

AN ERASMUSX & RSM GUIDE TO

FAIR ASSESSING & GRADING

*When using innovative assessment practises, such as Programmatic Assessment, we want to ensure that we don't just implement an innovative assessment model, but ensure we follow an equitable and inclusive approach. For that reason, we would like to propose the following **F.A.I.R.** acronym as a guiding principle when assessing.*

.....

Principles of **F.A.I.R.** Assessing & Grading

- **F**lexible
- **A**ccurate
- **I**nviting
- **R**esponsible

Fairness is about anticipating that equal treatment does not translate into equal chances. Therefore, we need to consider the barriers that some students experience and adopt an equitable and inclusive approach, so that every student – not just the majority – can indeed have a fair chance to demonstrate learning.





Flexible



As a non-native language speaker, I find it hard to express myself within the limited word count for a given assignment (600 words). For that assignment, going over 600 words resulted in a 5-point deduction and going beyond 660 would result in receiving a “0”.



Rigid policies with such consequences penalise students who perhaps need additional words to explain/express themselves due to, for instance, studying in their second language. A better option could be to set the limit at 660 and then indicate that any words beyond that count would not be taken into consideration for grading. Therefore, the student’s actual performance level is based on what the student produced until 660 words, rather than reducing a grade punitively (and therefore altering performance accuracy).

What does it mean to be flexible?

When we are flexible in assessing and grading, we resist the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach and celebrate diversity and variability by making proactive and responsive adaptations. Flexibility is also about validity because if certain ways of assessing and grading create or maintain barriers for some students, these should be adjusted to eliminate obstacles, capture authentic learning, and provide fair and equitable access for all students.

Reflective Questions

- **Does our programme or course offer ways for students to learn from their mistakes and re-attempt a task to demonstrate improvement?**

In a student portfolio, this would allow students to collect additional datapoints as evidence towards demonstrating competence, in case existing datapoints do not provide sufficient evidence. In the case of an exam, this would mean that students are allowed to retake an exam no matter what grade they received the first time.

- **How do we assess the collection of datapoints in a student’s portfolio?**

Datapoints need to be reviewed on the improvements a student demonstrates from one point to the next in line with the learning outcomes of the programme. If a student improves in one of the learning objectives, they should not be punished for their lower grade earlier in the portfolio; the improvement should weigh the most in the final assessment.

- **Are students allowed to present self-selected evidence in their portfolio to help demonstrate progress towards competence?**

Allowing students to collect self-selected evidence promotes self-regulated learning, which is a key development area for students.



Literature

Feldman (2019), Meyer, Rose, & Gordon (2014).





Accurate



I was going to get an 8/10 but suddenly one point was deducted, and I asked why.

The teacher responded that since another student did way better, everyone's grade was lowered.



One student performing better does not mean another student's grade should be lowered, especially when it is possibly one statistical outlier since it doesn't accurately reflect the way that these students performed.

What does it mean to be accurate?

When we are accurate in assessing students, the grades students receive reflect their achievement against specific success criteria or learning objectives. We also must be aware of the 'illusion of objectivity' that weaves itself in the use of scoring tools with points, calculation methods, and weights as these contain many subjective decisions. Accuracy in grading includes grading individual learning (e.g., avoiding group grades and curving grades) using transparent tools (e.g., true rubrics), as well as evoking professional judgement (e.g., seeking perspective, engaging in a dialogue with students).

Reflective Questions

- **Do our assessments solely cover elements described in the learning objectives of our course?**

Including elements that are not part of a course's learning objectives decreases the accuracy of the assessment itself. The measure of what the student knows and can do is possibly polluted by elements such as attendance, late submission or following general instructions (also called 'hodgepodge' grading).

- **Are criteria-referenced rubrics used? Are these rubrics providing a description or illustration of the expected quality for each criteria level?**

Using rubrics which clearly describe the expected quality for each criteria level provides transparency for students and promotes assessing individual learning.

- **How does the assessment committee deliberate? When decisions are difficult to make, how can we engage in a dialogue with each other to ensure our conclusions are fair?**

Involving the student's coach or mentor in the assessment committee is one approach to increase the likelihood of a fairer deliberation.



Literature

Brookhart (1991), O'Connor, K. (2022), Valentine et al (2021), Valentine et al (2022), van der Vleuten et al (2012).





Inviting



When I get feedback, it is often impersonal and blunt, making me feel less confident in my abilities. When it is time to turn in my assignments, I don't feel like I really gave the best work that I could if I had gotten more informational feedback.



Giving constructive feedback to students is essential in creating a positive and welcoming learning environment. When feedback is given, it is important that teachers deliver their feedback in a supportive tone without being too blunt, so that the student does not feel inadequate and overly criticized. Not answering questions makes the student feel as if the teacher or professor is completely uninterested in their learning process, which in turn makes the student feel less interested in the class itself. Furthermore, it prevents the creation of any connection between the teacher and student; a connection which is necessary for an inviting learning environment.

What does it mean to be inviting?

When we are intentionally inviting, we consider that all learning is relational and that we need people to connect with one another, experience warmth and learn in non-judgemental and supportive environments where the channels of communication are open. This inviting stance is conveyed through our word choice, non-verbal communication, tone of voice, and through ways in which we create a psychological safe space and hold space for one another so everyone, not just the majority, can be who they are. In being inviting, we recognize that tools and techniques are not sufficient and that creating a pedagogical alliance is fundamental.

Reflective Questions

- **With learning being relational, have we considered sharing anything about ourselves and what we do beyond the classroom?**

Building a relationship with students develops teacher-student trust and provides a safer environment for students to share experiences and learn.

- **What actions have we undertaken to establish our classroom environment as one in which students can develop a growth mindset?**

This is an environment in which students see failure as an opportunity to learn and believe that skills and talents can be improved over time through effort and determination. In such an environment, students take time to reflect on success *and* failure, realising both are important steps towards mastering the learning goals of a course.



Literature

Leighton & Gómez (2018), Gravett & Winstone (2022).





Responsible

“I received good mid-term evaluations and got on well with the doctors. One of them even told me about her research and personal past. Towards the end of the internship, I asked her to fill in an assessment. She gave me a fail on the component ‘ability to build collegial relationships’. I was very emotional about this, because at no time did I have the idea that something had gone wrong. I asked for feedback, but she avoided the issue and wouldn’t adjust the grade. In the end, my final assessor decided I was good enough to continue, but my grade was kept low.”

(Story reported by Hok, 2022).

The criteria about what constitutes quality evidence for this ‘professional behaviour’ are not transparent, leaving plenty of room for the assessor’s bias. In addition, there is an absence of data and dialogue in this situation, leading to psychologically unsafe atmosphere for the student who receives a ‘silence treatment’.

What does it mean to be responsible?

When we are responsible, we respect the rights and dignity of all students and actively dismantle structural issues that make certain groups more vulnerable and less likely to succeed. We adopt a bias-resistant approach by examining our blind spots and seeking feedback, and consider dialogues (e.g., coaching conversations with students) as valid data points that enrich the evidence gathered, therefore mobilizing inter-subjectivity and qualitative data in the decision-making process. Responsibility can also come in the form of actively dismantling structures that derail us from being FAIR.

Reflective Questions

- **What steps have been taken to ensure that students are not negatively affected during the assessment and grading process?**

Topics to consider include being aware of cultural differences, language barriers and awarding bonus points for activities that are not related to the learning objectives of a course.

- **Do we engage in conversation with colleagues to check on our assessment and sometimes our decisions?**

Seeking feedback from colleagues on the assessments you created or decisions you made (four-eyes principle) can help to identify and reduce possible bias.

- **What assumptions are we making about our students? Are we engaged in exploring our own biases?**

There are several online tests available that allow you to gauge possible biases to help understand and reduce these moving forward. E.g., [Take the Implicit Bias Test](#) or [Explore the wheel of Power & Privilege](#).

Literature

Van Andel et al (2022), Bok, van der Vleuten & de Jong (2021), Valentine & Schuwirth (2019).



Responsible

“I received good mid-term evaluations and got on well with the doctors. One of them even told me about her research and personal past. Towards the end of the internship, I asked her to fill in an assessment. She gave me a fail on the component ‘ability to build collegial relationships’. I was very emotional about this, because at no time did I have the idea that something had gone wrong. I asked for feedback, but she avoided the issue and wouldn’t adjust the grade. In the end, my final assessor decided I was good enough to continue, but my grade was kept low.”

(Story reported by Hok, 2022).

The criteria about what constitutes quality evidence for this ‘professional behaviour’ are not transparent, leaving plenty of room for the assessor’s bias. In addition, there is an absence of data and dialogue in this situation, leading to psychologically unsafe atmosphere for the student who receives a ‘silence treatment’.

What does it mean to be responsible?

When we are responsible, we respect the rights and dignity of all students and actively dismantle structural issues that make certain groups more vulnerable and less likely to succeed. We adopt a bias-resistant approach by examining our blind spots and seeking feedback, and consider dialogues (e.g., coaching conversations with students) as valid data points that enrich the evidence gathered, therefore mobilizing inter-subjectivity and qualitative data in the decision-making process. Responsibility can also come in the form of actively dismantling structures that derail us from being FAIR.

Reflective Questions

- **What steps have been taken to ensure that students are not negatively affected during the assessment and grading process?**

Topics to consider include being aware of cultural differences, language barriers and awarding bonus points for activities that are not related to the learning objectives of a course.

- **Do we engage in conversation with colleagues to check on our assessment and sometimes our decisions?**

Seeking feedback from colleagues on the assessments you created or decisions you made (four-eyes principle) can help to identify and reduce possible bias.

- **What assumptions are we making about our students? Are we engaged in exploring our own biases?**

There are several online tests available that allow you to gauge possible biases to help understand and reduce these moving forward. E.g., [Take the Implicit Bias Test](#) or [Explore the wheel of Power & Privilege](#).

Literature

Van Andel et al (2022), Bok, van der Vleuten & de Jong (2021), Valentine & Schuwirth (2019).



References

Bok, H. G., van der Vleuten, C. P., & de Jong, L. H. (2021). "Prevention Is Better Than Cure": A Plea to Emphasize the Learning Function of Competence Committees in Programmatic Assessment. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2021.638455>

Brookhart, S. M. (1991). Grading practices and validity. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 70(1), 35-36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-3992.1991.tb00182.x>

Feldman, J. (2019). *Grading for Equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Gravett, K. & Winstone, N. E. (2022). Making connections: authenticity and alienation within students' relationships in higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 41(2), 360-374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1842335>

Hok, F. (2022, 12 May). That doctor who called Moroccans kutmarokkanen is just a good, critical doctor'. <https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2022/05/12/that-doctor-who-called-moroccans-kutmarokkanen-is-just-a-good-critical-doctor/>

Leighton, J.P., & Bustos Gómez, M.C. (2018). A pedagogical alliance for trust, wellbeing and the identification of errors for learning and formative assessment. *Educational Psychology*, 38, 381-406.

Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and Practice*. Wakefield, MA: CAST Professional Publishing.

O'Connor, K. (2022). *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades*. Winneconne, WI: First Educational Resources, LLC.

Valentine, N., Durning, S., Shanahan, E. M., & Schuwirth, L. (2021). Fairness in human judgement in assessment: a hermeneutic literature review and conceptual framework. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 26(2), 713-738.

Valentine, N., Durning, S. J., Shanahan, E. M., van der Vleuten, C., & Schuwirth, L. (2022). The pursuit of fairness in assessment: Looking beyond the objective. *Medical teacher*, 44(4), 353-359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2022.2031943>

Valentine, N., & Schuwirth, L. (2019). Identifying the narrative used by educators in articulating judgement of performance. *Perspectives on medical education*, 8(2), 83-89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0500-y>

van Andel, C. E. E., Born, M. P., van den Broek, W. W., & Stegers-Jager, K. M. (2022). Student ethnicity predicts social learning experiences, self-regulatory focus and grades. *Medical Education*, 56(2), 211-219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14666>

van der Vleuten, C. P. M., Schuwirth, L. W. T., Driessen, E. W., Dijkstra, J., Tigelaar, D., Baartman, L. K. J., & van Tartwijk, J. (2012). A model for programmatic assessment fit for purpose. *Medical Teacher*, 34(3), 205-214. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.652239>

About the Authors

Fanny (Education Developer) & Aki (Student Assistant) work at ErasmusX. Marijn (Learning Innovation Consultant) works at Rotterdam School of Management (RSM). The authors developed this guide as part of the Programmatic Assessment Community at EUR.



**Fanny
Passeport**
(She/Her)



**Aki
Negate**
(He/Him)



**Marijn van
den Doel**
(He/Him)



MADE BY ERASMUSX

ErasmusX is a team of daring and passionate people, and the driving force behind educational disruptive innovation for the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR).

Learn more
about us.



erasmusX

RSM

