

ENssentials Quick Guide

Designing Inclusive Assessments: Flexibility, Optionality, Alternatives, and Adjustments

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Overview:

Inclusive assessment design provides equitable opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate their learning. It features flexible assessments that offer meaningful choices for students (such as method, topic, form or other elements of assessment). Such an approach “emphasises diverse assessment practices that provide multiple ways for students to represent their knowledge”, anticipating, by design, the diversity of our students, thus “reduc[ing] the need for individual accommodations” and the labour associated with this (Nieminen 2024). Inclusive approaches to assessment promote agency, wellbeing, motivation and development for all students (Firth et al. 2023; QAA 2024).

What do I need to do?

To begin considering inclusivity in your assessments, take a RAFT approach:

Recognise you (we) have a legal duty to ensure no student is disadvantaged by assessment design.

Anticipate need for adjustment of your assessment(s) for various possible learning needs or disabilities (visual impairment, anxiety etc.), while also considering, more broadly, the students we support now (rather than those of previous years and decades), their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs (Firth et al. 2023)

Find the flexibility in your assessments, where students have options (of mode, topic, format, or other elements) with which to best demonstrate their learning. Where there is limited flexibility/optionality, you might need to find an appropriate alternative assessment.

Tell your students clearly how they will be assessed, the options available to them, and how they can discuss their needs.

Here's an example...

Dr Clara Jensen is a lecturer in the (fictional) School of Anthropology. She is the Module Leader for the Research Methods (SCQF Level 8) module, which has three Learning Outcomes (LOs):

- L01** Understand key research designs in social science research
- L02** Critically evaluate and summarise ethnographic information
- L03** Summarise and present research data for an academic audience



Dr Clara Jensen
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These are summatively assessed by a 1000-word annotated bibliography [L01 & L02] (submitted via Moodle) and a 5-minute presentation [L02 & L03] (in class).

Dr Jensen wants to give all her students the best chance of success, so she:

Recognised, from [mandatory training](#), her legal requirement to think about and take reasonable steps to overcome barriers students might face.

Anticipated that, whether disclosed or not, some students will experience barriers that impact their ability to demonstrate their learning, such as dyslexia, anxiety, ADHD etc.

Found that, while the current assessments on the Research Methods module might prove more difficult for these students, she has often been flexible when students have asked for help. For example, when her student Max told her they were worried about the

presentation because they find public speaking extremely challenging – their mind goes blank because of intense fear and nausea – and were waiting to see a GP about possible social anxiety disorder, Dr Jensen said it was fine for Max to submit a recorded PowerPoint presentation instead. Thinking now about the annotated bibliography, Dr Jensen considers that students who struggle to write in English might nevertheless be able to understand and evaluate their chosen articles well, but they might make mistakes in their writing – she could highlight that students are only marked on how they meet their learning outcomes, and could suggest format options other than a written submission. To do this she could use a single marking rubric, mapped to learning outcomes rather than format-specific aspects (e.g. 20-marks for “explaining the research-design merits and limitations of three published research articles [LO2]”, rather than 20-marks for “Style: adherence to academic English writing and referencing conventions”).

Told her students, in updated [Assessment Briefs](#) for each assessment, that: marks for the annotated bibliography were given to the extent learning outcomes were demonstrated, not for spelling, grammar, etc. (so long as the intended meaning was clear); they could also choose, by week 12, whether they would deliver their 5-minute presentation in class or submit a 5-minute recorded PowerPoint.

Why is it important?

Ensuring our assessment strategies and practices are inclusive by design is an important means of fulfilling our legal obligations and duty of care for all our students. Under the disability provisions of the Equality Act (2010), disability is defined as: “A physical or mental impairment that has a substantial, long term and negative effect on the ability to carry out normal day to day activities”. Failure to make reasonable adjustments for individuals equates to a discrimination; we have a duty to provide reasonable adjustments and this duty is anticipatory (The University of Bristol v Dr Robert Abrahart, 2024). Anticipatory reasonable adjustment means that we are required to plan for difference and in advance to “take reasonable steps to:

- Avoid substantial disadvantage where a provision, criterion or practice puts disabled students at a substantial disadvantage.

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- Avoid substantial disadvantage, where a physical feature puts disabled persons at a substantial disadvantage; this includes removing the physical feature in question, altering it or providing a reasonable means of avoiding it.
- Provide an auxiliary aid where without one, disabled students would be put at a substantial disadvantage ([Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2010](#)).

The duty is an anticipatory and continuing one that we owe to students generally, regardless of whether you know that a particular student is disabled or whether you currently have any disabled students. You should not wait until an individual student approaches you before you consider how to meet the duty; additionally, should such a student approach you, you should not require them to register with disability services before you undertake reasonable adjustments. Instead, you should plan ahead and anticipate the needs of diverse students and the adjustments that might need to be made for them. You are not expected to anticipate every need of every prospective student but you are required to think about and take reasonable and proportionate steps to overcome barriers, that may impede people with different kinds of disabilities, backgrounds, and needs – not only students who may have disclosed a disability. (ENU Assessment Toolkit: Principle 1; Firth 2025). That is to say, undertaking this anticipatory duty in terms of inclusive assessment design benefits *all* students.

Common Reasonable Adjustments relate to more than just assessment, but those that are specific to Assessment & Feedback practice include:

Extra time, optionality/flexibility (regarding format, topic choice, submission, task sequencing), not being penalised for spelling/grammar (where this is not core to the achievement of learning outcomes), transparent marking criteria that is clearly and specifically communicated in assessment guidance (including in accessibly formatted assessment briefs) and in feedback.

Inclusive Assessment Design: Mainstreaming Reasonable Adjustments

Inclusive assessment is flexible by design and mainstreams reasonable adjustments, including a number of options, all capable of assessing the same learning outcomes, available to all students. The flexibility in this approach “enable[s] students to demonstrate their learning through a variety of methods, timings, and formats... sequencing, negotiated tasks or questions, criteria or weighting... all aligned with intended learning outcomes. It offers students meaningful choices in how, when, and sometimes what they are assessed on in order to recognise the individual student circumstances” ([Firth et al, 2025](#)).

The inclusive approach does not make an arbitrary distinction between ‘disabled’ and ‘non-disabled’ in the same way that it would make no distinction between students from ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds. Nor does it compromise academic standards (Waterfield & West, 2006). Quite to the contrary, in the pursuit of meeting the needs of the diverse student population, the inclusive approach to assessment is concerned with equity, regardless of disability, learning preference or learning experience.

Incorporating assessment ‘optionality’ or ‘flexible’ assessment, inclusive assessment “is about maintaining academic rigour while recognising diverse student strengths, lived experiences, and future goals. By aligning assessment with inclusivity and authenticity, it prepares students for the complexity of real-world professional and academic contexts.” (Firth, et al 2025).

Overall, the best way to design an inclusive assessment is to assume that you will have on your module a large and diverse range of learners, in terms of their educational background, nationality, gender, physical characteristics and language abilities (Gravestock, 2006); in the social model of disability, anticipating student diversity more widely can remove additional attitudinal and organisational barriers for all (Tregaskis,

2004), while affirmation models further support through a celebration difference (Cameron, 2014).

How inclusive are your assessments?

This quick guide has outlined the legal and pedagogic background of anticipatory duty and reasonable adjustments in the context of student assessment. The following questions should help you reflect upon the extent to which approaches to assessment in your context support learning and its demonstration for all students.

- Are your assessments *inclusive* by design, with flexibility and options available to all students? Can students make meaningful choices between a number of methods, timings, and formats, sequencing, negotiated tasks or questions, criteria or weightings?
- How are the students guided through flexible choices and are they supported in making the best decisions for them?
- Do you offer reasonable adjustments only on request?
- Are your adjustments *contingent* on a norm that excludes disabled students? For example, the use of extra time to allow such students to perform in the same way as differently abled peers?
- Do you offer *alternative* assessments only to disabled students (either by request from the student, or in response to their learning profile)?
- How are marking criteria and moderation processes applied consistently across assessment formats?
- What barriers currently make this module's assessment inaccessible to some students?

The following examples, exemplars, and resources should help you identify and address areas of strengths and enhancement, and you can contact DLTE and Disability Inclusion teams for further advice.

Examples: From Assessment Taxonomy

Assessment Type [Category]	Traditional Definition	Reasonable Adjustments, Flexibility, Optionality & Alternatives	
Essay	A piece of writing dedicated to a chosen or assigned topic and presenting reasoned, evidence-based arguments. Used to assess knowledge and understanding, as well as a student's ability to address and synthesise research literature in a clear and persuasive way to form a position/argument on a topic (or an experience, e.g. placement).	Students could be given options as to topic and/or format: e.g. a video essay (where students can use visual evidence to formulate their position/argument as an alternative to a traditional written essay).	<i>Beyond assessment strategies within individual modules, consideration should also be made at a Programme level, to ensure</i>
Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE)	A practical exam in nursing which is a test of competence, known as the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). This assessment assesses basic clinical skill levels and competence and communication skills in various stations.	While a competency-based exam, reasonable adjustments could include providing students access to large-print materials, materials printed on a range of paper colours, or tablet devices to access resources.	<i>the volume of assessment between modules is manageable for students, i.e. that students have enough time to prepare for each</i>
Oral Presentation	A presentation to assess students' communication skills as well as knowledge, understanding and analytical skills.	Students could be given options as to topic, collaboration, and/or modality: presentations can be individual or group assessment, they can be in person or online, and they can be 'live' or asynchronous (i.e. pre-recorded video or presentation).	<i>assessment and that deadline clashes are avoided.</i>

Exemplars from ENU

Module	Assessment Type	Learning Outcomes	Assessment Description
Managing Complex Care In Child Health Nursing (CHN09121)	Report	<p>1 Evaluate the evidence base to develop the knowledge and skills required to assess, prioritise, implement and evaluate the care for children and young people with complex health and social care needs.</p> <p>2 Demonstrate effective problem-solving and decision-making skills, utilising a systematic approach, to address and meet the changing needs of children and young people with complex health and social care needs and their families or carers.</p> <p>3 Demonstrate understanding of key clinical, legislative and other formal decision-making frameworks relevant to nursing practice.</p> <p>4 Apply knowledge of altered physiology to evaluate the impact on health and wellbeing for children and young people with complex care needs.</p> <p>5 Based on the best evidence, prioritise and manage the care of children and young people with acute and complex care needs.</p>	<p>a) A 10-minute narrated digital presentation of a critical incident in the style of a clinical handover. The students will need to choose a clinical scenario, explain the complex health presentations, and the strategies to address the challenges of care, providing a rationale for the non-pharmacological and pharmacological interventions of care. Students will need to explore the evidence-base related to the clinical problem and provide recommendations for addressing the care needs throughout the lifespan. Students will need to evaluate their decision-making and critical thinking (LO1-5).</p> <p>OR:</p> <p>b) 1500-word critical incident report of a chosen complex clinical scenario. The students will need to explain the complex health presentations, and the strategies to address the challenges of care, providing a rationale for the non-pharmacological and pharmacological interventions of care. Students will need to explore the evidence-base related to the clinical problem and provide recommendations for addressing the care needs throughout the lifespan. Students will need to evaluate their decision-making and critical thinking (LO1-5).</p>
Introduction to the Criminal Justice System in the UK (SSC08104)	Portfolio "Infographic"	LOs 1-3 (see below)	For this assignment you will choose one of the vignettes provided in the assessment brief and create an infographic showing the case's possible outcomes, from potential police responses to prosecutorial decisions. Your submission should include up to 300 words and at least 3 references.
	Oral Assessment "Reflexive dialogue"	<p>1 Identify the development of criminal justice systems in the UK.</p> <p>2 Describe the role of agencies within criminal justice systems and identify relationships between the different parts of the process.</p> <p>3 Discuss a variety of different aims which these systems may have.</p> <p>4 Review the effectiveness of criminal justice systems in the UK in addressing social harms.</p> <p>5 Explain contradictions, tensions and inequalities in criminal justice systems in the UK.</p>	For this assessment you will write a report picking up where your infographic left off: using the same vignette, you will examine how the case may progress from court through the whole criminal justice process, considering the various possible sentences/disposal options, the different criminal justice agencies involved and their aims, and reflecting on the possible impact of each outcome. This part of your submission should be 1,000 words and include at least 5 references. You will then participate in a 15-minute face to face oral dialogue during which you will discuss your report and demonstrate your critical engagement with the module material. You will also be asked to reflect on how the case study you examined during your component 1 and 2 assessments illuminates the contradictions, inequalities, and historical development of UK criminal justice systems. [Note: <i>Flexibility in coverage of learning outcomes assessed over both written and interactive oral assessment</i>]
Global Shakespeare: Adaptation and Appropriation (CLP10137)	Oral Presentation	LOs 1-5 (See Below) plus: 6 Demonstrate the ability to work both independently and with your peers.	Present either individually or in pairs , on a topic relating to one of our primary texts. The purpose of this assessment is to foster research independence and to encourage collegial peer-engagement and review ■ You will choose a presentation topic in class in Week 2, from a list of pre-published topics. Presentations will start on or around week 4. Presentations will take place during the first hour of class. The presentation may be live or pre-recorded for display before the discussion

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	Essay	<p>1 Appraise, analyse, and critically reflect upon a range of Shakespeare adaptations and appropriations from across the globe.</p> <p>2 Critically analyse the ways in which different adaptations and appropriations draw on their source texts, paying particular attention to their ability to stand alone as creative works.</p> <p>3 Demonstrate a critical awareness of the theoretical frameworks deployed in the field of Global Shakespeare studies, including adaptation theory, postcolonial theory, and critical race studies.</p> <p>4 Critically analyse the status, impact, and ideological work of Shakespeare on the modern world.</p> <p>5 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the political and cultural contexts of a diverse array of Shakespeare adaptations and appropriations.</p>	<p>Students will be able to decide between the following two options. Both are student-centred and student-defined: you choose the focus of your assessments:</p> <p>Option One: Research Essay of 3,500 words Comparatively analyse at least two primary texts studied on the module. The aim of this assessment is to advance your close-reading skills and your ability to apply salient historical and cultural contexts and theoretical frameworks to global Shakespeare adaptations and appropriations. Your module leader will supply a list of potential topics as a prompt, but you will devise your own essay question in conjunction with your peers and module leader. Note that you may not write on the same topic, text, or author/director you presented on.</p> <p>Option 2: Creative Response (2,500 words) and Critical Reflection (1,000 words) Produce a creative response (2,500 words) to Shakespeare that draws inspiration from the texts and concepts studied on the module. The 1,000-word critical commentary is an opportunity to demonstrate the critical thinking behind your creative process. You are expected to give a clear academic rationale for your choices and to demonstrate how you have drawn on the materials we looked at on the course. This might mean, for instance, that you refer to adaptation theory, and/or postcolonial theory. Your reflection needs to be clearly linked to the aims and objectives of the course, and to show that your creative work does not emerge sui generis, but draws from the wellspring of our reading of primary and secondary texts.</p>
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Useful References and Resources

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