

Assessment Policy Review

Transforming Assessment Policy and Practice in Scotland
(TAPPS) Project

September 2026



STEP

Scotland's Tertiary
Enhancement Programme



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Enhancement Programme

Assessment Policy Review: A review of the assessment policies of institutions across the Scottish tertiary education sector

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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Introduction

This policy review has been co-produced by staff and students participating in the Transforming Assessment Policy and Practice in Scotland (TAPPS) project. TAPPS forms part of Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP), a sector-wide initiative funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and managed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA Scotland) and the College Development Network (CDN).

The 2024–2028 enhancement cycle is framed around the overarching theme *Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys*, reflecting a sector-wide priority to address transitions, inclusion, and the increasingly complex pathways students take through tertiary education. Within this context, TAPPS represents a cross-sector collaboration led by Edinburgh Napier University and the City of Glasgow College, with partners including Queen Margaret University, the University of Stirling, the University of St Andrews, Ayrshire College, and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The project adopts an evidence-based approach to examine how Scotland's tertiary education sector can more effectively support an increasingly diverse student population, with a particular focus on the role of assessment policy and practice.

The purpose of this review was to analyse current assessment policies across Scotland's colleges and universities. The policies of all 43 Scottish tertiary institutions were reviewed, comprising 24 colleges and 19 universities. In addition to institutional assessment policies, the review considered supporting guidance appended to or linked from policy documents as well as institutions published strategic priorities, to gather a more comprehensive understanding of 'how policies effectively align with institutional direction. The analysis is further informed by relevant QAA Scotland and Qualifications Scotland (QS) frameworks and assessment guidance, ensuring alignment with national quality expectations and enhancement priorities.

In line with STEP's chosen theme for the current cycle, this review focused on ascertaining whether existing assessment policies support inclusive, innovative, and effective practice in assessment. These remain key considerations within the TAPPS project. All documents were reviewed using the following themes as interpretative lenses, to establish the extent to which considerations on these aspects feature in institutional policy guidelines:

1. Choice and Flexibility in Assessment
2. Optionality and Diversity in Assessment
3. Equity and Inclusion
4. UDL (Universal Design for Learning)
5. Innovation
6. Skills Development

1. Choice and Flexibility in Assessment

Choice and flexibility in assessment refer to the planned provision of opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes through different formats, methods, or timings within defined parameters. Through this lens, the review considered the extent to which institutions draw students' attention to having the option to choose their assessment format or give students flexibility in assessment modes, tasks, deadlines and weightings as promoted in policy.

Findings in Further Education Institutions

Across all college policies reviewed, four colleges make explicit references to flexibility or student-centred approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment, including flexible deadlines, personalised approaches, and student partnership models.

A further six colleges implicitly reference flexibility through practices such as negotiated assessment timing, flexible assessment pathways (including Recognition of Prior Learning), or adaptive approaches to learner need. However, these are referenced in recommendations for staff decision-making on a case-by-case basis rather than representing a structured framework designed around learner choice or flexibility.

More broadly, flexibility is most frequently evidenced across at least 18 colleges through procedural mechanisms such as Alternative Assessment Arrangements (AAA), mitigating circumstances, extensions, and deferrals.

In the majority of cases, flexibility is therefore inferred through compliance with awarding body and regulatory requirements rather than explicitly articulated as a principle of assessment design. As a result, flexibility is predominantly positioned as an adjustment or mitigation process, rather than an embedded feature of policies evidencing an inclusive approach to assessment design.

Overall, the findings indicate that while flexibility is present within the operational structures of college assessment policies, explicit learner choice is evident in only four of twenty-four colleges. Flexibility remains largely procedural, reactive, and compliance-driven, with limited evidence of it being systematically established within assessment design, resulting in variability in practice, application and impact on students' outcomes.

Findings in Higher Education Institutions

There are few examples across the policies of HEIs that demonstrate a clear emphasis or support for flexibility and choice in assessment for students. Most institutions have a highly controlled approach to flexibility, which is mostly reactive and designed to accommodate students' specific needs or respond to exceptional circumstances rather than anticipating them.

The institutions that include a level of flexibility in their policies differ significantly in terms of how they consider flexibility and how they apply it in practice. For example, Edinburgh Napier University includes 'optionality and agency' within their wording of Principle 1 (2.1) suggesting that students should have a choice in assessment mode and task, with flexibility built in. The University of Glasgow's assessment policy states that students should get information in advance so they can 'make choices about the assessments which suit their particular learning needs' (8.1), with some flexibility in deadline deferrals, late windows, and alternative arrangements in some Extenuating Circumstances cases (16.27, 16.28, 16.52 (h)). Other institutions (like the University of Stirling) suggest that 'alternative formats can be offered' for assessments that are considered stressful for some students, like oral exams and presentations, or advocate for choice and flexibility for students in assessment in a stated principle:

To minimise the use of assessments that require individual learning adjustments to be made and to make assessment inclusive by design, offering choice and flexibility to students, not just across a programme, but within an assessment task (University of Edinburgh, Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities, p.5)

In remaining policies, flexibility and choice for students in assessment are generally more limited and reactive rather than programmatic and openly inclusive. In some institutions, each type of assessment has its own policy but without choice or flexibility, while in some cases flexibility is understood in terms of reasonable adjustment. In most policies, flexibility is present but applied on a case-by-case basis and highly procedural, operating primarily through formal processes, such as extensions and deferrals, which are considered exceptional arrangements made in specific circumstances that require evidence and institutional approval. There is sparse evidence of built-in flexibility or student choice in assessment design, with flexibility therefore remaining largely institutionally controlled and activated primarily under exceptional conditions and through a regulatory approach, rather than student choice.

There are also clear differences between institutions and their policies related to reassessment attempts, with significant potential impacts upon learners. These differences vary by level of study, status of students (home, international and visiting students) and programmes (i.e. those accredited by Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body (PSRB), where specific requirements apply), demonstrating the existence of significant variations in practice and experiences (as well as opportunities) for students across Scottish universities.

General observations and reflections:

Broadly, flexibility can be seen in many assessment policies, but the extent of student choice is limited, demonstrating that flexibility exists but in a controlled rather than fully open way. There is a need for greater recognition of institutional ability to be more flexible in assessment to allow students genuine choice and flexibility without comprising academic standards or staff workload. This may be accomplished through engaging with evidence from sector projects, their outputs (e.g. Firth, 2025, '*Framework for Flexible Assessment*') and case studies or examples of flexible assessment in use when considering revisions to assessment policies. There appears to be a clear need to raise awareness amongst quality assurance and enhancement colleagues about the benefits of flexibility in assessment. Developing teaching staff's understanding of the nature and possible implementations of flexibility in assessment would also enhance assessment design and facilitate the incorporation of flexibility in assessment policy and practice across the sector.



Presenters from Edinburgh College highlighting the importance of flexible assessment at a TAPPS Sharing Event at Edinburgh Napier University, June 2026.

2. Optionality and Diversity in Assessment

In many ways an extension of choice and flexibility, optionality in assessment is broadly understood as an approach to assessment design in which learners are enabled to evidence achievement of learning outcomes through a planned range of formats, methods and submission contexts. To work effectively and successfully, optionality and diversity in assessment require careful planning and scaffolding, institutional buy-in, and staff development, as well as a strong staff/student partnership.

Findings in Further Education Institutions

Across all college policies reviewed, only two policies make explicit references to 'a variety of assessment approaches' and a 'range of teaching and assessment approaches' as embedded within policy. A further three policies implicitly reference diversity through alignment with awarding bodies' requirements and through expectations of varied evidence generation.

More broadly, assessment diversity is most frequently referenced in relation to alternative assessment arrangements and exceptional circumstances, where reasonable adjustments are made as required. However, this is not consistently operationalised within assessment design, which may result in variability in practice.

In the majority of cases, diversity is inferred through awarding body requirements rather than being explicitly articulated as a principle of assessment design within policy documents.

Overall, the findings indicate that while optionality and diversity are present within the structure of college assessment policies, there is inconsistency in how these concepts are articulated and embedded as explicit pedagogical principles in assessment design.

Findings in Higher Education Institutions

Across the reviewed policies, there is limited emphasis on both optionality and the promotion of the use of diversity in assessment methods and formats, both within and across programmes of study. Some institutions explicitly mention and encourage the application of these two principles (e.g. Edinburgh Napier University, University of Stirling, Queen Margaret University, University of Dundee and Robert Gordon University) some allude to them more implicitly (e.g. Glasgow School of Art, University of St Andrews, University of Glasgow, University of Edinburgh) and others make no reference to them within the policy documentation.

For example, Edinburgh Napier University (ENU) promotes the use of optionality and flexibility in assessment (citing Firth et al.'s 2023 QAA report and recommendations on assessment optionality) in Principle 1 of the Assessment Policy, while the University of Stirling's Assessment Strategy encourages a range of assessment across programmes with integration

of formative and summative and sequencing of tasks to aid learning (7, pg.2). Importantly, Stirling's policy acknowledges the need for staff to innovate in their practice in order to respond to and support increasing student diversity, whilst Queen Margaret University's (QMU) policy (sections 2.3 and 4.4) mentions the importance of assessment variety to reflect the programme, mode of study and fairness as well as reflecting skills, knowledge, understanding, intellectual, practical and transferable skills.

Most assessment policy documents acknowledge that assessments can take different forms, distinguishing between formative and summative assessment, and highlighting that different types of assessment serve different purposes. Increasingly, institutions require that assessments are 'constructively aligned... to the intended learning outcomes', meaning that different skills or knowledge areas may require different assessment formats. This supports diversity in practice, as programmes can use a range of assessment methods and tasks that are tailored to what is specifically being assessed.

General observations and reflections:

While some institutions make explicit statements about the value of optionality and diversity in assessments, embedding these notions into their main policy documentation and assessment regulations (often in the form of broad principles), more often commitment and references to optionality and diversity are included in related documents, making it unclear whether they represent abiding policy requirements or rather recommended 'good practice'. This allows for the establishment of a normalised gap between what is recommended in assessment practice to pursue enhancement of assessment (but remains aspirational), and baseline expectations in standard practice that is normally (and perhaps less ambitiously) implemented and expected on a routine basis.

3. Equity and Inclusion

Equity in assessment recognises that learners have different starting points and may require different support or approaches to achieve the same outcomes. It focuses on fairness of opportunity and outcome, rather than consistency of treatment, ensuring all learners can demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes within robust academic standards. Inclusion in assessment ensures that all learners can demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes through accessible and supportive approaches that remove barriers, while maintaining fairness, validity, and consistency. Focusing on the explicit mention or implementation of these two principles, this section of the review intended to observe the extent to which institutions consider equity as a requirement in their assessment policies and recommend

adopting a variety of assessment formats to address 'exclusionary assessment norms' (Firth, 2025) such as academic writing.

Findings in Further Education Institutions

Across the twenty-four Scottish college policies reviewed, fourteen colleges make explicit reference to equity or fairness within assessment policy, typically framed through statements such as 'equitable and fair', 'equality of treatment' or commitments to consistent and impartial assessment practice. A further six colleges demonstrate implicit alignment with equity through compliance with Equality Act 2010 requirements, awarding body regulations, and internal verification processes designed to ensure fairness and consistency.

More broadly, equity is most often systematically embedded through procedural mechanisms, including standardisation of marking, internal and external verification, moderation processes, and clear assessment regulations aligned to Qualifications Scotland and awarding bodies' requirements. These approaches emphasise consistency, reliability, and fairness of judgement, rather than addressing differential learner needs or structural barriers to assessment. In the majority of cases, equity is therefore conceptualised as equality of treatment rather than equity of opportunity. While policies demonstrate a strong alignment to quality assurance requirements, there is limited evidence of equity being embedded as a design principle within assessment.

Across all the college assessment policies reviewed, twelve colleges make explicit reference to inclusion within policy or associated documentation, typically framed through commitments to equality, diversity, access and student support. These references position inclusion as a core institutional value and principle underpinning learning, teaching and assessment. A further eight colleges demonstrate implicit alignment with inclusive practice through statements relating to fairness, equity of treatment, and compliance with the Equality Act 2010. However, these references are primarily procedural and focus on ensuring equitable treatment rather than inclusive assessment design.

More broadly, inclusion is most frequently referred to through Alternative Assessment Arrangements (AAA), reasonable adjustments and formal support processes, rather than being embedded within assessment design. This includes approaches where students are required to disclose their specific needs and access support through structured mechanisms, often aligned with awarding body requirements and verification processes.

In the majority of cases, inclusion is therefore framed as compliance-led and support-based, rather than as a proactive design principle prioritised within assessment design. While several

colleges demonstrate strong institutional commitment to inclusion, there is limited evidence of this being consistently translated into assessment design and practice.

Findings in Higher Education Institutions

Most institutions' policies did not demonstrate a fully integrated, inclusive approach to assessment design, even though there were often references to 'fairness' and mechanisms for supporting students engaging in and undertaking assessment. In these cases, inclusion was often implicitly enacted and supported through processes or procedures rather than being a specific focus of the policies or cited explicitly. As with other aspects, this makes it difficult to ascertain how the application of principles is supported in practice. However, some policies did see inclusion foregrounded and explicit.

For example, inclusion is clearly embedded across the University of Dundee's policy, which states that assessment should be 'fair' and 'transparent', and should 'recognise and respect equality and diversity and is inclusive by design' (Section 1.5.1). This establishes inclusion as a core principle underpinning assessment practice further supported in the policy through specific requirements (also seen across other policies though without that emphasis in principles), such as clear marking criteria provided before teaching begins (Section 2.8), accessible information about assessment scheduling (Section 2.6), and set feedback turnaround times (fifteen days).

Glasgow School of Art (GSA), together with Abertay University and Edinburgh Napier University, also feature inclusion as a core principle within their policies with supporting mechanisms that help operationalise this in practice. GSA states (1.36e. p5) that 'assessment schemes are designed to be inclusive and equitable, and to directly assess the intended learning outcomes' which is also supported by an emphasis on 'combination of formative and summative assessment to support the learning process' and a specific policy section (1.4) on equality, diversity and inclusion. More importantly, GSA's policy also states that all changes to 'an assessment scheme' require an Equality Impact Assessment (2.1, 25). This suggests a strong institutional commitment to practising equity in assessment, though policy documents do not specify how this requirement relates to innovation.

In other cases, as in the University of Stirling's policy, guidance on 'developing inclusive assessments' (Appendix 1) directs colleagues to an Assessment Strategy that foregrounds inclusion and wellbeing, while acknowledging that 'student learning behaviours and preferences are changing, and our student body is becoming more diverse' (1, p. 2). Inclusion here features as an explicit emphasis on assessment literacy, indicating that assessment content, design and processes need to be 'accessible and inclusive for student[s] from different backgrounds' with a need for assessment instructions and marking related to presentation (grammar, referencing etc.) to be explicitly stated by staff and not assumed as 'implicitly understood'. Assessment literacy is therefore expected to be designed

into modules and programmes to help students understand processes of assessment, standards and marking (15, p. 3), aiming at the same time to reduce stress, build confidence, resilience and independence in all students.



Professor Zack Moir sharing his approach to Student-Led Assessment at a TAPPS Sharing Event at Edinburgh Napier University, June 2026.

The University of Edinburgh explicitly mentions inclusion and equity in its *Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities* document. Principle 3 states, 'Assessment and feedback will be inclusive, equitable and fair' with assessment being 'developed taking into account diverse student learning needs and approaches' (3.1) and 'designed to minimise the need for individual learning adjustments' as far as possible (3.2). This document expands on this principle stating that in applying it staff should proactively consider:

[...] diverse learning needs [and] ensure that students have the opportunity to experience (and are supported to undertake) a range of assessments. [...] Staff should take action to address any gaps in progression or achievement that are found to exist for subgroups of students (which may include increased support or assessment literacy or changing the nature of the assessment) (p. 4).

The document also stipulates an equitable approach to marking, indicating that 'expectations about spelling, grammar and language should be made clear, especially for the benefit of

students with specific learning disabilities and non-native speakers. Care should be taken to ensure criteria do not unfairly disadvantage some students' (4.2).

General observations and reflections:

Overall, the findings indicate that while equity is widely referenced across policies (either explicitly or implicitly), it is predominantly enacted through procedural fairness and regulatory compliance, with limited evidence of it being translated into inclusive, design-led assessment practices. The general lack of clarity about implementation expectations indicates that declared policy priorities and strategic principles are not sufficient to ensure that assessment approaches actively address diverse learner needs and reduce structural inequalities.

4. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is an approach to curriculum and assessment design that anticipates learner variability by providing multiple ways for learners to engage with content and demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes. It emphasises proactive, inclusive design to reduce the need for individual adjustments, while maintaining standards of validity, reliability, and equity, and seeks to embed accessibility and flexibility as standard features of assessment, rather than relying on reactive support mechanisms. This section of the review captures the extent to which institutions have embraced the principles of UDL within their assessment policies to make learning and the demonstration of achievement of learning outcomes accessible, with inclusion for all considered from the outset.

Findings in Further Education Institutions

Across the twenty-four Scottish college policies reviewed, no colleges explicitly reference UDL as a defined framework within their core assessment policies. While some policies demonstrate alignment with UDL principles, this is not articulated using consistent terminology or embedded as a formal design approach.

A total of six colleges demonstrated implicit alignment to UDL through strategic commitments to inclusive, student-centred, or personalised learning and assessment approaches. These included references to inclusive curriculum design, flexible learning pathways, and student partnership models.

A further eight colleges demonstrated partial alignment with structured support mechanisms, including alternative assessment arrangements, personalised support plans, and inclusive practice statements. However, these were typically framed as support processes based on individual student need rather than proactive assessment design.

More broadly, the remaining ten colleges demonstrated little or no evidence of UDL-aligned practice beyond compliance with the Equality Act 2010 requirements and awarding body guidance. In these cases, support for learners is primarily enacted through reasonable adjustments rather than through anticipatory, inclusive assessment design.

In the majority of cases, assessment policy infers inclusive practice is implemented through reactive models of adjustment, rather than through a proactive, design-led approach consistent with UDL principles. This results in reliance on individual learner disclosure and formal support processes, rather than embedding accessibility and flexibility as standard features of assessment.

Findings in Higher Education Institutions

Rather than proactively advocate or stipulate that the design of assessment should be accessible for all learners, policies generally appear to reflect a partial and indirect alignment with UDL principles, and a more traditional accommodation model (UDL Principle 2: Multiple Means of Action and Expression). Alternative means of expressing learning are mostly framed in terms of accommodation of individual needs through reasonable adjustments and alternative assessments, instead of a developed engagement strategy with the principles of UDL or a fully embedded inclusive design model.

There are, however, examples of institutions that effectively adopt aspects of UDL in their policies. The University of the Highlands and Islands' policy, for instance, specifically incorporates UDL Principle 2 (multiple means of action and engagement) in citing the use of multiple forms of feedback for students. The University of Dundee policy [*Assessment policy for taught provision Academic Year 2025/26*] includes explicit formulations that clearly align with UDL principles. Section 2.10 (Disabled Students) states that assessment should be 'inclusive by design', 'proactively consider accessibility', and should 'anticipate reasonable adjustments.' This is significant because it indicates that assessment should be designed in a way that reduces barriers from the outset, rather than relying solely on individual adjustments once issues arise.

More often, whilst institutional policies contain some principles that are compatible with UDL, they mostly do not explicitly discuss accessibility by design, proactive removal of barriers, multiple ways of engagement, or multiple means of expression, all of which are central elements of UDL. So more broadly, there is limited evidence of a fully embedded UDL approach to assessment.

General observations and reflections:

In broad terms, assessment policies across the sector do not mention UDL specifically or explicitly, even though in some cases they promote some of its principles. However, unless

UDL principles are foregrounded within policy, it remains difficult to embed them in routine assessment design. Institutions tend instead to rely on individual adjustments in response to student needs, creating an evident gap between what is often promoted in literature, guidance and CPD related to UDL, and the actual implementation of its principles and incorporation in assessment policy. The most significant implication for learners is that, whilst accommodation is available, this is granted upon request or communication of individual needs, with implications for their sense of belonging and inclusion, and the potential risk of delays as well as an increase in workload for academic and disability support staff. This can therefore have a direct and severely negative impact on learners' assessment experience.

5. Innovation

This section of the review examines how and whether institutions encourage the use of innovative assessment methods to evaluate learning. Innovation is intended as the development and use of new or enhanced approaches to assessing learning that move beyond traditional methods to better enable learners to demonstrate what they have learned, supporting deeper engagement and leading to more positive assessment experiences.

Findings in Further Education Institutions

Across the twenty-four Scottish college policies reviewed, six colleges make explicit reference to innovation in learning, teaching and assessment within policy or strategic documentation. These references typically highlight commitments to innovative pedagogical approaches, digital technologies, industry-informed curriculum design, and enhancement of assessment practice.

A further seven colleges demonstrate implicit alignment with innovation through references to emerging practices such as online assessment formats, collaborative learning, employer engagement, or the use of digital tools to enhance assessment and feedback. However, these are generally positioned within broader teaching and learning strategies rather than explicitly embedded within assessment policy.

More broadly, the remaining eleven colleges demonstrate little or no explicit reference to innovation within assessment policy. In these cases, assessment approaches are primarily framed through compliance with QS and awarding body requirements, with limited scope for experimentation or the introduction of innovative assessment methods.

In the majority of cases, innovation is therefore positioned as a strategic aspiration rather than a defined or required feature of assessment practice. While some colleges highlight the

importance of innovation in enhancing student experience and skills development, there is limited evidence of this being consistently implemented within assessment design or supported through clear policy expectations

Findings in Higher Education Institutions

There is variation across policies in whether and how innovation is mentioned and/or supported. Some policies encourage innovation in assessment in principle, but caution this must be carefully managed and piloted before wider implementation. For instance, the University of Dundee policy [*Assessment policy for taught provision Academic Year 2025/26*] indicates that 'all innovative approaches to assessment must be reviewed to appraise validity, reproducibility, feasibility, educational effect and acceptability' (9.2.1). The University of Edinburgh's *Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities* openly supports the use of 'creativity, innovation and experimentation in assessment and feedback', encouraging forms of assessments and feedback that are 'forward-looking and aspirational' (p.9). However, in most instances, policy documents explicitly mention innovation as an underlying principle but do not provide specific information on how this is supported or enabled in practice.

There are also interesting instances of policies that do not explicitly mention innovation as a key principle but include examples of where innovation in assessment is encouraged. This can be for example in the use of AI (Edinburgh Napier), in the inclusion of student partnership in assessment, or in the adoption of authentic assessment (Abertay, ENU, Edinburgh, RGU, Stirling and UWS), promoting the use of different modes of assessment to enable students to demonstrate learning in different ways.

Equally, there are also policies across the sector that continue to privilege regulation and consistency, prioritising standardisation over innovation, offering little encouragement of or room for innovation.

General observations and reflections:

Overall, the findings indicate that while innovation can be referenced in policy documents, either explicitly or implicitly, it is rarely mentioned or clearly defined as a guiding principle, and it is not consistently embedded within the framework of assessment policy.

Innovation remains largely aspirational and uneven in application, with assessment practices still predominantly shaped by regulatory compliance and concerns for standardisation and assessment integrity. There appear to be no systematic encouragement of creative or transformative approaches to assessment design so careful consideration is needed to ensure that in practice innovation in assessment is supported in sustainable and meaningful ways.

6. Skills Development

Skills development in assessment refers to the intentional use of assessment to support and measure not only what learners know, but what they can do with that knowledge, including the development of practical, cognitive, and transferable skills. It recognises assessment as an integral part of the learning process, shaping how learners develop capabilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving and self-regulated learning, preparing them for further study, employment and lifelong learning. In this specific context, the review considered whether and how institutional policies allow students to engage in assessments aligned with their individual backgrounds, personalities, abilities and aspirations, supporting students in developing skills relevant to the evolving job market and valuable for their employability profile.

Findings in Further Education Institutions

Across the twenty-four Scottish college policies reviewed, eleven colleges make explicit reference to skills development within assessment, often linked to employability, future skills, or preparing learners for work and life. These policies highlight assessment as a means of developing broader competencies such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, frequently aligned to strategic priorities.

A further seven colleges demonstrated implicit alignment by referencing the role of assessment in evidencing skills, knowledge, and understanding, or through broader commitments to learner development within learning and teaching strategies. However, these references are often general and not explicitly linked to assessment design.

More broadly, the remaining six colleges demonstrate limited or no explicit reference to skills development within assessment policy, with a stronger emphasis on meeting awarding body requirements and evidencing competence against unit specifications.

In the majority of cases, skills development is therefore framed as a strategic or institutional priority, rather than being explicitly embedded within assessment design. While most policies (eighteen out of twenty-four) recognise the importance of developing transferable and employability skills, there is limited evidence of how assessment is intentionally structured to support or measure these outcomes across programmes. As a result, the relationship between assessment practice and the development of transferable skills remains variable and often implicit, with limited evidence of systematic implementation across the sector

Findings in Higher Education Institutions

Policies were identified as falling into three categories: a few that explicitly mentioned skills development as a key principle or intended outcome of assessment that was intended to equip students with skills post-graduation; several that either made brief mention of skills in relation to

graduate attributes and/or discussed skills but primarily in the context of meeting specific programme learning outcomes; and policies that made no mention of skills development, either as part of meeting programme learning outcomes or for broader employability and society.

One notable example is ENU's *Assessment Policy*. Principle 4 states that methods of assessment will support students' 'broader development of knowledge, skills and attributes by providing opportunities for students to apply their learning in the different contexts in which they live and work, now and in the future' and that (Principle 5: 'Assessments foster student development') assessments 'will enable and empower students to develop and demonstrate core employability skills such as communication, critical thinking and collaboration supported through active, collaborative learning approaches and assessment methods. Assessments will support student's development of digital capabilities and critical information literacies through tasks that utilise digital technologies including Generative AI.'

In the University of Edinburgh's *Assessment and Feedback Principles and Priorities*, it states that assessments can 'develop students' knowledge, skills and attributes (assessment as learning)' and that 'learning technologies can be used to increase the scope for creativity, innovation and experimentation in assessment, support new kinds of assessment, and help students develop the digital and creative skills needed for effective use of contemporary modes of knowledge representation.

The University of Stirling's *Assessment Strategy* includes a principle on authentic assessment, in which it states that assessments 'will provide students with the opportunity to apply skills and learning in authentic ways which develop their graduate attributes and reflect "real world" application. We will use a range of assessments across programmes and through stages of study to develop confidence and mastery. Our range of assessments will include those which mirror real-life situations or tasks to allow our students to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world scenarios, which may relate to the world of work. In doing so, they can demonstrate deep understanding, higher-order thinking, problem solving and professional skills'.

Implications/potential gaps:

Lack of clarity in what is considered policy and therefore required in assessment practice and what is guidance for colleagues to consider and work towards in enhancement of assessment, i.e. what is baseline expectation and what is a nice to have/aspirational. This is seen in the use of appendices, supporting guidance documents and statements on skills development in the use of assessment methods. Related to this, while there is sometimes evidence of good practice in supporting staff to design authenticity into assessments to support skills development in students – for example one of the many toolkits Heriot Watt University has is on designing authentic assessments - it is unclear how this relates to assessment policy at the institution.

Overall, the findings indicate that while skills development is referenced either explicitly or implicitly, it is not consistently embedded within assessment policy.

Considerations and Recommendations

Across the tertiary sector, assessment policy is well-established and strongly aligned with Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland enhancement priorities and Qualifications Scotland (SQA/QS) requirements for validity, reliability, fairness and consistency of standards.

Across all themes, a clear pattern emerges with most policies surveyed articulating strong institutional commitments—reflected in wider strategic commitments to inclusion, equity, student-centred learning, and skills development. These align closely with the STEP theme of *Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys* and demonstrate a shared sector ambition to improve learner experience and outcomes.

However, the findings also highlight a consistent gap between strategic intent and policy implementation. While themes such as diversity, flexibility, inclusion, equity, innovation, and skills development are widely referenced across both policy and strategy, they are most frequently enacted through procedural and compliance-based mechanisms, including Alternative Assessment Arrangements, and verification processes, rather than being systematically embedded within assessment design. Across multiple themes, practice remains predominantly reactive, with limited evidence of proactive, design-led approaches such as structured learner choice, assessment optionality, or Universal Design for Learning. This indicates that assessment practice across the sector continues to be shaped by regulatory compliance, with less emphasis on pedagogical enhancements in assessment that by are inclusive by design to support diverse learner needs.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Scottish tertiary sector is broadly operating within a robust quality assurance framework, but is not moving towards establishing a genuinely enhancement-led model, as promoted by QAA Scotland, in which assessment is:

- proactively designed to support learner variability;
- explicitly aligned to strategic priorities;
- consistently embedded across programmes rather than applied through exception.

The TAPPS project's ambition is therefore to bring to fruition the sector-wide opportunity to strengthen the connection between strategy and practice by embedding choice, diversity, and inclusive design as core principles of assessment, rather than relying predominantly on reactive and compliance driven mechanisms. More specifically on the aspects considered in this report, the TAPPS project's findings indicate the need to implement the following recommendations:

1.Choice and Flexibility in Assessment

- Amendments or additions in assessment policies on including flexibility in assessment by design and allowing some level of choice or autonomy for students, supported by guidelines for staff in expectations of implementing this and examples of effective use of flexibility in assessment.
- A need for institutions and their policies to be more anticipatory of student needs and acknowledging at a regulatory and policy level the diversity of students and their likely needs particularly in relation to assessment mode, format, and submission deadlines given the challenge (and competing priorities) of many learners within the contemporaneous context (e.g. work and caring commitments, commuting, mental health challenges).
- Identification and agreement of a standard (potentially sector wide) grace period without penalty for late assessment submissions to reduce administrative workload for staff and additional stress and burden for students.

2.Optionality and Diversity in Assessment

- Make policies clearer in relation to what is required to implement in practice for assessment optionality (in individual assessment tasks) and diversity or variety of assessments methods to be used in and across programmes of study (see Firth, 2025).
- Include a clear (shared) definition of optionality particularly to support staff with assessments design responsibilities.
- Provide clarity on the extent to which optionality and flexibility can address the need for reasonable adjustments often made in response to specific needs rather than anticipating and addressing likely needs in assessment design.

3. Equity and Inclusion

- Devising a clear, sector-wide definition and standard for inclusive assessment design supported by examples and/or case studies from across the tertiary sector.
- Policies should define what is meant by equity and to ensure that there is consistency in and an equitable approach to specific regulations (e.g. number of assessment attempts and/or resubmissions).
- Both equity and innovation need to be taken into account when reviewing and designing assessments to ensure, for example, that innovation does not (dis)advantage certain student groups.

4. UDL

- All institutions should actively consider the explicit incorporation of UDL principles within their assessment policies placing emphasis on inclusive assessment practice through design, instead of response and adjustment to individual needs. This can be actioned by working in partnership with inclusion or disability service teams in assessment, moving towards adopting inclusive, anti-ableist assessment policies and practices.
- Provide guidance, examples, and CPD for staff in applying UDL within assessment design. This should be invited, commissioned and shared across the sector to support institutions and colleagues in applying UDL in assessment policy and practice (forthcoming case studies from the TAPPS project will act as a relevant resource in this sense).

5. Innovation

- Further research is needed to satisfactorily resolve the current potential tension between innovation in assessment and consistency and standardisation. This should guide further action to support sector-wide incorporation in policy and implementation in assessment practice of innovation.
- Related to the above, institutions might want to consider how opportunities for innovation are identified, supported, and evaluated at a programmatic level within existing governance frameworks and review cycles.

6. Skills Development

- Clarify principles and approach to skills development in assessment strategies/policies, which would then underpin assessment design toolkits etc. on developing skills through assessment.

Summary of general sector-wide recommendations:

- Address current fragmentation of policy documentation;
- Address currently barriers in accessing policy documentation;
- Address current difficulty of policy language hindering clarity and accessibility. This should also be sector-wide and link directly to the [Language Accessibility Promise](#);
- Establish a shared language and clear naming conventions, definitions and descriptions of notions and practices related to assessment policy – e.g. regulations, policy, principles, procedures and guidance. This will provide sector-wide clarity on what constitutes best practice and offer a clear, consistent procedural model for students, whilst also supporting those working across institutions in accessing, understanding and implementing policy documents, e.g. staff, external examiners, TQER reviewers as well as students and parents/carers.

- Ensure that pedagogical innovation is encouraged but remains inherently inclusive and equitable, balancing experimentation with clear risk management mechanisms to safeguard the learning experience of diverse learners.

- As part of the vision and implementation of Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), consider the efficacy and potential value of an agreed, co-created sector-wide set of principles of assessment or indeed an assessment policy to support enhancement of assessment practice across the Scottish tertiary sector.

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