CADQ Guide

Assessment: Designing for inclusion

This resource on inclusive assessment is focused on design issues and on the degree to which specific assessment types can cause difficulties for some students. At NTU the ethos of inclusion is that 'whilst legal compliance remains essential, promoting inclusive practice represents a key conceptual change - to move away from considering inclusion as a legal duty and towards providing an enabling environment for all students'.[1] Assessment design is considered within a framework of whole course assessment throughout.

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The resource has 4 sections which can be directly linked to via the contents section on the right.

To discuss assessment design and inclusion contact Michaela Borg (CADQ). For further information on adjustments to a specific assessment, made for an individual student, please contact the Disability Manager, Student Support Services.

Overview of inclusive assessment design

Inclusion is about the right of *all* students to gain access to the same learning opportunities at university. Often associated with disability, we use the term here to mean the sense that all students should be provided with the support they need to enable them to achieve and to be valued for who they are, regardless of difference or impairment.

Within a *whole course assessment* approach, designing assessments for inclusion will mean consideration is given to both the type and range of assessments across the course. Each assessment type (e.g., examinations, essays) will advantage some students and disadvantage others. Two possible strategies to counter this are:

- Alternative assessments that allow students flexibility in how they can meet course objectives. Flexibility within assessment choices can allow *all* students to select an option which best demonstrates their understanding of a topic, how they have met the assessment criteria and achieved the learning outcomes. This approach is supported by the QAA[2].

  A reasonable approach might be for a course team to identify modules where students may choose their assessment from a limited number available, as appropriate to learning outcomes.

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[1] NTU guidance note (approved June 2011) on Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act 2004 (DDA). Further guidance is available at: http://www.ntu.ac.uk/equality_diversity/about_you/disability/index.html

[2] QAA Code of Practice, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Section3Disabilities2010.pdf

- A range of assessments: To allow students to undertake a range of assessment methods during their course which will balance out the strengths and weaknesses that some students have with one particular assessment. Graham Gibbs[3], however, warns against too much variety as it may lead to:
  - o student confusion about expectations, structure, etc.
  - o lack of progression in standards over time as there is too little practice of each type of assessment.
  - o feedback that doesn't feed forward – i.e., feedback from a students' last assessment doesn't feed into their next assessment as the task does not seem to be related.

> A balanced approach would be for a course team to identify a set of assessment types which students undertake over the duration of their course. This should allow variety while providing students with an opportunity to develop their understanding of an assessment type and their skill in undertaking it.

It should be noted that while inclusive assessment aims to provide equal access for all, reasonable adjustment and flexibility are opportunities to support individuals[4].

Examinations and inclusive design

The focus of this resource is on assessment design and around considerations of how inclusive examinations are. The intention is that inclusivity should be considered at the design stage to ensure that as far as possible, assessment tasks are suitable for all students from the outset.

Examinations are usually timed, often 2-3 hours, may include multiple choice questions, short answer or essay questions. There are different kinds of examinations which assess different knowledge and skills. The type of exam chosen will impact on how inclusive it is.

> **Unseen examinations**, i.e., students do not know what the questions will be in advance of the exam. This exam type is useful for assessing:
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> - Memory, quick interpretation of information or questions, speed of thinking and analysis, ability to organise answers quickly
> - Skills of identifying key information or data and summarising it quickly
> - Ability to stay calm and focused under time pressure
> - Ensures that the work produced is by the student with little chance of plagiarism or collusion

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[3] TESTA resource: Assessment patterns that fail, and that work. At: http://www.testa.ac.uk/resources/best-practice-guides/96-revised-assessment-patterns-that-work

[4] NTU defines the following approaches to assessment for disabled students: *Modified assessment* - Alternative versions of an assessment available within the programme in anticipation of those students who would be disadvantaged in undertaking the standard assessment; *Reasonable adjustments* - Individual arrangements for students with particular disabilities in order for them to undertake the standard assessment in a different way.

Seen examinations, i.e., students will have been provided with the questions in advance of the exam.

- Memory and the ability to research known questions
- Ability to research complex topics or issues
- Greater importance is attached to the structure of answers, less emphasis on writing or thinking quickly

Open book examinations, i.e., students may use notes or in some cases textbooks. This may be conducted in more traditional, timed exam setting or may be a take home exam.

Students may have been given the question or topic in advance

- Ability to use and consult sources, less emphasis on memory
- Ability to work under time pressure

Challenges that some students may face with examinations

The following is offered as general guidance for consideration during assessment design as individual students will vary in their needs and challenges. Specific advice on adjustments will be available from students themselves and from *Student Support Services*.

- The time-pressure aspect of examinations may prove difficult for many students to deal with as they must process, organise and hand write quickly under pressure. This is particularly relevant to dyslexic students, students with English as an additional or foreign language and some students with mental health issues. Pressure may also lead to dyslexic students relying on basic vocabulary and overlooking key words in a question.
- Students with dyslexia or mental health issues may have difficulty memorising information or retrieving that information from memory under pressure.
- Sitting in position for a long period may cause discomfort or pain to physically impaired students.
- Questions which rely on the analysis of diagrams or other visual elements may prove difficult for students with visual impairments as they cannot necessarily be 'read' by the student or screen reader software. If a helper is available then their subject knowledge (or lack of) may be a factor.

Considerations for the use of examinations

- Questions should be written clearly with short unambiguous sentences and direct questions.
- If photocopies of original sources are included they should be easily readable or a transcription provided.
- The time pressure that examinations place students under may be more justifiable if for example retrieving information from memory under pressure is a relevant skill for a graduate in a particular discipline.
- Supporting students with exam technique, e.g., the importance of devoting time to reading and planning, and explaining grading criteria will help students to prepare themselves and may lessen the impact of the time pressure on their achievement.

Essays and inclusive design

The focus of this resource is on assessment design and around considerations of how inclusive essays are. The intention is that inclusivity should be considered at the design stage to ensure that as far as possible, assessment tasks are suitable for all students from the outset.

Essays are usually individual pieces of writing which are undertaken over a specified period of time to a deadline. The word number for submission varies although it generally shows an increase according to module credit size and to year of study.

Students may have to write to a specific title or brief, they may have a choice of titles or may negotiate one of their own.

Essays assess students' abilities to:

- research and offer a synthesis of a topic, drawing on sources
- organise the work in a logical manner, often according to a broadly similar structure
- manage their time

A number of skills may be assessed, for example writing (style, language, grammar, punctuation), research and referencing skills, drafting and revision.

Challenges that some students may face with essay writing

The following is offered as general guidance for consideration during assessment design as individual students will vary in their needs and challenges. Specific advice on adjustments will be available from students themselves and from *Student Support Services*.

- Some students may struggle to see what the final product should look like so there should be time allowed for discussion of format as well as approach. Explicit information should be given as to whether feedback will be offered on plans or drafts. Examples of students who may find this aspect particularly challenging are those with Asperger's syndrome, international students, or mature students who have not been in formal education for a lengthy period of time. Dyslexic students may also find sequence and structure challenging.
- Some students may struggle with spelling and grammar, for example because English is not their first language, for example international students and deaf or hearing impaired students or because they are spelling phonologically, e.g., students with visual impairments. Dyslexic students may also be affected.
- The challenge of a large piece of work with a deadline in the distance may be difficult for some students to deal with, for example students with mental health difficulties. This group may have periods in which their concentration and management of time is good and other periods when it is more problematic. Students who have caring responsibilities may also struggle with time management, particularly if deadlines on several modules are bunched together.

- Access to and reading of a range of sources and literature may be particularly difficult for some students, for example students who are blind or visually impaired and students who are using English as a second or additional language.

Considerations when setting essays

- Questions should be written clearly with short unambiguous sentences and direct questions.
- There should be clarity and discussion around deadlines and assessment criteria.
- Students should be given a clear message about whether spelling and grammar are considered important and, if they are then this should be reflected in the assessment criteria. Feedback should reflect the position taken.
- Students can benefit from seeing or working with a model or guidance on structure and format, in addition to having access to assessment criteria.
- Consider whether the whole task can be broken down into chunks with staggered deadlines and possibly some feedback (from tutor or peers) on elements.
- Electronic submission may help students who have access issues.

Oral presentations and inclusive design

The focus of this resource is on assessment design and around considerations of how inclusive oral presentations are. The intention is that inclusivity should be considered at the design stage to ensure that as far as possible, assessment tasks are suitable for all students from the outset.

Oral presentations are given by an individual student or a group of students to other students, the tutor and occasionally other, for example professionals. The presentation usually has a time limit and a requirement to take questions. Presentations are generally assessed by the tutor although the process may include elements

Presentations assess students' ability to

- research and offer a concise synthesis of a topic
- talk and answer questions about a topic.

Presentations may also assess:

- oral skills, e.g., voice projection
- body language, e.g., making eye contact
- presentation of information, e.g., the use of graphs or tables for information
- time management

Group presentations may assess the additional ability of working with others.

Challenges that some students may face with oral presentations

The following is offered as general guidance for consideration during assessment design as individual students will vary in their needs and challenges. Specific advice on adjustments will be available from students themselves and from *Student Support Services*.

1) The delivery of the talk itself may be difficult for some students, for example:

- If a deaf or hearing impaired student is using an interpreter to allow signing then fluency and eye contact may be affected.
- While some dyslexic students may perform well, others may struggle with the pronunciation of complicated or unfamiliar words.
- Blind students or those with a visual impairment may need notes to talk from as any other students.
- If a student is taking medication then this may impact on performance as it can lead to side effects such as slurred speech or impaired memory or concentration. This may affect a range of students including those with mental health difficulties or physical impairments.
- Some physical disabilities such as Cerebral Palsy may create problems with communication.

2) The social interaction aspects of presentations may prove challenging for some students who may struggle to make eye contact or deal with questions, examples are:

- students with autism spectrum condition.
- students who are deaf or hearing impaired (whether using a hearing aid or lip reading).
- students from cultures in which directness is not seen as polite; these students may have an additional challenge if English is an additional or foreign language.
- students with mental health difficulties.

Reference to eye contact as evidence of interacting with an audience is particularly problematic for blind students and those visual impairments.

If the presentation is a group presentation then an additional element will likely involve students working together to gather information, organise the presentation, etc. Students who have communication difficulties (e.g., deaf, hearing impaired, autistic spectrum) may struggle with this student-led group task, e.g., navigating group communication and decision making and ensuring that they are able to contribute.

Considerations for the use of oral presentations

- Consider the size of the audience; a smaller group may be less difficult and create less anxiety for many students. There could be a progression over the duration of the course from presenting to a small and familiar audience to a larger and less familiar audience if this is a skill that is important for graduates of a particular discipline to develop and demonstrate.
- The wording of assessment tasks and criteria is important. Where certain skills are expected to be demonstrated then consideration is needed if they are skills that could be difficult for some students to demonstrate, such as oral skills or body language. Tutors will need to ensure that the wording is inclusive. For example, rather than having

a criteria which refers to the use of eye contact, wording might indicate that students need to demonstrate appropriate contact or awareness of audience, including facing the audience, eye contact, etc. This can then be interpreted according to each individual.

- If students are required to give a group presentation then support for the group work preparation element is important, for example the provision of clear guidance on structure and tasks, how to divide up the work, maintain communication, etc

References

This resource draws on ideas from:

Open University, *Making your teaching inclusive.* Accessed online (16 December 2012) at:

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http://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/TIC/guidelines/assessments/exams.php

http://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/TIC/guidelines/assessments/written-work.php

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