

Designing inclusive and accessible assessments: A step-by-step guide

Centre for Innovation in Education



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01

Introduction

Designing accessibly allows all students to engage with challenging, motivating, more personalised assessments. This guide explains how to create accessible assessments that minimise the need for bespoke reasonable adjustments, supporting an accessible assessment environment for all students, including students with disabilities (Equality Act, 2010).

- Designing inclusively can help students personalise assessments to their needs without additional support, as well as increasing engagement with the topic.
- Where your context differs, you may need to adapt this guidance, ideally using the [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) principle of 'Multiple Means of Expression' – aiming to give students choice so they choose how they can best demonstrate/express their learning.

In addition to this guide, please see the [University of Liverpool's Code of Practice on Assessment \(CoPA\) appendix K, annexe 1](#). This provides practical guidance for marking, feedback and anticipatory reasonable adjustment for students with dyslexia and/or other Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs).



02

Design Steps

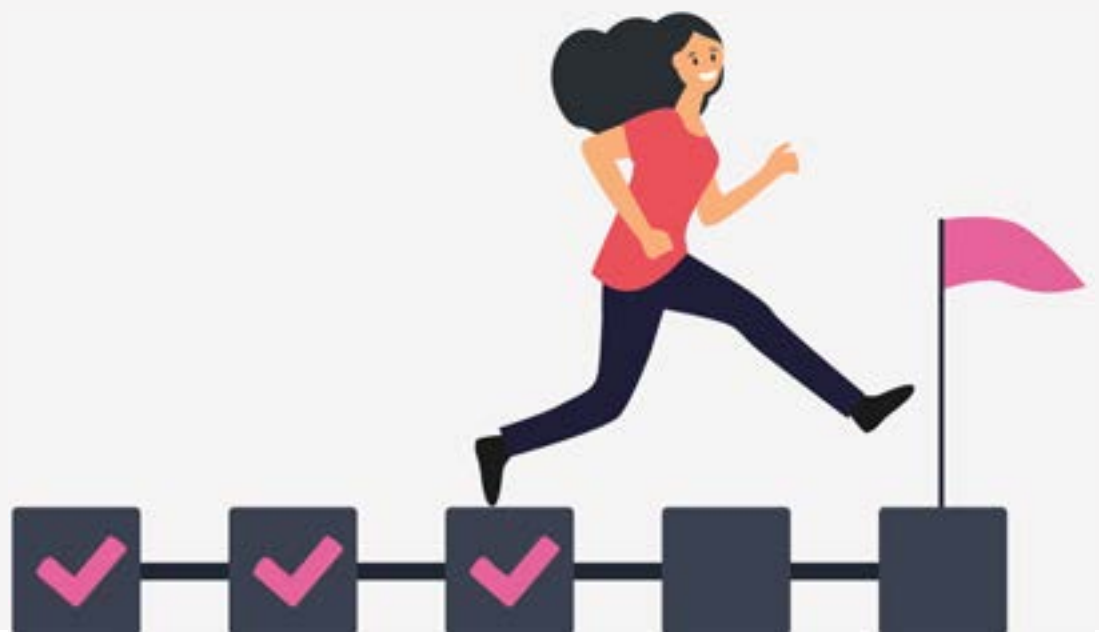
1. Check your Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs) and Module Learning Outcomes (MLOs)

Your assessments should all align with these outcomes, providing opportunities for students to demonstrate that they have met them.

- While doing this, you might want to review your current MLOs.
- Are any outcomes likely to be unachievable by students with some disabilities?
- If you can see problems, think about starting the process of revising your LOs.

2. Find out what assessments students are doing in other modules on your programme, as well as your own

- Design holistically: For example, if you are teaching a first-year module, you may see opportunities to help students build assessment skills that will enhance their ability to tackle an authentic assessment in the third year.
- Vary assessment format if you discover an assessment type is being used repeatedly. Students are often comfortable with familiar types of assessment; however, varied forms of assessment provide additional learning opportunities and avoid inadvertently disadvantaging students who are better able to demonstrate their learning in different formats.
- Avoid assessment bunching: Collectively schedule assessments with colleagues leading other modules that semester, to space out deadlines. Assessment bunching can be stressful for all students and may particularly disadvantage disabled students.
- Could you be over-assessing? Estimate the student workload to ensure that students will not feel over-loaded and add these up with all the other hours required by the module (15 credits = 150 hours of student work in total). We know that a [perceived sense of too much to do](#) can be a barrier for students.
- Consider the balance of formative and summative assessments across your module. Too many summative assessments can cause stress due to student over-work; too few can be stressful because the stakes for each are so high, but you can help alleviate this with a series of relevant formative assessment opportunities ([see step 6](#)).



3. Use the insights you have gained to select what outcomes you are assessing and choose appropriate format(s) for your assessment

- Can you anticipate any accessibility issues? If so, can you mitigate them? For example, when setting a presentation, you might give all students choice about whether to record a presentation with a voiceover, or to perform it live in front of the class; you may decide to lengthen the time of the exam for all students.
- Where possible, offer a choice of assessment format, so students can choose the format that best enables them to meet the learning outcomes (e.g. submit an essay, blog, or podcast). Rubrics help ensure equivalency and that Learning Outcomes are demonstrable by all format options.
- Support negotiated content in assessment where possible (permitting students to focus on their area of particular interest within your discipline). This can reduce awarding (attainment) gaps and might allow students with mental health issues who find [particular sensitive content triggering](#) to make a choice that supports their wellbeing, for instance.

4. Use clear assessment instructions and rubrics

- Help students understand what you are marking them on by [using a rubric](#) that aligns with learning outcomes and indicates the weighting of different elements.
- Ensure your written instructions are in clear, concise, plain English, accessibly formatted, and easily located by students. Lack of clarity is a [common trigger for panic](#) in students with mental health issues.
- To make written assessments as accessible as possible, consider how you distribute marks between 'higher order' learning, such as content, ideas and critical thinking, and more technical, grammatical elements of the assignment. This does not mean disregarding spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPG); rather, it is about considering the relative value of different elements and awarding marks accordingly, taking into account any formal competence standards.
- Marking criteria should aim where possible to award marks only for things which are achievable by all students. Rather than specifying behaviour that can be impossible for disabled students, why not create a more flexible criterion e.g. instead of good eye contact, you might ask for good engagement with the audience, which could be achieved physically or through creative digital communication.

5. Design-in activities that will build assessment literacy

- With first year students, provide class time to explore how assessment works in the UK at HE level.
- Consider activities that [teach students to use rubrics](#) to 'mark' one or two mocked-up or anonymised (with permission) assessment examples to build their assessment literacy, including their understanding of what success looks like and their insight into how to improve their own submitted work.
- Ask students to identify and include a key piece of feedback from a previous assessment, together with a sentence on how they are addressing it in this new piece of work. Brief feedback on this when marking their work can help create a dialogic feedback process, encouraging students to make use of the important feedback you give them.
- Consider asking your students to review any new assessment design, providing you with feedback. Even if these students do not subsequently take the assessment, they will develop their assessment literacy in the process of reviewing it.

6. Design formative opportunities to help scaffold students' progress to the assessment

- Provide [formative assessments](#) (low- or no-stakes) for students to develop their ability to use feedback to successfully complete summative assessments.
- Consider designing peer review to increase students' assessment literacy and reduce the marking burden.

7. Final planning and delivery considerations

- Outline assessment tasks and formats before students choose your module, so they can make an informed choice more likely to match their needs.
- Schedule assignment deadlines thoughtfully to avoid wherever possible assessment bunching, religious observances, deadlines outside of office hours.
- Think about how much time to allocate to take-home exams, bearing in mind that some students have complex needs, commitments and lives, and that certain impairments mean a slower processing speed. Can you allocate a time slot that would work for all students and thus avoid special arrangements? Advise students of how long they are expected to work on the assessment within that time allocation.
- If you are planning a group assessment, consider having the class negotiate rules for [compassionate and productive group protocols](#) or have groups complete the [CIE group work contract](#) in class.

03

Further guidance

In addition to the resources linked to above, you may find the following helpful:

- Group-work: our [Multi cultural Group-Work Spotlight Guide](#) advises on creating inclusive groups and fostering belonging.
- Inclusive Curriculum: our [Spotlight Guide to the Inclusive Curriculum](#) provides guidance on ensuring everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and succeed.
- [Advice on creating inclusive Canvas quizzes](#): (University of Liverpool sign-in required) including inclusive settings, and when a reasonable adjustment or alternative format may be needed, from our Hybrid Active Learning Course ('creating accessible learning materials' section).

Explore further resources on inclusive, pedagogical and digital education topics by searching our [CIE resources](#).

Additional reading:

AbilityNet. (2022) [HE and FE Accessibility Maturity Model](#)

Advance HE. (2020) [Transforming assessment in higher education](#)

AdvanceHE. (n.d.) [Inclusive curriculum](#) (retrieved April 25th 2022).

Baughan, Patrick (ed) & Advance HE (2021) [Assessment and Feedback in a Post-Pandemic Era: A Time for Learning and Inclusion](#)

British Dyslexia Association (2018) [Dyslexia friendly style guide](#)

Gillespie, Helena (2021) [Marking schemes – does inclusive practice lead to a 'standards' problem?](#) Higher Education Policy Institute Blog

Hanesworth, Pauline; Bracken, Seán; Elkington, Sam (2018) [A typology for a social justice approach to assessment: learning from universal design and culturally sustaining pedagogy](#)

JISC. (2016) [Inclusive assessment](#)

Talbot, C. (2004). Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity: Curriculum Matters (P. Frame, Ed.). SEDA.

UK Home Office (n.d.) [Designing for accessibility](#)

Universities UK/National Union of Students. (2019). [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment At Uk Universities: Case studies #Closingthegap](#). (May), 51.

University of Plymouth (n.d) [Inclusive assessment](#)



