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INTEGRATING ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT OPTIONS FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

M. Green, K. Ward

University of Kent (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract

Ensuring an assessment method is appropriate for a diverse student demographic can be challenging, particularly when considering activities that are publicly assessed and may prove difficult for students with social anxiety, specific learning difficulties, and other short or long-term disabilities. Furthermore, the health and wellbeing of university students has been of growing concern in recent years; with the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent return to face-to-face study, and now the cost-of-living crisis in the United Kingdom further compounding students' mental and emotional health.

This paper describes the proactive workflows that have been adopted in developing and integrating alternative assessment options for students. In particular, it discusses the methodology that has been adopted within higher education courses to provision students with defined options of alternative assessment where the original assessment may exacerbate a pre-existing medical condition, whilst ensuring learning outcomes are maintained.

Keywords: assessment, student support, inclusive learning, higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The assessment of student learning stands as a fundamental feature of higher education, demonstrating the level of success within a particular field of study. Yet, this seemingly straightforward pursuit of evaluating student knowledge can become challenging; especially when considering a diverse student demographic and the need to design assessments that provide equitable opportunities for all learners. Typically, all students are expected to complete the same assessment within a set timeframe. Whilst reasonable adjustments, such as additional time, are often made for individuals were extenuating circumstances warrant, this isn't always sufficient. Given the increasing proportion of students declaring poor mental health and wellbeing [1 - 6], together with severe cases reported at other universities [7, 8], it is essential to ensure all students have access to appropriate support and assessment which is suitably recorded.

1.1 Alternative assessment

Alternative assessment is often considered to be any assessment which goes beyond the more traditional and conventional forms for assessing knowledge, involving elements such as critical reflection and real-world tasks [9, 10]. In the context of this body of work, alternative assessment is the provision of an assessment to a student which varies from the advertised assessment which the majority of the cohort are undertaking.

Through allowing any student who requires support to request and undertake an alternative assessment, which still demonstrates the required learning outcomes, it is possible to support students where a pre-existing health condition or other significant circumstance prevents them from completing the advertised assessment. Furthermore, taking a pro-active approach to offering such alternatives would seek to find early resolution for mitigating circumstances, fostering a more supportive and inclusive student environment.

Whilst informal mechanisms for such provision exist, for example through students presenting 1-to-1 where a known extenuating circumstance exists, this body of work sought to strengthen the process, creating and embedding a consistent approach across assessments whilst ensuring the provision was available and pro-actively offered to any student who may require it.

2 DEVELOPING THE PROCESS

In the late summer of 2022, a proposal for the pro-active implementation of alternative assessment options across all taught courses within the Division of Computing, Engineering and Mathematical

Sciences at the University of Kent was formed. It was important that any proposal did not rely on students having to request an alternative, or for any Inclusive Learning Plan (ILP) to explicitly include provision concerning assessment flexibility. Whilst many students are able to manage longstanding health conditions without needing to access the provision in their ILP, some students may have short- or long-term conditions without any ILP provision as they are yet to set this up. Therefore, it was critical to ensure this option would be readily available to *any* student who may require support due to extenuating circumstances.

Initially, it was planned to identify all 'live' event assessments, including presentations, group work, role play, and seminar participation, which were felt could potentially be the most problematic for students with health difficulties, such as anxiety, to have to deliver. In addition, these assessment types are often not eligible for extensions or late submission, leaving the only option available to students as an end of year mitigation request, whereby the outcome of the application is not confirmed until the Summer Exam Boards. An early outcome in the form of an alternative, where feasible, would avoid students having to wait for the rest of the academic year for a resolution for the non-submission of work, which could further exacerbate a health condition or crisis.

Once all 'live' assessments were identified, it was intended to request at least one alternative for each type of assessment, with the academic colleagues designing alternatives being given guidance and exemplars to ensure a consistent approach across modules. This would also allow the Division's Student Support Team, who would be processing requests for an alternative, to be able to quickly offer a resolution without the need to liaise with academic colleagues during busy teaching periods. Importantly, the Student Support Team would be able to offer an alternative assessment option to students via three routes:

1 If a student requested this during a support meeting;

2 Via provision in an ILP; and

3 To students who may not have requested an alternative, but where staff are aware of individual circumstances through other means, i.e. extension requests or reported absences where such circumstances suggest a student may struggle to complete a live assessment and so an alternative could be pro-activity offered.

Due to its science-based disciplines, the Division has a very high number of assessments throughout the academic year (in excess of 750 assessments in 2022-23) with at least 66 identified as potentially needing alternative provision. Consequently, discussions were held with Directors of Studies (DoS) to ensure they could feed in as key stakeholders for their respective disciplines. It was concluded that it was not feasible to initiate the proposed alternative assessment plan with all 'live' assessments due to the workload required given the teaching term had just got underway, and for some assessments an alternative may simply never be requested. Therefore, it was decided to introduce the alternative assessment options just for presentations, as these accounted for around half of all those identified. In addition, it was felt that presentations could present the most difficulty for students with a range of wellbeing concerns. As a result, to ensure a consistent approach three alternatives to a presentation were defined which still maintained the appropriate professional practice and transferrable skills development:

1 Presenting to the lecturer 1-to-1 in-person;

2 Presenting to the lecturer 1-to-1 online; and

3 Delivery by pre-recorded video with Q&A to be facilitated by the lecturer either via online call or email following submission.

The remaining 'live' assessments were then to be handled on an ad-hoc basis through consultation with relevant academic colleagues in consultation with the Division's Assessment and Feedback lead to provide guidance as required. In all cases the student would be able to select the alternative they felt most comfortable with from those provided. The final process was subsequently approved by DoS, the Divisional Director of Education and Student Experience, and disseminated to academic colleagues with the assurance that learning outcomes would not be compromised.

3 DELIVERY AND IMPLEMENTATON

The agreed approach to alternative assessment options, illustrated in Figure 1, was implemented in the 2022-23 academic year. Delivery began with the Student Support Manager contacting all students within

the Division with an ILP where assessment flexibility or support with presentations was included (forty-four in total at the time). These students were asked to complete a short online Microsoft Form about presentation assessments. From this it was possible to ascertain if students had presentation assessments, if they had any concerns, if they would like to complete an alternative, or if they were unsure and wanted to discuss further with a member of the Student Support Team. Seventeen responses for alternatives were received, suggesting that the alternative options are only being used by those where a disability or longstanding health condition may cause impact, and not by a majority as a preference or because it is seen as an easier option.

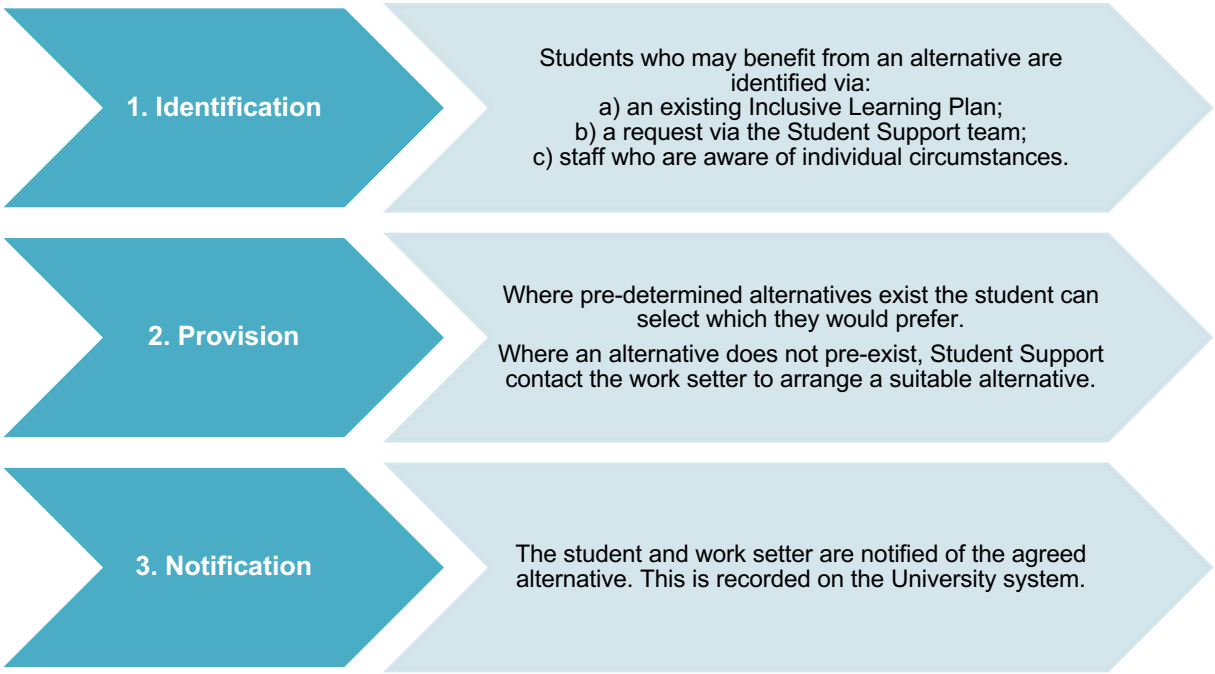


Figure 1. The process of facilitating an alternative assessment.

Furthermore, as it was desired to ensure that alternative assessment options were pro-activity offered to all students without the barrier of requiring an ILP, as some may be able to manage their health condition or not require assistance, information on the process was added to the Division's support pages on the students' Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle. In addition, the option for an alternative assessment is pro-actively discussed with students during support meetings where it is felt they would benefit from such an intervention but are not yet aware of it. This resulted in a further sixteen applications for an alternative assessment regarding presentations.

Whilst the focus was presentations, it is important to recognise that a handful of requests for an alternative assessment to other assessment types were also received and actioned positively. An example of such a request could be an alternative required to an extensive written assessment due to dexterity limitations. Here a video essay, or combination of short report and video, permits the student to demonstrate their learning and communication skills but via a method better suited to their circumstances.

It is acknowledged that this currently represents a small number of students across the Division (less than 2% of all those registered on taught courses), however, the alternative assessment options approach was introduced successfully mid-way through Autumn term when some assessments will have already taken place. Moreover, discussions with students have demonstrated that without this intervention many would not have been able to submit their assessment and would have received zero marks, adding further distress to their circumstances. This could then be exacerbated further with the wait for an outcome to an end of year mitigation request causing a downward spiral of impact. Rather, these students were able to attempt their assessments along with their peers, creating a sense of inclusivity and supported learning, which enhances the learning environment for all. Particularly, one student commented "the alternative assessment gave me the agency to progress and improve, and meant that if I made mistakes, I didn't have to feel like they were massive setbacks that were seen by everyone, which would make my anxiety even worse". Interestingly, student reflections also revealed that "being able to give the presentation only to examiners helped me build confidence in a way nothing

else would [. . .] just last week I was able to present in front of a similar sized class with only nerves, instead of the huge stress and anxiety I felt before". This demonstrates that the provision of an alternative, whilst enabling students to undertake assessment alongside their peers, does also have the potential to foster longer lasting positive impact and personal development.

Alongside the benefits to students, it is important to consider the impact on academic and professional services staff in provisioning such an intervention. Beyond the initial development, the delivery and implementation of alternative assessment options is not felt to increase workloads. Specifically, the Student Support Team are able to provide greater support through being able to offer such an option at the earliest opportunity. A list of pre-approved options reduces the need to liaise with academic colleagues on each request, further saving time for staff and providing faster response times for students. Additionally, this will reduce the volume of end of year mitigation applications for these assessments, further streamlining their services. From an academic perspective, the pre-defined options ensure academic standards are met without the need for further consultation, whilst requests for alternatives for other assignments is not unduly onerous. Furthermore, where additional alternatives are defined these can be stored for re-use, rather than needing to be reworked for each request. Importantly, there is a shared understanding and desire to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students which enables the work to be implemented effectively.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Student mental and physical wellbeing has been of growing concern in recent years, with the pressure to perform well against a backdrop of high tuition fees, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently the United Kingdom's cost-of-living crisis compounding this further [3]. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the curriculum design is as inclusive as possible, recognising that a one-size fits all approach to assessment is not always possible.

Following the success of this initiative in 22-23, the process is being enhanced through the introduction of technology to streamline the request process for students, ensuring it is fully accessible and supportive. An online form is now in place for all students to use to indicate if they may need to discuss alternative assessments, rather than needing to initially book an appointment to discuss this. In this way, adjustments may be made quickly, where necessary, and follow up support appointments can be made thereafter. The online form also streamlines communication for students who often find emails cumbersome, but it also enables efficient administration for the Student Support Team who can then use Power Automate flows to send automated emails of support when certain key words or options are selected within the form. This means timely support, advice, and guidance, can be given to more students whilst also managing administrative demands.

Further developments will include reviewing other 'live' assessment activities to see if a similar exercise of a pre-approved list of adjustments can be collated and offered to students who may require support. This is a larger body of work as other assessments may become module or course specific, however, the benefits, as evidenced from the work with presentations, is clear.

Taking a pro-active approach to facilitating alternative assessment options demonstrates one way in which students with a range of health concerns can be supported in their university assessments, enabling them to perform to the best of their abilities. Such an intervention can also positively support Mental Health Charters, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity values. Moreover, whilst the uptake for alternatives was small, this work demonstrates the need for such an intervention and how it can be implemented effectively and collaboratively, both for pre-defined and ad-hoc alternative provision.

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