

Ipsative Assessment

Category: Assessment, Feedback and Learning

Ipsative assessment interprets a learner's current performance in relation to that learner's previous performance or personal best. Its central question is not how the learner compares with peers, but what progress has occurred and what improvement is now possible. It is therefore a self-referential approach to evidence and feedback.

Ipsative information can strengthen motivation and make development visible, particularly across repeated or connected tasks. It does not by itself establish whether an external academic or professional standard has been met, so it is commonly combined with criterion-referenced judgement ([Hughes, 2011](#)).

Ipsative Assessment Cycle

1. **Establish a baseline:** Identify relevant features of an earlier performance using credible evidence.
2. **Select comparators:** Compare like with like while recognising changes in task difficulty or context.
3. **Identify progress:** Describe gains, persistent patterns and newly emerging challenges without empty praise.
4. **Set a personal target:** Choose a demanding but attainable next improvement linked to useful strategies.
5. **Retain standards:** Report criterion attainment separately where certification or progression requires it.

Examples in Practice

Across three clinical simulations, a student compares the clarity of handovers, response time and reasoning documented in each attempt. Feedback recognises individual progress and sets the next target, while the final competence decision still uses programme standards.

Why It Matters

Ipsative assessment can redirect attention from competition towards progress and sustained self-regulation. Used alone, however, it may reward improvement that remains below the required level; transparent combination with criterion reference preserves both motivation and defensible standards. Progress comparisons should remain supportive rather than becoming another public ranking system ([Hughes et al., 2014](#)).

Further Reading

6. Hughes, G. (2011). [Towards a personal best: A case for introducing ipsative assessment in higher education](#). *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(3), 353–367.
7. Hughes, G. (2014). [Ipsative assessment: Motivation through marking progress](#). Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Hughes, G., Wood, E., & Kitagawa, K. (2014). [Use of self-referential \(ipsative\) feedback to motivate and guide distance learners](#). *Open Learning*, 29(1), 31–44.

Related Terms: Criterion-Referenced Assessment | Self-Assessment | Mastery Learning | Growth Mindset