Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Universal Design for Assessments

What are the elements of "universally designed assessments"?

NCEO developed seven elements of universally designed assessments based on a review of the literature on universal design, assessment, and instructional design. Test developers have used many of these elements to increase assessment validity and accessibility. The seven elements are:

- Inclusive assessment population
- Precisely defined constructs
- Accessible, non-biased items
- Amenable to accommodations
- Simple, clear, and intuitive instructions and procedures
- Maximum readability and comprehensibility
- Maximum legibility

What specific steps are involved in the universal design of assessments?

To develop assessments that conform to the elements of universal design, test developers can integrate a list of recommended practices at each stage of test development. Test developers should remember that although the list does not specifically reference English learners with disabilities (ELs with disabilities), these students should be included and their needs considered at every stage of the assessment development and implementation processes.

Is there one best way to universally design an assessment so that it is equally accessible for all students?

The goal of a universally designed assessment is to create a test that includes the maximum number of students with a variety of learning-related characteristics, but it does not fix all accessibility problems for a test. Changes to an assessment item can make it more accessible for some students and less accessible for others. For example, removing nonessential illustrations may make items less distracting for some students, but it may also remove context clues that can be useful for other students. Finding an appropriate balance is important. Decisions must be made with a solid understanding of the range of students participating in the test and the construct being measured.
Will universal design result in reducing or eliminating the use of accommodations during assessments?

Universally designed assessments will not eliminate the need for all accommodations. However, they may reduce the need for them. They can also increase the utility of accommodations that can be used without threat to the validity and comparability of the scores. Some students will still need accommodations even when universal design principles are applied to an assessment. For example, students who are easily distracted by the presence of other students may still need to be tested individually. Also, if some English learners (ELs) or ELs with disabilities need the support of a dictionary or word list on a science test, a universally designed assessment would plan for appropriate vocabulary support in the design of the test. Finally, students who cannot read print in a size less than 18 point, or who must use braille, will still need a large print or braille test.

Are universally designed assessments easier, resulting in artificially higher scores?

Developing assessments using universal design principles may result in more valid scores. Valid test results reflect actual student knowledge and skills, and not extraneous factors. Universal design principles include careful thought about the construct, level of difficulty, and nature of the measurement problem. Design decisions do not change features necessary to measuring the intended content or language skills, nor the range of content and skills tested.

For example, if an item on a fourth grade math test is intended to assess a student's knowledge of how to find the perimeter of a rectangle, that focus would not change in a universally designed item. However, the universal design process could address issues such as complex language and vocabulary in the item, or the context of a word problem. For example, a context such as measuring the perimeter of a soccer field might be familiar to more students than measuring the perimeter of the living room to purchase floor boards. Universal design is intended to address the accessibility of items, along with the validity of inferences about student performance, not the standard that is assessed.

Are all technology based assessments universally designed?

No. There has been tremendous progress in accessibility of test items over the past decade. Computer based platforms have dramatically reduced the need for many resource-intensive accommodations, including, for example, humans for read aloud, large print tests, and scribes. At the same time, new technologies have created opportunities for students to set their own preferences for reading and engaging with items. These options include determining the font size or print color, to mention just a few. Still, if an item is inaccessible, biased, or does not align with its intended construct, no amount of technology can help.
How can English language proficiency (ELP) assessments be universally designed?

It is important to implement universal design procedures from the very beginning of planning and designing both content assessments and English language proficiency (ELP) assessments. Doing so ensures that item formats do not act as barriers to students demonstrating knowledge and skills that they may have. For example, asking students to label or describe pictures on a reading test is a common vocabulary item format on ELP assessments. However, English learners (ELs) with visual impairments and ELs who are blind will have difficulty completing these items even though they may know the vocabulary. A thoughtful application of universal design principles would allow for multiple types of item formats or multiple avenues for students to demonstrate vocabulary knowledge. Test developers must keep in mind the English proficiency constructs that are important to assess as they make universal design decisions.

If some students' disabilities prevent them from performing a skill that is required by an ELP assessment, there are several issues that should be addressed. Decision makers must be willing to recognize that a skill may have to be accommodated for some students. For example, taking information in from sign language may need to be considered listening for those who cannot hear. One difficulty in making these decisions is to determine how far along a continuum a skill can be considered the same when a disability is considered. For example, can responding by means of sign language be considered "spoken language" for those students who have been deaf since birth? Policy decisions similar to this example require much discussion among personnel responsible for assessment, curriculum, special education, and English as a second language or bilingual education. For more on this issue please see “Questions to Ask to Determine How to Move Closer to Universally Designed Assessments From the Very Beginning, by Addressing the Standards First and Moving on From There.”