# Inclusive assessment design framework

This design framework is for university educators and teaching teams who are seeking more equitable assessments for all students. It is intended for use alongside other resources such as the [Assessment Design Decisions (ADD](https://www.assessmentdecisions.org/)) and the [Universal Design for Learning](https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl) frameworks. It has been developed by a research team in collaborative process with academics, access and inclusion staff, and students, drawing from expert practice, student interviews and the literature.

## Inclusive assessment principles

* **Assessment should credential or develop capability in relation to learning outcomes, not extraneous attributes, skills, or behaviours.**
* **Assessment should support diverse students to demonstrate what they know and what they can do, without unfair barriers and in a way that benefits their development.**

Why inclusive assessment design?

Students from equity groups face barriers to their learning such as: disabilities; medical and mental health conditions; living in rural, regional or remote areas; socioeconomic status; culture, race and gender difference; language proficiency; age; and care and work commitments. Frequently, adjustments (accommodations) of time, space or mode of submission are provided to individual students as a means of addressing some of these inequities. While these may be useful, they can also have drawbacks. Treating assessment design holistically and broadly can lead to both more inclusive practices and better assessment design.

Learning about student experiences can help to understand the need for inclusive assessment. Students with disability access plans say things like:

*“My units where I've been successful and I've received high distinctions, the difference was the unit chair and their empathy and flexibility and I think that made the most difference for me.”*

*“… handwriting and speed is not my friend. … I couldn't do this degree without [adjustments] to be quite honest.”*

*“As soon as they put the camera on me, that's it. I can't move, I can't breathe …Then as soon as they took the camera off of me I did it again and did it perfectly. The comment that I got back was I just need to get over the anxiety.”*

*“With a disability and being a sole carer, I need to be highly organised to be able to do my academic best. I often need information quite in advance to be able to plan and prepare.”*

Assessment design: Purposes and scope

A broad view of assessment includes graded (summative) and non-graded (formative) tasks, as well as self- and peer assessment.

Assessment has multiple purposes, including credentialling achievement and promoting student learning. Balancing these purposes through design involves compromise, which varies according to the location of the assessment within a unit or program.

Assessment design sets the parameters of tasks within a unit/course, including consideration of a broader program context. Disciplinary norms, administrative processes and resourcing are inevitably part of this process.

## The inclusive assessment development lifecycle

At each phase within this framework, a series of considerations prompt assessment design decisions.

### Plan for inclusive change

Planning requires a focus on inclusive change within a unit or broader program. This may be a process of iterative articulation across several cycles of the framework. Useful first steps are:

* Consult students and accessibility staff: What are their experiences of enablers and barriers to successful participation in assessment? What problems with assessment have been encountered previously? What is the pattern of adjustments?
* Consider your student cohort: What is known about their characteristics and intersecting identities? How can you find out?
* Reflect on the overall pattern of assessment tasks: How do assessment tasks assess what is necessary across the unit/program?
* Find exemplars of inclusive assessment: What other designs/approaches can inform you?

Develop assessment tasks  
‘Tasks’ describe activities such as exams and assignments and form the fundamental building blocks of assessment design. Consider what you are asking students to do or know, over what time and in which space. Bear in mind inclusion is about accommodating **diversity** (e.g., disability, neurodiversity, social diversity and so on) and you may need to balance different tensions.

* Consider the [Universal Design for Learning guidelines](https://udlguidelines.cast.org/) across tasks in a unit or program.
  + Engagement: How do the tasks align with students’ diverse motivations/goals/interests but at the same time allow them to demonstrate the learning outcomes? How might authentic assessment help create this balance?
  + Representation: How can the assessment instructions, rubrics, or marking guides be communicated to suit diverse audiences? How can people with diverse backgrounds and characteristics be recognised within assessment representations?
  + Expression: How might you offer students variety or flexibility to demonstrate or express their capabilities? To what extent does the mode of expression rely on students being able to know or do things unrelated to the learning outcomes?
* Develop scaffolding for diverse students to meet the task requirements. Supports may be practical (e.g., templates), technical (e.g., accessible software), cognitive (e.g., exemplars) or relational (e.g., enable discussion about the task).
* Anticipate common assessment adjustments: How can flexibility in task mode, format or submission timing potentially avoid the need for individual modifications? How might requirements unintentionally advantage or disadvantage particular groups of students?
* Locate the task within a broader unit or program context: In what ways can all the tasks within a program shift together to be more inclusive as a whole?

### Implement assessment

As students are introduced to and then complete assessment tasks, flexibility and responsiveness to unanticipated issues are required to support inclusion. An explicit, low-fuss and supportive approach to adjustments can strengthen relationships and reduce stress. During the implementation phase, consider how to:

* Communicate with assessment stakeholders: How might you ensure that students and access staff share an accurate understanding of processes and task requirements? How might you proactively reach students whose circumstances may put them at risk of attrition, and in a timely manner (e.g., before census date)?
* Expect some adjustments: In what ways can you streamline processes to reduce the effort required to request and implement adjustments?
* Adapt to unanticipated circumstances: How do students’ needs and capabilities match your expectations? What types of assessment-related support might address any issues?
* Monitor for continuous improvement: What insights can you gain about the inclusiveness of your assessment design and processes through tutor feedback, moderation meetings, and informal student comments? What do you need to change on-the-fly? Who else is involved and should be included in the discussion?

### Evaluate and reflect

The evaluation phase allows for iterative improvement and overlaps strongly with the planning phase. A key challenge is noticing your own blind spots when considering others’ perspectives. The following considerations can help educators articulate how inclusive the assessment was in practice:

* Think about assessment design in light of student submissions: How did student work match the aspiration of an appropriate and fair way to demonstrate learning outcomes? How did the assessment task enable diverse students to express/demonstrate their capabilities?
* Consider students’ experiences: Were there many requests for particular adjustments? How did the adjustments work in practice, including the unintended consequences? What patterns of underperformance or failure might need further investigation?
* Revisit what you asked students to do or know, over what time and in which space: What data or evidence, including formal evaluation, suggests that requirements unintentionally advantaged or disadvantaged particular groups of students?
* Consider resourcing: In what ways might you reallocate energy/efforts to ensure inclusivity?
* Share success: Who else would benefit from this work? What opportunities do you have to share with others?

## Examples of the framework in use

**Rearranging assessment across a unit**

**Context** A series of assessments met learning outcomes for five interlinked topic areas, which built on each other. Topics 1, 2 and 3 were covered in a quiz and a group assignment, but there was insufficient time to assess topics 4 and 5 prior to the end-of-semester exam, which covered all topics. **Plan** The educator reflected on how the timed conditions of the exam exacerbated students’ mental health challenges. Students writing in a second/additional language reported spending a lot of time looking up vocabulary rather than focusing on the questions. The educator also observed that universal time extensions granted under pandemic conditions resulted in a drop in adjustment requests. **Develop** Since some learning outcomes had been assessed earlier, the educator realised that they did not need to be so heavily represented in the final exam. Reducing assessed content acts in the same way as increasing time in the exam, and thus relieves anxiety and stress. The educator also considered ways to reduce the number of case studies that students needed to be familiar with to complete the final exam. **Implement** Reducing the content was an action that could be undertaken without the paperwork associated with changing an assessment within a unit. The educator decided to use the same case study scenarios in all teaching and assignments, which also appeared in the final exam. Specific questions on Topics 1-3 were reduced in the exam. **Evaluate** Adjustment requests stayed at pre-pandemic levels. The switch to fewer case studies meant questions could be more in-depth and students took the opportunity to provide more sophisticated responses.

**Removing an exam**

**Context** The Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) is often seen as a fair way of testing clinical skills by rotating health professional students through short observed sessions, where they undertake simulated clinical encounters after reading a short, written prompt. They complete an OSCE at every year over a four-year degree. **Plan** The OSCE is intended to assess diagnostic skills, but educators realised that the final year OSCE took place after a series of clinical rotations that had already assessed students on these very skills, possibly making the OSCE itself redundant. Moreover, the OSCE is very stressful for students, and requires performances under timed conditions that do not equate to clinical experiences. After talking with students, educators realised that the format required students to rapidly read and process prompts, which was not a learning outcome. **Develop** Resources were re-allocated to assess students in situ, where the tasks were more strongly aligned to accreditation and institutional learning outcomes. OSCEs in earlier years of the degree were retained, but students were given the option of having the observer read the prompt and received more time between tasks. **Implement** A number of students took up the offer of the reader in the earlier OSCEs. After assessment change paperwork was processed, the final OSCE was replaced by a portfolio designed to help students collate their clinical assessment experiences. **Evaluate** The course coordinator worked with the disability liaison officers, students and clinical educators to review changes. Students reported the reading arrangements and additional breaks reduced their stress. Clinical educators preferred the final year portfolio model as representing clinical capability more authentically than the OSCE.

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