

Tutor Support sheet: Supporting non-domestic students with open assignments

Center of Expertise on Learning and Teaching, M.J. Verkroost
19-9-2018

This support sheet brings together some knowledge and tips for tutors at the EWI Faculty who support the international students in finding their way and making the best of their studies. Open assignments, such as writing a report or a critical essay, can be new for some of the international students. Discussing the tips of dealing with such open assignments in advance might give these students a better start.

Types of open assignments

In university education, a variety of open assignments are in use. Most common are:

Technical or scientific report	Describes the results of research or the state of a research problem.
Lab report	Describes and analyses a laboratory experiment.
Project report	Describes the process and results of a project.
Making a summary	Summarizes of a book or article or a collection of articles.
Critical review	Critically reviews an article, book, design, or other work.
Essay	A short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting the personal view of the author.
Scientific article	Describes conducted scientific research or the state of the art of research in a certain field.
Project presentation	Presentation of the results of a project or group work by one or more of the project members.

All these different assignment types have their definition and format. The teacher has to explain the expectations for a certain assignment to the student and should make this information available in the digital learning environment.

The process of working on the assignment

When the student faces a new assignment, it is important to actively collect as much information as possible on what is required. *If this is not clear, the student should contact the teacher.*

- What is the task?
 - o What has to be done, which sub-tasks can be distinguished?
 - o What is the problem definition?
 - o When should it be ready, how much time per week is available?
 - o Should it be done individually or in a group?
 - o Is there some kind of supervision available?
- What is the type of output?
 - o Format, length, writing style
 - o How to be handed in, in which format
- How is it assessed?
 - o Assessment criteria
 - o Marking
 - o Procedure

The actual process of working on the assignment depends on the answers on the questions posed above. In general, however, the following steps can be defined in working on larger open assignments:

1. Preparation
 - a. Collect all necessary information on the assignment
 - b. Make a plan with steps, set in time
 - c. In case of a group assignment: make a plan for how to work together
2. Execution of the plan
 - a. Follow the steps
 - b. Keep track of time

- c. Make use of available supervision and feedback opportunities
 - d. Engage actively in discussions within the group and with the supervisor
 - e. Ask for feedback from peer students or experts
- 3. Writing the requested output
 - a. Check with the assessment requirements and criteria
 - b. Write a draft version
 - c. Ask for feedback from peer students and the supervisor
 - d. Make a final version to be handed in
- 4. Evaluate the process of working on the assignment and what could be improved for the next assignment.

Problems encountered by students

English proficiency

Some students might find it difficult to write in proper English. When they face such a problem, they could make use of grammar tools such as the build-in spelling/grammar checker of the programmes they are using. They can also follow an English course from the university language coordination point (TCP, <https://www.utwente.nl/en/ces/tcp-language-centre/students/>).

Fraud

Copying and using work from others without proper referencing is considered fraud at the UT and could lead to punishment by the Examination Board. Because of the sometimes low English proficiency, students might go for copying other's work because this looks better. Maybe they come from a country where copying others' work is normal. It might not be the intent to commit fraud, but it happens. It is therefore important that students are informed well on what we consider as being fraud. And that they get the opportunity to practice with it: maybe the first time they get a warning and the second time they get punished. The EER defines fraud:

<https://www.utwente.nl/nl/ewi/onderwijs/reglementen/oer/2017-2018/richtlijn-oer-bachelors-2017-2018.pdf>

Not knowing how to start

In some cultures, education is quite traditional where the teacher tells the students what to do. The students listen, take notes and study for the exam. When you have this background, it might be difficult to start working on your own, making a plan for yourself. It is not so that these students cannot do this, that they are intellectual less. They miss a lot of experience. If they become better acquainted with the expectations, they can perform the same as the Dutch students. It is the role of the teacher and fellow students to help them in getting started.

Tips for the tutor

When students face problems with dealing with open assignments it is good to discuss what the exact problem is: Depending on the problem, you can give tips yourself, refer the student to the responsible teacher or organise a discussion of the problem with the other international students.

It is important to let the students support each other. Before giving your advice, ask the other students to give their advice first.

Some problems might be quite personal and embarrassing to speak about in a group. For these cases, offer the student the opportunity to speak individually about it.

Encourage the student to go to the teacher him/herself to ask for more information on the assignment or for feedback. It is not a good idea to do this for them because they need to learn to do this themselves. You could, however, prepare this with the student if necessary: how to address the staff member, which questions to ask, etc.

Resources for students (date of retrieval 17-9-2018)

- Guide to Technical Report Writing: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/ei/internal/forstudents/engineeringdesign/studyguides/techreportwriting>
- How to do a lab write up: <https://www.wikihow.com/Do-a-Lab-Write-Up>
- Guide to writing a project report: <https://newton.ex.ac.uk/handbook/PHY/forms/WLB010919-4.pdf>

- How to write a summary: <https://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Summary>
- How to write an essay <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-to-write-an-essay-p2-1209096>
- Writing a critical review: <https://student.unsw.edu.au/writing-critical-review>
- Writing for an academic journal: 10 tips: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/sep/06/academic-journal-writing-top-tips>
- How to Creatively Present a Project: <https://www.wikihow.com/Creatively-Present-a-Project>

Resources for tutors (date of retrieval 17-9-2018)

- Students are encountering linguistic and cultural obstacles to writing: <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-cantwrite/cantwrite-04.html>
- Guidelines for Responding to the Writing of International Students: <https://www.du.edu/writing/eventsnews/newsletters/guidelines-for-responding-to-nns.html>
- Understanding Stressors of International Students in Higher Education: What College Counsellors and Personnel Need to Know. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Chi_Sing_Li/publication/232454263_Understanding_Stressors_of_International_Students_in_Higher_Education_What_College_Counselors_and_Personnel_Need_to_Know/links/5419ba280cf25ebee9887de7/Understanding-Stressors-of-International-Students-in-Higher-Education-What-College-Counselors-and-Personnel-Need-to-Know.pdf