



## Rethinking assessment: inclusive assessment & standards in a dynamic and changing world

### Call for Case Studies

(Updated 31 January 2024)

#### 1. Introduction

On 17 April 2024, QQI and AHEAD with DAWN will host a conference on inclusive assessment and standards in further and higher education. The aim of the event is to encourage **teaching/academic staff, academic leaders, academic and learner support staff, learners, and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)** to reflect on the **validity** of approaches to the **assessment** of learners' achievement of **intended learning outcomes (i.e., standards)**. We hope the event will provide opportunities for participants to consider:

- how learners are **affected** by assessment and standards,
- whether those standards and assessment approaches need to be more **inclusive** and, if so,
- how to make them more inclusive.

As part of the event, we intend to explore the potential for developing a set of high-level **principles for inclusive assessment and standards**.

*“Inclusive assessment refers to the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do. Much of the research draws attention to the ways in which some assessment practices advantage some students and disadvantage others. Other studies focus on alternative forms of assessment that enable as wide a range of students as possible to develop and achieve on an equal footing.” (Hocking, 2010)*

Educators are encountering an increasingly diverse learner profile in their classrooms, reinforcing the need to recognise that 'inclusion is everyone's business'. For example, our learners come to tertiary education from different socio-economic backgrounds with different levels of preparedness for study, different language groups, gender identities, cultural groups, and disability profiles. But do our assessment practices reflect these demographics?

The event will be of interest to all learners because inclusivity is a concern for all. All means all: For the avoidance of doubt it includes learners with disabilities, learners whose first language is not English, learners domiciled in other countries, and mature learners.

*"..... I really hate timed exams. I found them myself being very anxious doing them, the pressure of being asked to show what you learned in such a short time. Because I don't like going against the clock. Overall, my grades went up from around a C average, to like a B plus average, so it kind of went up significantly... So, I find it's been much better". – AHEAD (2023) student research participant on the move to alternative assessment during Covid-19*

*"Exams are not the single most effective way to examine a students' capabilities, and pinning a significant amount of percentage on one assessment is not an adequate nor accurate representation of that student's capabilities. Exams are extremely stressful for even the average student but (when) struggling with mental health and other disabilities it's extremely overwhelming. The choice between an exam and another form of assessment would enable students who struggle with intense exam anxiety to feel more at ease". – AHEAD (2023) student research participant*

*"This...has reminded me of 1 thing I'll miss from having things be online. No memory alone based exams. In 1st year, I failed my psychology exams and scraped passes in my criminology ones. Now in 2nd year, in both of my subjects for my end of term assignments (criminology) and exams (psychology), which was open book but still timed, I've been top 5 or 10 of my entire year." - AHEAD (2021) student research anticipating the move back to in-person timed exams post Covid-19*

## 2. What we mean by assessment

Assessment of learning is critical both for gauging and supporting learning and for the credibility of educational qualifications. Assessment, whether its purpose is formative or summative, normally follows a period of instruction and learning. Essentially, assessment of learning aims to infer whether a learner has achieved a given standard by setting tasks for the learner to perform under prescribed conditions and evaluating their responses. Assessment tasks and the conditions under which they are undertaken must be aligned with the relevant standard. However, in the context of higher education especially, the approach to assessment is rarely, if ever, uniquely determined by the standard.

## 3. Assessment validity, standards, and diversity

The validity of an assessment task for a given standard depends on, among other things, the learner. Using the same task for all learners in a cohort may result in some learners being unable to equitably demonstrate their learning, and in some cases, in undeserved fails.

Even where assessment is perfectly valid and reliable, the formulation of standards can give rise to inequity if it fails to focus exclusively on outcomes that really matter and to avoid incidental ones that don't matter.

Teaching/academic staff have been encouraged in recent years to diversify their approaches to assessment to make it more inclusive, but there are other good reasons too such as to enable the assessment of a wider range of learning outcomes including more authentic ones.

## 4. The challenges of inclusive assessment

Making assessment inclusive can be challenging for the following reasons among others.

### Perceptions about robustness against cheating (this is part of assessment validity)

Concerns about robustness of some assessment approaches against cheating have led some to revert to forms of assessment that are reputed to be more resistant to cheating such as in-person

proctored examinations. The COVID-19 pandemic required teaching/academic staff to try new kinds of assessment and many hoped that this experience would stimulate a reimagining of assessment practice after the pandemic - and perhaps it did. But the rapid response to COVID-19 precluded the kind of detailed planning required to validate new approaches including to ensure their robustness against academic malpractice. Whilst academic integrity is an important consideration, it would be a regressive step if threats to academic integrity were to discourage diversification of assessment.

### Resourcing

There is no denying that rethinking assessment requires work. Teaching/academic staff who are already working at full capacity to keep up with their routine complement of teaching, assessment, (sometimes research) and administrative duties may require support to find capacity to rethink their approaches to assessment. However, it is also worth noting that current approaches to accommodating diverse learners to participate in dominant assessment modes such as invigilated in-person exams, also require significant and increasing resources to perpetuate.

### Extreme modularisation

Large programmes of education and training are generally organised on a modular basis. This can result in a siloed approach to assessment that may be inefficient for both staff and learners, impede the assessment of programme-level standards and limit the opportunities for inclusive assessment.

### PSRBs

Some PSRBs may have views on how learners should be assessed and convincing them about changes to assessment could potentially be another challenge. Equally, perceptions often exist among teaching/academic staff that there is only one way to demonstrate professional standards, even if the professional body in question is more flexible than some perceive it to be.

### Grading learners within cohorts

Fixation on grading and the approaches to grading may also inhibit diversification of assessment practice.

*“If we are genuine about transformation, and if we are genuine about authenticity... we must connect grading with the purpose of assessment. Most formal education has an utterly self-defeating, not fit for purpose grading system.” (McArthur, 2023)*

One of the arguments that may be put forward against the adoption of more inclusive assessment is that allowing different learners to be assessed differently makes it more difficult to grade (rank) learners within a class. It is assumed that if everybody sits the same proctored examination under the same conditions, we can rank learners fairly. While such a ranking may be valid in relation to their performance in the examination, it does not follow that it is valid for ranking in relation to their level of achievement of the relevant standard (i.e., the intended learning outcomes).

## 5. Call for Case Studies

To share and stimulate thinking on approaches to inclusive practice, we wish to invite submission of case studies from the FET and HE sectors of effective practice and policy relating to inclusive assessment and standards. Case studies will be reviewed in terms of their relevance, innovation, impact, replicability and scalability and five submissions will be invited to make presentations (10 minutes each) at the conference. A broader selection of case studies will be made available online by QQI.

Case studies on any topic relating to inclusive assessment would be welcome. In particular, the following challenges are among those that we expect the event to address:

- How bias can impact on learners through standards, assessment, and feedback and how to avoid it.
- Challenges to academic integrity such as the use of contract cheating services, unauthorised use of generative artificial intelligence, and other forms of academic misconduct need to be considered when designing approaches to assessment and need not be barriers to innovative approaches to making assessment inclusive.
- How to make better use of resources by moving from individualised ad hoc exceptions to designing inclusivity into assessment and standards from the outset.
- How to enable learners to inform the design and implementation of inclusive approaches to assessment and the benefits in doing so.
- Inclusive assessment as part of providers' wider response to EDI.
- How to ensure equity and validity of assessment when offering learners a choice of assessment formats.
- Overcoming the challenges of alternative assessments at scale.

Submissions may be in text, audio or video formats and should follow the structure and content outlined in the appendix. As relevant case studies will be published on the QQI website, where they include images and links to other resources and references, please ensure that any required permissions or access rights are in place prior to submission.

- **Written submissions** should have a maximum wordcount of 1500 words.
- **Audio and video** submissions should not exceed 10 minutes. Video/Audio files should not be shared directly with QQI, rather the video should be uploaded to a file sharing service with the link to download shared with us. Please also submit a transcript/captions of video audio shared so we can ensure accessibility of final outputs published on our website.

The closing date for submission of case studies for consideration at the conference is **29 February 2024**.

Case studies should be submitted via email to [rethinking.assessment@qqi.ie](mailto:rethinking.assessment@qqi.ie).

By submitting a case study, you are consenting to the document:

- a) being reviewed by relevant QQI, AHEAD and DAWN staff; and
- b) being made publicly available via publication on the QQI website.

Queries in relation to the preparation of case studies may be submitted to [rethinking.assessment@qqi.ie](mailto:rethinking.assessment@qqi.ie).

## 6. References

1. Joanna Tai, Rola Ajjawi, Margaret Bearman, David Boud, Phillip Dawson & Trina Jorre de St Jorre (2023) Assessment for inclusion: rethinking contemporary strategies in assessment design, Higher Education Research & Development, 42:2, 483-497, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2022.2057451](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2057451).
2. Christine Hockings (2010), Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: a synthesis of research, Higher Education Academy EvidenceNet April 2010, <https://www.advance->

[he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-learning-and-teaching-higher-education-synthesis-research](https://www.he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-learning-and-teaching-higher-education-synthesis-research) (retrieved 18/10/2023).

3. Geraldine O'Neill (2017) It's not fair! Students and staff views on the equity of the procedures and outcomes of students' choice of assessment methods, *Irish Educational Studies*, 36:2, 221-236, DOI: [10.1080/03323315.2017.1324805](https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2017.1324805).
4. Jan McArthur (2016), Assessment for social justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41:7, 967-981, DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2015.1053429](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1053429).
5. Jan McArthur (2023), [Dr Jan McArthur - Rethinking assessment can we balance caution and transformation.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#) QQI Rethinking Assessment Conference 2023.
6. Joanna Tai, Rola Ajjawi & Anastasiya Umarova (2021) How do students experience inclusive assessment? A critical review of contemporary literature, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, DOI: [10.1080/13603116.2021.2011441](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.2011441).
7. AHEAD. (2021). *Learning from Home During Covid-19 2020/21: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities*. AHEAD Educational Press.
8. AHEAD. (2023). *Changing Landscapes: Examining the experiences of tertiary education students with disabilities returning to post-lockdown learning*. AHEAD Educational Press.
9. [Assessment for Inclusion in Higher Education | Promoting Equity and So \(taylorfrancis.com\)](#).
10. Joanna Hong-Meng Tai, Mollie Dollinger, Rola Ajjawi, Trina Jorre de St Jorre, Shannon Krattli, Danni McCarthy & Daniella Prezioso (2023) Designing assessment for inclusion: an exploration of diverse students' assessment experiences, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 48:3, 403-417, DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2022.2082373](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2022.2082373).

## Inclusive Assessment & Standards: Case Study Structure & Content

**Case Study Title:**

**Organisation:**

**Background:**

- What is the nature of the education and training context?
- Who are the learners?
- What are the challenges?

**Aims:**

- What was the rationale for the initiative?
- What were the aims for the initiative?

**Implementation:**

- What steps were taken?
- Who was involved/consulted?
- What was the timeline?

**Outcomes:**

- What were the key outcomes?
- What was the impact?
- Are there any future plans for the initiative?

**Reflections:**

- What worked well?
- What were the biggest challenges?
- What could be improved?
- What did you learn from it?