

Compassionate Assessment in Action: Transforming Assessment Practices and Policies in Scotland

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Overview

- Situating the Session – Compassion and the need for assessment transformation
- Setting the Context:
 - Scottish Tertiary Sector - Quality Assurance & Enhancement
 - Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)
- STEP Project – TAPPS
- Sharing Case Studies
- Discussion – Policy as an enabler or barrier to compassion in assessment



Compassion

‘...compassion means the noticing of social or physical distress to others and the commitment to reduce or prevent that distress’
(Theo Gilbert, 2017, p.189)

‘To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin’
(bell hooks, 1994, p.13)

‘..motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering’
(Strauss et al, 2016, p15).

Half of UK university students are battling mental health strains

A survey of 1,000 university students and graduates has revealed that 43% frequently battled anxiety during their studies, with concerns ranging from academic failure to post-graduation pressures.



NEWS By [Lauren Edwards](#)

08:21, 25 Feb 2025 | Updated 09:38, 25 Feb 2025



38p/week

THE **i**PAPER

IMPARTIAL NEWS + INTELLIGENT DEBATE

My daughter took her own life on day of university exam - how many more will die?

Natasha Abrahart's family say 'superficial sticking plasters' are not enough to tackle student suicides



Natasha Abrahart, 20, took her own life while studying at the University of Bristol, after a long struggle

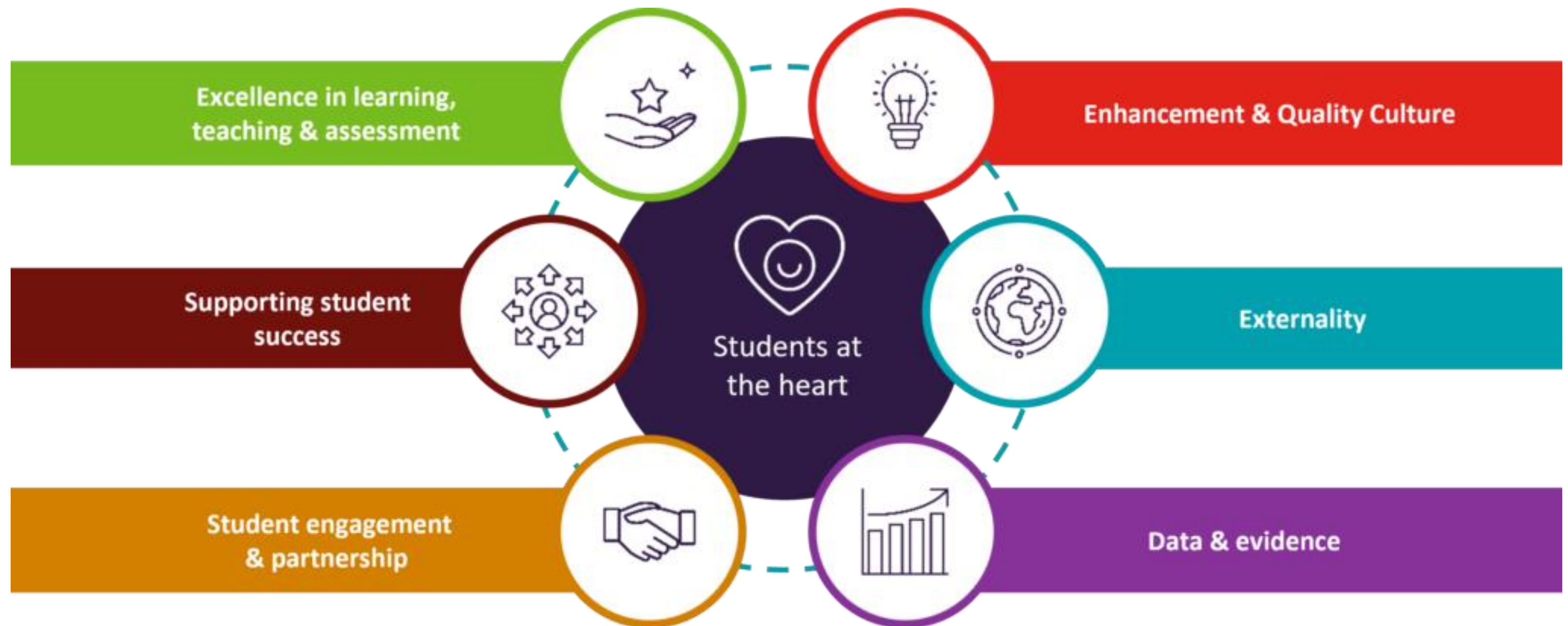
TQEF – Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework

- Single Tertiary Sector for both FE and HE institutes
- Unified/shared approach to quality assurance and enhancement
- Collaborative community



Where is the Scottish sector?

Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF)





STEP

Scotland's Tertiary
Enhancement Programme

step.ac.uk

- STEP (Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme) is the **new collaborative programme** that will support Scotland's tertiary sector to innovate in quality enhancement.
- It is designed to enable **Scotland's colleges and universities to work together** to improve and enhance learning, teaching, the student experience and staff development across tertiary provision.
- It is one of the delivery mechanisms of Scotland's [Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework \(TQEF\)](#) and is underpinned by the TQEF principles.

STEP Topic (2024-2028)

'Supporting diverse learner journeys'.

The topic underpinned by **four priority areas**:

Supporting diverse learner journeys by...			
Supporting transitions and navigating pathways	Strengthening engagement, community and belonging	Developing skills and capabilities for learning	Delivering tailored, targeted and personalised support

What is STEP?



Discovery – Year 1

During the Discovery phase, staff and students will come together for a series of Discovery Days to establish collaborative partnerships and design projects that will form the core of the programme.

Implementation – Years 2 & 3

The focus of the Implementation phase is to launch and carry out the projects planned during the Discovery phase. Project leads and teams will be responsible for taking forward the programme of work identified in their proposals.

Reflection – Year 3

The Reflection phase allows for the summative evaluation of the cycle, as well as its constituent projects and additional activities, considering not only the impact of the work, but the effectiveness of its delivery.

As projects conclude, the Reflection phase allows for the dissemination of project outputs throughout and beyond the sector. The aim is to ensure that outputs and outcomes are embedded within the mainstream activities of colleges and universities to become 'business as usual'.



“Assessment practice needs to transform to allow for further and more diverse methods of assessment (Advance HE, 2019) to be used across the sector **to better accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse student cohort, as well as the evolving skills development requirements of students** to successfully navigate post-educational opportunities via work or further study”.

- **Project Leads:** Edinburgh Napier University & City of Glasgow College
- **Partners:** Queen Margaret University, University of St Andrews, Stirling University, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Ayrshire College.

TAPPS Project Context

- Current policy and practice predominantly uses **traditional modes of assessment** which favour students with specific characteristics and demographics (QAA, 2005).
- With **increasing diversity of students** in tertiary education, e.g. background, experience and demographics, there is a need to ensure assessment practices support student learning, development and success – rather than hinder.
- We need to drive further **diversity in use of assessment formats and methods to better reflect the diversity of students help ensure fairness, inclusion and skills development** (Firth et al. 2023).

Project aims...



To capture existing effective assessment practice to:

- **develop an evidence base** and a portfolio of resources to encourage and enable policy change
- **increase awareness and sharing of best practice** from across the Scottish tertiary sector where innovative, inclusive and diverse methods of assessment that are student-centred and recognise growing learner diversity are effectively adopted
- **influence widespread and sustained changes in assessment practice** to benefit student experiences of assessment across the Scottish tertiary sector.

Deliverables for 2025/26

- Conduct and complete **literature review**
- Overview and **analysis of current assessment policy** across tertiary sector
- **Analysis and summary of institutional** assessment data
- Hosting a series of **sharing events across Scotland**, sharing examples/case studies of innovative, inclusive assessment practice

Project work to date

- Literature Review
 - Initial draft complete
 - Themes identified related to assessment for literature search:
 - Optionality, Choice/Flexibility, UDL, Inclusion, Equity, Innovation and Skills Development
- Policy Review
 - Assessment Policies gathered from main Awarding Bodies, Universities and Colleges across Scotland.
 - Initial analysis using seven themes emerging from literature review
- First Sharing Event – City of Glasgow College, L&T Conference 20th January
 - Case Study Presentations: City of Glasgow College, University of Glasgow, Edinburgh Napier University
 - Student Contributions: BA Television – Filming workshops; HND Journalism - Voxpops

TAPPS Sharing Event - City of Glasgow College

20th January 2026:

Workshop Themes: *Responding to diverse cohorts, optionality, assessment diversity*

Case Studies from:

- City of Glasgow College:
 - Skills-development, assessment optionality
 - UDL approach, skill-application, optionality
- University of Glasgow:
 - Relevant, 'authentic' alternative assessment
- Edinburgh Napier University:
 - Assessment change, 'authentic' and meaningful

Context - Queen Margaret University



<https://www.qmu.ac.uk/about-the-university/quality/quality-enhancement-and-external-context/strategy-documents/learning-teaching-and-assessment-strategy-2025-2030>



PILLAR 2

CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT DESIGN

Our QMU values underpin the strategic objectives for curriculum and assessment design, in particular our commitment to **intellectual curiosity, social justice, and valuing the individual**. These objectives foster learning, promote equity, and provide students with a means to recognise and communicate their ongoing development.

1. MEANINGFUL CURRICULUM DESIGN

- Focus curricula on the application of knowledge and skills to real world contexts (e.g. work experience, placements) and make curricula meaningful and authentic to learners
- Recognise and respond to mode (e.g. QMU Online) and context (e.g. TNE partnerships)
- Embed research-informed digital capabilities in curricula
- Make curricula inclusive, draw on principles of universal design for learning
- Embed equality, diversity, inclusion (EDI), decolonising and sustainability into curricula informed by sector initiatives e.g. compassionate pedagogies; trauma-informed practice; Sustainable Development Goals

2. PROGRAMME APPROACH TO LEARNING

- Design curricula and map assessments across a programme, guarding against fragmented modular silos
- Use sector (SCQF) and subject benchmarks to map content and skills progression across programme levels
- Articulate assessment scaffolding (e.g. formative assessment, links between module assessments) and feedback across a programme
- Ensure realistic and achievable content, taking into account level, subject, learner (and educator) effort, mode, context and time needed for chosen pedagogical approaches

3. FAIR, INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AND PROCESSES

- Design accessible and equitable assessments
- Ensure alignment between learning outcomes, teaching and assessment
- Communicate assessment expectations clearly
- Include scaffolding and formative feedback as an integral part of assessment
- Promote consistent and robust assessment processes

4. FEEDBACK

- Provide targeted, individualised, constructive feedback that includes suggestions on how to improve future work
- Include positive and motivational feedback
- Help learners manage and enact feedback
- Ensure feedback is timely and shared when it will have most benefit

LEAD Guide

Neurodiversity-affirming Teaching Practice

This toolkit aims to support QMU staff in fostering inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming teaching and learning environments.

How to use this guide

The introductory guide sets out the foundational principles and is one of six in the series. Start here, then dip into the other guides as needed. It has been developed by Lynne Bremner with LEAD in partnership with neurodivergent student changemakers and QMU staff, and is underpinned by:

- Neurodiversity-affirming and anti-ableist practices
- Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

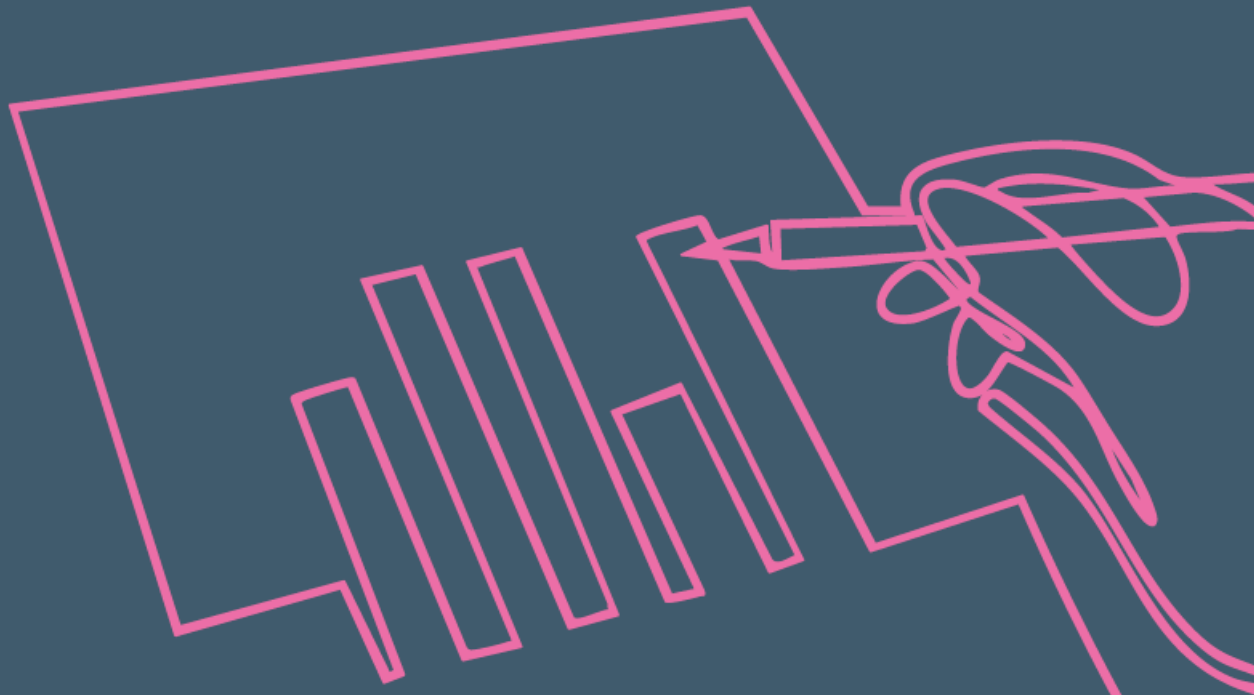
It focuses on the experiences of neurodivergent students, exploring how they may think and participate in ways that are not aligned with typical expectations, and how this variation can enrich our academic community.



Neurodiversity-affirming teaching

Assessment

LEAD guide



→ Experiences of neurodivergent QMU students

Emma: “Two different essays, but they were quite similar and what I had to do, but one I understood much easier because of the way that the task was set up, whereas the other one it took quite a lot of time with the study skills just to make me understand what I was doing, even though it was essentially the same”.

Greta (pseudonym): “I do like the discussion boards.....otherwise. I’ll be emailing the professors, but at least I can see what everyone else has asked and I don’t have to ask that again.”

Sian (pseudonym): “In second year, we were struggling with reports because that was a completely different format than essays. So [lecturer] helped us come up with a format for reports and then we followed that. ...if we needed help for some specific modules...he would talk with the lecturers and come up with a presentation or like a session.... And I think that really made a big difference.”

→ What you can do

Perceiving time, focusing and planning ahead

- **Break assessments into smaller, manageable tasks** and discuss these in class.
- **Provide a suggested timeline** for working on an assessment
- **Use anonymous discussion boards**, allowing students to clarify without fear of judgement.
- **Offer well-timed formative assessment.** This helps students get started, receive feedback, understand expectations and estimate time requirements
- **Show compassion** when students express anxiety about deadlines.

→ Good practice

Alice McGrath (Lecturer, Arts Management and Cultural Policy): Encouraged by Sambell *et al.*,’s (2012) guidance on demystifying assessment expectations, I combine several strategies to support learners: I provide written guidance that adheres to QMU regulations, including clear instructions, suggested word counts, and signposting to further resources. I also design formative activities, such as reflective writing exercises followed by group discussions, to give students practice and foster peer learning. In addition, I hold class-wide discussions at key points to clarify assessments and encourage questions, creating a supportive environment for quieter students. Finally, I offer individual support responsive to students’ needs, which may involve answering queries and signposting to additional resources or support services when necessary.

Context – City of Glasgow College

- Creative Industries commitment to embedding Universal Design for Learning -

- Curriculum Design
- Learning and Teaching
- Assessment



CoGC Case Study – Dug Liddle Curriculum Head Games Development and Esports



Student Profile

- 38% declared disability
- 39% Development Disorder, 29% Specific learning difficulty and 18.5% Mental health condition

Knowledge and Skill

- Purpose of the assessment – Learning what it takes to work in the Creative Industries sector, developing and incorporating soft skills/meta/attributes.
- Optionality to work - groups, individual, pairs

Traditional Assessment Method

- Report
- Power Point Presentation

Assessment Optionality

- Video
- Audio track
- Animation

Impact

- Higher levels of student engagement and motivation.
- Increase in student pass rates
- Application of skills and knowledge developed in a wider context related to 3D animation.
- Linking experience into a variety of industries and sectors in a future jobs context.
- Building communicative skills and affiliation with peers and wider sectors.

CoGC Case Study – Ross Semple, Lecturer Media, and Communications



Student Profile

- 31% declared disability
- 30% Development Disorder, 31.5% Specific learning difficulty and 25% Mental health condition

Knowledge and Skill

- Purpose of the assessment -
- Understanding the creative economy, media law
- Research

Traditional Assessment Method

- Report
- Extended written response

Assessment Optionality

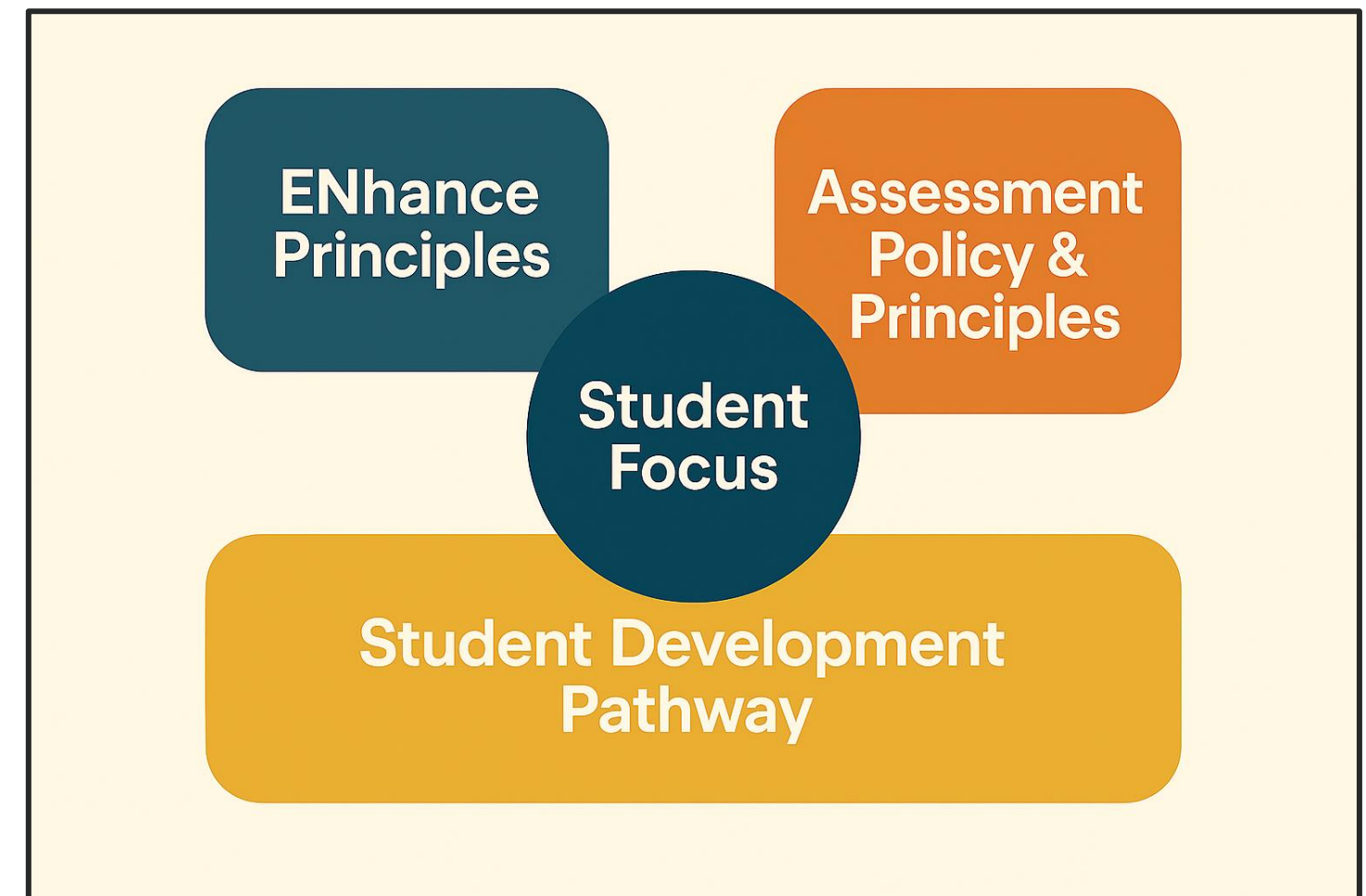
- Video
- Audio track/Podcast
- Report
- Verbal Presentation

Impact

- Higher levels of **student engagement** and motivation
- **Higher quality of work** produced and submitted
- Application of skills and knowledge developed that directly relates the multimedia sector
- **Increase in student confidence** in assessment production
- **Assessing the right skills** and knowledge through removal of barriers

Context: Edinburgh Napier University

- Refresh of ENhance Curriculum Framework
- New Assessment Policy & Principles:
 1. Assessments are inclusive
 2. Assessments are appropriate and valid
 3. Assessments and feedback are student-focused
 4. Assessments are relevant and authentic
 5. Assessments foster student development
 6. Assessments engage and develop global perspectives
- Inclusive Marking Practices



ENU Case Study

BSc Nursing (Singapore) – SCQF Level 9 Ethics & Care Module

- Students
 - International TNE students: Nurses in Singapore
 - Large cohort
- Previous Assessment
 - Written ethical dilemma (little reflection, difficulty identifying ethical dilemma, academic integrity)
 - Module Feedback:
 - Students enjoyed (formative) scenario discussion, empowered practice change, authentic
- Revised Assessment
 - Part1: Asynchronous online class test (20%)
 - Part 2: One-hour online group discussion of an ethical scenario (80%)
 - Students will be presented with a selection of ethical scenarios from week 3 – explore and draft decision map for each
 - Facilitator will use standardised prompt sheet, students marked individually based on criticality.

Provocation

The Scottish tertiary sector needs to revisit the purpose of assessment, to push against the rigidity – the sector has the power to reduce harm via compassionate assessment though compassion is framed as an exception rather than a core principle of assessment policy and design.

We suggest:

- An absence of compassion in assessment policy produces inequitable assessment practice which can cause harm to students in their learning experiences.

Discussion

Can we use assessment to provide assurance of learning whilst mitigating harm?



Can you support the TAPPS Project...

- If you would like to **contribute to one of our sharing events, promote our work** in your institution or share a case study, contact us at:
TAPPS@napier.ac.uk
- TAPPS Sharing Events:
 - Friday 20th March 2026 - University of St Andrews
 - *'Optionality in Assessment'*, (Online Keynote), Dr Miriam Firth, University of Manchester
 - Thursday 7th May 2026 - Ayrshire College, Kilmarnock
 - Wednesday 13th May 2026 - Queen Margaret University
 - Tuesday 9th June 2026, 10.30am-3pm - Edinburgh Napier University
- If you have practice to share, please complete the [short form](#) providing a summary of your case study

Register for the Sharing Event, Friday 20th March 2026 -
University of St Andrews

...

'Flexibility in Assessment through Optionality'
Keynote by Dr Miri Firth, University of Manchester

TAPPS Sharing Event - St. Andrews
20 March, 2026 - Registration
Form

