CQSD
CENTRE FOR QUALITY SUPPORT & DEVELOPMENT

University of Reading

FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

USING A VARIETY OF ASSESSMENTS TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE LEARNING

INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENTS

Assessments need to be for learning rather than of learning, to enable students to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes required of 21st century graduates. Our students are increasingly diverse, thus our assessment strategies should also be inclusive to enable all students to fulfil their potential, through formative and summative assessments, which are varied and authentic and prepare students for the next part of their programme. Our [Curriculum Framework](#) sets out our approach to provide a student centred and inclusive learning environment. Moving beyond the use of exams and essays is more likely to meet the needs of a diverse range of students. Thinking about assessment at a programme level enables students to be provided with a diverse (but not overwhelming) range of assessment methods, with suitable scaffolding to develop assessment literacy.

The University policy on [Inclusive Practice in Teaching and Learning](#) commits to the use of inclusive assessment practices. This involves taking an anticipatory approach when planning assessments to ensure an inclusive learning experience for all, rather than needing adjustments to be made for individuals later (though some may still need this, depending on their specific needs). We aspire for the University of Reading to be an environment that respects and supports the needs of individual learners from all diverse backgrounds and in doing so enriches the wider collective student experience. Inclusive assessments mean all students have sufficient time, support and ability to complete them in a way that meets their individual needs, and allows them to fully engage.

USING A VARIETY OF ASSESSMENT METHODS

Offering varied assessment methods across a programme is beneficial for the following reasons:

- **Inclusivity.** Different methods of assessment may advantage or disadvantage different students or groups of students, for various reasons. Offering a variety of assessment methods ensures every student has the best possible chance to demonstrate their learning.

- **Engagement.** Assessing students' ability to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways fosters a greater sense of ownership, leading to deeper and increased engagement.

- **Skill development.** Different methods of assessment promote the development of different skills. By offering a variety of assessment methods, we can ensure that students develop and demonstrate a range of skills and attributes.

Caution is required however, as too much variety can overwhelm students as they will constantly be required to learn how to tackle new types of assessment. For undergraduate programmes, a maximum of 12 types is considered a suitable maximum number of types, whilst 7 for a postgraduate programme (including the dissertation). This approach would allow for the introduction of, development and mastery of assessment literacy in each type (see Table 1).

Creating variety across a programme

Programme level assessment strategies can be used to identify the variety of assessments offered and ensure the achievement of programme level learning outcomes and attributes. A programme level perspective can also help to ensure that there is an appropriate range and volume of assessment types. It is important to remember that too much choice in the types of assessment offered can lead to student confusion, so a balance is needed. It is also important to consider where in the programme students encounter different assessment types. For example, if students are expected to produce a reflective journal in Part 3, they could be asked to produce a piece of reflective writing in Parts 1 and 2 as to prepare them. Table 1 shows an example of how the type and variety of assessments might be mapped across a programme.

Table 1: Assessment strategy across a programme

Type	Part 1		Part 2		Part 3	
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Report		I	D	D	M	
Essay	I	I	D	D	M	M
Reading journal	I		D	D		M
Podcast				I	D	
Presentation	I	I	D		M	
Poster			I	D		M
Research task	I	I		D	M	M

I = Introduce D = Develop M = Master

How can I create an inclusive coursework assessment?

Start by revisiting the module learning outcomes and reflect on the **skills, knowledge and attributes** required to demonstrate learning for this module. This will indicate how the students can best demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes e.g., a written document, an oral presentation, a piece of collaborative work or reflective writing. By adopting a [constructively aligned](#) approach, students can see clear linkages between their learning and their assessment(s).

Next, check the Programme Specification to identify the types of assessment to be used on your programme; and select a suitable assessment method. The [University A to Z of Assessments](#) might also help.

Exams were traditionally set for all university assessments when the University was founded, in an age when knowledge was the exclusive prevail of those who could afford higher education.

Today's students are much more diverse, and employers' demands for graduates have changed; no longer is the ability to regurgitate information valued, instead students' abilities to think critically, conceptualise and be creative are recognised as key attributes.

Exams often test students' memorisation skills and as such promote a surface approach to learning with little information retained. Our own students have told us "for exams I usually memorise information in order to repeat and recall it in exam conditions but there is much less understanding happening, just memorisation". Furthermore, exams cause significant stress on students, do not enable them to produce their best written work and provide little opportunity to be creative and thoughtful.

Can I set an in-class test instead of an exam?

In-class tests (which serve a primarily summative purpose, similar to a centrally administered exam) create a confusing two-tiered system of official and unofficial exams. Setting an in-class test raises the possibility of students with additional needs not being appropriately supported. Module Convenors should carefully consider whether in-class tests can be replaced by other forms of authentic assessment; if not, can the tests become formative assessments to support learning and prepare for summative assessments? Where summative in-class tests are unavoidable, these should be scheduled throughout the semester, ensuring necessary adjustments are made for students with additional needs.

I've selected my assessment, how do I ensure it is accessible?

There are a number of considerations to think about when creating inclusive assessment including:

Clear assessment information: inclusive assessments have a clear brief, set of marking criteria and opportunities for students to get some [formative feedback](#). Consider the materials and documents used to introduce the assessment; students need to understand what to do, what are the parameters of the assessment, how to get started and how their work will be marked. Clear supporting documents will make your expectations of the students transparent, use student friendly language and ensure all terms are clearly defined. Where possible, use exemplars to help students visualise what is expected. Think about the following:

1. What does a well-structured essay/report look like for your discipline? How would students know this?
2. What is your understanding of criticality in your discipline? Is it the same as your colleagues? How will you help students find that critical voice?
3. What does excellent data analysis look like to you?
do you have pre-conceived ideas about presentation skills? Both oral and written presentation of information and ideas, how will students learn about this?
4. Check with students who have an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) to ensure they can access the assessment.

Scaffolding new assessments: Check if students have done a similar assessment before. If they have, use this as an opportunity for them to build on their feedback and develop their skills e.g., as part of an assessment support seminar that students bring early drafts of their work to. If students have not done this type of assessment before, identify the skills they might need to develop to tackle it e.g., a poster design workshop and provide support to develop these skills. For third year modules, check with the Programme Director if it is advisable to introduce a new assessment at this part.

Removing potential barriers that might prevent some students from demonstrating their learning (e.g. dense instructions that dyslexic students might struggle with; a lab practical for a student using a wheelchair)? Work with support services where necessary or the University inclusion consultants to find out how to remove these barriers as far as possible. If the student has a disability adviser, contact them for support if you're unsure on how to remove potential barriers. Try to ensure sufficient steps have been taken to reduce the requirement for those with additional needs to have to ask for adjustments; adding to the list of help to access their learning is not acceptable.

Developing assessment literacy: throughout the module, ensure students are supported to revisit the requirements of the assessment in class, to receive information on how to get support to do their assessments e.g., assessment support webinars and have the chance to ask questions, the answers to which are shared with the cohort e.g., using a FAQs document on Blackboard. By building students' confidence in their ability to do an assessment, they will engage in deeper learning approaches.

Inclusive assessment checklist

a) Ensure there is support for types of assessments which are new to the students e.g., clear assessment briefs, signposting to support within the University, assessment seminars, opportunities to discuss draft work, a FAQ document on Blackboard, use of exemplars.

b) Check that all students will be able to demonstrate their strengths and capabilities.

c) Offer assessment support seminars to clarify expectations.

d) Ensure students are clear on how to tackle the task and understand the expected standard.

e) Identify potential barriers which might prevent some students from demonstrating their learning e.g., dense instructions that dyslexic students might struggle with; a lab practical for a student using a wheelchair?

f) As potential barriers are identified, check steps have been taken to reduce the requirement for those with additional needs to have to ask for adjustments?

g) Does the module contribute to an inclusive array of assessments for the overall programme?

h) Have you worked with the programme team to minimise assessment bunching for the programme?

i) Will opportunities for formative feedback be offered and how?

k) Have you considered offering students a choice in the format of their submission? E.g., a presentation or podcast?
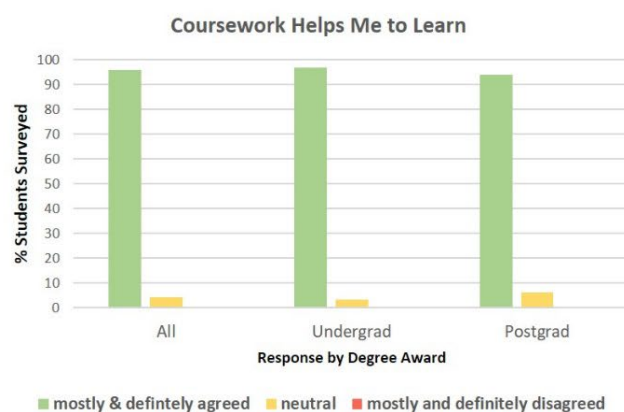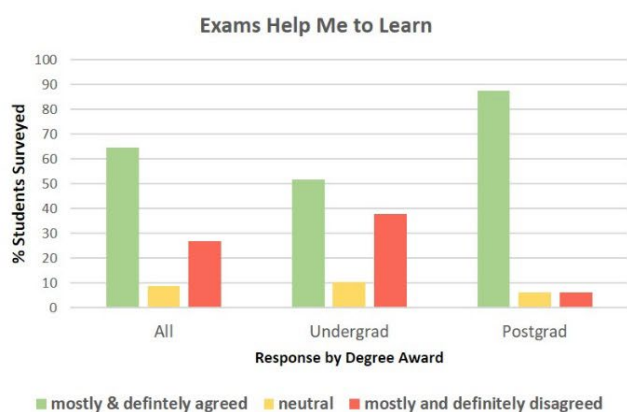

Figure1: Students Preferences for Exams and Coursework as a Learning Tool (UoR, 2021)

I have worked through the list above and have consulted with support services where necessary. Is this approach to assessments actually what students want?

We consulted with University of Reading students about their assessments and they told us they "*think coursework is much better for learning. Exams basically seem more like a test of your memory rather than anything else. Coursework actually tests your knowledge*". Undergraduates had a strong preference for coursework rather than exams as shown in Figure 1. Student feedback via RUSU on take home exams demonstrated the majority of students were satisfied with the alternative "take-home exams". .

Students found coursework allowed them to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the subject matter, prompting them to do more research, read more deeply and demonstrate higher level thinking skills.   More often than not students brought up the importance of having varied assessments to help them develop graduate skills and/or complete assessments that played to their own strengths.

A wide range of examples of types of coursework were listed as representing the most meaningful assessment students had undertaken. They welcomed assessments that gave them a choice, enabling them to explore aspects of a subject that interested them. The application of learning and development of skills through authentic assessments was seen as invaluable.

"In module X the 100% coursework piece was to compile a statistical report on the 'greenness' of Whiteknights Campus. It … required us to use the learning from all of the module content and … there was a degree of flexibility for personal choice and opinion in the assignment." "In our X module … we had a coursework to present a business case presentation for a new product launch which I found to be very real life, practical, innovative and useful. We needed to prepare a new product for an existing company and present it in front of the CEO and the Board of Directors (hypothetically), which is really a real-life scenario."

However, it was also noted that too much variation can be confusing for students (who need to develop understandings of the conventions and structures of each new assessment type).

"Having a variety helps practice a range of skills and allows a student to showcase different strengths." Reading University Student 2021.

CHOICE IN ASSESSMENT

Providing students with some choice in assessment (content and methods), where possible, enables students to take ownership of their learning and leverage their individual strengths. Some examples are listed in Table 1. The choice must be realistic, enabling all students to do their best work regardless of the choices that they make and should allow them to fulfil the module learning outcomes. Assessment support sessions run early on in the module can help students to make informed choices which are tailored to their area of interest and/or their strengths in terms of skills.

Table 1 Adding elements of student choice into assessments

ASSESSMENT	ELEMENT OF STUDENT CHOICE
Presentation	Students opt to do voiceover to slides, video recording or traditional presentation
Reading journal (students read set articles)	Students choose the focus of their responses to the articles, focusing on an area that interests them. Support for this could include suggestions of areas to focus on but students would not be obliged to use them. Assessment seminars could allow students to discuss their ideas with a tutor to check they are on the right lines.
Data report	Students choose the focus of the data analysis e.g., by choosing a specific audience such as local residents or a charity
Business proposal	Students select their own case study and research the organisation before creating a proposal (scaffolding to support less confident students through suggestions of organisations they could look at).
Case study choice	Offer a range of specific case studies for students to explore, providing them with some site/location/company specific information as a starting point for each one. E.g., ask the students to create a landscape timeline for a UK National Park of their choice or ask students to look at a range of scenarios and choose one to create a plan of action to tackle the issues of concern.

Additional case studies can be explored in University College Dublin's resource. When offering a choice to students, take time to ensure that all choices are equal in terms of challenge, effort required to complete them and the opportunity for students to produce high quality work for which they are rewarded.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

In summary, inclusive assessments are designed so that all learners can tackle them without additional adjustments being needed. Inclusive assessment strategies result in a variety of tasks being set across a programme, but not so many that students are always having to learn how to do a new task. Inclusivity means taking care to ensure that expectations are clear, the work is academically challenging as appropriate for the level of study, but not stress inducing, overwhelming or unachievable. The work is carefully scaffolded and aligned to module learning outcomes. Incorporating a variety of assessment methods into our programmes enables students to fulfil the Curriculum Framework's Graduate Attributes and gain the skills needed for life after graduation. For help in designing inclusive assessments, please contact the ADE (Academic Development and Enhancement) team.

To contact us and explore other guides in our **Focus On:** series, please visit https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources

References and Further Reading

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University College Dublin. (2011). A practitioner's guide to choice of assessment methods within a module. https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/choice_of_assessment.pdf

Talis reading list on inclusive assessment. https://rl.talis.com/3/reading/lists/ED8C974E-C3D6-616D-19B7-E0E61216C893.html
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