Flexible Assessment Guidance

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Introduction: Defining Flexible Assessments in the Liverpool Context

This guidance should be used in conjunction with the Flexible Assessment Policy.

'Flexible Assessment' is the act of providing students with options from which to select or construct an appropriate assessment methodology that works best for their interests, abilities and their area of focus during the specific assessment activity. These might include (but are not limited to):

- The option to select and complete an assessment type from a list of different available submission types.
- The option to select an approach from a number of different approaches to the same submission type (such as setting the task to be a 15-minute video submission, but with options on the content, format, and software used).
- The option to construct the assessment entirely within a given set of parameters (such as a self-constructed essay question with pre-defined elements).
- Patchwork assessments, where students complete a set of formative tasks that they themselves identify across a period of time and then 'stitch' them together to form a final submission.

In each of these cases, as well as in any other assessment strategy that falls under the Flexible Assessment Policy, the tutor outlines the degree of flexibility to the assessment and the procedure through which students select their options. The student then takes an active role in selecting the desired elements of the assessment, within the tutor-defined parameters and procedure.

Why Flexible Assessments?

Flexible assessments can help with a number of often-challenging aspects of assessment. Perhaps the most notable is inclusivity – opting for a flexible assessment is often a more inclusive assessment strategy than opting for a single assessment method. This is because it helps academics respond to the needs of individual students, allows for equitable distinctions in how students complete their assessments, and helps to develop assessment variety across a programme.

They can also help with the authenticity and general appeal of assessments. Because formats of assessments can be selected or tailored, flexible assessments allow for the implementation of student-focused, authentic and scenario-based strategies, replicating

more accurately situations that students may find themselves in once they have graduated and have entered industry, disciplinary or workplace-based contexts. Optionality in assessment can also make it more appealing, interesting or exciting to students, thereby encouraging them to more actively engage in the assessment.

At the same time, however, the restriction of choice based on the parameters of the curriculum (such as the Learning Outcomes and the marking criteria) helps to ensure that the needs of the curriculum also continue to be met.

Implementing Flexible Assessments

It can be very tempting to allow for maximum flexibility in an assessment, such as allowing students to pick any assessment format they wish. However, flexible assessments always need to be fairly administered, completed and marked, and this means that certain factors must be accounted for, including:

- Ensuring the marking criteria and learning outcomes are adequately measured and met.
- Ensuring that there is sufficient equivalency across different assessment types or formats on offer.
- Ensuring that adequate support is available for all students regardless of the assessment types or formats on offer.
- Ensuring that the options of assessment format, type or completion do not create extra work for students who opt to use them.

Marking Criteria and Assessment Types

The marking criteria for a particular assessment should always be universally-applicable across all of the assessment options. It can be appealing to write new marking criteria for each assessment type because the assessment types are different and, on the surface, this might actually seem fairer to the students.

However, marking criteria should not be rewritten or reconstructed for each of the assessment types on offer, because a truly fair assessment must ensure that all of the students taking that assessment are marked using the same criteria. It is not fair to have different sets of marking criteria, no matter how similar they might be. It would also create unnecessary workload to write different marking criteria for different formats, and make marking and moderation far more complex and less reliable.

This means that the assessment types or formats you offer in your flexible assessment should always be capable of being marked using one set of marking criteria designed to assess the learning outcomes of the module. This might limit the formats you're able to offer the students. For example, if your marking criteria includes a criterion based on written communication skills or command of written English, then it is unlikely that a student opting to complete an oral or visual based assessment, such as a podcast or

documentary video, will be able to meet this criterion, and therefore oral or visual flexible assessment options should not be offered as the assessment would not be valid.

Equivalency and Workload

One of the biggest challenges to flexible assessments is to decide upon the equivalency of the submission types on offer. For example, if a flexible assessment offers students the option of completing an essay of 3000 words, the tutor will need to consider and decide what the other available submission types will need to consist of (in terms of their relative size) in comparison.

The University of Liverpool has separate equivalency guide, which outlines some suggested equivalencies in terms of the proportion of the amount of time a student spends preparing for and completing an assessment, relative to the credit bearing of the module. A 15-credit module is equivalent to a notional 150 hours of student effort. Thus, a 30-credit module equates to 300 hours. Across the sector, the general consensus is that 20-30% of a student's time on a module should be spent on assessment, which equates to the following table:

Proportion of hours allocated to assessment	Credits	Notional total student hours spent on module	Notional student assessment workload
20%	15	150 hours	30 hours
	30	300 hours	60 hours
25%	15	150 hours	37.5 hours
	30	300 hours	75 hours
30%	15	150 hours	45 hours
	30	300 hours	90 hours

This will naturally differ depending on the module, disciplinary and departmental contexts, and should only be used as a guideline to draw up equivalencies across assessment options.

A further consideration when ensuring that assessment types on offer are equivalent is the peripheral workload that may come attached to different formats. For example, part of the marking criteria may relate to the use of references, which are normally expected in an essay or other written assessment format. However, these are less common in presentation, podcast or video submissions. Rather than change the marking criteria to remove the use of references (as this may relate to the module learning outcome), it makes more sense to ask students to include a separate reference list as an additional document. However, the key point here is that this 'additional' task should correspondingly reduce the workload of the original assessment, so that both original assessment and 'additional' add up to the complete whole. For example, a video submission would be shorter in length due to the addition of the need to develop the reference list.

Finally, the assessment submission date should be the same for all of the assessment types.

The workload of a flexible assessment should also be considered in relation to the staff required to mark and moderate submitted assessments. As the assessment types available should all adhere to the same set of marking criteria, the marking and moderation workload should not be significantly affected, however this is still something that you should consider when establishing a flexible assessment.

Transparency in Flexible Assessments

The transparency of an assessment simply refers to how well the student understands what is being asked of them, and whether or not they have the knowledge and expertise to actually complete it. In essence, the assessment's format should not form part of the assessment's challenge.

The same holds true for flexible assessments, except that this needs to be even more carefully considered across all of the assessment formats available. In short, if the students have not been exposed to any of the assessment formats on offer, then it should not be offered. It is not fair to ask students to complete, for example, a critical reflection, if they have not had the chance to understand and explore what a critical reflection is. Therefore, you may wish to consider incorporating formative tasks that introduce your students to each of the options available. This will be especially important on modules offered across multiple programmes where it will be extremely difficult to know the full range of assessments to which students have been exposed.

The same also applies to assessment formats that require technical, specialist or technological knowledge. Any options within assessment 'type' should encourage the use of institutionally available tools in the first instance (so as not to disadvantage students without access to paid for software). For example, video assignments could be edited in institutional lecture capture or video-editing software, rather than other third-party apps that the institution does not currently support. Marking criteria should also avoid assessing aspects of the submission that could be directly affected or altered solely by the software used (unless it is within the module learning outcomes), so as not to disadvantage students who may be reliant on specific pieces of software for accessibility reasons.

Assessment Support

It is important to appropriately support students in the completion of flexible assessments. Each different assessment type available to the student must have equivalent support and guidance provided, otherwise the process itself would not be equitable across all the student body. Sources of support do not necessarily have to come from the tutor; an external or institutional source of support that provides a similar level of support for an assessment activity may suffice, depending on the context of the assessment.

It is also worth remembering that assessment formats must be something that students have already seen and are aware of (otherwise the assessment will not be suitably transparent) and so 'support' in this context should not refer to the process of learning how to do and/or create something from scratch.

Flexible Assessment Examples

Example 1: 1500-word written assessment

In a level 4 introduction to research skills module, students are required to complete a 1500-word assignment assessing their ability to critique at least five academic journal articles. The marking criteria is based on the students' ability to:

1. Search for and identify five academic journal articles related to a specific research area within their disciplinary subject using a range of different research methods (20%)
2. Demonstrate ability to critique the suitability of the research methods to answer the research questions posed (30%)
3. Outline how, and to what extent, the findings from each article advance knowledge in the research area (30%)
4. Justify, in their own opinion, which of the papers identified makes the biggest contribution to knowledge and why (20%)

Students can choose from the following submission types:

- Annotated bibliography of 5 journal articles plus conclusion on a research area of their own interest (1500 words in total)
- 1500-word report
- 1500-word blog post for A level students on how to critique research using 5 example papers

In this example, the tutor has identified the types of assessment submission they think will still provide opportunities to evidence the associated module learning outcomes, and which fit the established marking criteria.

Example 2: 20-minute Digital Case Study

On a Level 6 module in the School of Life Sciences, students are required to research a specific current initiative or project currently being undertaken in wildlife conservation anywhere on the planet, and produce a 20-minute case study explaining the initiative, its aims and its connection to the wider conservationist movement and the scientific theory that underpins it, and which evaluates the strengths, weaknesses and potential impacts of the project. The assessment is designed to measure the student's ability to perform research to source and organise information and present it in a different, more accessible format; to measure the students' critical and evaluative abilities; to measure the student's ability to apply their knowledge of the wider discipline to the specific situation (including the use of secondary material and theoretical frameworks), and the student's

communication and presentation skills. As a result, the assessment's marking criteria covers the following broad areas:

- Content, knowledge and understanding of the topic.
- Critical/evaluation skills and the formulation of an argument.
- Research skills and primary/secondary source engagement.
- Application of prior knowledge, theory and theoretical frameworks.
- Language, communication and organisation skills.

Students are able to choose from the following submission types, or are able to propose their own if they have a format that they would prefer to explore and which is relevant to their engagement with the topic of the assessment:

- 20-minute presentation.
- 20-minute video submission.
- 20-minute audio podcast (or a series of podcasts that add up to 20 minutes).
- Academic poster presentation with accompanying 10-minute Q&A session.

Additional guidance and support in the development of flexible assessments is available from the Centre for Innovation in Education (CIE).

Summary and Final Points

If you are new to the concept of flexible assessments, then you may find it more useful to try this out on a formative assessment task in the first instance.

In all cases, the following steps below need to be followed:

1. Decide on the alternative assessment types, ensuring all measure the module learning outcomes.
2. Ensure that the selected assessment types can all adhere to an established set of marking criteria, which themselves align with the learning outcomes.
3. Ensure that you have adequately considered the marking and moderation process for the flexible assessment.
4. Ensure that the assessment types are effectively equivalent, in terms of workload and that you have accounted for any 'extra' or 'supplementary' tasks that come with some assessment formats (such as separate reference lists).
5. Decide on a general, or set of, feedback mechanisms (as these may be different across the assessment types). Ensure that the feedback is equitable across all of the assessment types.