

Early Assessment: Protocol

This document, directed at all Stellenbosch University academics involved in the teaching and assessment of first-year students, aims to explain the **early assessment** (EA) system, and to answer some of the questions about this initiative.

EA is described in the First-year Academy report as tests or **any other method** of assessment that can give a good indication of which students might be high risk cases in certain modules, in order to ensure that the required help and support is provided early enough. This description thus also explains the purpose of the early assessment process.

1. Why assess?

Before we can talk about **early assessment** we have to consider possible reasons for assessing student learning.

The Stellenbosch University Assessment Policy cites four purposes for assessment namely:

- Diagnostic assessment, thus for the purpose of determining suitable support or remedial actions
- Formative assessment, thus assessment **for** learning
- Summative assessment, thus assessment **of** learning
- To provide feedback thus, assessment for the advancement of quality.

These objectives often overlap with one assessment task speaking to more than one purpose. Thus, assessment for grading is only one of the foci of assessment practice and the guiding and encouraging of sound approaches to effective learning is of equal relevance.

2. Why Early Assessment?

Research has shown that a large component of students who do not achieve success in the first year have often started struggling in the first few weeks at university. With the early identification of students who are most likely to need additional support, timely assistance can be provided and their chances of long term success can be improved.

Early assessment also gives a signal to the student, saying to them "if you continue in the same way, this is what your results are most likely going to look like at the end". In other words it is a form of performance feedback, an indication of how effective their approach is while they are still in the position to make the required changes, or to find additional help.

Thus, it should be seen as low-stakes assessment – assessment designed to promote student learning, making a small (or no) contribution to the class and final marks. Students should realize that they are being given an opportunity to revisit their approaches and commitment towards their learning.

In contrast, high stakes assessment is defined as testing used primarily as a measure to determine grade retention, promotion and certification.

So, ideally EA results should provide feedback for the lecturer and the student, as well as the module coordinator, departmental head and faculty management.¹

¹ In 2007 the person(s) responsible for the student's account received a letter with the student's EA marks. See Addendum A for an example of the letter with the EA marks that was sent to the parent/student.

This feedback includes aspects such as:

For the student:

- How I am coping (its volume, transition from school to university, academic demands, etc.)
- The nature of university assessment
- The required standard

For the lecturer:

- How the students are coping
- What are they finding difficult
- What they already know

For the module coordinator/department/faculty management:

- Modules that students are finding difficult
- The potential of the first-year intake
- Reflection and curriculum renewal

However for this to be the case, there are certain conditions that have to be met: (1) the assessment has to take place early enough, and (2), it has to give *reliable* results.

3. How to make EA work?

Ideally EA should be integrated into the existing structures within module e.g. tutorials, practicals, assignments or tasks or even web-based tasks. The use of smaller, varied (if possible) assessment tasks might, for example, be considered. An early assessment opportunity needs not be a full test, or essay, but could focus on a single, important aspect, and could comprise a small test, taken down in class time (if practical), such as an adapted, and graded, classroom assessment technique.

Some lecturers are concerned that the assessment takes place too early in the academic year and that they will not, at that point, have covered sufficient content to conduct meaningful assessment. Many modules assume that a certain amount of background knowledge has to be in place to ensure success e.g. reading skills, writing skills, mathematical skills, or even familiarity with parts of the content. In these cases a background knowledge probe (not factored into their class mark) might give useful results, especially for the purpose of deciding what help to offer.

It might also be useful to include the assessment of some of the generic skills (SAQA's Critical outcomes that are written into all programmes offered at the University) into the EA.

At all times, the purpose of each early assessment task, as well as its contribution (or not) to the class mark and final mark should be communicated to the students.

4. Suitable methods of assessment

The EA in a module should be guided by the set outcomes for the module. Students should be able to recognize that the assessment is seeking to provide them with an early measure of the extent to which they are grappling successfully with the expected outcomes for the module.

Ideally the EA should be aligned with the formal semester test and exams as far as is possible. In other words, the EA should reflect an assessment approach that will be used in high stakes

assessment later in the module. To this end it is necessary to keep in mind that if, for example, practical marks are typically significantly higher than test marks, the use of practical marks alone may produce an inflated result for students.

But, it is not necessarily required that EA uses the same methods of assessment as the high stakes assessment. For example, it might indeed be possible to effectively use multiple choice tests even in a module where most of the assessment tasks later on will be in the form of essays. It will be very important, however, to clearly communicate this to the students.

If at all achievable, the early assessment mark should preferably be compiled from a number of smaller assessment tasks, utilizing different assessment methods e.g a selection including a tutorial test, a practical report, a web based multiple choice test, a graded classroom assessment technique, etc.

5. Do these results get included in year/semester marks?

Irrespective of whether the EA marks are factored into the year/semester marks (and possibly it would make most sense to include them), it is important to realize that the focus of the EA is **formative**, that is to encourage effective student learning.

6. What do we do with this information?

Even though 2007 was a pilot year, many significant interventions resulted from the EA results with many departments and faculties going to considerable lengths to respond accordingly. Ideally the results should be discussed in the Faculty TLC (LOK) which typically consists of selected lecturers of first-year classes. Examples of interventions that took place in 2007 (some of these were already in place prior to 2007) include:

- Individual consultation with students performing poorly across all modules (this was more typical in the professional programmes and/or where there were smaller numbers)
- Electronic communication via departments with students who are struggling encouraging them to either make contact with their lectures, join tutorial groups, join a mentor-tutor group, meet with a counselor from CSCD, etc.
- Web-based support provided on myMaties.com
- Appointment of a designated Coordinator: Undergraduate studies (EMS)
- Implementation of additional tutorials
- Review of tutorial structures
- Training of tutors
- Faculty-based mentor support
- Referral of students to CSCD short courses on time management, study skills, preparing for tests and exams, etc.

7. Planning for 2008

The final date for the **submission of EA marks for 2008** for all first-year modules is **Thursday, 20 March**. This is the last day of the first term. Please keep in mind that the semester ends on 16 May thus any later date for EA would seriously limit the potential impact of the results. Marks will be made available to students and all academic staff via the portals on Monday, 31 March 2008.

To this end the following is recommended:

- That all module outlines for 2008 (first semester) clearly indicate the EA as part of the formal assessment for the module;
- That it is clearly communicated to the students at the start of the semester what the EA is, why it is done and how they should interpret it;
- That faculties, possibly within the TLC structure, encourage discussion amongst lecturers as to the most suitable assessment methods thus encouraging open debate about teaching and learning.

Concluding thoughts

The EA is meant to serve as an educational tool providing feedback across all strata of the university. However, there is an indisputable sensitivity to the fact that it can increase the already heavy burden of lecturers who at first-year level often teach the largest classes. For this reason lecturers are encouraged to make the EA work for them by seeking to seamlessly incorporate the practice of formative assessment into everyday classroom activity, by using technology, by applying for marking and/or administrative support where appropriate and by ensuring that the activities around EA remain sustainable and realistic. In the case of practical modules, such as in music, it might be necessary to follow a flexible approach with respect to EA. To this end, lecturers are welcome to contact the CTL advisors who are linked to their faculties (see Addendum B) or to contact the First-year Academy coordinator, Susan van Schalkwyk (scvs@sun.ac.za) directly.

24 October 2007

Susan van Schalkwyk

Hanelie Adendorff.

Addendum A: Example of the letter sent to the parents/student with the EA results

Dear Parent/Student

EARLY ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Early Assessment (EA) has been conducted for almost all first-year modules for the first time this year. It is an attempt to give students an idea of how they are progressing and where there may be areas that need to be addressed – this in good time before the official June exams which often send out a warning signal that is too late. It is, therefore, a diagnostic process.

The marks reflected on the enclosed letter provide an overview of progress made during the first 4-6 weeks of the academic year for each first-year student. The results could reflect a single assessment opportunity or a series of assessments undertaken as part of tutorial or practical classes. **Please note:** No student will be asked to leave the University or cancel his or her studies on the basis of these results.

The modules for which the student is registered, the Early Assessment mark achieved (shown as a %) as well as the average mark achieved for all students in the module (shown as a %) are given. In some instances a mark may not be reflected and the ‘comments’ column will indicate either ‘No Early Assessment’ or ‘No Early Assessment mark’. This means that either the module concerned did not conduct early assessment or, in the case of the latter comment, that the student was ill or did not attend class on the day that the assessment was conducted. The module average is provided so that you are able to interpret the mark against the background of what was achieved for all of the students in the module. It is important that this interpretation is done as in some instances, marks are quite high.

Where the individual’s marks are consistently below the module average mark, students are encouraged to reflect on their study practices to date. Questions to be asked include: Are you attending your classes regularly? Do you go to lectures well-prepared? Do you work through your notes after each class? Are you attending one of the many tutorial and other support classes offered in several departments across campus?

There may of course be many other reasons why students are struggling at this stage of the academic year. To this end, students are encouraged to make use of the **First-year help feature** that is on the student portal (www.mymaties.com). This site provides the opportunity for students to share their concerns and immediately receive feedback on where they can go to find support.

The University remains committed to an ongoing partnership with its students and parents to enhance student success.

Yours sincerely

J du Toit

Addendum B: First-year Academy TLC (LOK) Representatives

Faculty	Representative	e-Mail	Extension	CTL-person
AgriSciences	Dr Renate Hillerman-Rebello	rhillerm@sun.ac.za	5824	Dr Francois Cilliers/Dr Hanelie Adendorff
Economic and Management Sciences	Prof Pierre Olivier	po@sun.ac.za	3428	Ms Noline Hermann
Health Sciences	Prof Marietjie de Villiers	mrdv@sun.ac.za	021 9389035	Ms Susan van Schalkwyk
Engineering	Prof Hansie Knoetze	jhk@sun.ac.za	4488	Ms Liezl van Dyk
Arts and Social Sciences	Prof Christine Anthonissen	ca5@sun.ac.za	2006	Dr Antoinette vd Merwe
Natural Science	Prof Andrew Crouch	amc@sun.ac.za	3535	Dr Francois Cilliers/Dr Hanelie Adendorff
Education	Prof Arend Carl	aec2@sun.ac.za	2285	Mr John Ruiters
Law	Prof MM de Gama	mmdg@sun.ac.za	3214	Ms Melanie Petersen
Theology	Dr Robert Vosloo	rrvosloo@sun.ac.za	3256	Ms Idilette van Deventer
Military Science	Mnr Sam Tshehla	samuel@ma2.sun.ac.za	022 702 3064	Mr Gert Young