

Mitigating Assessment Anxiety in First-Year University Students

A resource guide for teaching staff

Many first-year students find the transition from high school to university challenging. For instance, the assessment structure is often quite different from the one they were used to in high school, with the most distinct differences being:

- Holistic integration of knowledge vs. discretization of credits
- “Fail is fail” vs. re-sits of assessments
- Self-regulated learning vs. being reminded that assignments are due
- Low feedback (hands-off) vs. high feedback (hands-on) environment
- Few vs. many exemplars
- Large classes vs. small classes

Not surprisingly, the transition to the university assessment regime can be anxiety-provoking for students, as it may not be clear to them what to expect and how to succeed in university-level assessments.

Lecturers and other teaching (support) staff can assist in mitigating first-year student assessment anxiety. Below are a few considerations:

Being familiar with NCEA content and structure

Is your topic taught at high school? If so, what is being taught, what are the expectations placed on students? What does it mean to get an Excellence / Merit / Achieve in the various standards?

Teaching for transfer

NCEA's structure of individually assessed credits encourages siloing of knowledge. Students may have the knowledge or skill to

solve a problem, but can't access it because they don't recognise the problem as one that requires that particular knowledge or skill. By making explicit links between concepts, knowledge areas, and showing how they are connected we can help students transfer knowledge and skills from one domain to the next.

Setting clear expectations

Students often know that university is different from high school, but they don't necessarily recognise *what* those differences are. Unless this information is made clear to them, students are likely to default to study strategies that have been successful for them in the past. In some instances, this reverts to rote learning (memorization) rather than procedural and applied thinking. One way of doing this is making exemplars and rubrics available so that students become familiar with the criteria by which they are held accountable, and can see the standard of work that is expected.

Communicating the purpose of an assessment

As presented in our research report, students bring to university certain anxieties about types of assessments, with invigilated tests and oral presentations at the top of the list. Importantly, the fact that students are anxious about certain assessments *does* not mean that such assessments should be avoided in practice! It is important, however, to scaffold students into such tasks. Knowing in advance that students will likely anticipate performance concerns is a good first step.

Communicating the purpose of an assessment and specific strategies how students could effectively prepare may be useful in such instances.

Building student confidence

Students' academic self-efficacy drives departure intentions more than actual performance. Scaffolding learning and assessments with clear expectations and clearly identified support (e.g. the university's support units) is critical for this. Encourage students to seek help and model this in class. For many, modelling what it takes to be an independent learner can improve a community of support while also removing the stigma of support services as directed only for remedial students.

Identifying a clear contact person for the course

Many large courses are taught by multiple instructors, and first-year students do not necessarily know or understand what a course coordinator does. It may be beneficial for academic staff to specify these roles from the beginning of a course so that students know where to go when they face a question or concern. In general, communicating how-to procedures can help students feel more included, prepared, and ready for their academic transition.

Creating a sense of belonging

Many students in first year feel quite anonymous, going from a 30-person high school class to a massive lecture theatre. Anything that can be done to create a more 'small-group' feel can be very helpful. This could take the form of encouraging students

to form study groups, doing group work as part of the course, or working closely with tutors (who typically have much smaller student numbers) to make sure that students feel like an individual, rather than a number.

The learning environment matters

Certain university students will be prone to assessment-related anxiety as they may already suffer from an anxiety or mood disorder. As described in our full research report, however, assessment-related anxiety is still sensitive to the learning environment. How a course is designed and its assessments are implemented can have a meaningful impact on students' experience during the transition to university.

Knowing the referral process

If a student appears to be struggling with anxiety, academic staff should familiarise themselves with the mental health referral process at their respective institution. Being aware of what this process entails, who the lecturer might contact, and how the lecturer might follow up involving a distressed student may be especially beneficial.

References

- Brogd, E., Soutter, A., Masters, S.L., Lawson, W. (2014). *Teaching for numeracy and mathematics transfer in tertiary science*. Ako Aotearoa Regional Hub Project Fund report.
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This resource has been developed as part of the "Understanding assessment anxiety during the student transition to University" by Valerie Sotardi and Erik Brogd, University of Canterbury.

Go to www.ako.ac.nz to find out more about this project and download all resources: <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/understanding-assessment-anxiety/>

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