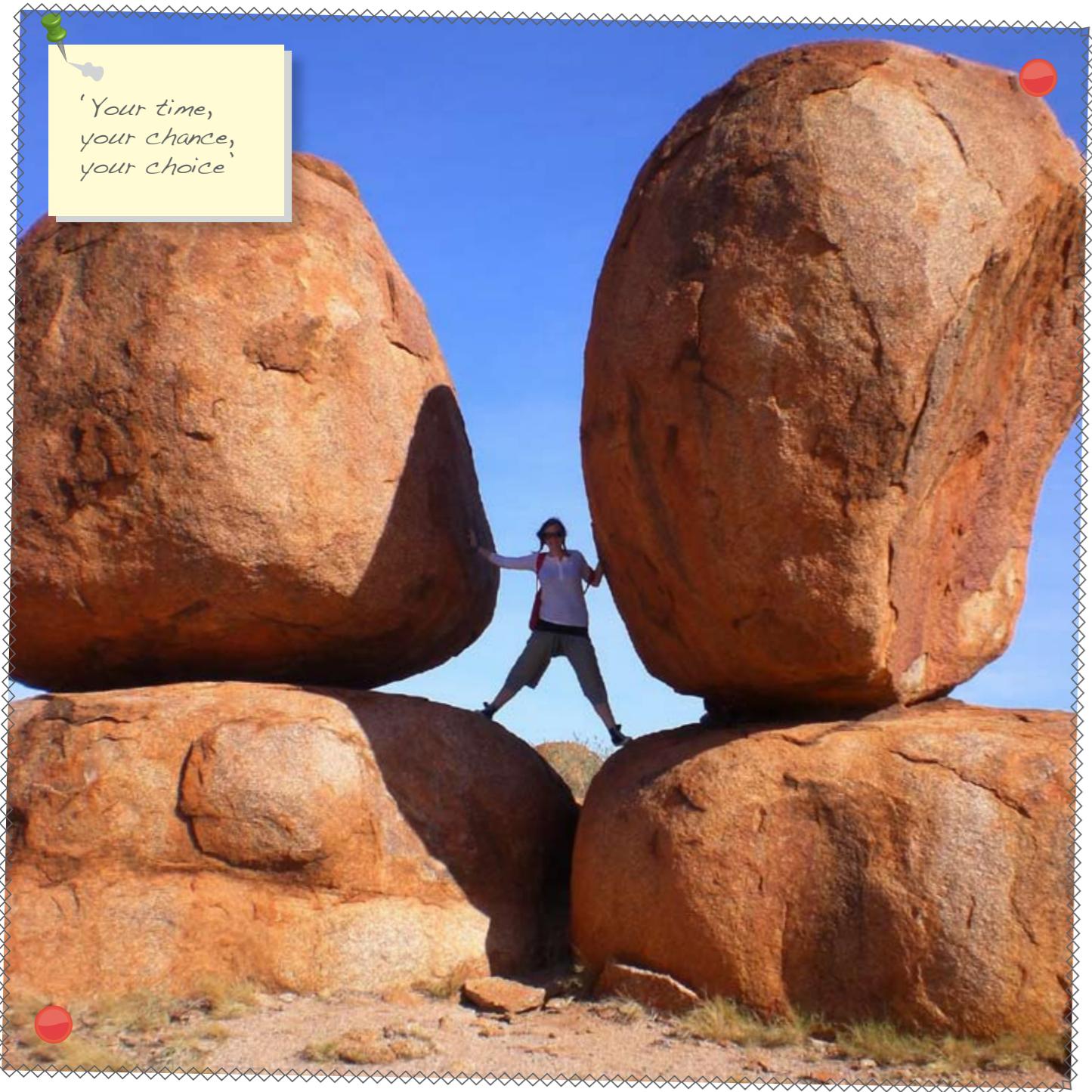
It is useful to:

- **Be able to find the exam room** – write down the date, time and room – and check it! Put it somewhere handy, like in your phone, so you have it handy on the day. Make sure you know where the room actually is, then you won't get lost on exam day.

- **Have a pen** – most exams will involve writing answers on paper or exam books (normally provided) with pens. You need to take a pen, or two. It's a good idea to have extra pens in different colours which you can use when planning out your answers before you start writing. Don't write in red, as assessors usually mark your work in red and so it can get confusing. In some exams you may use computers, in which case they will be provided for you in the room.

- **Only take the stuff you need** – don't take anything into an exam that could be embarrassing (like detailed notes, sample exam answers or books other than those explicitly permitted). You don't want to be accused of cheating! You may be asked to leave your mobile phones, MP3s and PDAs away from where you are working and put them on silent. You may get into trouble if your electronic gadget bursts into tune when you are in an exam.

- **Watch what you eat** – it's not normally the done thing to take large and noisy snacks into exams, although sweets without crinkly wrappers and plain water are normally OK.



'Your time,
your chance,
your choice'

- **Go to the toilet before the exam** – it's a good idea to go to the toilet before you enter the exam. If you need to go during the exam you can do, but the invigilators will have to take you there to make sure you don't cheat along the way. It also wastes valuable time, as you don't get time added on for toilet visits.

Essays: These are the most common kind of coursework assignment in many subjects – you're probably quite familiar with how to go about them already, but at university expectations may be more demanding.

What they are about – on many courses you will be given an essay title and asked to write on a topic of the lecturer's choosing, or you may be given the option of creating your own topic within a set range.

How many words? First-year essays will normally be no longer than around 3,000 words and may be much shorter. If this is longer than the essays you usually write, don't panic! It's possible to break up the task into bite size pieces and deal with it a bit at a time. For guidance on how to write essays well you can make use of Learning Support Services – they are there to help you develop study skills. Student Services may also be able to help if you have particular needs, e.g. if you have dyslexia.

What lecturers expect – different lecturers expect different things when it comes to essays. It pays to tune in to what they're looking for in a good essay, not least by listening to their advice to the class in lectures or in module handbooks. Your job is to get as many marks as you can by giving each lecturer what they want, to the best of your ability! It's a game and you will succeed by listening to your lecturer, playing by the rules and knowing how to score points.

Avoiding trouble – students sometimes worry about being accused of plagiarism (copying other people's work) or cheating. To avoid this worry, make yourself familiar with your university's guidance materials, usually provided to first-year students at induction,

and always available from the Library. In particular, learn how to go about citing other authors' work in your own essays, making it very clear where you're using a direct quote, but also carefully attributing ideas to their original authors, including an accurate list of references at the end of your essay, so your assessors can see exactly what you have been using as your source materials. Getting the references exactly right is quite difficult – even lecturers themselves find this hard – and that's probably why they're often very fussy about you getting it right! It's worth investing some time in learning to do it well.

Presentations: Some people feel absolutely terrified at the very idea of standing up and talking in front of other students. At most universities you won't be asked to do this without preparation and you certainly won't be required to stand up in front of everyone on your course. On some courses you don't have to do it at all. It is, however, a useful skill to develop to take into the workplace.

Preparation – if you feel nervous about giving a presentation, make sure that you have prepared well. It's best not to prepare a full script to read out, but some notes you can read easily to jog your memory. Practise your presentation, then it will be more natural on the day.

Using computers – it often helps to prepare a visual presentation using PowerPoint or something similar, so you've got some slides you can talk to and can use to jog your memory. It's always a really bad idea, in short live presentations, to rely on live internet access, as delays and problems can be very stressful and are not worth the worry. Have a plan if the technology fails (e.g. screen shots).

In groups – when presentations are involved, usually first-year students will work in groups for their earliest presentations and the audience will normally be a modest number of your fellow students. It is useful to be able to watch what other students have done as it gives you the chance to learn from each other. Several groups



normally present within an hour at this level, so your bit is unlikely to be more than a few minutes. Make sure everyone knows what bit they are doing and in what order. Have plans to help each other out if anyone gets nervous and loses track of what they are saying. Work as a team.

Reports: Some of the same principles as mentioned in 'essays' above continue to apply to writing reports. Different lecturers may be looking for different things in a really good report, so keep your wits about you so that you pick up each and every clue to what they're looking for. Often, reports will be linked to practical work you do, on your own or with one or two other students. In particular, staff marking reports are looking for your own interpretations of the results or observations you've made during the practical work, not just a blow-by-blow description of what you did. You may also be expected to link your findings to appropriate work from the literature in your field, and tutors will normally give some guidance on exactly how you might go about this.

Getting on with it – it's really important to write practical reports within a day or two of actually doing the work! After a week or two, it becomes much more difficult to remember what you did, and what you noticed at the time. Whatever happens, don't end up with a backlog of reports to write, at the time when you might really need to be swotting up for exams.

Computer-based tests: These may be new to you, but you're very unlikely to be given such a test 'cold'. Normally, there will be computer-based learning materials to practise on, and it's a really good idea to get up to speed with working at a computer using such materials, so that when you get a computer-based test, you know the ropes, and don't waste time trying to work out what to do.

Multiple-choice questions: Multiple-choice questions are used in computer-based tests, where your job is to pick the right (or best) option from several in front of you. Don't just look for what is 'right'. Look at all the other options quite carefully, and work out what's

wrong with them, until you're only left with the best one to select.

OSCEs: Objective structured clinical exams. This type of assessment is often used in medical and other health-related university education. You may come across a version of it in other courses, particularly where there are practical components to the skills that you are taught.

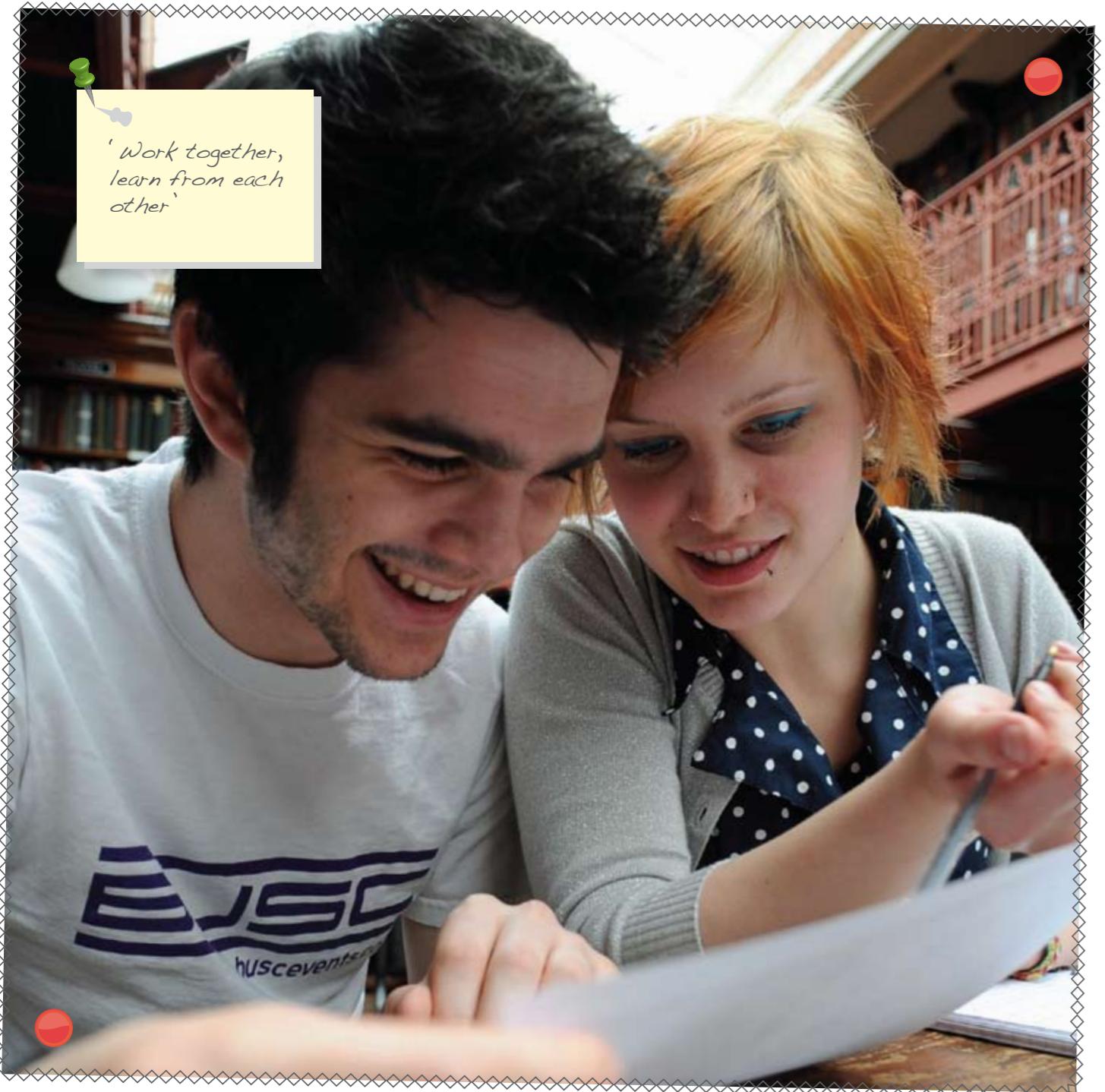
What exactly is an OSCE? An OSCE is a series of stations where at each station you complete a different task within a set time limit and you will be marked on how well you did by the tutor. You may also be asked questions by the tutor at each station. The tasks you will be asked to complete will have been covered in class and you will have had time to practise them before the OSCE.

How many stations will there be? This will vary dependent on the number of individual tasks you have been asked to prepare but it could be anything between 5 and 20. An alarm is often used to tell you to move to the next station.

What will the tasks be like? If you are doing a health related course you may find that it entails doing something to a model who may be a fellow student or an actor playing the role of the patient, e.g. listening to their chest sounds using a stethoscope or measuring how much movement they have in one of their limbs.

Posters: Sometimes you might be asked to produce something a bit more creative than an essay as an assessment. This might involve producing a poster to show in words and pictures your views or research into a particular topic.

Preparation – you will more than likely be given help and guidance in how to go about making a poster especially if it's the first time you have done it. Tutors will give you advice on how many words to put on it, style guidance about the best way to display pictures and what key aspects they expect to see displayed.



Group working – you may be asked to work together as a group to produce a poster. As mentioned earlier it's important to work together as a team and use the time appropriately at the beginning of the task to decide who will do what. Set each other deadlines and agree how people will work together. It's always useful to play to people's strengths, so if you have someone in your team who is good at design give them the job of deciding on colours and what will go where on your poster.

How will it be marked? It's important that you understand what the tutor is looking for in the poster and bear in mind how many marks there are for the content, i.e. words and pictures, in comparison to the design and layout. Keep this in mind when you are working on your poster so that you spend your time appropriately. It would be a waste if you spent a long time working on the layout to the expense of other aspects when there was only 20% of the mark for this aspect.

Crits/Critiques: Creative subjects, particularly those in art & design, often require students to present their projects in a 'crit' or critique. Crits are similar to presentations and you should prepare for a 'crit' in the same way. As well as being an appropriate way to assess your work, crits develop your ability to communicate, build confidence (in yourself and your work) and develop your professional skills.

What happens in a crit? Details can vary but generally in a crit each student is asked to display their work (whether it be work in progress for an interim crit or a more polished exhibition for a final crit), talk about the key points to a small audience of staff and fellow students, answer questions and give and receive feedback comments about the work.

How will I know if what I have produced is good? You will get immediate feedback from a range of people and can learn from other people's work as well as your own. A really good crit should result in a lot of discussion and exchange of ideas and leave you with valuable suggestions as to how you can develop your project work in future.

How long does it take? The length of an individual student's crit can vary between 5 minutes and half an hour (or more) depending on the level of study, the type of project and the size of group. Whatever the length of time, you should prepare for the crit and be willing to contribute to the discussion of other students' work as well as your own.

What's the best way to prepare for a crit? Avoid the temptation to talk about absolutely everything you have done. Give a brief overview and concentrate on the key points that you want your audience to remember. Listen attentively to other students' presentations and be ready with questions or comments about their work. Crits can be stressful for some people and there is a tendency to switch off with relief once you've done your bit. Try not to do this as you will need to think about how you are going to record the comments you receive so you can reflect and act on them later.

How will I know how good my work is?

University staff are geared up to help first-year students understand how they are doing by giving them feedback on assignments. Don't confuse this with some of the negative experiences you might have had at schools in years gone by where markers have concentrated on telling you everything you have done wrong. Feedback at university is specifically designed to tell you how to improve, but also to let you know what you're already doing really well. Don't miss out on the good news!

If it's good news - when something you do attracts positive comments from your assessors, work out exactly what it was, so you can do it again and again.

What if it's not good? Don't get downhearted at critical feedback. It is really important that you use all the feedback you get to help you understand how



to improve your performance. Like an athlete on the race track, you can learn how to improve a little bit at a time, whatever the standard of your work at the start. Read everything that is written on the bottom of your essays (don't just look at the mark), go along to feedback sessions led by staff and take note of things the lecturers say to you in the classroom while you are involved in practical tasks.

For more thoughts on making the most of feedback, read the 'Building on Feedback' material by Phil Race from 'How to Get a Good Degree': 2nd edition (2007) which is also free to anyone on the 'students' page of his website: www.phil-race.co.uk.

Will my lecturer give me feedback on my work before I hand it in?

One of the big differences you may notice between assessment at school and university is that you won't usually receive feedback on a piece of assessed work before you hand it in. You really need to ensure that the work you submit is the very best you can do in the time available. Take notice of any feedback so that you can use this to improve future assignments.

What can I do if I can't finish an assignment in time to hand it in for the deadline or if I have problems getting in for an exam?

Danger! You have to act immediately. Unlike some schools and colleges, at university, a deadline is a deadline and you will be penalised if you hand work in late or fail to turn up for an assessed event. Quite a few students have problems as they don't realise this and put off telling tutors or lecturers what they need to know.

- if you are able to, tell the person who set the assignment as soon as you know you are going to have a problem.
- if you can't phone, write a note, email or text yourself, try to get someone else to do it.
- if you are ill, you may be able to ask for an extension, but you would normally need a doctor or the health centre to confirm this. Simply saying you were ill will not normally be enough.
- if you are so ill you are unable to communicate at the time, the university will understand and make allowances, but you must let tutors know as soon as possible.

At some universities, deadlines are deadlines! There are no extensions, think about it – that's how the world outside works – no second chances for interviews, funding bids, job applications, important meetings and so on. Often you will be given another chance to tackle something equivalent.

- if you suffer from depression, it can be really difficult to motivate yourself to take action at a time of crisis, so you will need to explain this as soon as you can thereafter.
- if you have other serious problems, for example a family member who is ill or needs your care, please let someone at the university know as soon as the problem arises or as soon as possible thereafter.
- if you encounter real problems getting in for an exam the university can take this into account, but something as simple as a bus being late, a train not running, or a car not starting would not normally be considered sufficient (plan to get at least one bus/train earlier than the one you need).
- it never helps your case if you offer trivial, unfeasible or unsubstantiated reasons for late submission of work or non-arrival at assessed events.



- there are university processes to cover all these matters: look for guidance in your course handbook, or speak to your students' union or course admin staff.

What can I do if I think I'm on a course where the assessment is just too hard for me?

Don't panic! Most people feel like this at some point on a university course, including the people who have put this booklet together. It's right, isn't it, that it should be that way, otherwise your course wouldn't be stretching you enough to take you higher. If you find something really difficult, give it your best go and then make good use of all the feedback you can get on your efforts. Remember, the first time you do something really difficult is the worst time – the second time it may feel much, much easier.

What can I do if I fail?

Best avoid failing, goes without saying. If everyone passed, it would be quite odd. The first thing to say to yourself is 'this does not mean I am a failure; it simply means I didn't succeed with this assignment or this particular exam'. Then find out where exactly the shortfall was. Use all the feedback you can get, so that you find out what to do next time, in similar circumstances, to succeed. Find out what you did that lost you marks. Find out what you missed out that cost you marks. But also find out what you did that did in fact gain you some marks – don't stop gaining those marks. There are numerous very successful people whose track record includes having failed things now and then. "An expert is someone who has made all the mistakes which could be made..." (Niels Bohr, Nobel Prize-winning nuclear scientist in the last century).

How long will I get to complete my assignments?

The time that you get to complete assignments will vary, depending upon the nature of the task. Don't leave it until the last minute and then discover you should have started it earlier. Plan to start it early and it will give you time to review and refine your work. If you leave it too late you may find yourself doing it when you are stressed, or ill, or that all the books you need are out on loan and you might not perform at your best.

Will I get the assignments, for all the modules that I am studying, all at the same time?

Not all university assessment happens at the same time, but there are key times, e.g. towards the end of the semester, when you have a number of assignments. You won't have too many but you will need to plan your time carefully if you have more than one. Look at the hand-in dates of them all and plan your diary.

All things being equal, start with the assignment you like most and finish it early – this will build your confidence and motivate you to tackle the others.

Will I know when to expect them?

All assessments are planned in advance and your lecturers will be able to tell you when they expect to hand them out and want them in. Consider assessment times when you are planning your work, holidays etc. Assessments are an important part of your time at university so plan to give them your best shot.

If you have any other questions about assessments in the first year at university please don't hesitate to contact us at studentguide@leedsmet.ac.uk

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