

7 Steps to: Inclusive Assessment

Overview

Higher Education (HE) expansion has resulted in greater student diversity. Rather than focusing on specific target groups or dimensions of diversity such as disabled students or cultural groups, an inclusive approach aims to make HE accessible, relevant and engaging for all (Thomas and May, 2010). Underpinning this concept are values of equity and fairness, where HE considers and values students' differences within the mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Hockings, 2010). This is informed by the simple but challenging maxim that "students don't want to stand out as different yet want to be recognised as individuals" (ibid).

Inclusive assessment was endorsed at Plymouth University in 2006 through the Staff-Student Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation (SPACE) project (Waterfield and West 2006). The project suggested an inclusive approach would meet the needs of the diverse student population. Inclusive assessment does not compromise academic standards. It instead improves the chances for all students to demonstrate their ability to meet the learning outcomes. It is more time-effective and equitable to consider the inclusiveness of the assessment at the programme or module design phase, rather than making individual adjustments later in the programme (Hockings, 2010). In addition, inclusive assessment helps to avoid the assumption that certain groups of students have a particular way of learning, when in reality students with disabilities "fall along a continuum of learner differences and share similar challenges and difficulties that all students face in higher education" (Healey et al., 2006, p.41).

This '7 steps' offers practical guidance and tips to incorporate inclusive assessment into modules and programmes, so that assessment enables rather than hinders students' learning.

1. Underpin your assessment with good assessment design principles

Inclusive assessment is not about changing or 'dumbing down' your assessment to benefit certain groups of students. As Waterfield and West (2006, p.219) explain, inclusive assessment should "benefit most learners without losing the requirement that assessment should aid learning and should demonstrate the acquisition of the module or course learning outcomes." In other words, principles of good assessment design such as constructive alignment, clear and transparent criteria, and timely and constructive feedback (See 7 Steps on Giving Effective Feedback), are still part of the design equation for inclusive assessment (Francis, 2008; Craddock & Mathias, 2009). Gibbs & Simpson (2004) and Nicol (2008) provide excellent examinations of good assessment principles. PedRIO and Educational Development provide workshops on assessment and feedback and you can also explore PU's Teaching and Learning website for information on assessment at: <http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/ouruniversity/teachlearn/guidanceresources/Pages/Assessment.aspx>.

2. Use a variety of assessment methods within your module/programme

Rather than relying chiefly on one or two assessment methods, consider increasing the diversity of assessment methods. For example, the use of in-class tests; multiple-choice questions; group presentations; viva voce; self and peer assessment; creation of audio-visual material; performance; reflective diaries or laboratory work (Please see PU's Teaching and Learning website for a list of different assessment methods - <http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/ouruniversity/teachlearn/guidanceresources/Pages/Assessment.aspx>). A diverse 'mix' of assessment methods will ensure that specific students are not disadvantaged by specific forms of assessment, varying assessment activities will also help develop a broader range of personal and employability skills (Brown and Glasner, 2003).

3. Incorporate choice to your assessment

Introducing assessment choice can empower students to take responsibility for their learning and in a number of cases assessment choice has been shown to eliminate the need for modified assessment provision (MAP) (Francis, 2008). When developing assessment choice, consider activities that simulate real-life contexts, even if it is just an abstraction of real professional practice. For example, students may be asked to write a report on current news events associated with an aspect of their discipline. Real-life contexts are likely to improve student engagement with assessment (Lombardi, 2007). However, choice should be used with caution. It is also important not to overwhelm students with too much choice (O'Neill *et al.*, 2010). Prepare your students by discussing the differences between the given assessment choices. It will also be helpful to provide examples of the choice along with clear assessment criteria to help students understand the difference. For certain assessment methods that are essential to the course (e.g. field work or lab work), some reasonable adjustment might be required, but consideration should first be made to design inclusive assessment which does not require modified provision.

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4. Design inclusive exams

For subjects where examination is an essential requirement by the professional body, consideration should be made to design inclusive exams. Ways of making exams more inclusive include: scheduling, i.e. time of exams; choice of exam method (open or closed book, take home exam); length of exam; weighting of the exam; the structure of exam questions (open or closed questions, multiple choice questions); enabling all students to type exams; and providing opportunities for students to practice exam. Further detail on developing inclusive can be found at: <http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/ouruniversity/teachlearn/guidanceresources/Pages/Assessment.aspx>

5. Consider how technology can assist

Technologies have the potential to enhance assessment practices by creating more diverse assessment methods and choice (Ball, 2009). A range of technologies are available that can support the submission of coursework, improve feedback processes and reduce the risk of plagiarism (Bull and McKenna, 2004). For example, assessment materials to be made available on the DLE can improve access and offer students the opportunity to submit their work electronically. Consider the use of e-portfolio, Question Mark Perception, podcast, online/ typed exams rather than handwritten exams (Mogey, 2008) and audio or video feedback. Learning technologists within your faculty can provide you with further support. It is important to arrange appropriate induction and training to ensure all students are able to access and utilise the technology.

6. Prepare, engage and support students in the assessment process

Students might resist innovative and different assessment approaches because they are concerned about how it might affect their performance (McDowell, 2001). It is important to prepare students and develop their assessment literacy in the first few weeks before assessment takes place (Price *et al.*, 2012). Students should be given adequate information on the assessment criteria, marking schemes, required standard and, where possible, examples of assignments using different assessment methods. For example, consider setting aside tutorials where students can discuss with each other and try out different assessment methods; or give students previous work (both good and poor examples) to assess, grade and discuss in order to help clarify the standard required. In addition, students should be given the opportunity to practice and rehearse any new assessment methods (Price *et al.*, 2012) through early assessment with smaller weightings.

7. Monitor, review, and share practice

Inclusive assessment needs to be part of a wider consideration of all assessment practice, rather than a modular or ad hoc issue. This can inform current and new course developments and provide a forum to discuss the resource implications and the staff development requirements (Waterfield and West, 2006). Student involvement in programme and assessment reviews, will help monitor inclusive practice. Assessment audits can also be incorporated as part of a programme team meeting, away day, or workshop, to enable the team to carry out and share good practice. An audit map is available from the Teaching and Learning website: <http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/ouruniversity/teachlearn/Documents/Assessment%20gap%20analysis%20A3%20size.docx>

In addition, staff are encouraged to share good practice and engage in dialogue with Educational Development, Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) team, Disability Assist and Student Representatives in order to support inclusive assessment.

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