

Strategies for Embedding Flexible Assessment



Associated Academic Enhancement Framework (Hybrid) Matrix Principles:

- ❖ **Student Success:** Course-wide emphasis on assessment for learning providing information about student achievement through active and student-led approaches.

Associated Assessment and Feedback Principles:

- ❖ **AD3:** Course-wide assessment practices are designed to ensure all students have equal opportunities to demonstrate achievement.
- ❖ **AD4:** Assessment approaches value student diversity by enabling appropriate opportunities to personalise the learning journey.

What do we know? Contemporary perspectives

When we refer to flexibility in learning, we usually focus on flexible instruction: we strive to implement instruction that supports more flexibility in time, space, pedagogy, and technology ([Jones-Devitt, 2020](#)). However, being flexible allows us to change more than our instruction and has led to significant developments in flexible learning and how the student learning experience is mediated, accessed, and assessed.

These developments are, according to [Ryan and Tilbury \(2014\)](#), underpinned by two interrelated dimensions of flexibility: 1) the practical and technological drivers for flexibility in modes of accessing and delivering learning, teaching and assessment in higher education; 2) a view of flexibility that emphasises the ability of people to think, act, live and work differently in complex, uncertain and changeable scenarios.

This expanded view of flexibility extends to choices students make about assessment methods and formats, as well as the extent to which they have an active role in shaping the assessment approaches and processes they are involved in ([Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012](#)). 'Good' flexible assessment design, from this perspective, is responsive to both students' individual learning needs as well as the needs of the curriculum.

Whilst not the main determining factor in flexible assessment, technology is an enabler for personalizing learning by giving students greater ownership over their studies. Increased student choice and input in assessment processes can also have a positive effect on student engagement and motivation; the exercise of choice and self-direction, leading to a greater feeling of autonomy and control ([Boud and Soler, 2016](#)).

In flexible assessment, assessment-for-learning rather than assessment-of-learning is placed at the centre of curriculum and learning. Focus shifts on to learning-focused assessment strategies and the facilitative role of formative assessment processes. Building in greater student input and involvement into defining the nature of assessment tasks – and structured opportunities for dialogue and self- and peer assessment – helps support students to make judgements on and decisions about their work encouraging them to be more proactive in terms of their learning roles and trajectories.

At the level of the curriculum, it is about fostering assessment and feedback strategies and practices that enables students to monitor their own progress and engage with timely feedback to improve their performance. Student engagement with assessment and feedback is most effective when they experience it embedded in, and threaded through, the curriculum in a wide range of forms and settings authentic to the discipline ([Jessop et al., 2014](#)).

What can we do? Reviewing practice

For flexible assessment to be effective in developing the kinds of learning desired, the scope of and parameters for flexibility and choice, as well as what aspects are non-negotiable, in assessment need to be determined at course-level and be clearly articulated through course and module assessment strategies and outcomes. It remains the case that learners should only be assessed on topics that have already been taught and which align clearly with these outcomes.

In addition to logistical and structural design considerations, flexibility in assessment also needs to take into account how students see themselves as learners. Are they prepared to take responsibility for their own learning? It may not be appropriate to have flexible assessment for students who have just entered a course as new learners. Equally, allowing an unlimited choice within assessment design may penalise those students whose self-regulatory abilities are not as well developed.

Instead, students need to be gradually introduced to the idea of flexible assessment at a module level, where early low-stakes (formative) assessment tasks are broken-down into separate, yet interrelated, assessment components allowing them to complete tasks in a proficient way and improve skills without feeling overwhelmed.

There are multiple ways to be flexible with assessments while still challenging students, maintaining rigour, and continuing to provide the required structure and support. Flexibility in assessment is about responding to students' individual learning needs as well as needs of the curriculum. The key is making assessment relevant to the learner. Students are far more likely to learn, remember and value work that has relevancy and application than an assessment that they are made to do for the sake of it.

To this end, the strategies described below include considerations for embedding flexibility around 'How' (methods and formats) and 'What' (focus and content) students are assessed on.

Students Choose How to Assessment

Moving beyond providing a range of assessment types that are predefined by the tutor, one flexible strategy is to provide students with the opportunity for negotiated and managed choice between an accepted range of 'alternative' assessment methods (see **Figure (a)**). Encouraging students to work closely with lecturers to agree on individually equitable assessment arrangements in this way can empower students to take responsibility for their learning and improve student engagement – a critical consideration at a time when students are likely to need to shift between blended and fully online delivery models.

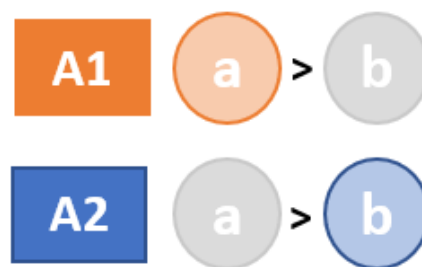


Figure (a)

It is important that where choice between alternative assessment modes and methods is provided, equivalences need to be carefully set out for students in terms of learning expectations. Available alternative assessment arrangements should be equivalent in both their relative weightings and capacity to demonstrate the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the module, as well as the level of challenge they present students (students should be able to complete either task with the skills being developed).

It is important to give careful thought to how combinations of different assessment methods and tasks might meet the learning needs and preferences of diverse student groups, including those studying at different locations, from different cultural/educational backgrounds, with additional learning needs, or with protected characteristics.

It is also a good idea to think about introducing easily actionable 'formative' opportunities, around summative tasks, for students to trial new practices and build confidence in using learning tools and technologies. Selecting a limited range of tools that work for you and your students and building in regular time and space for focused practise and knowledge checks throughout the assessment processes enables students to monitor their own progress and engage with feedback in a timely and productive manner.

Students Choose What to Assessment

Another flexible assessment strategy is to consider utilising a 'patchwork assessment process'. Patchwork assessment processes provide a cumulative set of formative assessment opportunities, each of which are complete tasks in their own right, which are then synthesised and 'stitched' together to produce a fully-justified summative account focused around a related theme or topic (Jones-Devitt, Lawton and Mayne, 2016). Here formative assessment is thoroughly integrated within the learning and teaching process. Furthermore, by utilising a diverse range of assessment methods which underpin the patchwork process, validity, authenticity and inclusivity can be improved, maximising the relevance to students within their own learning context.

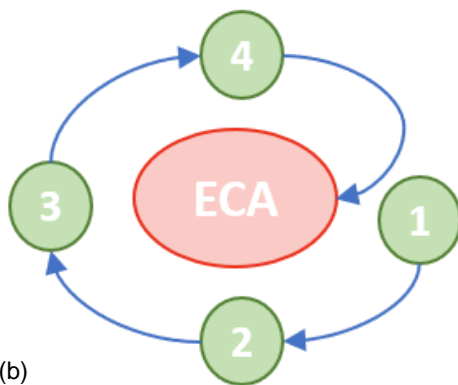


Figure (b)

A patchwork assessment process is not a random set of items or ideas. Each patch is a carefully designed component of a broader process of assessment within a module, acting as a pivotal (formative) episode of learning (see **Figure (b)**). It is important that patches are designed to link to intended learning outcomes, clearly articulate anticipated skills students will develop, and are tailored to authentic contexts – i.e. consider professional practice when responding to a client brief; review and critique a journal article; analyse a data set.

Providing regular, structured, and scaffolded formative feedback opportunities is essential to develop student engagement in the patchwork assessment process, but it is the student's selection of patches and justificatory narrative that are important in making the final summative work a unique and authentic account of student learning development. It can be a good idea to decide on core and optional components in advance and to make these details clear to students.

Different learning technologies and tools can be used within the patchwork process to support and enhance student learning; it is important that the technological infrastructure and processes are in place at the beginning for students and that support and guidance is made available throughout.

Developing Personal Assessment Plans

Assessment, if well-designed, can act to build students' self-regulatory capacity to make judgements beyond immediate tasks or learning outcomes, through creating opportunities for students to develop the capabilities to apply judgements on their own work and progress.

An effective strategy for supporting the development of students' self-regulatory capacity in this way is to work with students to produce a 'Personal Assessment Plan'. This typically takes the form of a template students complete at the beginning of an assessment process, capturing information pertinent to how they plan to engage with and complete designated assessment tasks. For instance, this might include the focus topic for the work and/or their choice of assessment method. Students would usually agree their Assessment Plans with their tutors early in the assessment process, submitting a final plan alongside completed summative work.

Here 'flexibility' in assessment is a means of enhancing students' understanding of fairness and transparency in assessment processes, which involves dialogue with students in supporting them to understanding the goals of different assessment tasks. It also helps to unpack the students' understanding of the requirements and assessment criteria on which academic judgements will be made and grades assigned. Students can also be encouraged to indicate their preferred means of receiving feedback (i.e. written, audio, or audio-visual) at different stages of the assessment processes and what aspects feedback should focus on. Providing this level of choice and authorship not only affords for a personalised learning experience on the part of the student; it also provides useful information for tutors to plan and manage academic workloads and support needs.

Useful Resources

Jones-Devitt, S., Lawton, M., and Mayne, W. (2016). HEA Patchwork Assessment Practice Guide. <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/patchwork-assessment-practice-guide>