



STEP

Scotland's Tertiary
Enhancement Programme

A summary analysis of relevant literature, research and scholarship on inclusive student assessment

Transforming Assessment Policy and Practice in Scotland (TAPPS)

September 2026

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The project is led by the Edinburgh Napier University and City of Glasgow College in partnership with Queen Margaret University, University of Stirling, Ayrshire College, University of St Andrews and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

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If assessment is always something that is done to us rather than with us or by us, it will rarely ever be for us. (Fecho, 2011, p.32)

Introduction

This literature review has been co-produced by staff and students involved in the *Transforming Assessment Policy and Practice in Scotland* (TAPPS) project, reflecting a shared commitment to inclusive, evidence-informed enhancement of assessment across the tertiary sector. TAPPS is part of Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP), a sector-owned initiative funded by the Scottish Funding Council and managed by QAA Scotland and Colleges Development Network (CDN). STEP supports sector-wide collaboration and innovation across colleges and universities, with the current cycle focusing on *Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys* and how institutions can better understand and respond to learners at key transition points. Within this context, TAPPS is a cross-sector collaboration led by Edinburgh Napier University and City of Glasgow College with Queen Margaret University, University of Stirling, University of St Andrews, Ayrshire College and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig that explores how assessment policy and practice can more effectively support an increasingly diverse student population. Through the development of case studies, the gathering of evidence of effective practice and the promotion of inclusive, flexible, authentic approaches to assessment, the project aims to build a sustainable community of practice that strengthens collaboration, enhances staff development and improves student experience, attainment and progression across Scotland's tertiary education landscape.

Each of the project team brought distinctive expertise to the TAPPS collaboration. For example, City of Glasgow College contributed knowledge in curriculum design through the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles; Queen Margaret University shared approaches to student-led work to produce a neurodiversity-affirming teaching toolkit; and Edinburgh Napier University shared learnings from the development and implementation of its inclusion-focused Assessment Policy. In developing this literature review, the project team identified Dr Miriam Firth et al.'s (2023) Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Collaborative Enhancement Project (CEP) report, *Optionality in Assessment: a cross-institutional exploration of the feasibility, practicality and utility of student choices in assessment in UK higher education*, as a productive starting point for this work, and the foundation of the project itself. The report collates surveys and interviews with both staff and students and presents insights about the expectations and challenges of assessment optionality. The conceptual framing informed our search for, and analysis of, literature relating to flexibility, choice, optionality, inclusion and Universal Design for Learning in tertiary education.

Assessment is widely recognised as integral to the student experience and is a pivotal activity in shaping engagement, participation, progression, and perceptions of belonging within tertiary

education (Tai, Ajjawi and Umarova, 2021). Students and staff encounter assessment practices and policies through a network of codified policy objects such as rubrics, assignment briefs and learning outcomes that impact their experience of education. In 2018, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the quality body for standards for UK Higher education, stated that 'Deliberate, systematic quality assurance ensures that assessment processes, standards and any other criteria are applied consistently and equitably, with reliability, validity and fairness' (QAA, 2018, p.2) and it is the concept of equity that guides this review. Situated within wider contemporary debates that question the continued dominance of traditional, standardised assessment practices there is compelling literature that calls for more authentic, inclusive and flexible approaches. Brown and Sambell (2024), for example, argue that assessment should offer students a wider range of meaningful ways to demonstrate learning, with greater attention to authenticity, value and student agency. These debates are particularly relevant to the TAPPS Project, as they foreground assessment not only as a mechanism for evaluating learning, but a site where inclusion, participation, confidence and belonging are actively shaped.

Adopting a critical ontological lens informed by social constructivist perspectives, this review understands assessment not as a neutral or objective measure of learning, but as a socially constructed practice shaped by power relations, institutional policies, material conditions, and cultural norms. From this perspective, assessment practices can actively favour learners due to their characteristics, particular forms of knowledge, and participation while marginalising others. This is commonly known as the 'hidden curriculum' – the unwritten and often assumed 'norms, values, and social expectations indirectly conveyed to students' (Sulaimani & Gut, 2019, p.30). As collaborative partners in the tertiary sector in Scotland, we are committed to addressing the myriad of challenges facing our learners across colleges and universities that impact their wellbeing and their ability to learn and engage effectively. These include poverty, trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹, financial and food instability, homelessness, estrangement, digital inequity, racism, transphobia and neurodivergence. Research has shown that such factors can shape students' access to learning, sense of belonging, engagement with assessment, continuation, and educational outcomes, particularly for students from underrepresented and marginalised groups (Advance HE, 2021; Scottish Government, 2022; Thomas, 2012). Such challenges have widely been recognised within literature spanning widening participation, student belonging, and inclusive education as significant influences on student experience, engagement, retention, and success within tertiary education (Tai, Ajjawi & Umarova, 2021; Thomas, 2012). This project therefore interrogates how contemporary assessment reforms can disrupt rather than reproduce structural inequities within Scottish tertiary education. This literature review provides a foundation for calling for change in both

¹ Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to potentially traumatic experiences occurring before the age of 18, including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, domestic violence, and parental substance misuse (Public Health Scotland, 2023).

assessment policy and assessment practice, with the aim of reducing harm and responding with compassion (Currant et al., 2024; Hill, 2023). It emphasises the importance of noticing where assessment practices disadvantage learners, taking action to address these issues, and more effectively supporting the journeys of an increasingly diverse student population in Scotland.

Situating Assessment

Discourse within tertiary education increasingly positions assessment not simply as a mechanism for measuring learning, but as a central component of the learning process itself. Building on longstanding critiques of traditional assessment practices, contemporary researchers and sector bodies have questioned the continued dominance of high-stakes examinations and essay-based assessments, arguing that such approaches may inadequately capture the complexity of student learning, constrain authenticity and risk reproducing existing inequalities within tertiary education (Nieminen, 2021; Tai, Ajjawi and Umarova, 2021). Within these debates, increasing attention has been paid to assessment authenticity, student agency, flexibility, and inclusivity. While conceptually distinct, these themes frequently overlap within assessment reform literature. Nieminen (2022), for example, reasons that inclusive assessment frameworks should move beyond reactive accommodations towards approaches that proactively design for learner diversity. Tai, Ajjawi and Umarova (2021) maintain that more inclusive assessment design requires moving beyond narrow and standardised assessment practices towards approaches that better recognise learner diversity and meaningful demonstration of knowledge.

The literature on inclusive assessment emphasises the importance of designing assessment that is accessible, transparent and meaningful for all learners from the outset. Inclusive assessment is commonly framed as a shift away from deficit-based models towards systemic approaches that anticipate learner variability (CAST, 2024; Roberts, Satlykgylyjova & Park, 2015). Approaches such as these require attention not only to assessment formats, but also to assessment literacy, clarity of expectations and the tacit norms that shape how assessment is experienced (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Ajjawi et al., 2019). Inclusive assessment is closely aligned with principles of Universal Design for Learning, promoting multiple means of engagement, representation and expression, while maintaining academic standards (Tai et al., 2021; O'Neill, 2017). By making expectations explicit and offering structured flexibility, inclusive assessment has been shown to support student agency, reduce unnecessary barriers and contribute to more equitable outcomes across diverse learner groups.

Similarly, authentic assessment approaches seek to align assessment tasks more closely with real-world practices, professional contexts, and meaningful application of knowledge extending the range and formats of assessments which are used, and which may be more relevant to learners and their skills/ways of expressing their learning. Recent work on interactive oral

assessment provides a practical example of this approach. Ward et al. (2024) argue that interactive oral assessments support students' authentic demonstration of learning, professional skill development, academic integrity, and meaningful application of knowledge through structured dialogue and real-world problem solving. Their case studies found that oral assessments provide academically rigorous alternatives to traditional written assessments while enhancing student engagement and opportunities for feedback. McArthur (2023) calls for a philosophical reconsideration of authenticity in assessment, challenging educators to resist conflating the 'real world' with the world of work. Instead, McArthur argues for attention to the broader social value of education, rather than a narrow economic framing. This perspective enables a shift from viewing the student as an isolated individual to understanding the student as a member of society. In doing so, 'Senses of achievement can become richer, thus enhancing the students' sense of self, self-worth, and well-being' (McArthur, 2023, p85). Bourke and Mentis (2013) further position assessment as relational and developmental, foregrounding feedback, reflection, and student self-assessment as integral components of learning rather than supplementary processes.

There is increasing advocacy for broader diversification of assessment methods, enabling students to demonstrate learning through multiple forms and modalities while maintaining alignment with shared learning outcomes. Discussing authentic assessment, in their podcast, Brown and Sambell (2024) similarly argue that assessment should involve activities that students 'recognise as having value and authenticity', highlighting the importance of engaging and meaningful assessment practices in HE. Such approaches challenge assumptions that fairness is achieved solely through standardisation and instead emphasise equity, accessibility, and authentic demonstration of learning. Emerging partnership approaches, meanwhile, frame learning and assessment as relational practices that foreground recognition, agency, and collaborative participation within learning experiences, as discussed by Hill and Taylor (2023). Collectively, these developments have contributed to growing sector interest in assessment flexibility, optionality, and co-design as mechanisms for enhancing student engagement and reducing barriers to participation.

While flexible and inclusive assessment approaches are often positioned as more equitable and student-centred, tensions arise relating to comparability, workload, reliability, and academic standards. Earlier work by Cook (2001) and Irwin and Hepplestone (2012) identified concerns regarding staff workload, consistency, and parity across assessment formats, while more recent scholarship suggests that inclusive assessment itself can produce institutional and pedagogical contradictions. Nieminen (2025), for example, describes a 'paradox of inclusive assessment', reminding us that efforts to increase flexibility and inclusion are complex because, 'assessment is not meant to 'include' but to objectively evaluate students against a set of standards and to *exclude* students from future prospects if they cannot fit these standards' (Nieminen, 2025, p.565). Similarly, Barua and Lockee (2025) argue that, without adequate structural and institutional support, apparently flexible approaches may transfer institutional complexity and decision-making burdens onto students themselves, thereby

reproducing rather than disrupting existing inequities. Contemporary assessment debates increasingly centre not only on what students are assessed on, but how, why, and under what conditions these assessment practices are designed and enacted.

Contemporary Sector Drivers and Policy Context

Alongside longstanding theoretical and pedagogical debates surrounding assessment, recent sector developments have intensified scrutiny of assessment policy and practice across tertiary education. Contemporary sector literature reflects growing interest in assessment enhancement, innovation, and reform in response to changing educational contexts (Norton & Stephenson, 2024). The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has particularly accelerated debate surrounding assessment validity, authenticity, and academic integrity within HE. Mollick and Clark (2024) argue that traditional assessment formats, particularly essay-based assessment and knowledge reproduction tasks, may no longer function as reliable indicators of student understanding in contexts where AI tools can generate sophisticated written outputs. Their research examining student experiences of assessment in an age of AI found that only 21 per cent of students believed their course primarily rewarded thinking and reasoning. Nevertheless, students across disciplines demonstrated a remarkably consistent understanding of what constitutes meaningful assessment, emphasising visible demonstration of understanding, application of knowledge, accountability, and developmental feedback. Concerns regarding AI are prompting renewed attention to the purposes of assessment and the extent to which existing assessment practices genuinely support learning rather than simply producing outputs and essay-based assessments submitted through virtual learning environments (Mollick & Clark, 2024).

Emerging evidence from the Scottish context suggests that these challenges extend beyond assessment design to questions of policy, guidance, and institutional support. Research conducted through the Scottish AI in Tertiary Education Network (ScAITEN) found that both staff and students perceived institutional support and guidance regarding generative AI to be insufficient, with considerable uncertainty persisting around what constitutes acceptable use of AI with HE. Participants also reported concerns regarding fairness, reliability, academic integrity, and the potential impact of AI on learning and critical thinking, while findings highlighted a continuing stigma surrounding AI use and a lack of confidence in institutional approaches to managing these technologies (Kiezebrink et al., 2026). In their report for WonkHE, Dickinson & Marshall (2026) explain that when students know they will be required to demonstrate understanding, AI is used reflectively often for self-testing and checking reasoning. When verification isn't required, students report using AI in more automatic, uncritical ways. These findings point to the importance not only of alternative assessment methods, but also of clearer policy frameworks, communication strategies and structured opportunities for dialogue between students and staff. Together, they reinforce growing calls for assessment approaches that foreground process, dialogue, critical reasoning and authentic

demonstrations of learning, rather than reliance on product-oriented assessment alone (Tai et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, legal and regulatory developments have further highlighted limitations in reactive accommodation-based approaches to inclusion. The Abrahart case (EHRC, 2024) has become a significant reference point in contemporary discussions of assessment, disability, and institutional responsibility within UK HE. Following the death of Natasha Abrahart in 2018, the courts found that the University of Bristol had failed to make reasonable adjustments in relation to assessment requirements and had discriminated against her under the Equality Act 2010 (Disabled Students UK, 2024; Blake, 2023). While the case centred on an individual student, its implications have extended across the sector, prompting renewed scrutiny of assessment policies, fitness-to-study procedures, and approaches to reasonable adjustments. These developments have reinforced calls for a shift away from reactive, individualised accommodation models towards anticipatory approaches to assessment design. Such discussions closely reflect critiques within inclusive assessment scholarship. Nieminen (2022), for example, argues that accessibility should be embedded within assessment design from the outset and advocates systemic approaches grounded in equity rather than reliance on individual adjustments. Similarly, Tai, Ajjawi and Umarova (2021) argue that students often experience inclusion through broader issues of participation, belonging, and recognition rather than through accommodations alone. The Abrahart case therefore illustrates how assessment design is not only a pedagogical issue but also a matter of student wellbeing, institutional responsibility and legal compliance.

Institutional and sector-wide reviews have similarly drawn attention to systemic issues relating to assessment governance and quality assurance processes. In its review of quality and standards processes at the University of Glasgow, QAA (2025) identified systemic risks relating to academic governance, assessment oversight, and institutional monitoring arrangements. The review resulted in a series of recommendations and has prompted wider discussion regarding accountability, transparency, consistency, and the effectiveness of institutional approaches to assuring academic standards. While the review focused on a single institution, its findings have wider relevance across the Scottish tertiary sector, highlighting the importance of robust governance, clear policy frameworks, and effective mechanisms for monitoring assessment practice and student outcomes. These developments demonstrate that assessment reform is not solely a pedagogical concern but is also shaped by governance structures, institutional policies, regulatory expectations, and quality assurance frameworks.

Within Scotland, these developments intersect with broader enhancement agendas seeking to reimagine learning, teaching and assessment in more inclusive, flexible, and student-centred ways, as exemplified by STEP and the current range of projects aligned to the topic of supporting diverse learner journeys. At a UK level, Firth et al. (2023), for example, position flexibility and optionality within assessment as mechanisms for enhancing authenticity, motivation, and inclusion, while QAA's Collaborative Enhancement activity increasingly

foregrounds assessment reform within wider sector discussions relating to student experience, participation, and educational transformation such as the Compassionate Assessment in HE Network and Belonging through Assessment: Pipelines of Compassion (QAA, 2023). TAPPS emerges within this wider landscape of enhancement activity, contributing to national discussions regarding how assessment policy and practice may better support equity, participation, authenticity, accessibility, and belonging across Scottish tertiary education while informing future sector-wide conversations about assessment enhancement and reform.

1. Flexibility

Flexibility is a significant concept within contemporary assessment reform discourse, particularly in relation to inclusion, authenticity, and student engagement (Firth et al., 2023, Firth, 2025; QAA, 2024). Across higher and tertiary education, flexible assessment is associated with providing students with greater adaptability in how, when, and through what modes learning is demonstrated, while maintaining alignment with programme learning outcomes and academic standards. The QAA/Advance HE *Framework for Flexible Assessment* (Firth, 2025) positions flexibility not simply as increased choice, but as a means of supporting inclusion, authenticity and engagement. Future-ready assessment design is enacted through more responsive and student-centred assessment practices. Within wider assessment scholarship, flexibility is frequently linked to broader debates surrounding learner agency, accessibility, assessment equity, and UDL, particularly in contexts shaped by increasing learner diversity and changing technological and social conditions (Barua & Lockee, 2025; Tai et al., 2022).

Flexibility in assessment is usually defined as the adaptation of assessment modes, timing, and weightings to accommodate diverse student needs. Much of the literature indicates that flexible assessment practices can enhance student engagement, satisfaction, and academic performance but cautions about standards, comparability, and workload. Cook's case study in large cohort courses highlighted staff workload and validity concerns (Cook, 2001). Irwin and Hepplestone (2012) discuss parity and reliability particularly noting technology's role in expanding presentation formats while warning about marking consistency. In their two-year study with over 200 students, Wanner, Palmer, and Palmer (2021) found students valued control over tasks, timelines, and weightings; empowerment gains were clearest for postgraduates, with staff burden and student decision load as trade-offs. They argue that 'empowering learners is not about better grades but about students gaining more input, voice and control in their learning and assessment. Despite the disadvantages of increased workload for teachers and a decision-making burden on students, the potential benefits for students justify consideration of more personalised and flexible assessment,' (Wanner et al., 2021, p.349).

However, care needs to be given to recognise that flexibility is not experienced equally by all students. From a critical perspective, flexibility may function as both an emancipatory practice and a mechanism that transfers institutional complexity onto individuals (Barua & Lockee, 2025). Without adequate structural support, flexible assessment risks privileging students with higher levels of cultural, institutional, and assessment capital, including confidence navigating academic systems and making informed assessment decisions. These tensions highlight that flexibility cannot be understood solely as an individual pedagogical adjustment. Rather, the literature increasingly positions flexible assessment as dependent upon wider institutional infrastructures, including assessment policies, digital systems, moderation processes, staff development, workload allocation, and quality assurance mechanisms (Firth et al., 2023; Firth, 2025; QAA, 2024). Consequently, flexibility is increasingly framed not simply as offering more options to students, but as requiring systemic and inclusive redesign approaches capable of balancing learner agency, accessibility, comparability, and academic standards across increasingly diverse tertiary education contexts.

2. Choice

Assessment choice refers to students selecting between assessment methods aligned to common learning outcomes (Morris, Milton & Goldstone, 2019). Across the literature, assessment choice is associated with increased student satisfaction, reduced assessment-related anxiety, enhanced perceptions of fairness, and greater engagement with learning, although evidence for improvements in academic performance is more mixed (O'Neill, 2017; Jopp & Cohen, 2022; Coulter, Coyne & Andrews, 2024). Within contemporary assessment reform discussions, choice is often positioned as a mechanism for increasing student agency and enabling learners to demonstrate achievement through formats that better align with their strengths, preferences, and future aspirations.

Some studies suggest that while academic performance may not always significantly improve, outcomes are at least equivalent across different assessment options (Jopp & Cohen, 2022). O'Neill (2017) found students generally judged procedures as fair (support, information, feedback), with no significant differences between grade distributions across choices, while staff perceived overall grades higher relative to prior cohorts, which raised some questions about standards or alignment (O'Neill, 2017). Critically, assessment choice assumes that all students possess the requisite assessment literacy to make informed decisions. Without explicit guidance, choice may inadvertently reinforce inequities by advantaging students who are more confident navigating institutional systems and understanding assessment expectations. Structured choice models, including curated assessment menus and transparent parity criteria, are therefore emphasised as necessary conditions for equitable implementation (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012; Morris, Milton & Goldstone, 2019). This raises important questions for assessment policy and practice. If students are expected to exercise meaningful choice,

institutions must consider how assessment literacy is developed and supported through program design, assessment guidance, feedback processes, and assessment-related communications. Assessment choice may therefore be most effective when accompanied by opportunities for dialogue, transparent information, and structured support that enable students to make informed decisions about assessment pathways.

Design, setup and configuration of assessment choice for students can impact student engagement, experience and wellbeing. Recent work on assessment choice positions flexible assessment as a mechanism for shifting the *locus of control* from teachers to students, thereby enhancing learner autonomy, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. The study by Jopp & Cohen (2020) implemented an assessment-choice model within an online business subject, detailing its design and the specific options offered to students. Findings indicate strong student receptiveness, reflected in positive feedback, improved satisfaction scores, and stable or enhanced success rates. While assessment choice did not significantly enhance academic performance, it did increase student satisfaction and alleviate stress. In general, providing students with a choice in their assessments is a useful and flexible way to enhance their online experience, provided it is well thought out.

Canal and Child (2025) examine how different assessment types contribute to awarding gaps in higher education, highlighting persistent disparities across gender, ethnicity, and fee-status groups. In the context of UK higher education, awarding differentials (or gaps) describe the difference in the proportion of UK-domiciled undergraduate students who are from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds who are awarded a first-class or upper second-class (2:1) degree, compared to white peers. In 2020/21, the Office for Students – the independent regulator of higher education in England – reported a 20% gap between Black students achieving a ‘good degree’ and their white counterparts (OfS, 2023). Canal and Child’s (2025) analysis shows that written examinations produce the largest awarding gaps, whereas multiple-choice assessments generate comparatively smaller disparities. Notably, group work appears to reduce awarding gaps, particularly for final-year students and those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. It is important to challenge deficit-based thinking as these disparities are evidenced as being institutional failures rather than stemming from students’ culture, language or prior learning (Valencia, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). The study underscores the role of assessment design in either perpetuating or mitigating inequities and argues for more inclusive, evidence-informed assessment practices to ensure fairer outcomes for all learners.

3. Optionality

Optionality extends the concept of choice to encompass decisions about how, when, and what students submit for assessment. This can include negotiation about word length, assessment mode, submission dates and the weighting of tasks (Basu, 2012; Pacharn, Day & Felton,

2011). Optionality can enhance motivation, inclusivity, and authenticity, while also exposing significant operational challenges. Institutions reported strong motivational value and inclusivity potential, alongside staff concerns about administrative load, training, and regulatory fit. The *Optionality in Assessment* project's findings, recommendations and resources are particularly relevant to the TAPPS project. Findings from the QAA *Optionality in Assessment* project (Firth et al., 2023) demonstrate that optionality can enhance motivation, inclusivity, authenticity, and student engagement, while also exposing significant operational challenges relating to workload, assessment design, regulation, and quality assurance processes. Importantly, the project's findings suggest that successful implementation of optionality depends not only on the availability of assessment options but also on the institutional structures that support staff and students. The project's recommendations emphasise the importance of staff development, assessment literacy, student partnership, transparent assessment criteria, programme-level implementation, and streamlined quality assurance processes (Firth et al., 2023). The report further highlights the need to ensure that students have access to the information, resources, and support required to make informed decisions about assessment options, thereby reducing the risk that optionality inadvertently reproduces existing inequities (Firth et al., 2023). Crucially the project highlighting that optionality is not simply a matter of providing additional assessment choices but requires coherent policy frameworks, institutional infrastructure and support, and partnership approaches capable of balancing flexibility, inclusion, and academic standards. A key output of the *Optionality in Assessment* project, which incorporates many of its recommendations, is the *Framework for Flexible Assessment* (Firth, 2025). The framework provides a model for implementing optionality as part of an approach to inclusive assessment design offering practical guidance for practitioners to build optionality into assessment practice, and includes advice on supporting change in processes, policies and strategy to help embed assessment optionality institutionally.

Implementing options in assessment, such as practical projects, presentations, or real-world simulations, may better align education experiences and workplace contexts, thereby supporting employability, motivation, and authentic demonstration of learning. Moulton's (2025) work on subject specific participatory work in Political Science echoes these benefits (authenticity, autonomy, employability) while noting practical and administrative constraints. Student recommendations foreground clarity, comparability, and realistic workload (Moulton, 2025). Evidence from healthcare and other disciplinary contexts suggests that optionality can support more inclusive assessment practices by enabling students to demonstrate learning through different modes while maintaining parity of academic standards. Craddock and Mathias (2009), for example, found that offering alternative assessment methods could improve student performance while maintaining comparability across assessment formats, including for students with dyslexia.

Such findings suggest that optionality may help reduce barriers to participation and provide more equitable opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to demonstrate achievement (Craddock & Mathias, 2009; Firth et al., 2023). From a critical perspective,

optionality highlights the infrastructural nature of assessment. Its success depends on policies (assessment boards, regulatory bodies, equivalences), technologies (submission platforms), and labour (design, timetabling, moderation, external examining). Optionality that ignores these socio-material conditions risks becoming performative, invoked rhetorically but experienced as administrative friction by staff or as ambiguous risk by students. The importance of agency was recognised in selecting meaningful assessment options, but it was also noted that optionality could result in increased workloads and feelings of being overwhelmed, thereby leading to a reduction in student motivation and engagement (Firth et al., 2023).

One approach that is of particular interest in the literature is negotiated assessment, or co-design. Negotiated assessment is a pedagogical approach where students and tutors collaborate to identify and design an assessment task. This draws on students as partners in learning and encourages students to not only take responsibility for their learning, but to be active agents in designing assessment (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Bovill and Felten, 2016). This thinking builds on Freire's critical pedagogy, which aims to subvert hierarchies and educate for empowerment through critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Fellows (2024) explained that widening participation students are less confident that their peers and need more support for negotiated assessment to be effective.

4. Equity and Inclusion

To precede enacting inclusive assessment, consideration of equity in the context of assessment is crucial in supporting the ontological lens of socially constructed learning. This requires an ongoing commitment, responsibility and accountability for continuous reflection on assessment practices in tertiary education. This moves us away from the status quo that tends to see a convenient turn to inclusion when suitable; such as when the focus on equity is challenged by the emphasis placed on assessment outcomes (Leathwood, 2005). Therefore, inclusive assessment moves beyond individual accommodations towards anticipatory design that addresses structural barriers. Conceptual and empirical studies demonstrate that traditional assessment practices often disadvantage disabled students, international students, and racially minoritised groups.

Conceptual work argues that mainstream assessment often encodes deficit views of diversity and that inclusive assessment requires rethinking traditions, expectations, and integrity discourses (Tai et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2022). Nieminen (2022) advances 'Assessment for Inclusion,' critiquing accommodation models tied to medicalised framing of disability and proposing principles grounded in resistance to ableism, codesign, and recognition of interdependence (Nieminen, 2022). Diversifying assessment types and reducing reliance on high-stakes written examinations can significantly reduce awarding gaps (Canal & Child, 2025). Sector projects attribute inclusive assessment design and policy learning from adaptations made during the pandemic (Elkington, 2021; Hill, 2023) alongside interventions to

decolonise assessment guidance (Campbell & Duke, 2023). Critical scholarship argues that inclusion requires challenging deficit-based models of student difference and reimagining assessment as a collective, relational practice, as well as student self-assessment practices. As Bourke and Mentis (2013) remarked, student self-assessment:

[...] is the most sophisticated and inclusive conception. While there are examples in only a few of the transcripts, it may be that this experience is more common for older students at higher secondary level or tertiary level. This conception is characterised by the student having an awareness of himself or herself in relation to the worthiness of learning. It goes beyond the student questioning 'Why do I need to learn this', which is a fairly typical question from many school-aged students. Rather, this conception is based on knowledge of a greater sense of learning [...].

(Bourke & Mentis, 2013 p. 854-867)

Extending this perspective, inclusive assessment involves intentionally creating space for student self-assessment as part of socially constructed approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. Such practices position learners as active participants in meaning-making rather than passive recipients of judgement. As a result, inclusive assessment must be understood as a programme-level and institutional responsibility, requiring coherence across curricula, assessment design and policy, rather than being confined to isolated pedagogical choices.

At the same time, recent scholarship highlights that the concept of inclusive assessment is inherently complex and, in some respects, paradoxical. Nieminen (2025) suggests that bringing assessment and inclusion together under a single conceptual framework exposes fundamental tensions, as these domains are often driven by contrasting imperatives. Assessment practices tend to prioritise standardisation, categorisation and individual measurement, while inclusion emphasises diversity, fluidity and interdependence. This generates three key tensions: between standardisation and learner diversity; between hierarchical categorisation and aspirations for equality; and between individualism and interdependence.

From this perspective, assessment does more than evaluate learning; it plays a role in shaping and stabilising norms around what counts as legitimate knowledge, performance and identity. As Nieminen (2025, p. 570) argues, 'normalcy can also be seen as a state, a pathological dichotomy between normal and abnormal, that assessment stabilises'. Recognising this tension invites a more critical engagement with assessment systems, positioning inclusive assessment not as a straightforward solution, but as an ongoing, reflective and ethical endeavour that requires sustained institutional commitment.

5. Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines and framework were developed by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) – a non-profit education research and development organisation. UDL offers a research-informed framework for inclusive assessment through three main principles:

1. Engagement – look for ways to motivate learners and sustain their interest
2. Representation – offer information in more than one format
3. Action & Expression – give learners more than one way to interact with the materials and show what they know (Morin, 2024)

Based on the Social Model of Disability, UDL shifts away from deficit thinking and builds on the premise that universal access to education for all learners - regardless of ability - is a worldwide priority (Fovet, 2020; Gronseth & Dalton, 2020). UDL is designed 'to develop "expert learners" who are, each in their own way, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed, purposeful and motivated' (CAST, 2024). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that UDL-aligned assessment improves student satisfaction and learning outcomes, particularly when implemented holistically, all three principles are enacted and when interventions are intentionally targeted (Cumming & Rose, 2021; Almeqdad et al., 2023). At the intersection of UDL and social justice, Hanesworth, Bracke & Elkington (2019) offer a typology for praxis that connects UDL with culturally sustaining pedagogy, recentring historically marginalised learners. Hockings (2010) highlights that, rather than relying on individual reasonable adjustments for students with additional learning needs (ALN), such as dyslexia or speech impairments, UDL encourages the design of curricula that learners can adapt to suit their own needs. She states that:

an alternative approach is to design curricula that learners can customise to suit themselves, thus minimising the need for last minute (or individual) adjustments and avoiding the need for students to disclose hidden differences. (Hockings, 2010 p.26)

The application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been shown to reduce student stress by proactively addressing potential learning barriers before they arise (Katz, 2015). Furthermore, it supports educators in designing flexible curricula from the outset, thereby minimising the need for subsequent adjustments (Schelly, Davies & Spooner, 2011). Shelly, Davies and Spooner (2011) also found that students reported increased accessibility as lecturers provided more diverse formats and enhanced engagement with the curriculum content. Improved feedback was noted as staff who implemented the principles provided more comprehensive information (Morina, Carballo & Domenech, 2025). There is compelling evidence that 'UDL-based pedagogical approaches improve learning, accessibility, and

participation for all students, including those with disabilities' (Morina, Carballo & Domenech, 2025, p.1722). However, existing literature cautions against superficial adoption. Effective UDL implementation requires strategic leadership, staff development, and alignment with assessment policies and quality assurance processes. Scott (2018) highlights a number of systemic challenges in implementing UDL, including limited support for inclusion from general education staff, insufficient administrative backing, and gaps in educators' understanding of UDL principles, as well as a lack of opportunities for preservice training and professional learning. When embedded institutionally, UDL supports both equity and academic integrity.

Conclusion

This literature review has highlighted a growing body of evidence advocating for more inclusive, flexible and authentic approaches to assessment across tertiary education. Collectively, the literature positions assessment not as a neutral or technical process, but as a socially constructed practice that shapes student experience, participation, identity and outcomes. Across themes of flexibility, choice, optionality, inclusive assessment and Universal Design for Learning, there is clear momentum towards approaches that foreground student agency, meaningful demonstration of learning, and anticipatory design for diversity. At the same time, these developments are accompanied by persistent tensions relating to standards, comparability, workload, governance and institutional capacity, reinforcing the complexity of assessment reform.

Despite this growing evidence base, gaps and limitations persist as much of the literature remains situated within specific disciplinary or institutional contexts, raising questions about scalability and transferability across diverse tertiary settings, including colleges and universities. Although student agency, choice and optionality are frequently promoted, there is insufficient attention to the uneven distribution of assessment literacy and institutional capital among students, and the extent to which these approaches may inadvertently reproduce inequities without structured support. Finally, there remains a gap between pedagogical innovation and institutional infrastructure, with more research needed on how policy frameworks, governance processes, digital systems and workload models can be aligned to support sustainable implementation at scale.

Addressing these gaps requires a shift from isolated pedagogical innovation towards whole-system approaches to assessment design and policy. This includes investing in programme-level and institutional coherence, embedding assessment literacy for both staff and students, and strengthening the alignment between assessment practices, quality assurance processes and regulatory frameworks. There is a need for ongoing, collaborative inquiry across the sector that brings together staff, students and policy stakeholders to generate shared

evidence, develop common principles and evaluate impact over time. In particular, co-production approaches, such as those underpinning TAPPS, offer a valuable mechanism for ensuring that assessment reform remains grounded in lived experience and responsive to the realities of diverse learner journeys.

At the same time, this review recognises the significant and ongoing challenges facing the tertiary sector in Scotland, including resource constraints, increasing student diversity, workforce pressures, regulatory demands and the rapid emergence of technological change, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence. Within this context, assessment innovation must be both ambitious and pragmatic. Approaches to flexibility, optionality and inclusion must be designed with careful attention to workload, feasibility, and institutional capacity, ensuring that they are sustainable in practice as well as desirable in principle. Without this, there is a risk that assessment reform becomes fragmented, performative or burdensome, rather than transformative.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that meaningful change in assessment policy and practice requires a careful balancing of competing priorities: between flexibility and comparability, innovation and assurance, agency and support, and inclusion and standards. Rather than viewing these as binaries to be resolved, they must be engaged with as productive tensions that require ongoing negotiation. Within this landscape, TAPPS contributes to a broader sector conversation that seeks to reimagine assessment as a site of equity, belonging and transformation - one that is co-constructed, evidence-informed and capable of supporting all learners to succeed.

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