Assuring Academic Standards in the Age of AI

Draft sector principles for assessment validity and standards

Briefing for QAA's Executive Leaders Network | Draft version 2.4 | October 2026

> **Draft for discussion**
>
> These principles are a working draft developed with QAA's Sector Advisory Group, which includes student members. They are shared to support early discussion within your institution ahead of the agreed principles and Assessment Definitions being published.

About these principles

The following principles are a second draft, following initial feedback from Sector Advisory Group members. The original draft was, in part, based on the findings of QAA's State of the Nation report, The Perfect Storm: AI, assessment and a sector under pressure (July 2026), and broader sector research. Key terms used in these principles will be defined in an accompanying list of Assessment Definitions.

> **QAA's overarching principle for this work**
>
> ### QAA assures through principles, not prescription.
>
> For providers subject to QAA Review, review methods will test how providers evidence valid, fair and inclusive assessment design, rather than mandating a single model.

The principles expand on, and are rooted in, UK Quality Code Principle 11 and its Key Practices, notably:

> ***Key Practice f:*** *Providers design assessments that test appropriate learning outcomes and are fair, reliable, accessible, authentic and inclusive. Where applicable, and sustainable, students are offered different options for undertaking assessments to promote accessibility and inclusion.*

The principles at a glance

There are eight principles for assuring standards and assessment validity, the first three of which are priority principles, although all are important. A further three enhancement principles support the wider development of AI capability and balanced assessment.

No.	Principle	Type
1	Assessment provides valid evidence of learning at individual assessment and programme level	Priority
2	Assessment is inclusive and accessible by design	Priority
3	Summative assessment includes proportionate points of assured demonstration across the programme	Priority
4	Assessment drives learning, building foundational knowledge, skills and competencies over time, valuing process alongside outcome	Assuring standards
5	All assessments have a clear and justifiable design rationale for their position on AI use	Assuring standards
6	Prohibition and detection are not reliable or effective approaches	Assuring standards
7	Assessment security is supported by realistic, meaningful and transparent academic regulations and accessible policy and regulation, not by academic integrity alone	Assuring standards
8	Staff are supported in valid assessment design through ongoing professional development	Assuring standards
E1	AI literacy/capability is a graduate attribute	Enhancement
E2	Staff are supported to develop AI capability	Enhancement
E3	Assessment is designed across the programme to ensure that summative assessment is proportionate and balanced with formative assessment	Enhancement

Principles for assuring standards and assessment validity

The following principles focus on assuring standards through effective assessment design.

PRIORITY PRINCIPLE

1 Assessment provides valid evidence of learning at individual assessment and programme level

Assessment is designed to be valid for the learning outcomes it assesses and, collectively, a programme's assessment provides coherent and sufficient evidence that the programme outcomes and the standard of the award have been achieved. Assessment is designed to reasonably verify the student's own capability, rather than the output of an AI[1] tool, against the learning outcomes, including, where AI use is permitted, the student's direction and critical evaluation of that use. Assessment design, and the conduct of assessment in practice, remain fair, reliable and inclusive.

[1]Including, but not limited to, generative AI/large language models and AI-enabled wearable technology.

PRIORITY PRINCIPLE

2 Assessment is inclusive and accessible by design

Assessment is designed to be inclusive and accessible from the outset, rather than adjusted after the fact. Providers meet their duties under applicable equality legislation, including the anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments. Beyond this, formats, timings, instructions and submission methods reflect the diversity of the student population and minimise barriers that are not relevant to what is being assessed, so that students are not disadvantaged by the design itself. This reduces reliance on individual adjustments, which continue to be provided where required.

Where AI use is permitted or expected, providers ensure that students have equitable access to the tools required. Because the inclusion effects of AI-responsive assessment designs are not yet well evidenced, providers evaluate new designs as they are introduced, involving students, including disabled students, in their design and review, and act on the findings.

PRIORITY PRINCIPLE

3 Summative assessment includes proportionate points of assured demonstration across the programme

Students are likely to use AI differently when they know there are clear points of accountability. Summative assessment therefore includes some elements, not necessarily the whole portfolio, that directly verify individual attainment of the learning outcomes under conditions where AI use can be controlled or verified.

Providers identify meaningful points across the programme where independent capability must be demonstrated. This assurance may be designed at programme level rather than repeated unnecessarily in every module. That demonstration can take different forms, such as oral, practical, observed, placement-based, simulation, presentation and questioning, or structured defence of an artefact.

ASSURING STANDARDS

4 Assessment drives learning, building foundational knowledge, skills and competencies over time, valuing process alongside outcome

Assessment is part of the learning process, not just its endpoint. Tasks are sequenced across a programme so that foundational knowledge, key skills and competencies develop cumulatively, with each assessment building on the last. Students are assessed on how they reach, justify and refine their work as well as on the final product. Feedback is timely, effective and designed to be applied to improve later tasks. In this way, assessment advances each student's learning while also giving credible evidence of what they have achieved.

ASSURING STANDARDS

5 All assessments have a clear and justifiable design rationale for their position on AI use

Whether AI use is permitted, expected or restricted, this is a deliberate design choice, explicitly justified and closely aligned with the assessment's intended learning outcomes. Because students may have the opportunity to use AI regardless of whether it is permitted, where the validity of an assessment depends on AI not being used, this is secured through the conditions of assessment rather than by instruction alone.

DRAFT

ASSURING STANDARDS

6 Prohibition and detection are not reliable or effective approaches

Blanket bans on AI use are difficult to enforce in practice, and current AI-detection tools are widely reported to carry significant rates of false positives and false negatives, raising concerns about reliability and equity. Given this evolving and contested evidence base, providers do not rely on detection software as a primary safeguard; the more durable response is robust, valid assessment design, combined with meaningful assessment security actions, rather than after-the-fact policing.

ASSURING STANDARDS

7 Assessment security is supported by realistic, meaningful and transparent academic regulations and accessible policy and regulation, not by academic integrity alone

Assessment security consists of meaningful actions to prevent and detect attempts by students to avoid accountability for their learning. Detection here means gathering evidence of learning, for example through questioning or evidence of process, rather than reliance on AI-detection software. These actions are underpinned by enforceable academic regulations, and explained through policy and student-facing guidance that are clear and accessible.

There are clear, visible mechanisms by which regulations on AI use can actually be enforced and checked – for example, where students are permitted to use AI for some tasks but not others. It is insufficient, and unfair, to set rules that providers have no practical means of verifying – for instance, distinctions between permitted and prohibited AI use that cannot be evidenced, checked, or distinguished after the fact – and then rely solely on students' individual academic integrity to ensure compliance. This approach transfers all responsibility for assessment security onto students, and risks penalising honest students who gain no advantage from AI use while others who breach the rules go undetected.

ASSURING STANDARDS

8 Staff are supported in valid assessment design through ongoing professional development

Teaching staff, and staff who support assessment design, are supported to develop and maintain competence in developing and delivering discipline-specific approaches to assessment that secure academic standards, including how AI and other technology affect the validity of assessment, and how to design assessments that reflect these principles. Because this is an evolving area, professional development is ongoing and includes communities of practice in which approaches are tested, shared and refined, rather than relying on one-off or definitive training.

Enhancement principles

ENHANCEMENT PRINCIPLE

E1 AI literacy/capability is a graduate attribute

Students develop the capabilities to use AI tools effectively, critically and ethically, and to understand the benefits and limitations of AI, as core preparation for professional life, along with the foundational discipline knowledge required to understand and verify AI outputs.

DRAFT

ENHANCEMENT PRINCIPLE

E2 Staff are supported to develop AI capability

Academic and Professional Services staff are supported to develop capability in understanding the impact of AI on learning, teaching and assessment, including how students are using it.

ENHANCEMENT PRINCIPLE

E3 Assessment is designed across the programme to ensure that summative assessment is proportionate and balanced with formative assessment

Overloaded portfolios and an imbalance toward summative assessment drive up both student and marker burden while narrowing what is actually being tested, so portfolios are deliberately designed at programme level to balance summative and formative assessment approaches. Summative assessment is proportionate to what must be assured.

This is a matter of purpose rather than volume: frequent summative testing may remain appropriate where it is secure and serves a clear purpose. Formative learning tasks are designed so that students undertake and value them, for example by drawing on them in later summative assessment through reflection on, or defence of, their work.

Next steps and feedback

The latest draft principles will be published on the QAA website on 19 October 2026 for open feedback from the UK and international sector. The agreed sector principles and Assessment Definitions are expected to be published in December 2026 (exact date to be confirmed).

We would welcome your views, particularly on how the principles would apply in your institution's context and any implementation challenges you anticipate.

For queries, please contact Phil Maull, Nations Enhancement Manager, Regulatory Services, QAA (p.maull@qaa.ac.uk).

Published – 12 October 2026
© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2026
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.qaa.ac.uk

DRAFT