

Evaluation plan: Birmingham City University (BCU) - Accessible Assessment Principles

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This is a comprehensive document that outlines the overall strategy and approach for evaluating an intervention. It is designed to align with and be linked to an Access and Participation Plan (APP) where relevant and appropriate and to give accountability to relevant staff and stakeholders within higher education providers (HEPs).

The evaluation plan should be developed collaboratively to ensure relevant perspectives are considered and will therefore involve input from practitioners, evaluators, and faculty staff, and should be signed off by a senior lead. It has been designed to inform the development of a research protocol - a detailed and specific document outlining a step-by-step guide to how each aspect of the evaluation will be carried out, including an analytical strategy. An example research protocol (template in [TASO's resources](#)) can be found [here](#) which details an evaluation of a curriculum reform intervention to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap. Depending on the capacity of individual HEPs, this evaluation plan may be shared internally or externally to support the development of the research protocol and subsequently to conduct the evaluation.

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Section 1: Evaluation objectives

This section should link to strategic planning such as APP development and/or strategic goals (for example, reducing the ethnicity degree awarding gap by X%). It is designed to ensure relevant staff and stakeholders are held accountable for their involvement in the evaluation and that findings from the evaluation are disseminated internally (and externally) as appropriate.

Evaluation objectives

Purpose

The accessible assessment principles intervention is designed to support students from a wider range of student groups, however, given the particular emphasis here on understanding whether this intervention supports marginalised ethnicity students, this evaluation will be tailored to this group. The purpose of this evaluation is therefore to determine whether (and to what extent) the intervention to develop accessible assessment principles (within the wider assessment workstream) supports Black and Asian students in continuation and in being awarded higher grades. It aims to collect evidence related to both implementation and process evaluation (i.e. have the activities been implemented as intended) and impact evaluation (i.e. did the activities lead to the desired outcomes). The goal of the intervention (described in detail in section 2) is to develop principles for accessible assessment and to support academic departments to implement these principles within their curricula.

Scope

As this is a pilot to a larger roll-out of the assessment workstream, the evaluation will be partly exploratory and partly confirmational, investigating whether and how revised assessment guidance supported students in assessment submission.

Within the scope of the current evaluation is also identifying whether the individual elements (e.g., sessions on data literacy, workshops, etc) generated the expected outcomes in terms of staff knowledge, confidence, and motivation.

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 most likely to be undertaken by staff.

Section 2: Intervention

This section describes the intervention being evaluated, to enable replication, and is taken from the associated Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC).

Intervention

Why was the intervention developed?

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.

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 1st 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 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.

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 long is / how many times will the intervention be delivered?

The plan is 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 the intervention 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.

Section 3: Evaluation design

This section provides details on the recommended evaluation of the intervention, including the design of both impact evaluation and implementation and process evaluation, sample, outcome measures, and data collection.

Evaluation design

This evaluation will combine aspects of impact and process evaluation as the implementation of the intervention is likely to vary across courses and modules, and this will likely impact the efficacy of the intervention on student outcomes.

Methodological approach

As the intervention is being delivered to priority modules in each faculty, there is a unique possibility to explore the experiences of students who are studying modules that have been targeted through the assessment workstream, and students studying modules that have not yet been revised. However, the target modules are those that have been identified as having particularly high gaps in student outcomes, and / or which have been identified as having greater challenges with providing accessible and consistent assessment practices for students. To address this concern a variation on a **regression discontinuity design (RDD)**¹ will be used to choose the modules with the closest awarding gaps not included in the pilot phase of the intervention, with the most similar student demographic (size and background). This allows a comparison between the changes in outcomes for target and non-target 'nearest neighbour' modules. There

¹ <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/regression-discontinuity>
<https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/introduction-to-quasi-experimental-designs/>

will be a suitable amount of data as this is an inclusive intervention and will be targeted primarily at modules with high proportions of Black and Asian students.

Using this methodology means that differences in outcome variables (e.g. assessment submissions, assessment grades, student continuation) can be compared between courses and modules with greater confidence that any differences are attributable to the implementation of accessible assessment principles and not because of any underlying differences between modules.

In this evaluation document, we refer to the modules involved in the intervention as 'target modules', and matched comparator courses as 'non-target modules'.

As the quantitative methods can only afford insight into student behaviours (submissions, grades, engagement, grade distribution), we will also use a **realist evaluation methodology**² to explore the hypothesised change mechanisms concerning student fatigue, staff attitudes, etc., and in particular whether – and how – the revised assessment policy works for Black and Asian students.

There is a vast array of observable and unobservable variables that may be affecting outcomes, leading to the persistence and growth of ethnicity degree awarding gaps. A realistic evaluation approach affords the opportunity to consider what works for whom, when, in what circumstances and how. While some variables may be controlled through the selected methods, it is recognised that reliable evidence of causality (Type 3) is unlikely to be achievable despite the adoption of quasi-experimental design principles. Nevertheless, a firm narrative (Type 1 evidence) will be achievable, with the aim of observing correlation (Type 2 evidence). This should establish a foundation upon which Type 3 evidence may be pursued in the future, following further development in the sector and BCU's internal intervention evaluation knowledge base and experience.

The implementation of this methodology through an iterative and realistic evaluation approach will facilitate the accumulation of micro-evaluations, starting with the pilot phase of the assessment interventions. Each of these will provide a time-bound evaluation opportunity, ring-fenced by a clearly defined and manageable scope, that is within the capacity of the delivery and evaluation teams. This will increase the likelihood of identifying and pinpointing any process, methodological and evaluation fallacies, as they arise.

² <https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/impact-evaluation-with-small-cohorts/getting-started-with-a-small-n-evaluation/realist-evaluation>

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 (APP), 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.

Data collection

Primary questions

To explore the primary research questions about the impact of the assessment principles, the following data will be collected and collated. These methods minimise the workload associated with this evaluation, as they either align with existing practices or require less time to design or minimal time to standardise:

- National Student Survey (NSS), internal survey, and bespoke surveys on assessment questions for students on target and non-target modules across current and previous academic years to explore confidence and satisfaction with assessment guidance. Questions about assessment fatigue, grade fairness, and assessment guidance clarity will be utilised.
- Feedback from course representatives on the ability to plan time using the assessment roadmap and feedback on clarity of assessment guidance, grade fairness, and assessment fatigue.
- Interviews with course leaders on target courses to explore perceptions of changes in the types of questions students are asking about assessment, and the timeliness of these questions.
- Administrative data on submissions, grades, continuation rates, and degree outcomes from target and non-target modules. Submission data will be taken from administrative records.

To answer the primary questions we propose using a quasi-experimental design using RDD to identify a comparator group, and then the general linear model (e.g. multiple linear regression, binary logistic regression) to control for student background characteristics, type of assessment, and previous grades and to explore assessment submission, first time passes, and grades achieved, using modules with similar population make-up, assessment type as comparators (identified through the modified RDD).

For qualitative data from interviews with course leaders and feedback from course representatives, we propose using rapid thematic analysis,³ which requires substantially less time in transcription and coding but affords rigor in interpretations.

Secondary Questions

To address the secondary questions on staff engagement in developing and implementing accessible assessment principles, we will collect and collate the following data:

- The evaluation team will use SharePoint (for Course documents, including roadmaps) and Moodle pages (for student-facing assessment guidance) to conduct an audit of the number of modules with and without updated module briefs by course / module / assessment type to check for differences, and the number of applied assessments that have been incorporated into modules (including assessment *type* as well as assessment *question* to check for applied nature of the assessment). These data will be used to determine whether the implementation of the assessment roadmap resulted in a greater spread of assessment across a given student's academic year.
- The team will also analyse the feedback provided by the assessment verification panel through a content analysis of the verification panel dedicated template, which will include specific sections around how clear and succinct the assessment briefs of each module are.
- To explore the extent to which the revised processes effect staff confidence in using the revised assessment framework, we will conduct a short survey pre-staff training, post-staff training, and post-implementation into module leaders' own assessment guidance.

Exploratory Question

To understand what aspects of developing and implementing a revised assessment policy most supports students in their assessments, staff and students' perspectives will be captured using:

- Feedback from course representatives
- Interviews with academic staff involved in the intervention.

Sample Selection

³ <https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13012-021-01111-5>

The whole cohort of students from the target modules and the same number of 'nearest neighbour' modules will be included for the regression discontinuity analysis. As this part of the evaluation will use administrative data, sample size is guaranteed.

For the realist evaluation, participants will be recruited from a sample of:

- Academic developers who worked with academics to develop and implement their marking and assessment strategies.
- Academics involved in developing and implementing marking and assessment strategies.
- Students who were part of a course where revised marking and assessment guidance had been conducted.

Outcome measures and data collection

Table 1 summarises the outcome measures, data sources and points of collection for each of the research questions.

- **Primary** – those pertaining to the impact of the assessment principles.
- **Secondary** – those that measure staff engagement in developing and implementing accessible assessment principles.
- **Exploratory** – explore which aspects of developing and implementing a revised assessment policy were the most supportive of supporting students in their assessments.

Table 1. Research questions addressed in the evaluation and corresponding outcomes and data sources

Type of Research question	Research question	Outcome measures / data sources	Sample	Point of collection
Primary	Are Black and Asian students awarded higher grades following the implementation of the intervention to revise and implement assessment policies?	Administrative data	Students on target and non-target modules	Ongoing
Primary	Are more Black and Asian students continuing on their course following the implementation of the intervention to revise and implement assessment policies?	Administrative data	Students on target and non-target modules	Ongoing
Primary	Do students feel more confident in their understanding of assessments?	Course representatives; interviews	Students on target modules; academic staff	Post-intervention
Primary	Do students feel less fatigued by the assessment schedule across the academic year?	Survey	Students on target modules	Post-intervention
Secondary	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? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ assessment briefs ○ assessment roadmaps ○ marking criteria 	Audit	Academic developers; assessment verification panel	Post-intervention

Type of Research question	Research question	Outcome measures / data sources	Sample	Point of collection
Secondary	Is there a greater prevalence of 'applied' assessments?	Audit; assessment verification panel	Academic developers; assessment verification panel	Post-intervention
Secondary	To what extent do staff feel more motivated and engaged in producing high quality assessment guidance for students?	Survey	Academic staff	Post-intervention
Secondary	Is there a broader spread of assessment grades and average module grades following implementation?	Administrative data	Students on target and non-target modules	Post-intervention
Exploratory	What impacts most on students	Course representative feedback; staff interviews	Course representatives from target modules; Academic staff	Post-intervention

Section 4: Project management

This section is designed to ensure relevant staff and stakeholders are held accountable for their involvement in the evaluation and that findings from the evaluation are disseminated internally (and externally) as appropriate. It should be used internally for HEPs to address issues such as buy-in and accountability and allows HEPs to provide a breakdown on the budget and resources needed to secure sign-off from senior stakeholders.

Project management of the evaluation

Evaluation stakeholders

List the key stakeholders the evaluation is designed for and how they will use the findings

Audience <i>(Who are the audiences for the information from the evaluation? e.g., students, teachers, management, staff, partners, etc.)</i>	How evaluation findings will be used <i>(How can they apply new knowledge from the evaluation study?)</i>
Project team	To monitor progress (making sure they're doing the right things for students) and identify whether any alterations are required.
Management	To inform return on investment (ROI) conversations. Having positive evaluation findings will provide assurance that things are working well and are worth additional investment. Conversely, knowing that the intended outcomes are not being observed enables management to review the intervention.
Implementation/delivery staff	Staff understanding of what works and why. Based on this informed understanding, staff's practice is evidence-informed, which helps deliver overall and sustainable culture change in relation to assessment. Evaluation findings could also help secure further buy-in from implementation/delivery staff.
Current students	It is a regulatory requirement of the OfS to communicate APP-related findings to students.

	There is also an aim to increase student communications, by being transparent about institutional interventions and how they affect the student body.
Prospective students	Evaluation signals an institution that values inclusive assessment practices that assists students to thrive could boost institutional reputation and applications. Students would want to know that they are going to an inclusive institution that rewards students for their efforts. Evaluation findings could also assist with narratives showing how well students are performing in and experiencing courses.
The HE sector	It is important that findings related to initiatives enacted to address persistent educational inequities like the ethnicity degree awarding gaps are disseminated to the entire sector to achieve equality of opportunity. It is equally important to disseminate findings about initiatives that worked as well as did not work. Dissemination through conference presentations, blogs and journal papers.

Reporting requirements

Date	Report type	Writer/s	Audience
Semester 1 2024–25	Implementation Report: Assessment Intervention	Planning and Performance Department	Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) Learning, Teaching & Assessment Quality Committee Academic Board Access and Participation Strategy Board
Semester 2 2024–25	Interim Report: Assessment Intervention (Post-Assessment Period 1)	Planning and Performance Department	Associate Deans – Teaching, Education & Student Experience Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) Director of Strategic Academic Engagement Access and Participation Strategy Board
July 2025	Interim Report (Post-Assessment Period 1 & Assessment Period 2))	Policy and Strategy	Associate Deans – Teaching, Education & Student Experience Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) Conference dissemination of findings and continued actions.

September 2025	Final Report: Intervention in wider APP context (End of Year)	Planning and Performance Department	Access and Participation Strategy Board Learning, Teaching & Assessment Quality Committee Academic Board Board of Governors Conference and journal outcomes disseminated
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Budget and staff resources

Specify the funding and resource capacity for the evaluation. Include materials, travel, external evaluators etc.

Budget for the evaluation study (What is the budget allocated to the evaluation?)		
Internal staff resources (List the staff resources in the Evaluation Team) Position	Internal staff resources (List the staff resources in the Evaluation Team) Position	Internal staff resources (List the staff resources in the Evaluation Team) Position
Head of Policy and Strategy (Planning), BCU	Head of Policy and Strategy (Planning), BCU	Head of Policy and Strategy (Planning), BCU
Data Analyst (Evaluation)	Data Analyst (Evaluation)	Data Analyst (Evaluation)
Data Analyst (Evaluation)	Data Analyst (Evaluation)	Data Analyst (Evaluation)

Time schedule

This section supports accountability and formulating a plan. What are the key timelines, key activities and milestones for the evaluation?

Key milestones	Due date
Evaluation team appointed	September 2023
Programme Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC) generated	7 th December 2023

Draft evaluation plan presented to team for feedback	15 th December 2023
Evaluation plan approved	17 th December 2023
Develop trial/research protocol	22 nd December 2023
Consultation with Head of Department (or appropriate staff member) regarding support and approval process for the evaluation	22 nd December 2023
Data gathering and analysis complete	Post-Assessment Periods during Semester 1 2024-25
Draft evaluation report	May 2025
Quality assurance	Ready for Academic Year 2025–26
Final evaluation report approved	Post-Academic Year 2025–26 - Spring 2027