

Accessible assessment:

A strategic imperative for school and college leaders

Accessible assessment has become a core component of inclusive, effective school leadership. As students' needs diversify, leaders must ensure every student can meaningfully demonstrate their understanding – without unnecessary barriers getting in the way.

Accessibility can mean different things to different people, from access arrangements to the language and contexts used in assessments. Yet for many, its purpose and impact can still be misunderstood. Some assume it means lowering demand. Others see it as something relevant only to SEND or EAL students. In reality, accessible assessment strengthens validity, equity and trust – and has implications far beyond the exam hall.

What accessibility really means

Ofqual [defines accessibility](#) as ensuring students can demonstrate their knowledge and skills without unfair barriers to engagement.

These unfair barriers appear when assessments inadvertently measure skills they were not designed to assess, such as:

- reading fluency in a maths question
- cultural familiarity in a humanities task
- unnecessary inference skills in a science item
- cognitive load created by unclear diagrams or structure.

Each of these gets in the way of the intended construct – what the assessment is meant to measure. Removing these barriers does not reduce the intended subject demand; it removes difficulty that was never meant to be assessed.

Accessibility does not lower standards

A persistent myth is that clearer language or more inclusive contexts make exams “easier.” But accessibility changes how students reach the construct – not the construct itself.

- simplifying language keeps the subject demand the same
- removing distracting context doesn't reduce challenge
- clarifying structure doesn't alter knowledge requirements.

By strengthening accessibility, we strengthen fairness and confidence while preserving rigour.



Benefits for SEND students – and everyone else

Features that disadvantage SEND students often disadvantage other students, too. Complexity in language, context or structure doesn't discriminate; it raises cognitive load. Accessibility, therefore, enhances fairness and equity for:

- SEND students by enabling more students to access standard assessments, while recognising that some will still require access arrangements or modified papers.
- Students using modified papers by increasing familiarity and reducing differences between standard and modified versions where possible.
- Students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) through clearer, more accessible language.
- Students with weaker literacy skills by reducing unnecessary reading barriers.
- Students encountering unfamiliar or complex contexts by minimising construct-irrelevant barriers.
- High-attaining students by improving clarity and allowing them to focus more quickly on the intended challenge.
- All students by ensuring assessment outcomes more accurately reflect the knowledge, skills and understanding being assessed.

Accessibility is not an accommodation – it's a design principle that benefits all.

Why this matters for school and college leaders

Accessible assessment has implications for:

Curriculum implementation

Clearer assessments reflect intended teaching and learning more accurately.

Progress and attainment

When barriers are removed, results more accurately reflect real ability.

SEND strategy

Assessment accessibility aligns with high-quality adaptive teaching.

Equity and inclusion culture

Schools build trust with students and their parents/carers when assessments are perceived as fair.

Teacher confidence

Clearer assessments reduce ambiguity, enabling more focused preparation and feedback.

Cambridge OCR's approach to accessible assessment: helping every student demonstrate what they know

Our approach draws on extensive research and specialist expertise:

- **Clear and accessible assessment**

Helping students understand what is being asked through clear language, intuitive design and removed complexity.

- **Fairer opportunities for every student**

Supporting diverse student needs through accessible assessment design and inclusive approaches.

- **Guidance that builds confidence**

Providing teachers with the support, resources and expertise they need to prepare students effectively.

At Cambridge OCR, accessibility is not a final check; it is embedded from concept and production throughout the lifetime of our qualifications and assessments. It is an ongoing process, and we continually review and improve our assessments to make them more accessible for all students.

More information

Discover our approach to [accessible assessments](#).