

ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange) is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) based in the Business School at Oxford Brookes University. It was set up in summer 2005 with a £4.5 million award from HEFCE in recognition of good practice based on pedagogic research into aspects of assessment.

The work of ASKe has been organised into three strands of activity

Strand 1: Replicating proven practice through

- A pre-assessment intervention which the ASKe team has shown to work. A simple intervention such as a marking workshop prior to undertaking an assessed task can significantly increase students' understanding of the assessment criteria and improve their performance of the task. ASKe has supported the development of this kind of intervention on all Business School programmes, as well as in three other Schools (Built Environment, Health and Social Care, and Westminster Institute of Education). This same support is available for the remaining four Schools plus five partner institutions.
- The Academic Conduct Officer (ACO) system which the ASKe team is further developing, in addition to researching effective ways of encouraging and promoting academic integrity.
- The Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) programme, long used by the Business School, which ASKe has extended across the School. Support is also offered to help at least three other Schools introduce PAL.

Strand 2: Pioneering evidence-based practice

Appropriate development projects will be funded, both within the Business School and across the whole University. Projects will seek out and support ways to develop and enhance assessment practices.

Strand 3: Cultivating a community of practice

The ASKe team has developed a new, £2 million building on Brookes' Wheatley Campus. This provides a physical environment to support student learning outside structured class time, in which staff and students can meet to develop a shared understanding of academic standards.

But it's more than just a building. The ASKe team argues that only a true community of practice will ensure shared understanding, so ASKe (in conjunction with other parties at Brookes) is also developing the social environment necessary to colonise this physical space.

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Cultivating community: why it's worth doing, and three ways of getting there



Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange
The Centre for Excellence in Assessment at the Business School



Why should we cultivate community?

Evidence from the literature and practice shows that student involvement and a strong sense of community are highly significant factors in students' academic success:

- individual learning is facilitated through social interactions and involvement in communities of practice¹
- student-to-student interaction and staff-to-student interaction engender involvement, which is the most significant predictor of student success²
- encouraging student-staff contact is considered a fundamental principle of good teaching and learning³
- a good understanding of assessment criteria and standards significantly improves students' academic performance, and such understandings are developed and rooted within academic communities⁴.

¹ Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. MA: Harvard University Press.
Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
² Astin, A. (1997) *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
³ Chickering, A.W. & Gamzon, Z.F. (1987) Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, *AAHE Bulletin* 39 (7).
⁴ O'Donovan, B., Price, M., Rust, C. (2008) Developing student understanding of assessment standards: a nested hierarchy of approaches, *Teaching in Higher Education* 13 (2).

...here's how you do it:

Improve students' interaction and involvement, and you are likely to encourage their sense of community. You can do this by:

- 1 Developing hospitable spaces**
 - Create 'social learning spaces' where social interaction (including eating and drinking), learning activities and use of facilitative technology can all happen, all together.
 - Think of spaces as both real and virtual.
 - Encourage academic structures and physical organisation that facilitate interaction *between* different facets of the academic community. For example, connecting researchers with those engaged with learning and teaching; connecting students with staff through shared facilities such as cafes and water-cooler spaces.
- 2 Rethinking the formal curriculum and supporting initiatives outside it that involve both students and staff**
 - Emphasise collaborative learning, teaching and assessment practices. Look for ways to bring students together through structured, course-based activity, particularly early on. Try collaborative classroom activities and collaborative group work to encourage students to get together outside formal class time.
 - Find means of bringing students and staff together in less hierarchical ways such as field trips, internal conferences and collaborative research projects.
 - Support student societies, social events and performances. Encourage student-staff events aimed at alumni, leavers or particular groups, eg international or diversity weeks.
- 3 Enhancing students' pedagogical intelligence**

'Pedagogically intelligent' students can evaluate their own learning as well as judge their learning environment, the course design and your teaching.⁵ Students gain such intelligence from formal 'learning to learn' courses and through more integrated means. To encourage their pedagogic intelligence:

 - Design activities that involve students in pedagogic processes such as self-assessment, peer review, and assessment and marking exercises. You can find out more about such activities in other ASKe '1,2,3' leaflets.⁶
 - Value peer support between students. Students who support their peers' learning gain pedagogic understanding themselves, so set up learning sets and buddying, mentoring and/or peer-assisted learning schemes.
 - Involve students in academic decisions. Mechanisms include student representation, participation in course design, and even assisting with the organisation and delivery of courses.

⁵ Hutchings, P. (2005) Building 'pedagogical intelligence'. *Carnegie Perspectives*. Available online at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives>.

⁶ Eg the '1,2,3' leaflets 'Improve your students' performance in 90 minutes!', 'Adopting a social constructivist approach to assessment' and 'Making peer feedback work in three easy steps!'.