

# **Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC) Birmingham City University (BCU) – Accessible Assessment Principles**

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# Accessible Assessment Principles

## Enhanced Theory of Change



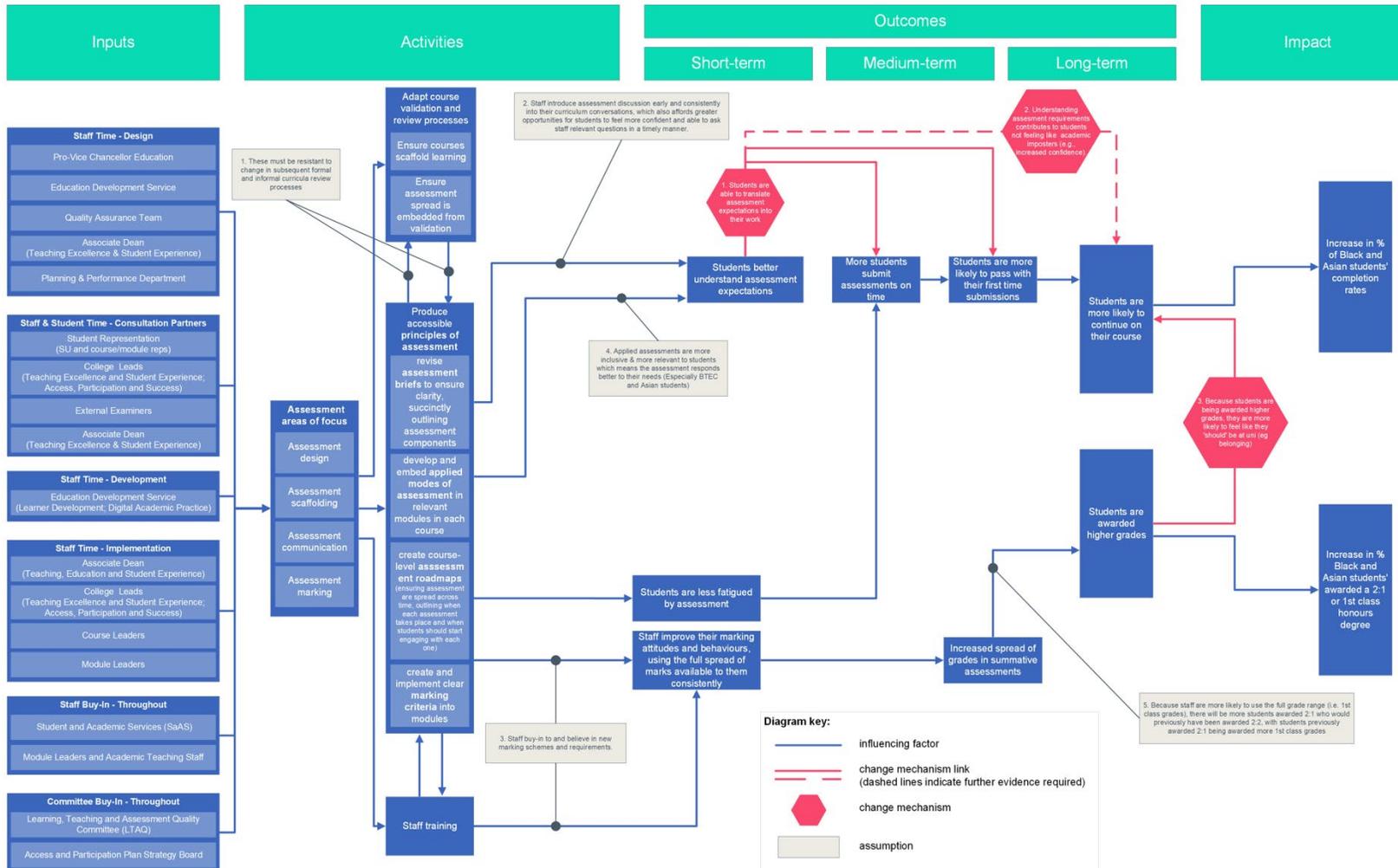
BIRMINGHAM CITY University

**TASO**



SCoLPP  
Staffordshire Centre of Learning and Pedagogic Practice

**AdvanceHE**



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**ENHANCED THEORY OF CHANGE UNDERPINNING NARRATIVE**

**VERSION**

**Version 3** – March 2024

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**NAME**

Accessible Assessment Principles

### WHY IS THE INTERVENTION BEING RUN?

The accessible assessment principles workstream is being undertaken because evidence from internal analyses on student assessment data suggest that particular student groups may be disadvantaged at various stages of the assessment process. The nature of this intervention was decided following the recognition of the following points:

- Intersectional analysis highlights the relationship with students achieving level 3 through vocational pathways (e.g., BTEC students).
- It is not always clear what the success criteria are for assessments and thus, some students need additional clarity on how success criteria applies to them.
- There are various channels students need to access to find information relevant to their assessment e.g. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Academic support services, library repository and advice and guidance etc. and thus students require guidance on how to navigate the support available.
- Module assessment briefs may be inconsistent in size and content. As a result of internal Course Monitoring and Enhancement processes, it has been identified that applied (related to employment) synoptic assessments are more relatable and build upon previous assessment mode confidence (e.g., vocational curricula), where appropriately applied.
- Students may benefit from additional support with time management e.g. breaking work down into manageable chunks throughout the semester.
- An appraisal conducted by the Education Development Service on internal assessment briefs, showed that some assessment briefs could be clearer and more concise.

### WHO IS THE INTERVENTION FOR?

The aim of introducing core assessment principles is to ensure that, regardless of background or subject discipline, students have assessments which are designed to be accessible and inclusive, there is clear communication and expectation for how to approach assessments, and that staff grade confidently and consistently using the whole grading scheme.

While we anticipate that this will be of benefit to all students, the aim is to particularly target student groups who face the largest gap in grades, namely Black and Asian students. Internal analyses have highlighted that these students are disproportionately likely to enter university with BTEC qualifications and are disproportionately likely to face inequalities in outcomes on certain courses (Business Management, Computing, Biomedical Sciences and Nursing as priority courses). This intervention stream has therefore been developed for students for whom 'traditional' university models of assessment may be less familiar (namely BTEC students), and therefore face additional 'hidden' barriers to success, and for staff on priority courses where there may be an increased need for guidance and support in developing and delivering accessible assessment practices.

## WHAT IS THE INTERVENTION?

This intervention is to revise and implement assessment policies. Briefly, this will include the following activities:

- Produce accessible principles of assessment.
- Support courses to create assessment roadmaps, to ensure that assessment elements are spread across the academic year, and to help students with their assessment planning, outlining when each assessment takes place and when students should start engaging with each assessment.
- Ensure that assessments are spread throughout the academic year, and that this is embedded from the point where courses are validated and continues through their lifecycle.
- Ensure that all modules have a clear assessment brief, succinctly outlining assessment components and what is expected from students.
- Embed authentic / applied modes of assessment. These are assessments that involve 'real world' tasks requiring students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in contexts that are meaningful to them.
- Implement marking criteria for all modules.
- Ensure courses scaffold learning (vertically and horizontally).

The intervention therefore includes a plan to design, develop, and implement a series of assessment guidelines for course teams which support in designing assessments and communicating assessments and expectations to students.

A core requirement for these resources is that they are written in an accessible format (easy to understand and brief; 1-2 pages, and/or a short video; 5-10 minutes), that they are prescriptive enough to provide consistency of quality, without stifling innovation, creativity or deviation for different subject discipline and assessment type requirements.

Resulting assessment briefs should be hosted in an accessible (and easy to locate) repository (alongside course and module specifications).

Assessment brief guidance will provide principles on designing, delivering, communicating, grading, and feeding back on assessments, under the principle that, at present, students are unclear of the expectations of assessments, and many may not be appropriately scaffolded or supported in their learning. The resources will therefore include:

- *Assessment design*: determining how many summative assessments should be included within a given module, alongside length and format – being mindful of staff and student workload resources.
- *Assessment scaffolding*: ensuring that within a given academic journey, students are scaffolded in their learning and through different types of assessment. This includes ensuring that assessments are spread throughout the academic year with opportunities to receive and implement feedback from previous assessments.
- *Assessment communication*: focusing on ensuring that students are clear on when and how they will be assessed within their course, year, and module, and how this learning will be scaffolded. For each module, this will include guidance:
  - a. for staff, on producing a plan for how and when assessment will be discussed.
  - b. for students, on how and when to approach an assessment.
- *Assessment marking*: This will include guidance for the course and module leads to ensure that work is being graded at the correct level (using the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ)), and ensure that markers are confident in using the full spectrum of the grading system (through to 1<sup>st</sup> class grades).

By requiring courses to adhere to principles through course validation, review, and monitoring, these assessment policies aim to make 'doing things right' unavoidable.

Once assessment principles have been produced, course validation panels will be trained to ensure they are confident in ensuring that principles are adhered to.

## WHO IS DELIVERING THE INTERVENTION?

Assessment guidelines will be designed and approved by the following teams and individuals:

- Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Education
- Associate Deans (Teaching, Education and Student Experience)
- Education Development Service
- Academic Services team
- Collaboration/consultation partners: Students Union/student representatives, College Leads (Teaching Excellence and Student Experience, Access, Participation and Success), Executive Deans, programme/faculty external examiners, student/staff panels of courses/modules
- Dependencies: Student and Academic Services, module leaders and academic teaching staff
- Committees: Learning, Teaching and Assessment Quality Committee (LTAQC) and Access and Participation Plan Strategy Board (APPSB)

Assessment guidelines will be developed by the following teams and individuals;

- Education Development Service
- Centre for Academic Success, Academic Development Department and Digital Academic Practice

Assessment guidelines will be implemented by the following teams and individuals:

- Associate Deans (Teaching, Education & Student Experience)
- Course Leaders
- College APP leads
- Module leaders and all staff involved in assessment marking.

### HOW IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

Guidelines will be developed remotely and through synchronous and asynchronous meetings with the core team, with consultation with key stakeholders as needed.

Once guidelines have been developed, these will be hosted on a centralised repository for easy access by academic teams, and Associate Deans will cascade to faculties through staff meetings and away days.

Module leaders will be supported in developing applied assessments, inclusive assessment briefs, and clear marking criteria through course-wide meetings and 1-to-1 support from the Educational Development Service.

### WHERE IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

Implementation of assessment guidelines will be evident through course improvement plans.

Resulting assessment briefs and marking criteria will be hosted on the VLE using principles from developed assessment guidelines for consistency within and between programmes.

### HOW MANY TIMES WILL THE INTERVENTION BE DELIVERED? OVER HOW LONG?

We are aiming to implement the assessment workstream iteratively between 2023–24 and 2027–28, with prioritised focus for courses with particularly high gaps in grades between Black and Asian students and their white student peers.

#### Marking criteria:

- Initial marking criteria guidance to be introduced for semester 2 (2023–24) and implemented for treatment modules identified through analysis of Course Module Evaluation data.
- All guidance to be produced for 2024–25 academic year, with intervention implementation prioritised for modules with relatively large numbers of students, the highest proportions of Black, Asian and ethnic minority students and on courses identified as having the largest ethnicity degree awarding gaps.

Assessment briefs for each module will be developed over a 2-4 week period (to write, approve and implement).

### WILL THE INTERVENTION BE TAILORED?

The assessment principles and processes will be consistent across all schools and faculties. However, these will be flexible enough to be interpreted variably to the unique needs of different subject disciplines, which may require different formats for teaching and assessment (e.g. to adhere to Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) requirements).

### HOW WILL IMPLEMENTATION BE OPTIMISED?

The key to successful implementation will be dedicated and consistent resource and project management provided for the assessment workstream's activities design, set-up, and implementation in the first two-three years. Through project management, checks will be introduced through the quality team to ensure that plans are being implemented – and being implemented consistently.

We will additionally build in milestone review points to enable monitoring and evaluation feedback at key points; these will be held through:

- Subject Performance Review
- APP Strategy Board
- Academic Board
- Learning and Teaching Quality Committee (LTAQC)

Communication and feedback loops will be built in for academics to feedback to evaluation team, so that this feedback can be used by quality to monitor success and enable iterative adaptation of implementation as required.

## WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS / STAKEHOLDERS?

### Design

- Pro Vice-Chancellor Education
- Associate Deans (Teaching, Education & Student Experience)
- Education Development Service
- Academic Services team
- Planning and Performance Team
- Collaboration/consultation partners: SU / student representatives, College Leads (Teaching, Excellence and Student Experience, APP), Deans, programme/faculty external examiners, student/staff panels of courses/modules
- Dependencies: Student and Academic Services (need to include for buy-in & information), module leaders and academic teaching staff
- Committees: Learning, Teaching and Assessment Quality Committee (LTAQC) and Access and Participation Plan Strategy Board (APPSB)

### Set-Up

- Associate Deans (Teaching, Education & Student Experience)
- Course Leaders
- College APP leads
- Module leaders and all staff involved in assessment marking.

### Delivery

- Associate Deans (Teaching, Education & Student Experience)
- Course Leaders

- College APP leads
- Module leaders and all staff involved in assessment marking.

External examiners to verify and feedback on marking practices in their report.

## CHANGE MECHANISMS

### Change mechanism 1

- There is a theorised relationship between students having a good understanding of the assessment expectations, and students' subsequent assessment submission (FeedbackFruits, 2021), pass rates, and continuation. This is hypothesised to occur as students then translate this understanding into their own assessments, to complete their assessments on time and meeting the criteria.

### Change mechanism 2

- There is a theorised relationship between students understanding assessment requirements and students continuing on their course. This relationship is hypothesised to occur as students are more likely to feel like they understand what is expected of them, and therefore have greater confidence in their own ability. Particularly in the case of underrepresented students (e.g. Black and Asian students, students from BTEC backgrounds), there may be a greater likelihood of increased imposter syndrome. In this eventuality, when students do not understand assessment expectations, such students may be more likely to attribute a lack of understanding to their own (in)ability, rather than the clarity of the assessment expectations per se, and therefore drop-out/withdraw from their course.

### Change mechanism 3

- There is a theorised relationship between students being awarded higher grades and students remaining on their course. This relationship is hypothesised to occur as students receiving higher grades will feel a greater sense of belongingness. If students feel like they belong, they are more likely to continue on their course (Pedler, Willis, & Nieuwoudt, 2022).

### References for all change mechanisms

1. FeedbackFruits. (2021). Feedback for learning: A comprehensive guide.  
[https://meeting.feedbackfruits.com/hubfs/FeedbackFruits\\_Resources/General/FeedbackFruits\\_ebooks/feedback\\_ebook/Ebook\\_Feedback\\_for\\_Learning.pdf](https://meeting.feedbackfruits.com/hubfs/FeedbackFruits_Resources/General/FeedbackFruits_ebooks/feedback_ebook/Ebook_Feedback_for_Learning.pdf)

2. Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E., (2022) A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46:3, 397-408, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844)

Change mechanisms were identified followed internal discussions between key stakeholders and based on a theorised relationship between the desired student outcomes and staff and students' experiences with assessments, for which there is a limited published evidence base. These hypotheses are therefore derived largely from professional experience and informal evidence.

## ASSUMPTIONS

### Assumption 1

- The principles of assessments that are designed into the curriculum must be resistant to changes implemented through subsequent formal and informal curricula review processes, otherwise the next time a course or module is revised, there is potential for this work to be overwritten.

### Assumption 2

- If staff introduce assessment discussions early and consistently into their curriculum conversations, this affords greater opportunities for students to feel more confident and able to ask staff relevant questions in a timely manner.

### Assumption 3

- Staff need to buy-in and believe in new marking schemes and requirements in order for them to engage meaningfully in training and to engage in creating and implementing clear assessments and assessment guidance for their students.

### Assumption 4

- Applied assessments are more inclusive and more relevant to students, which means the assessment responds better to their needs.

### Assumption 5

- Because staff are more likely to use the full grade range (i.e. 1st class grades), there will be more students awarded 2:1 who would previously have been awarded 2:2, with students previously awarded 2:1 being awarded more 1st class grades.

### References for all assumptions

There is limited evidence available. Assumptions were identified followed internal discussions between key stakeholders and based on factors that are theorised to impact the extent to which the intervention will be successful.

## WHAT IS THE EVALUATION AIM?

This evaluation aims to understand whether and to what extent the intervention to 'revise and implement assessment policies' within BCU's Access and Participation Plan for 2024–25 to 2027–28 supports Black and Asian students to continue their studies and leads to improved attainment. It aims to collect evidence related to both process and impact evaluation to assess whether the activities have been implemented as intended and whether they lead to the desired outcomes.

The evaluation aims to establish overall efficacy of the assessment guidelines intervention, to unpack specific change mechanisms or causal pathways or to establish efficacy, estimate efficiency and ensure value for money.

A key aim will be to disseminate the findings internally and externally.

## WHAT ARE THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS?

### Research Questions

#### Primary:

The main question addressed by this evaluation is whether updating and implementing a revised assessment policy will help to reduce the continuation and awarding gap for Black and Asian students by increasing students' knowledge and understanding of assessment expectations and reducing assessment fatigue. This is explored through the following questions:

- Are Black and Asian students awarded higher grades following the implementation of the intervention to revise and implement assessment policies?
- Are more Black and Asian students continuing on their course following the implementation of the intervention to revise and implement assessment policies?
- Do students feel more confident in their understanding of assessments?
- Do students feel less fatigued by the assessment schedule across the academic year?

#### Secondary:

The secondary purpose of this evaluation is to explore staff engagement in the process of developing and implementing assessment guidance and resources, and to explore the impact of staff training in this regard. This will be explored through the following questions:

- To what extent, and how well, have the following been updated as required and are there any differences in engagement and implementation across the institution?
  - assessment briefs
  - assessment roadmaps
  - marking criteria
- Is there a greater prevalence of 'applied' assessments?
- To what extent do staff feel more motivated and engaged in producing high quality assessment guidance for students?

- Is there a broader spread of assessment grades and average module grades following implementation?

**Exploratory:**

To understand whether – and how – developing and implementing a revised assessment policy supports students in their assessments, exploratory evaluations will also be undertaken to explore staff and students' perspectives about their experiences with the assessment resources, and exploring which elements are perceived as most helpful and which are least helpful. This will aid future development by prioritising aspects of assessment support that have the most impact on students and are most likely to be undertaken by staff.

### WHAT METHODOLOGY ARE YOU USING?

- A variation on the **regression discontinuity analysis** will be used to identify comparator modules.
- These will be similar modules not included in the pilot phase of the intervention, matched to treated modules through criteria such as student demographic (size and characteristics data), delivery and assessment methods and subject area, allowing comparison between the changes in outcomes for target and non-target 'nearest neighbour' modules and courses.
- The modules involved in the intervention at any given time are referred to as 'treatment modules', and matched control modules as 'non-treatment modules'.
- The **general linear model** will be used to control for confounding student demographic factors to predict outcome variables related to the primary research questions.
- **Realist evaluation approach** will explore what works for whom, when, in what circumstances and how.
- The implementation of evaluation methodology through an iterative and realistic evaluation approach will facilitate the accumulation of micro-evaluations.
- Evaluations to be ring-fenced by clearly defined and manageable scope within the capacity of the delivery and evaluation teams.

The lessons learned through this iterative process of continual improvement in evaluation will also support more agile identification of and response to what works. It will also inform the developing evaluation approach to other aspects of the Access and Participation Plan, as well as other interventions introduced across BCU, establishing a reliable and evidence-informed method of evaluating interventions, leading to the accumulation of a gradually growing body of evaluation knowledge and experience.

RISKS AND LIMITATIONS	
RISK AND LIMITATION	MITIGATION
<p><b>Resistance to Change:</b> Academic and administrative staff may resist the proposed changes due to comfort with the status quo, leading to poor implementation fidelity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement <b>pilot changes</b> in a controlled environment to demonstrate potential benefits and learn from any resistance encountered.</li> <li>• Involve staff through <b>stakeholder engagement</b> during the planning and decision-making process to foster ownership and reduce resistance.</li> <li>• Employ <b>change management</b> practices (or provide training to equip relevant colleagues with these skills) to help staff understand the benefits of the changes and equip them with skills to adapt.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resource Constraints:</b> There may be limited financial, human, or time resources to implement the intervention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a thorough <b>resource assessment</b> and create a strategic plan that prioritises activities based on available resources.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lack of Engagement:</b> There is a risk that students and staff may not engage with the intervention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively <b>involve students and staff</b> in appropriate stages of the assessment redesign to ensure the changes meet their needs and interests.</li> <li>• Utilise existing and establish new channels for ongoing <b>feedback opportunities</b> to understand and address areas where engagement, or expected impact is lacking.</li> <li>• <b>Run awareness campaigns</b> about the reasoning behind the intervention and its expected benefits.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that resources are <b>simple and easy</b> to engage with and the <b>default resource</b> on the VLE.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Inadequate Monitoring:</b> Without monitoring and evaluation frameworks, it may be difficult to track progress and measure the impact of the intervention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule regular check-in points and <b>reporting on progress</b> to maintain transparency and accountability.</li> <li>• Use of evaluation plan.</li> </ul>