

Queen's Principles of Assessment

An introduction to the principles

Assessment shapes what counts as learning and how it is demonstrated at Queen's University. These seven principles articulate a shared approach to the design and use of assessment to support student learning across the University. They are intended to guide instructors, learners, academic units, curriculum committees, and policy makers in how assessment is designed, implemented, and understood across the University.

The following principles were developed by a cross-University working group of the Senate Committee on Academic Development and Procedures (SCADP):

1. Assessment is a relational practice that supports learning and growth, grounded in Indigenous perspectives of knowledge sharing that emphasize respect, relevance, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.
2. Assessments respect diverse ways of knowing.
3. Assessments are intellectually challenging and support the progressive development of learning.
4. Assessments generate trustworthy evidence of learning.
5. Assessment expectations are clear, and learners are evaluated consistently, transparently, and fairly.
6. Assessment feedback is actionable and supports student learning and recognition.
7. Assessments are connected across courses and reflect professional, disciplinary, and civic contexts.

The group drew on current assessment research, practices at peer institutions, and extensive dialogue among its members, reflecting the perspectives of learners, instructors, staff, librarians, and academic leaders. Importantly, the principles are centred on the Indigenous 4Rs Framework—Respect, Reciprocity, Relevance, and Responsibility—which understands assessment as a relational practice between learners and educators. Within this framework, assessment becomes more than evaluation; it is a collaborative process that honours relationships and fosters mutual learning and growth. These principles represent a shared, evidence-informed understanding of how assessment can best support learning at Queen's University.

In higher education, assessment serves multiple purposes that extend beyond the communication of achievement through grades. The act of assessment is an integral part

of the learning process itself. These principles emphasize assessment’s role in promoting learning and development rather than prioritizing ranking or performance alone. While grades can summarize achievement, they do not, by themselves, foster learning. Accordingly, these principles focus on assessment practices that help learners understand their progress, strengthen their learning, and provide opportunities for further engagement

Assessment is multifaceted, and the principles, though presented as discrete, are deeply interconnected in practice. This interdependence is represented through the honeycomb model, where each principle both supports, and is strengthened by the others, while the Indigenous 4Rs Framework forms core. As a result, some ideas may appear across multiple principles—an intentional reflection of their integration. Just as the strength of a honeycomb lies in the interlocking structure of its cells, so the effectiveness of these principles emerges from their combined application.



Credit: The honeycomb centres four Indigenous principles of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

The principles are not intended to function as prescriptive rules. Instead, they are meant to guide assessment practices at the course, program, department, and Faculty levels. Instructors should be familiar with the full set of principles, recognizing that not every principle will apply equally to every assessment, and no single assessment should attempt to reflect them all. Rather, the principles are designed to inform professional judgement, with particular principles shaping assessment design where they are most relevant.

Queen's principles of assessment

Each of the seven principles below is described in relation to both educator and learner responsibilities, recognizing that effective assessment is a shared responsibility.

Principle 1: Assessment is a relational practice that supports learning and growth, grounded in Indigenous perspectives of knowledge sharing that emphasize respect, relevance, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

Effective assessment acknowledges the shared responsibility of learners and educators to engage meaningfully in knowledge sharing. In Indigenous ways of knowing, knowledge is understood as discipline-relevant, life-centred, and grounded in respect. Learning is inherently relational, rooted in connection and sustained through contribution, responsibility to community and place, and the recognition of story as a vital means of sharing knowledge.

These commitments originate in scholarship on meaningful engagement between Indigenous peoples and higher education institutions, originally described by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991). Because assessment involves one person evaluating another, educators hold that authority in trust and are responsible for exercising it with care, fairness, and regard for the learning relationship.

Educator responsibilities: Cultivate respectful learning relationships and design assessments that recognize learning as relational, grounded in connection among learners, educators, communities, and knowledge, and accountable to practice and diverse ways of demonstrating understanding. Where appropriate, create opportunities for learners to situate their learning in relation to place, purpose, and community.

Learner responsibilities: Engage actively and ethically in your learning process. Consider your relationships to communities, places, and knowledge, asking who you are learning for and why that matters. Where given the opportunity, show your learning in ways that connect to the people, places, or practices your learning touches. Reflect on how your knowledge can contribute to and move forward the communities where you are a member, with respect for all relations.

Principle 2: Assessments respect diverse and disciplinary ways of knowing.

Disciplines and cultures value different forms of knowledge and approaches to learning. Assessment can respect these differences by providing varied and equitable ways for learners to demonstrate what they know and can do, within disciplinary standards and considering the institutional and practical constraints that shape assessment design. Realising these commitments depends on instructional conditions that make thoughtful assessment design feasible.

Educator responsibilities: All learners should have an equitable opportunity to demonstrate their learning. Assessment design should anticipate diversity and accessibility needs and provide accommodations consistent with current Queen's policies and legislated requirements, enabling learners to generate equivalent evidence of learning without lowering standards. Where pedagogically appropriate, offer flexibility in format or medium and make transparent how each option aligns with the same outcomes and criteria, considering relevant constraints such as academic integrity requirements, cohort size, available teaching support, and professional or accreditation standards.

Learner responsibilities: When possible, choose the format that allows you to best demonstrate your learning within disciplinary norms. Request and when needed, use accommodations appropriately, and produce equivalent evidence that meets the stated outcomes and criteria.

Principle 3: Assessments are intellectually challenging and support the progressive development of learning.

Effective assessments require learners to apply, analyze, create, and reflect at a level appropriate to the course and program. They extend thinking, invite intellectual risk-taking and build progressively toward course and program-level expectations. Challenging

assessments remain attainable through effort, structured support, and timely feedback, promoting learner growth, rather than discouragement.

Educator responsibilities: Design tasks that align with course learning outcomes and are appropriately demanding for the level of study. Break complex tasks into manageable steps where needed. Provide clear criteria and learner feedback that support improvement.

Learner responsibilities: Engage actively with challenging tasks and take intellectual risks. Seek and apply the feedback you receive. Use criteria and learning outcomes to guide effort and monitor progress. Make use of available academic and wellbeing supports when needed.

Principle 4: Assessments generate trustworthy evidence of learning.

Assessment tasks are designed to make each learner's own understanding visible, and clearly their own. Assessments may invite originality, imagination, and multiple pathways to demonstrate learning, provided they allow each learner's genuine capability to be seen. Where collaboration or tools are permitted, assessment design should preserve the ability for an educator to distinguish each learner's contribution and understanding, from work that merely simulates it. As more tools become capable of generating plausible responses that do not reflect a learner's own understanding, assessment should also develop learners' capacity to evaluate the quality and authenticity of work, both their own and others'. Clarity about what tools, collaboration, and resources are permitted is fundamental to the integrity of what assessment can show.

Educator responsibilities: Clearly communicate what tools and collaboration are permitted, and what must be completed independently. Design assessments that make individual understanding visible even when supports are allowed. Use criteria and exemplars to clarify expectations of quality work.

Learner responsibilities: Demonstrate your own understanding clearly and make your individual contributions clear. Follow the stated rules for each assessment. Take responsibility for ensuring submitted work represents your own learning. Develop your ability to evaluate the quality and authenticity of work, including your own.

Principle 5: Assessment expectations are clear, and learners are evaluated consistently, transparently, and fairly.

Assessments are designed to align with course learning outcomes and to yield fair, transparent, and consistent evaluations. Transparency anchors this alignment: expectations, criteria, standards and how grades are to be determined are visible to learners before learning begins. When work is returned or results communicated, the reasoning behind evaluations is made explicit, helping learners understand how criteria were applied. Criteria are applied consistently by educators across tasks, sections, and over time. Fairness, the assurance that all learners are evaluated against the same visible expectations, is the foundation of accuracy and consistency.

Instructors provide opportunities for learners to reflect on not only what they produce but how and why they learn. Over time, learners are expected to use these opportunities to develop their own judgement about what good work looks like, becoming less reliant on instructor feedback alone.

Educator responsibilities: Make expectations, criteria, standards, and how grades are determined visible before learning begins. Make reasoning behind evaluations explicit when work is returned. Align assessment tasks to course outcomes. Apply criteria consistently across tasks, sections, and over time. Engage in grading practices that promote shared, reliable evaluation of learner work, and provide opportunities for learners to reflect on not only what they produce but *how* and *why* they learn.

Learner responsibilities: Use posted expectations and criteria to guide preparation and self-assess work before submitting. Use the reasoning provided on returned work to understand how criteria were applied. Over time, develop your independent judgment about what good work looks like, becoming a more independent judge of your own work.

Principle 6: Assessment feedback is actionable and supports student growth and recognition.

Feedback on assessments allows both learners and instructors to see what and how well learning has occurred, understand how to demonstrate it effectively, identify progress, and target improvement. Assessments and grades are connected but distinct: assessment informs learning, while grades summarize it for external communication. Recognition of achievement rests primarily on evidence of learning in relation to course learning outcomes. The volume, timing, and nature of assessment and feedback affect both learner

and educator wellbeing, and thoughtful design ensures that assessment demands remain realistic for both.

Educator responsibilities: Provide feedback that is timely and actionable for the learner, and sustainable for the teaching team. The frequency, depth, and format of feedback should reflect the teaching context, remain realistic for the teaching team, and be applied consistently across learners.

Learner responsibilities: Submit work that represents your own learning, calibrated against criteria and exemplars, and use feedback to plan specific next steps and demonstrate progress toward course outcomes on subsequent assessments.

Principle 7: Assessments are connected across courses and reflect professional, disciplinary, and civic contexts.

Course-level assessments contribute to program-level outcomes. Programs coordinate the progressive development of these outcomes through scaffolding, alignment, and clear connections across courses.

Within and across courses, assessments prepare learners for professional practice, active civic participation, and lifelong learning beyond the university. Assessment designs incorporate relevant contexts, audiences, and standards so learners can understand how evidence of learning transfers across courses and into professional and community settings.

Educator responsibilities: Connect assessment tasks to program outcomes and to relevant professional, disciplinary, or community contexts and standards. Coordinate sequencing where possible to support progressive skill development.

Learner responsibilities: Make connections across courses and articulate your own progress toward program outcomes. Present work in forms appropriate to relevant professional or community audiences and consider how your learning can contribute to those contexts.

Using the principles in practice

These principles are not a checklist to be completed or a standard against which instructors are evaluated. They are a shared institutional framework. Their value lies in the conversations they make possible and the questions they help people ask at different levels of the University.

The principles are intended to be useful at multiple levels, from the design of a single assessment task to the development of a new degree program. The table below illustrates how different members of the Queen's community might draw on the principles in their work.

The table below illustrates how different members of the Queen's community might draw on the principles in their work. The groupings are meant to be useful, not limiting: if an idea appears under a different audience, it may be just as relevant to you.

Who	How the principles can help
Learners	<p>The principles describe what learners can reasonably expect from assessment at Queen's: that tasks will be intellectually appropriate and clearly explained (Principles 3 and 5), that feedback will be timely and usable (Principle 6), that assessment demands will be realistic for learners (Principle 6), and that assessments will be designed with fairness and accessibility in mind (Principle 2).</p> <p>Learners can draw on the principles to articulate concerns about assessment practices, to engage meaningfully as student representatives on curriculum committees and Senate bodies, and to understand the shared responsibilities that underpin the learner responsibilities described in each principle.</p>
Individual instructors	<p>Use the principles as a design reference when building or revising a course. Ask whether assessments are intellectually demanding and scaffolded appropriately (Principle 3), whether feedback is actionable and assessment demands are realistic for the teaching context (Principle 6), and whether expectations are visible before learning begins (Principle 5). Finally, consider whether the assessment supports a genuine and ethical exchange of knowledge between learner and educator (Principle 1).</p>
Teaching teams and course coordinators	<p>Where multiple people contribute to teaching or grading a course, including teaching assistants, the principles support a shared understanding of assessment expectations with evaluative authority exercised with the same</p>

	<p>care and consistency required of any individual instructor (Principle 1). Principle 5 (consistent, fair evaluation) and Principle 4 (trustworthy evidence) provide a common framework for aligning marking criteria, calibrating grades across sections, and onboarding those joining a teaching team mid-stream. Course coordinators can use the principles to structure grader training and to document the rationale for assessment design decisions.</p>
<p>Term adjunct instructors</p>	<p>Term adjuncts are responsible for the full range of assessment design and grading within their courses, often with limited institutional orientation and without the continuity that allows assessment practices to be refined over time. The principles offer a concise framework for making sound assessment decisions independently: are expectations clear before learning begins (Principle 5)? Is feedback actionable within the constraints of the teaching context (Principle 6)? Does the assessment approach respect the disciplinary context and diverse learners (Principle 2) and reflect that evaluating another person’s learning is a relational act requiring care, fairness, and shared responsibility (Principle 1)?</p>
<p>Departments and curriculum committees</p>	<p>Map program-level assessments against the principles to identify gaps: Are assessments scaffolded progressively (Principle 3)? Do they connect to professional and civic contexts (Principle 7)? Are diverse ways of knowing reflected across the program (Principle 2)? This mapping can inform curriculum reviews and support continuous improvement conversations at the departmental level. Departments can also ask whether the program’s assessment practices, taken together, reflect a respectful and reciprocal approach to knowledge exchange (Principle 1).</p> <p>The principles also support departments in naming and examining the assessment approaches distinctive to their discipline or sub-discipline, such as the use of case studies in professional fields, moot court exercised in law, or studio critique in the arts. Identifying these practices explicitly can help programs articulate the pedagogical rationale for assessment choices that might otherwise be taken for granted.</p>
<p>Instructional designers</p>	<p>Instructional designers support faculty in developing assessments that are coherent, equitable, and aligned with learning outcomes. The principles offer a shared vocabulary for those consultations: designers can prompt conversations about accessibility and diverse ways of demonstrating learning (Principle 2), ask whether assessments are appropriately scaffolded and intellectually demanding (Principle 3), and ensure expectations and criteria are made visible before learning begins (Principle 5).</p>

	<p>When working with instructors in large or multi-section courses, the volume, frequency, and format of feedback are design decisions with real consequences for teaching workload and learner experience alike, and the principles support explicit attention to those trade-offs (Principle 6). The principles also support conversations about the relational dimensions of assessment: decisions about how learners are evaluated carry ethical, not only pedagogical, weight (Principle 1).</p>
<p>New program or curricular modification proponents</p>	<p>Use the principles when completing Queen’s University Quality Assurance Process (QUQAP) submissions. Demonstrating alignment between proposed assessments and these principles strengthens the pedagogical rationale in program proposals and major modification documentation and helps reviewers evaluate coherence between learning outcomes and assessment design.</p>
<p>External reviewers (QUQAP cyclical program reviews or accreditation)</p>	<p>Programs undergoing cyclical review are expected to demonstrate the quality and coherence of their assessment practices. External reviewers can use these principles as a reference point for evaluating whether a program’s assessment approach is consistent with the institution’s stated values - particularly around alignment (Principle 3), trustworthiness of evidence (Principle 4), transparency (Principle 5), and progression across courses (Principle 7). Reviewers may also consider whether the program understands assessment as a relational practice (not only a measurement function) and whether evaluative authority is exercised with appropriate care and accountability (Principle 1). The principles do not prescribe specific methods, but they articulate what Queen’s considers sound practice and provide reviewers with a shared institutional framework.</p>
<p>Faculties and Schools</p>	<p>The principles offer a common language for Faculty-level conversations about assessment practice. Deans and Associate Deans can use them to frame priorities in Faculty teaching and learning plans, to orient new faculty and term adjuncts, and to provide context for policy conversations about academic integrity, accommodation, and generative AI.</p>
<p>Academic support and learner-facing professional staff</p>	<p>Staff in units such as Student Academic Success Services, Student Accessibility Services, and the Registrar’s Office interact regularly with learners on assessment-related matters, such as accommodations, extensions, grade concerns, and appeals. The principles, particularly Principle 2 (diverse ways of knowing, accessibility) and Principle 5 (transparent expectations and consistent evaluation), provide relevant context for those conversations. Understanding the institution’s stated</p>

	<p>commitments helps these staff support learners more effectively and identify when a learner’s concern reflects a potential gap between practice and principle.</p>
<p>Senate committees</p>	<p>The Senate Committee on Academic Development and Procedures (SCADP) and the Senate Cyclical Program Review Committee (SCPRC) can use the principles as a values-based reference when reviewing committee business or developing assessment-related policy. The principles provide a foundation for evaluating whether proposed policies are consistent with the University’s stated commitments about learner learning, and for identifying where institutional practice has diverged from institutional values.</p>
<p>Community partners and professional organizations</p>	<p>Partners supervising work-integrated learning placements or evaluating capstone projects can use these principles to understand the assessment framework that shapes how learner work is prepared and evaluated at Queen’s. Principle 7 is particularly relevant, as it frames assessment as a bridge between academic and professional or community contexts. Partners providing informal feedback on learner performance should note that their role is typically formative: they contribute to learning without determining a grade. Where partners hold a formal evaluative role, coordination with the course instructor ensures alignment with the learning outcomes and criteria established in the course.</p>

Further conversations the principles can enable

Beyond their immediate practical uses, the principles are intended to open and sustain broader conversations about assessment at Queen's. Several pressing questions in higher education are brought into sharper focus when there is a shared institutional framework to anchor them.

Generative AI and large language models. The emergence of generative AI tools has unsettled many conventional assumptions about what assessments measure. The principles, particularly Principle 4 (trustworthy evidence of student learning) and Principle 2 (diverse and disciplinary ways of knowing) offer a grounded starting point for evaluating which existing assessments remain fit for purpose, which need redesign, and what new forms of evidence might be appropriate. Rather than framing the question as "is AI use permitted," the principles redirect attention to the prior question: what is this assessment actually trying to show, and does it still show that?

Assessment workload and saturation. Students and instructors alike have raised concerns about the volume and pacing of assessment. Principle 3 (intellectually demanding, progressively developmental) and Principle 6 (actionable feedback that is sustainable for the teaching team) together provide a basis for conversations about whether the aggregate assessment load within a course or across a program is coherent and manageable. The principles can support departments in evaluating not just whether individual assessments are well-designed, but whether the cumulative demand is reasonable.

Policy development. The principles are foundational, not procedural. But they can identify where institutional policy is absent or unclear. For example, the commitment to actionable, timely feedback in Principle 6 raises the question of whether there should be an institutional expectation about when in the term learners receive their first substantive feedback. The principles do not answer that question, but they make it a principled one rather than an arbitrary one. SCADP and other governance bodies can use this framework to identify where further policy work is warranted.

The relationship between grades and learning. The principles explicitly distinguish assessment from grading: assessment informs learning, while grades summarize it for external communication (Principle 6). This distinction creates space for conversations that are often difficult to have without a shared framework: what grades are actually measuring, whether current grading practices accurately reflect learning, and what the evidence says about grade distributions over time. These are conversations with implications for academic standards, credential integrity, and institutional trust, all of which connect to the University's core commitments under these principles.

Scholarship informing the principles

Note: The references below represent an initial body of institutional policies and scholarly literature consulted in the development of this document. They are illustrative rather than comprehensive and are not intended to constitute an exhaustive review of the field.

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Working group membership

Terms of reference guided membership, which specified that the working group should be composed of:

- 1) One or more SCADP members with relevant expertise;
- 2) Representatives from a diversity of disciplines and Faculties or Schools;
- 3) An educational developer;
- 4) An assessment specialist;
- 5) Student representation;
- 6) An Indigenous scholar and educator; and
- 7) Vice-Provost (Teaching and Learning), who served as Chair.

Membership

- Kevin Banks, Associate Dean, Faculty of Law.
- Katrina Carbone, Graduate Student, Education.
- Yasmine Djerbal, Associate Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning.
- Susan Hedley, Assessment and Evaluation Lead, Smith School of Business.
- Corinne Laverty, Librarian.
- Kelly Maracle, Faculty member, Indigenous Knowledges and Perspectives. Indigenous scholar and educator.
- Erin Meger, Faculty member, Computing.
- Oluwamisimi Oluwole, Undergraduate student, Nursing & SCADP member.
- Kelley Packalen, Faculty member, Smith School of Business and Special Advisor to the VPTL on Academic Integrity.
- Heidi Ploeg, Faculty member, Smith Engineering.
- Colleen Renihan, Faculty member, Drama and Music.
- Michelle Searle, Faculty member, Education & SCADP member.
- Philippe Di Stefano, Faculty member, Physics, Engineering Physics & Astronomy.
- Gavan Watson, Chair, Vice-Provost (Teaching and Learning).

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