

# Embedding Inclusive Assessment: **FINAL REPORT**

Part of a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project  
Led by Teesside University

July 2022

**Project Partners:** Teesside University (lead), Oxford Brookes University, Greenwich University, University of Hertfordshire, University of Brighton, University of West of England, Kingston University, and Birmingham City University.



QAA



Teesside  
University



University  
Alliance

## Project Overview

**Context:** For higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a focusing event, forcing universities to reconsider how the significant resources devoted to learning, teaching, and assessment might be reconfigured to support and maintain an inclusive student learning experience across different modes of delivery. This QAA Collaborative Enhancement project aimed to explore and understand the relationship(s) between assessment outcomes and inclusive assessment designs for different groups of students during the pandemic-affected academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21. While this area of assessment practice in complex times has garnered some initial scrutiny and evaluation (Baughan, 2021; Sambell and Brown, 2020) as yet few large-scale empirical studies of this kind have been conducted and shared.

**Approach:** The project comprised a three-phase approach: 1) an analysis of assessment outcomes for specific cohorts across each partner institution capturing the range of design/policy changes alongside those course/programmes displaying the largest percentage reduction in attainment/awarding gaps (for 2019-20) and improved student continuation rates (for 2020-21). 2) partner institutions conducted interviews with academic staff and focus groups and interviews with students from those courses identified with the latter facilitated by a cadre of student researchers employed by each institution to garner student feedback on the inclusivity of assessment arrangements. 3) All staff interview and student focus group/interview data were subjected to a process of thematic analysis to capture key emergent themes and sub-themes at a course/programme level. Thematic data across each partner institution was then curated and reviewed to generate overarching themes representative of student and staff experiences of inclusive assessment.

**Outcomes:** Final overarching thematic data were then used to inform a phase of collaborative development via a series of tailored (online) sandpit events with the aim of producing four main project outputs, namely: 1) an inclusive assessment position statement; 2) a set of inclusive assessment attributes; 3) a reflective toolkit and associated collection of case studies; and 4) a final project report (this document). These outputs have been developed as practical resources with the aim of supporting HE leaders, academics, and students in higher education to review, plan for, and evaluate enhancement-led inclusive assessment policies, initiatives, and interventions.

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## The Collaborative Enhancement Project Group: Partner institutions and teams

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## Project Focus and Aims

The primary aim of this project was to explore and develop a set of Inclusive Assessment Design Attributes for use across the UK HE sector. The project was informed by a collaborative analysis of the impact of alternative assessment methodologies and associated regulations introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic across eight different University Alliance institutions. In addition to measuring such impact, the project aimed to identify characteristics of assessment design and regulation which have contributed to improved outcomes for higher education students.

There is currently limited direct evidence linking changes made to assessment approaches during the pandemic period and the consequent impact on students, the quality of their learning experience and their outcomes. Alterations in learning and teaching delivery models and changeable student circumstances during the pandemic have almost certainly modified the assessment landscape, the associated benefits of which have been acutely observed in reducing awarding gaps and improving outcomes for historically disadvantaged groups.

This collaborative project sought to interrogate these early observations by drawing on, examining, and mainstreaming the shared learning from a consortium of University Alliance institutions around key areas of assessment policy and practice, including the relationship between inclusive assessment design and student wellbeing, the impact of No Detriment/Safety Net approaches, and measures taken to assure academic integrity. The distinctive student body and the mission of the University Alliance ensures that the project is significant within the current assessment climate across the sector.

Student co-creation has been fundamental to the ethos and philosophy of the project, operationalised primarily through funded student researcher roles from across each participating institution.

## Project Objectives

- 1) To analyse assessment outcomes for specific cohorts of students during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the impact of No Detriment/Safety Net approaches and alternative assessment methodologies. Cross-discipline attainment gaps will be analysed with a critical lens examining inclusivity.
- 2) To develop a shared understanding of cross institution inclusive assessment approaches and policy arrangements.
- 3) To devise a series of evidence-informed inclusive attributes of assessment and recommendations for implementation in policy and practice for sustained impact beyond the pandemic.

# Project Approach

## Introduction

In this section we outline the constituent components and activities comprising the project approach undertaken between April 2021 and July 2022. The section covers key details around project governance, data collection and analysis, and generation of project outputs and resources.

## Project Governance

A governance structure was established comprising a Steering group and Operational group facilitated through a designated Microsoft Teams Project Site. The Steering Group included project leads and was accountable for the overall governance of the project and helped to collectively determine the nature and content of core project activities. The Operational Group included wider project team members and was responsible for overseeing and facilitating the day-to-day running of the project across each of the core project activities, including planning and coordinating the primary data collection and analysis.

## Collaborative Agreement and Project Ethics

A collaborative agreement was established and entered into by all partners. The purpose of the agreement was to ensure clarity regarding project aims and expectations and provide agreed parameters for confidentiality and publication.

An overarching ethics application for the project was approved by Teesside University's Health and Life Science Ethics Committee for all partner HEIs to conduct staff and student focused research as part of the data collection and analysis strand of the project. Where required, partners drew upon the Teesside University application to inform, complete and secure separate internal ethical clearance.

## Recruitment of Student Researchers

Each of the eight partners received funding to recruit a current student to undertake the contracted role of a paid research assistant to support institutional project work. Each student researcher post equated to a total of 80-hours of related project work per institutional partner. The role involved student researchers: 1) working in collaboration with project leads and teams to undertake and contribute to a defined programme of qualitative data collection and analysis; 2) Support and contribute to the development of resources and documentation relevant to the project plan.

## Mapping Institutional Policy Responses

Initially, all project partners completed and shared a Policy Mapping Matrix capturing details of policies active and/or deployed from March 2020 in terms of assurances, support, and guidance aligned to key student demographic groups. Partners also provided corresponding policy documentation where this was appropriate to do so.

## Phase 1: Data Collection and Analysis

### Capturing Institutional Attainment Data

Each partner curated, and prepared initial datasets based on key Access and Participation Plan (APP) student characteristics (provided by the Office for Students) highlighting changes in attainment between student demographic groups in 2019-20 compared to previous years. A primary focus of this exercise was for each partner institution to identify in their respective datasets evidence of where awarding gaps were reduced, pointing also to possible evidence of impact for institutional policy responses from a quantitative perspective. These data then provided the programme/course-focus for recruitment to subsequent staff interviews and student focus groups/interviews for primary data collection.

### Primary Data Collection

Using these insights from their respective institutional datasets, each partner identified the programmes/courses where the largest reductions in awarding gaps were observed. Partners then approached programme leaders and associated team members from the identified programmes/courses, inviting them to participate in staff interviews designed to explore the nature of assessment arrangements and support deployed from March 2020. Staff interviews were conducted via an online meeting platform and lasted for an average duration of around 30-40 minutes. To ensure consistency of approach across institutional partners, an interview question schedule was devised by the project group that all partners then deployed in their interviews with staff. Questions focused on the steps taken to ensure assessment processes had been accessible and fair for students, those aspects of alternative assessment practice that had most positively impacted student learning, as well as those aspects of assessment practice that had proved most challenging. Finally, staff were asked about the sources of information and/or support they had found most useful when devising alternative assessment arrangements. Across the eight institutional partners a total of 18 staff spanning 14 programmes were interviewed.

Liaising with programme leaders, along with Student Representatives for those programmes/courses identified from the institutional data, partners recruited final year students to participate in a series of student focus groups with the aim of garnering insights into the student experience of alternative assessment arrangements and support deployed at programme level. Focus groups (or where required to accommodate student availability, individual interviews) were conducted via an online meeting platform, lasted for an average duration of around 30-40 minutes, and were structured around a question schedule again devised by the project group to ensure a consistent approach was being adopted. Focus groups were conducted either by partners or Student Researchers. Questions explored the extent to which students felt they had been provided with opportunities to engage with, and have input into, different assessment tasks and approaches; the extent to which they felt assessment arrangements adopted had been practical and realistic; those aspects of assessment practice that had most positively impacted their learning; what had been the most challenging aspects of assessment practices; and the nature of the support they had received. Across the eight institutional partners a total of 22 students from 14 programmes/courses participated in 16 focus groups/interviews.



## Thematic Data Analysis

All staff interviews and student focus groups/interviews were transcribed in full and subjected to a process of thematic analysis. Partners and student researchers analysed their own staff and student data. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, recognised as patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the study focus or say something about an issue (Clarke and Braun, 2013). This process is much more than merely summarising the data; a good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it. For the purposes of this project the focus was primarily on identifying and making sense of key themes related to inclusive assessment practices and their impact on the student assessment experience. Following Maguire and Brid Delahunt (2017), a thematic analysis template was used by each partner to capture key emergent themes and sub-themes at a programme level, along with an initial descriptive account of each theme's meaning.

## Phase 2: Data Collection and Analysis

### Capturing Institutional Continuation Data

A second phase of the project examined continuation rates, to identify if similar changes in attainment observed in the final year of study were apparent in earlier years of study over the same period. Each partner curated, and prepared initial datasets based on Continuation data 2020-21 highlighting changes in student progression compared to previous years. A primary focus of this second exercise was for each partner institution to identify in their respective datasets evidence of where continuation had improved, again pointing to possible evidence of impact for key institutional policy and support. Repeating the approach adopted in Phase 1, these improvements then provided the programme-focus for recruitment to subsequent staff interviews and student focus groups/interviews (Phase 2).

### Primary Data Collection

Each partner used insights gained from institutional datasets to identify programmes/course where the largest improvements had been made on continuation. To ensure continuity with Phase 1, partners then approached programme leaders and team members for those programmes highlighted by the institutional data inviting them to participate in subsequent staff interviews. Staff interviews were again conducted via an online meeting platform lasting for an average duration of 30-40mins. A revised interview question schedule was developed for Phase 2 data collection to reflect the shift in focus (on to continuation) and based upon key reflections around the practical implementation of the interview question schedule deployed in Phase 1. Questions focused on understanding how assessment practices during the pandemic were different compared to those deployed before March 2020, the extent to which changes in teaching approaches influenced assessment design, what additional support had been made available for students to support assessment changes, as well as how this information was communicated. Finally, staff were asked to outline those changes in assessment practice they planned to retain and why. Across the eight partners a total of 22 staff spanning 12 programmes/disciplines were interviewed during Phase 2 data collection.

Working closely, again, with programme leaders and Student Representatives for those programmes identified from the institutional data, partners recruited current final year (Level 6) students to participate in a series of student focus groups with the aim of garnering insights into the student experience of alternative assessment arrangements and support



deployed at programme/course level during the previous year at Level 5. Focus groups (or where required due to accommodate student availability, individual interviews) were conducted via an online meeting platform, lasted for an average duration of around 30-40 minutes, and were structured around a revised focus group topic guide devised by the project group (including student researchers) to align with the shift in focus onto continuation and based on key reflections from Student Researchers around the practical implementation of the focus group question schedule deployed in Phase 1. The new focus group topic guide explored the extent to which students had felt supported in their assessments and the form(s) that this had taken, the nature and variety of assessment tasks they had experienced, the extent to which they felt revised tasks and arrangements were relevant and worthwhile, and whether they felt they had a voice in decisions around assessment methods utilised. Finally, students were asked to describe what had been most positive about assessment changes they had experienced, as well as what they felt were the biggest challenges from a student learning perspective. Across the eight partners a total of 19 students spanning 12 programmes/disciplines participated in 14 focus groups/interviews.

### Thematic Data Analysis

All staff interviews and student focus groups were transcribed in full and subjected to a process of thematic analysis, following the procedure administered in Phase 1. The same thematic analysis template was used to capture key emergent themes and sub-themes at a programme level, along with initial descriptive accounts of each theme's meaning.

### Final Thematic Analysis

In a final thematic analytical step, each partner was tasked with reviewing all emergent, programme-level, themes from Phase 1 and 2 data collection to generate overarching themes representative of student and staff assessment experiences for each phase. Each partner submitted separate templates, identifying the overarching student and staff themes for both Phase 1 and 2.

Taken together, these final, institutional level, overarching themes were then used to inform the development of Output Activity 1 (Inclusive Assessment Position Statement) and Output Activity 2 (Inclusive Assessment Attributes) and formed the basis for developing final institutional case studies as part of Output Activity 3 (Reflective Toolkit). The approach to developing each project output activity is discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Phase 3: Generating Project Outputs

This section outlines the work undertaken to develop and produce key project outputs, namely: 1) an inclusive assessment position statement; 2) a set of inclusive assessment attributes; 3) a reflective toolkit and associated collection of case studies; and 4) a final project report (this document).

Project outputs were collaboratively developed and co-produced with project partners and, where appropriate, student researchers via a series of tailored (online) sandpit events. A total of four sandpit events provided a supportive and open space to encourage and enable participants to express their views, consider available evidence and, in this way, uncover shared insights to be taken forward into the various project artefacts and resources.

## Output Activity 1 – Inclusive Assessment Position Statement

A blended approach to developing the Inclusive Assessment Position statement was taken. A concept board was developed on Padlet and shared with a set of asynchronous engagement protocols for the partners to engage with ahead of the sandpit. The concept board included inclusive practice/inclusive assessment definitions from all participating institutions plus those from Advance HE, QAA and a concise example from an international institution. The sandpit drew on the work generated in the pre-event engagement and identified the key values, terms, and concepts of inclusive assessment to form a draft statement which was circulated through the Padlet for feedback and asynchronous discussion before the final position statement was agreed.

## Output Activity 2 – Inclusive Assessment Attributes

Once each partner had completed their individual thematic analysis, a small sub-group worked together to identify the common themes and sub-themes across both staff and student data, and from these drew up a list of draft attributes in a shared Google Jamboard (one attribute per sheet). In the sandpit event, the draft attributes were shared, and partners were allocated into breakout rooms and asked to refer back to their own analysis templates and identify if any key themes were missing and add these as additional attributes if necessary. Each partner was also asked to consider the language they would use to describe each attribute and add this as a sticky note under each attribute heading. The whole group then came back together to discuss and broadly confirm the proposed set of inclusive assessment attributes. Partners who could not attend the sandpit event were able to add comments to the Google Jamboard afterwards. Following this, the members of the sub-group focused on one or two of the proposed attributes and worked individually to refine the wording of both the main attribute descriptor and its definition, based on the comments and suggestions that had been added to the Google Jamboard by each partner. The sub-group met again to agree the wording for each, and a final session was then held with all partners where the proposed attributes were shared, and the wording further refined and agreed.

## Output Activity 3 – Reflective Toolkit and Case Study series

### *Reflective Toolkit*

A panel of reflective questions were developed in a series of sandpit events attended by both staff and student researchers. The definition of each inclusive attribute was considered by discussing its meaning for three key stakeholder groups: leaders; academics; and students. From this we generated up to two questions for each user group to prompt reflections on where practice was currently positioned and how this could be further enhanced. The exercise also formulated an indicative protocol and template for undertaking a reflective review.

### *Case Study Series*

Drawing on insights generated through their institutional data analysis each partner identified and developed one case study to illustrate where alternative assessment arrangements had been most positively impactful for student attainment and/or continuation at a programme/course-level. A collaborative draft and peer-review process ensured that the final case study series (eight in total) represented a range of disciplines, where both student and

staff perspectives were captured, and that each individual case study included four key areas: 1) the disciplinary context; 2) assessment arrangements; 3) outcomes and key learning; and 4) were illustrative of specific attributes of inclusive assessment at the subject/programme level.

#### Output Activity 4 – Final Project Report

As part of the Final Project Report (the current document) which captures and outlines the constituent components and activities comprising the project approach undertaken, the wider project group including Steering Group and Operational Group members were asked to consider and respond to a series of reflective questions (facilitated through Microsoft Forms). Questions related to what partners believed to be the value, reach and impact of the project work undertaken at a local institutional and at a broader sector level. This information was then taken forward and considered as part of the final sandpit event with key insights drawn together and presented in the final section of this report (see page 16).

## Mapping the Policy Context

This section provides an overview of the collective policy response from across project partners (key features, themes, and changes) drawing on the institutional mapping exercise.

### Introduction

Following the National Covid-19 lockdown announced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, all Universities made rapid decisions about changes to assessments, especially for the May/June 2020 examination period. Like many universities, the eight partner institutions all made changes to assessment policies with the aim of limiting the negative impact of the pandemic on student performance whilst maintaining the integrity of their degrees. In adopting these revised flexible strategies there were some similarities of approach across institutions and some variations, yet all eight partners identified Assessment Principles prior to the Semester B assessment period (May/June 2020), approved at institutional level (e.g., by an Academic Board).

The University's no detriment policy is underpinned by the following principles. The policy will

- i. operate in the best interests of students ensuring that they are able to receive academic awards and progress between stages of study at the rate originally planned, and to achieve academic outcomes that fairly reflect their performance;
- ii. be implemented in a manner that ensures that academic standards are upheld and grade inflation is avoided; in doing this the University will meet its obligations to ensure that degrees awarded to students hold their value over time and secure the confidence of employers and the public;
- iii. will be applied across the University in order that all students can be confident of fair and equal treatment;
- iv. take account of the University's diverse curriculum structures which will necessitate the use of different models for applying no detriment;
- v. award credit where course learning outcomes have been met.

Example of Assessment Principles from one of the partner Universities (*Brighton*)

Following agreement and publication of principles, partner institutions approved temporary changes to assessment regulations/policies and applied these for the remainder of the 2019/20 academic year, and in most cases for the 2020/21 academic year. Some of the partner institutions maintained some of the assessment changes into the academic year 2021/22, with six institutions identifying permanent changes to assessment policy. Interestingly for some of the HEIs, policy changes deemed to be supportive during the pandemic had either already been brought in that academic year, or were agreed for future implementation, and fast-tracked into operation when the pandemic hit.

## Analysis of policy changes

Having reviewed policy documents, a range of assessment changes were identified, and each partner institution completed an analysis spreadsheet indicating which changes they made. They also indicated if the changes were applied across all, or specific assessment periods within academic years:

Assessment period	England Covid-19 lockdowns and measures
June 2020 Semester B	National lockdown
August 2020 Referrals/Deferrals & Semester C	2m Social distancing rules and local lockdowns
January 2021 Semester A	Third National lockdown
June 2021 Semester B	Step 3 – ‘rule of 6 or 2 household gatherings
August 2021 Referrals/Deferrals & Semester C	Step 4 – limits on social contact removed
January 2022 Semester A	Face mask regulations
June 2022 Semester B	No regulations
August 2022 Referrals/Deferrals & Semester C	No regulations expected

## Summary of findings

Most changes made by partner institutions were applied during the Semester B assessment period in June 2020 and the remainder of the 19-20 academic year and then throughout the 20-21 academic year – the period most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

All partners applied a locally agreed set of Assessment Principles at institutional level. In 5 out of the 8 HEIs assessment design such as conversion of exams to 24-hour take home format, was not dictated, and in 7 of the partners, local approval for assessment changes were required rather than institution-level approval, thus enabling departments and programme teams to design assessments appropriate for their disciplines to meet module and programme/courses learning outcomes.

Seven partner institutions applied embedded placement requirement changes and in 6 of the partners, the changes were led by guidance or specified requirements determined by professional, statutory, or regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Decisions about sandwich/placement year requirements were made individually by the institutions.

All 8 partner institutions applied a ‘no-detriment’ policy although the policies differed with calculations made at individual and/or module and/or classification level, and 6 partners did not apply penalty capping for referred assessments either at the individual assignment and/or module level.

Changes to extension (6 partners) and deferral (8 partners) policies were made recognising the challenging circumstances that students were facing (e.g., home schooling, digital access, limited access to resources, financial burden due to loss of employment) and included relaxations of evidence requirements and increased extension periods. 4 HEIs instigated automatic deferral opportunities for any students who did not submit assignments.

Extra time and adjustments for students with disabilities were applied in all 8 partners and 2 of the partners required no evidence for disability-related adjustments during the Covid period. Four partners also applied extra time in assessments (e.g., for online quizzes and tests) recognising non-disability related challenges such as wi-fi issues and caring responsibilities).

The covid pandemic policy response demonstrated the ability to fast-track good ideas and practice. In a number of instances policy changes were instigated rapidly during the pandemic, some being policy changes already in the institutional pipeline that had not been scheduled for introduction for another one-to-two academic cycles. This has brought into question the necessity for the turgid lead-in times in our standard policy change processes.

### Assessment policy change themes

Several themes were identified from the policy changes which have informed our inclusive assessment position statement.

Standards	Flexible	Value	Choice	Ownership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•No detriment policies</li> <li>•Uncapping for referrals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment Principles</li> <li>• Placement requirements</li> <li>•Extra time and adjustments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•No detriment policies</li> <li>•Extension and Deferral relaxations</li> <li>•Extra time and adjustments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•'Best of' policies</li> <li>•Automatic deferrals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment Principles</li> <li>•'Best of' policies</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Analysis of implemented changes**

Change	Total 'n' partners applying changes	'n' partners applying changes 19-20 and 20-21 #	'n' partners applying changes for 19-20 to 21-22 ##	Other/comments	
<b>Institution defined assessment principles</b>	8	6	2		
<b>Assessment changes required - central or local approval</b>	Central (institutional)	1	-	1 (1HEI applied required local approval during covid years and then Central approval in academic year 21-22)	
	Local (department/programme level)	7	-		
<b>Institution imposed assessment design, e.g., 24hr online exam</b>	3	2	1	5 did not have dictated assessment designs	
<b>Embedded placement hours adjusted</b>	PSRB led	6	6	-	1 HEI did not indicate any associated change
	Institutional agreement	1	1	-	
<b>Adjustments made to sandwich/placement year requirements</b>	PSRB led	-	-	-	1 HEI did not indicate any associated change
	Institutional agreement	7	5	2	
<b>'Best of' submission policy *</b>	3	2	-	1 HEI has implemented this since June 2021	
<b>No Detriment Policy **</b>	Adjusted individual to 'self' pre-pandemic	7	4	-	3 HEIs applied an 'individual' no detriment policy only for academic year 19-20
	Adjusted cohort by module (e.g., pre-pandemic 3y average)	3	2	-	1 HEI applied a 'module' no detriment policy since academic year 20-21
	Adjusted by classification calculation	5	1	2	2 HEIs applied a classification calculation only for 19-20
<b>Changes to previous extension request policy ***</b>	6	5	-	1 HEI has applied the change since academic year 21-22	
<b>Changes to deferral regulations</b>	No evidence required for personal/exceptional circumstances	8	7	-	1 HEI applied the change for 19-20 and Sem A 20-21
	Automatic deferral for no submission	4	2	-	2 HEIs applied the change for 19-20 only
<b>Uncapped marks for referrals</b>	Assignment only was uncapped	5	4	-	1 HEI applied the change for 19-20
	Whole module was uncapped	5	2	2	1 HEI applied the change for 19-20
<b>Extra time and reasonable adjustments for assessments</b>	Evidence not required for disability related extra time	2		1	All 8 HEIs applied extra time and made reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities. For 1 HEI, the 'evidence not required' change applied only for 19-20
	Extra time applied for other reasons (e.g., Wi-Fi issues/carers duties)	4	4	-	

# during biggest impact of the pandemic

## all academic years since pandemic began, including 21-22 academic year

\*(institution allowed students to submit more than once for an assignment/assessment and the best mark chosen)

\*\*Where 'no detriment' policies were applied, they were applied for Undergraduate (including integrated Masters) and Postgraduate Taught programmes.

\*\*\* e.g., previously assignment extensions could be granted for up to 10 working days - in pandemic, they could be granted for up to 15 working days; no evidence required for an extension during pandemic.

## Inclusive Assessment: a position statement

To frame the development of key project outputs, as well as the broader conversation we want to encourage around inclusivity and assessment in higher education, it was important for the project group to have a clear position with regards to what we mean when referring to 'Inclusive Assessment'.

As a collection of University Alliance institutions, we support a distinctive and diverse student body and share a collective ethos that values equity and inclusion where students' differences are considered and valued within mainstream curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (see [University Alliance](#)).

To this end, the position statement presented below offers the lens through which we invite universities and practitioners to critically consider their own assessment policies and practices.

We believe inclusive assessment ...

*"... is realised through holistic and flexible approaches that recognise value and reflect student diversity, facilitating choice and enabling every individual to demonstrate their achievement with respect to academic/professional standards and empowering them to take ownership of their learning journey.*

*To achieve this, assessment needs to be strategically designed as an embedded element of the curriculum to proactively consider students' needs and to remove systemic barriers in institutional policies, processes, and practices."*

The position statement provides the anchor point for a series of evidence-based Inclusive Assessment Attributes, each designed to highlight and articulate a key aspect of embedding effective inclusive assessment at institution and practice level.



## Inclusive Assessment Attributes

Inclusive assessment:

### **Requires considerate policies and processes.**

The design of assessment policies and processes are informed by an awareness of student needs, understanding of external pressures, and insights into structures and societal barriers.

### **Communicates meaningfully.**

The assessment process is clear and transparent to all developed through a constructive dialogue between staff and students. Different levels, and modes, of communication are managed to ensure timely and accessible information.

### **Develops assessment literacy.**

Students are actively engaged with assessment processes with a focus on clarifying learning outcomes and expectations. Students and staff share an understanding of the purposes, requirements, and approaches of assessment.

### **Embeds support.**

Academic and wellbeing support is integrated within teaching and assessment. It is easily accessible, dialogic, responsive, and considerate of individual student needs.

### **Provides formative opportunities.**

Assessment is framed as a developmental process within which students engage in formative tasks and receive timely, relevant, and manageable feedback. Students feel safe to fail, knowing they will be supported to learn from the experience.

### **Fosters digital capabilities.**

Assessment design is alive to the opportunities of different technologies. It creates a culture in which students and staff can develop and extend their digital capabilities, facilitating learning and teaching in diverse contexts and environments.

### **Enables personalisation.**

Assessment is designed to facilitate ownership and flexibility in how students demonstrate learning outcomes. Students feel empowered to make informed choices over what, when, and how they are assessed where appropriate.

### **Promotes authenticity.**

The assessment tasks are relevant to students' subject areas, employment sectors and contexts of further study to which students will progress. The assessment culture encourages multi-modal and creative assessment design.

### **Requires continuous reflection.**

Assessment is continuously reviewed and critiqued, using feedback and discussions with students, staff, and key stakeholders, to ensure ongoing enhancement of policies, practices, and processes.

## Project Summary, Insights and Next Steps

This project has brought together eight institutions from across the University Alliance mission group to consider and understand the impacts of large-scale assessment change triggered by the COVID pandemic and resulting educational pivot. Despite the challenging and difficult times, it was recognised that many of the changes made to assessment policy and practice had positively affected awarding and/or continuation gaps. The project group were keen that this impact be captured, explored, and articulated, with a particular focus upon drawing out inclusive assessment attributes and practices.

Through institutional case-studies, continuation and attainment data, policy analysis and conversations with students and staff, the project has produced a series of practical, evidence-based insights into the impact of alternative assessment arrangements on student outcomes, highlighting areas of good practice and creative implementation. This led to the development of a shared understanding of inclusive practices and practical changes that have enhanced assessment experiences, and the ways these can continue to have a positive impact on all students. A set of inclusive assessment attributes was collectively developed to reflect the insights generated through the research work undertaken. The intention is to share these attributes and associated toolkit with the sector, providing a framework to assist colleagues in reflecting upon their current institutional policies and practices.

The project has been illustrative of how clear, positive outcomes can develop from adversity and how agile thinking and responses to change have allowed institutions to put creative solutions and inclusive practices in place within a short period time with the culminative effect of improving student outcomes. A suite of case studies was developed to illustrate the types of approach that were deployed and the impacts that were seen. These case studies provide more in-depth insights into how institutions might practically approach the development of enhanced inclusive assessment practices and policies.

The cross-institutional, fully remote, approach adopted to deliver such a large-scale project was new to all partners and provided a fresh collaborative methodology that has proven to be sustainable throughout periods of lockdown and pandemic-related restrictions. The approach outlined above offers a truly co-creative working model for collaborative partnership projects, providing increased flexibility and opportunities for learning that may have previously been less recognised.

A key component of this research project has been student partnership. Each institution appointed a student researcher to work actively across the data collection and data analysis stages of the project. By engaging with student researchers in this way, we have observed reciprocal benefits related not only to the student researchers' professional development, but also to the process of knowledge production in the context of institutional research. Conducting research about the student experience in collaboration/partnership with students has provided considerable value to the research process, as well as the overall quality of the project outputs and resources produced. Student researchers share one important characteristic with student participants: they are students at the same university. This has enhanced important elements of the qualitative research process, such as building rapport with participants during interviews/focus groups or searching for themes within a thematic analysis process. Although this is not to say that the student researchers' immediate understanding of the student experience is assured, a more symbiotic relationship between researchers and participants has the potential for more experiences to be shared, resulting in a better understanding of the student experience.

## Project Insights

### **A focusing event leading to demonstrable awareness of the importance of inclusive policies and the impact that policy changes can have for the better.**

The Pandemic offered an unprecedented opportunity to reframe and reconsider the relationship between assessment policy and practice at scale. Whilst the sector has always recognised the importance and impact of inclusive assessment policies, the large-scale shift in assessment practice adopted through the pandemic has crystallised our understanding of its significant positive impact on student outcomes.

### **The need for a holistic, integrated, and reflective approach to assessment – from staff development, assessment policies and student engagement.**

In order to identify the agile solutions required by the transition to online, dialogue between staff as well as between staff and students around assessment redesign, marking schemes and grade calibration was significantly increased and improved. This supported consistency, alignment and parity which led to better outcomes for students.

### **Culminative small-scale changes (in assessment design and support) can lead to significant improvement**

Assessments do not have to be redesigned in their entirety to have a significant impact on student outcomes. Flexibility in the mode of assessment or length of completion time (e.g., 24-hour exams) can have positive outcomes by reducing stress and anxiety and allowing students to work to their strengths.

### **Teaching and learning of assessment literacy is critical to student success – embedding a shared and transparent understanding between students and staff and having mechanisms to support this.**

Given the significant and rapid variations to assessment design and delivery, staff focused more attention and took additional care to explain the changes to students. These explanations took more innovative and accessible forms, such as pre-recorded explanations of the assessment brief and criteria, which in turn supported students' engagement with, and understanding of, the assessment. This dialogue proved to contribute as much, if not more to students' positive outcomes than a change to the assessment design or mode of assessment. Conversations between staff and students about the purpose and expectations of assessment are vital and build a shared understanding of what good looks like. Assessment literate students begin with assessment literate staff.

### **New or alternative ways of assessing students which authentically assess the process not merely the product.**

The range and diversity of authentic assessment developed and deployed as a response to the pandemic have been shown to support the learning outcomes, skills and competencies that are less adapted to traditional forms of assessment. In addition, the pandemic accelerated significant developments in assessment strategy, supporting the development of graduate skills that reflect industry requirements.

## **Student support – integrating student academic and wellbeing support into curriculum and assessment design.**

A key aspect of the success of the pandemic approach to assessment was the embeddedness of student support and its alignment with the assessment process. Increased support around assessment, such as regular online drop-ins and tutorials, scaffolded assessment tasks which further reinforced a positive and compassionate approach to assessment.

## **Embedding Inclusive Assessment: A call to action**

Set against the backdrop of unprecedented challenge and sector uncertainty in higher education, the approach and work outlined above presents a range of useful insights, guidance, and resources to help structure and inform discussion, planning, and design for embedding greater inclusivity in university assessment. It also provides an important starting point for dialogue between institutions, practitioners, and students surrounding the development and implementation of inclusive assessment opportunities within the curriculum.

This report should be considered in concert with the **'Embedding Inclusive Assessment: A Reflective Toolkit'** and **'Case Studies in Inclusive Assessment'** resources. These resources have been developed with the aim of supporting HE leaders, academics, and students to review and evaluate assessment practice, regulations, and infrastructure against a set of evidence-informed Inclusive Assessment Attributes with a view to reducing awarding gaps and improving student continuation.

### **Leaders**

An important step in embedding inclusive assessment is to ensure that it is clearly signalled in the relevant institutional strategies. Poorly conceived policy and regulation can focus staff on minor details of assessment, diverting attention from assessment as a whole process and lead to rejection of more diverse methods with benefits for learning or inclusion.

HE leaders are encouraged to use the toolkit and associated resources to 1) critique, review and enhance policies and consider resource requirements for embedding greater inclusivity into assessment processes; 2) reframe the application of resources which support staff to develop best practices in assessment; and 3) integrate this practical knowledge in academic staff development programmes (i.e., PGCertLTHE); 4) encourage discussions between the different groups to increase understanding about how inclusive current practice is, how this can be further enhanced and to agree a plan of action.

### **Academics**

Staff 'buy-in' is vital to enhancement in such a pervasive aspect of higher education as assessment where resistance to change can be high. Institutions will need a planned and sustained staff development strategy to support the implementation of necessary assessment change, underpinned by dedicated substantial resource for staff development.

A key step to achieving this will be encouraging all relevant staff to use the toolkit and associated resources to review their own assessment-related practice to: 1) reflect on the inclusivity of their assessment when (re)designing them; 2) draw on the case studies provided to model for the kinds of ways they can make their own assessments more inclusive with a view to addressing degree awarding gaps and student continuation; 3)

identify additional support they require to enhance inclusivity and to feed this back; 4) encourage students to use the resources to reflect on their experiences and feed this back.

## **Students**

Students have an important role to play in effectively embedding inclusive assessment. They are likely to resist change unless they understand the reason for it and its benefits to them in relation to learning, fairness and relevance. Developing students' assessment literacy, that is their understanding of the language of assessment and assessment processes, is paramount.

Active student engagement with assessment standards needs to be an integral and seamless part of programme/course design and the learning process to allow students to develop their own, internalised conceptions of standards, as well as an informed understanding of assessment safeguards, policy, and available support.

Encouraging and supporting students to use the toolkit and associated resources to review their assessment experiences can help them to: 1) audit and review the inclusivity of assessment arrangements and give informed feedback to practitioners; 2) identify gaps in their knowledge and understanding of policies, practices and expectations and identify ways to close these gaps; 3) identify opportunities to work with other students to improve their understanding of expectations; 4) identify barriers to their learning/assessed work and to seek appropriate support.

Students may additionally find the resources useful when they are working as part of development teams for periodic reviews and validations, and/or co-creating assessments in partnership with staff, as they will support dialogue around the barriers to inclusive assessment.

## **Next Steps in Inclusive Assessment Research**

Equality legislation places a duty of care on higher education institutions to promote equality, to tackle persistent and long-standing issues of disadvantage, such as awarding gaps between white and black and minority ethnic students, and the low participation and continuation rates of certain student groups. Assessment has been shown to have an important role in supporting this undertaking, particularly in enabling all students to successfully demonstrate their achievements. However, though this project has provided valuable insight into how certain assessment arrangements might enable effective inclusive assessment at institution and practice level, further research and development work is still needed to fully understand how well-designed assessment practices can benefit all learners and reduce the requirement for specific modifications for individual students.

Further longitudinal work is also required to identify which of the policy and practice-level assessment changes captured in this project have been sustained beyond the initial pandemic period and any associated long-term impact on student success.

Embedding quality inclusive assessment also has the potential to assess a wider variety of educational outcomes and reduce concerns that modifications to traditional assessment methods may be lowering standards. Inclusive assessment requires a more open-minded consideration of how the learning outcomes for a module or programme can be demonstrated, for example using a variety of assessment methods and student choice. A

core challenge in achieving this is designing assessment that provides for all students while meeting the needs of specific groups.

Additional practice-based research is needed to explore, in detail, the relationship between inclusive assessment design, policies and de-colonised curriculum content to examine and understand the limitations and biases of current and future pedagogic arrangements more deeply. The goal is here is to enhance diversity through intentional recognition and inclusion of student differences into existing institutions in ways that do not significantly challenge existing (and possible future) measures of success.

Enforced changes to assessment arrangements brought about by the onset of the pandemic have undoubtedly surfaced concerns about care and the need for practitioners to apply compassionate practices. We have gained glimpses into how changes in our teaching and interactions with students, and colleagues, can lead to inclusive action and practices that alleviate anxiety and promote wellbeing.

Further work is urgently needed to build on this recent insight to better understand, apply, and mainstream what we know about mental health and the impact of mental wellbeing on study and work to enhance the assessment experiences of all students and staff, especially those who have historically been excluded or felt silenced by conventional approaches to learning.

Further work is also needed to counter arguments regarding grade inflation. Recent discussions by the government and Office for Students (OfS) have suggested that the increase in proportion of good degrees and particularly first-class degrees across the sector is unexplained. The OfS argue that even after taking in to account observable factors such as students' prior entry qualifications and their background characteristics, nearly six in ten first class degrees are unexplained. (Office for Students, 12th May 2022). The factors considered do not include consideration of assessment design and, as this collaborative study has shown, inclusive assessment design has led to reductions in awarding gaps and increased attainment for students from widening participation backgrounds.

The OfS challenge to universities to address grade inflation may result in a return to more conservative assessment methods and greater reliance on traditional examinations. However, the results of our study support an alternative proposition that sets inclusive assessment at the heart of a concerted effort to ensure fairer assessment and grading of students across different demographics and educational backgrounds. In future work we plan to investigate this further and monitor whether any reversion back to pre-pandemic assessment methods causes retrograde changes in attainment data for specific groups of students.

## References

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