

Brookes Briefing

Making Examinations Inclusive

Historically, examinations have been considered an effective means of evaluating and verifying student learning, aptitude, skills, knowledge and competence, especially in disciplines where key competences need to be certified (Bearman et al, 2017), such as in healthcare. During the COVID-19 lockdown new approaches to exams (e.g. online, flexible timings) emerged that worked effectively for students under duress or requiring flexibility (Brown and Sambell, 2020), but concerns have been raised about their validity given the relatively unsupervised online examination window. More recently, interest in exams has had a resurgence in response to wider concerns about academic integrity (Jisc 2023): timed, controlled conditions negate opportunities for students to look up information (in closed book examinations), use 'essay mills' or GenAI.

However, examinations are not necessarily inclusive (Nieminen, 2022); they disadvantage students with specific characteristics (e.g. those with SpLDs such as dyslexia); cause undue anxiety in a context where mental health issues amongst students are increasing (Lipson et al, 2022); judge students inequitably (due to personal circumstances, illness or neurodiversity); focus too narrowly (depending on rote memory, which may be an inherent weakness in cognitive processing for students with protected characteristics [Taylor and Vestergaard, 2022]), and is time constrained (disadvantaging students with different processing speeds or working memory [e.g. dyslexia, ADHD, autism). In addition, there is often the argument that examinations (more than other forms of assessment), encourage 'teaching to the test' (or 'backwash' [Green, 2020]) over deeper understanding and critical thinking.

Other scholars, however, have pointed to the fact that memorisation is not only useful for employment, but strengthens key memory pathways (Plé, 2024, Van Bergen & Lane, 2014). The literature on designing inclusive assessments is 'sparse' (Tai et al, 2022). However, this Briefing sets out and synthesises the core pedagogical, literature-informed principles for designing inclusive examinations so those that teach and support learning at Brookes can implement the **Brookes Position Statement on Examinations**.

Principles and practices for inclusive examinations

Principle 1: Use exams sparingly

Examinations should be used within the context of an Integrated Programme Assessment Strategy (Principle 1 of the Brookes Position Statement on Examinations) which provides students with a diverse, holistic range of assessments. Exams can be inherently exclusive, and there are limitations in terms of the ability of timed examinations to accurately assess deeper understanding. The default position of assessment design should be the use of authentic and meaningful assessment modes (see Principle 4 [Adopt Authentic Assessment] of the Brookes guidance on **Using Generative AI Applications for Learning, Teaching and Assessment**). The literature on this tends to recommend offering choice and/or diversifying assessment. A recent University Alliance project (2023) describes offering a choice of assessment as an inclusive assessment practice, and the AdvanceHE Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) is developing a Disabled Student Commitment which asks higher education providers to ensure "there is choice in the form of assessment for each module where possible and appropriate" (DSC, 2022). The Disabled Students' Commission in their annual report 2021-22 conclude that "anticipatory reasonable adjustments and a more flexible approach to teaching, learning and assessment provides disabled students with the choice to learn and be assessed in a way that supports, rather than impacts on, their disability"(DSC, 2022). Assessment variety and choice is an integral part of the Brookes IDEAS model (see questions 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 of the **IDEAS Question Set** for Assessment for, as and of learning, which ask colleagues to consider the ways in which assessment motivates and draws upon prior learning whilst offering choice and different channels of feedback).

- Exams should only be used as a part of a wider array of assessments when required by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB). Consider the extent to which examinations may fit (or not), into a wider assessment strategy that incorporates choice and diversity.
- Avoid unnecessarily duplicating the testing of different skills / LOs across a programme / module so as to streamline assessment.

Principle 2: Ensure support is in place and implemented correctly

Examinations can be made more inclusive by embedding support and appropriate scaffolding in accordance with Principles 2 (First Semester Learning Approach), 3 (Feedback-centric Assessment) and 4 (Assessment Clarity and Consistency) of the **Brookes Position Statement on Examinations**. Such support is primarily aimed at students with Individual Support Plans (ISPs), but many of the recommendations here ought to be implemented as part of our anticipatory duty / anticipatory reasonable adjustments so as to be as inclusive as possible. Although 'sparse', the available literature on inclusive examination arrangements (such as additional time, breaks, separate rooms, oral formats, scribes or the use of assistive technologies) indicates that such adjustments are helpful. However, recent research has shown that variabilities in the organisation or deployment of such support can be detrimental, especially when such support is not in place, disrupted, poorly organised or even ignored (Tai et al, 2022). Students often report 'feeling like an inconvenience' (Tai et al, 2022, p.394), which can further entrench the idea of assessment being exclusionary rather than inclusive (Nieminen, 2022), and can perpetuate, reinforce or further problematise prior traumatic experiences during earlier education (possibly before formal diagnosis and support).

- Ensure students' individual support requirements / reasonable adjustments are catered for effectively and efficiently - delays can cause additional stresses and cognitive burdens.
- Rather than putting students with ISPs in separate rooms, it can be better to place them with students who have similar requirements. This can have the benefit of the students having 'fewer distractions but still a sense of inclusion' (Tai et al, 2022, p.396).
- Ensure familiarity with the **Brookes Application of the Blue Card Marking Guidelines**.
- Assistive technologies have been shown to make examinations more inclusive for students with ISPs, but not if the technology is unreliable, there is poor or unreliable internet connectivity, or students are used to certain interfaces (e.g. Microsoft Word) but are then required to use different tools with different or unfamiliar functionalities. Ensure invigilators have the Brookes IT Services phone number to hand in examinations so that problems can be remedied swiftly.
- Allow backup internet devices and accommodate student preferences in terms of technological platforms to enable the examination to progress smoothly with minimal additional cognitive burdens or stressors. At Brookes, if assistive technologies are used the Inclusive Support Service recommends that students bring their own device so that they are working with technology packages they are familiar with and is set up for their individual needs.
- Ensure familiarity with the requirements of your students (ISPs or Blue Marking Cards put in place by the Inclusive Support Service. You can also signpost students to the support available (if not already in place) by suggesting that they use the **Self Referral Form**.
- Allow flexibility for students with ISPs or alter the format so that students with ISPs can undertake their examination at some point over 24 or 48 hours (either within a set window or over a longer period). This allows students to choose a time which suits them and / or allows for breaks to prevent cognitive overload.
- Ensure any of the above arrangements are clear, organised in advance and fully communicated to the student to avoid last-minute stressors and confusion.

Principle 3: Scaffold the examination tasks / questions

Like any other assessment activity examinations should be scaffolded. A key element of this, as per Principles 3 (Feedback-centric Assessment) and 4 (Assessment Clarity and Consistency) of the Brookes Position Statement on Examinations. Examinations are known to cause high levels of anxiety for significant numbers of students (P duraru, 2019; Robotham and Julian, 2006), so scaffolding is essential. Scaffolding simply means 1) building activities into your programmes that enables students to develop the skills they need, and 2) rendering expectations, parameters, instructions and marking rubrics clear, consistent and understandable. Familiarity with the format and demands of the task can help to reduce levels of anxiety (Tai et al, 2022).

- Use the Inclusive Support Service's guide on **Designing Inclusive Assessment for Students with ISPs** to understand the main cognitive challenges faced by neurodiverse students and get tips on how to support / scaffold assessment tasks (by genre). This will help you to write examination papers that are more accessible and inclusive.
- Use 'open book' examinations (if possible), which can significantly reduce stress and reduces the chances of cognitive overload. The availability of materials within the examination acts as a key scaffolding device as it can assist students to critically engage with the material rather than expending too much mental energy on rote memorisation and recall.
- Fully align what is being tested with the intended learning outcomes.
- Use, share and model the use of assessment rubrics to help develop students' assessment literacies (via peer assessment, sessions on exam preparation and expectations etc., or jointly run sessions with the Centre for Academic Practice). This enables the goals and expectations to become transparent, socialised and thus accessible. The clear communication of expectations and marking criteria helps to scaffold the acquisition of examination and assessment literacies (CAST, 2009) whilst building in opportunities for creating feedback-centric assessment.
- List what intended learning outcomes are being tested and if necessary, rank them in terms of importance.
- Write examination questions in clear English, avoiding unnecessarily distracting, lengthy or extraneous text (such as prefacing simple questions with overly complex quotations). Extraneous complexities act as a barrier to success for students with either cognitive overload issues (such as those with SpLDS) or those whose English is a second language. Reduce any prefaces to only the information / context that is relevant to the question / intended learning outcomes so as to not overcomplicate the task or send students on unnecessary tangents. Seek a second opinion on the clarity of your examination instructions by consulting with colleagues in CAD or an Educational Developer in OCAED (each faculty has a dedicated OCAED Faculty Partner you can contact for advice).
- Consider the use of sub-questions for complex or lengthy responses (such as essay responses) so as to scaffold the task. In cases where students struggle with cognitive overload, this can be invaluable in enabling them to demonstrate their knowledge independently from the cognitive challenges associated with their neurodivergence, thus helping to level the playing field.
- If using multiple choice questions (MCQs), avoid the use of double negatives, unnecessary narration, or irrelevant detail. Use plausible, but not overlapping / equally valid alternative answers.

Principle 4: Make your examinations as authentic as possible

One of the key aspects of the Quality Assurance Agency's **Embedding Inclusive Assessment: A Reflective Toolkit** (2022) is that 'the assessment tasks are relevant to students' subject areas, employment sectors and contexts of further study to which students will progress'. This aligns with Principle 4 [Adopt Authentic Assessment] of the Brookes guidance on **Using Generative AI Applications for Learning, Teaching and Assessment**). Ensure what is tested is authentic by relating content and question types to disciplinary requirements, conventions and employment. If students can see the relevance, applicability and usefulness of what is being tested, it can help scaffold not only motivation, but sense making (CAST, 2009 and Tai et al, 2022).

- Ensure material, content and questions are fully and accurately aligned with the intended learning outcomes. This ensures students are tested equitably and fairly on what they have been taught and are expected to achieve.
- Align subject content to both the discipline and the world / employability. This ensures students can see the direct, authentic relevance, applicability and importance of the exam content
- Build in opportunities for students to draw upon prior knowledge / educational experiences. We should never assume students arrive at university (or even progress through university) with assessment literacies. Scrutinise what students in your discipline have been taught / tested on before (e.g. at A level, BTEC, Access, year 1, undergraduate level etc.) and design examinations that build upon that prior knowledge / approach to assessment / assessment competence.
- Provide authentic feedback. As per Principle 3 of the Brookes Position Statement on Examinations (Feedback-centric Assessment), ensure that feedback authentically scaffolds towards success in future assignments across the full spectrum of the Integrated Programme Assessment Strategy (Principle 1 of the Brookes Position Statement on Examinations).
- If possible, utilise examination formats and approaches that authentically align with future employment and explain to students that these exams might be replicating a situation they may have to expect in future careers. Many professions rely upon examinations (e.g. Law, Accounting, Healthcare, and safety-critical industries such as rail, aviation etc.), so familiarising students with examination techniques, etiquette and approaches authentically prepares them for employability. However, do bear in mind that this assessment literacy needs to be scaffolded and reasonable adjustments put in place if appropriate to remain as inclusive as possible.

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References, resources and further reading

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