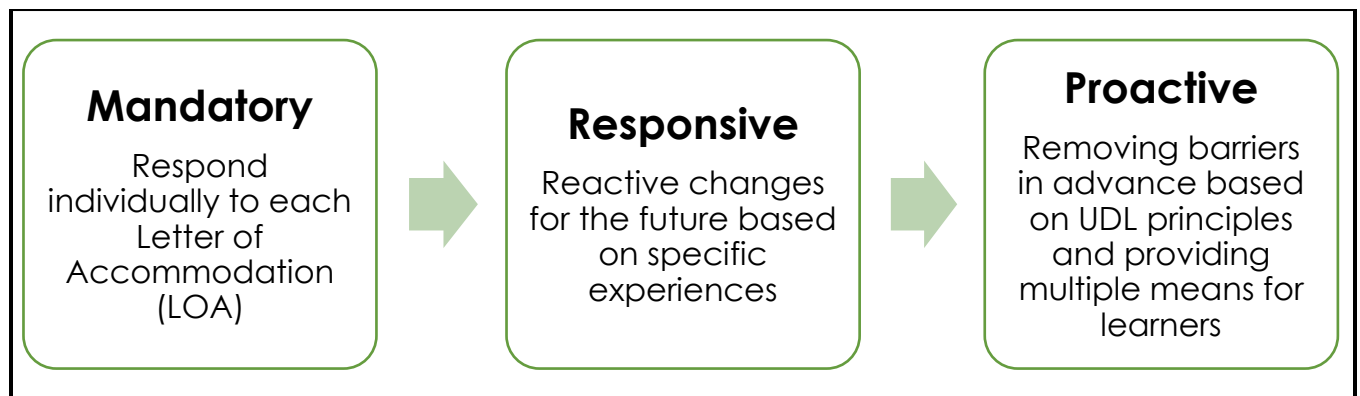


# Options to support accommodations for tests and exams

In 2018 – 2019, 91.7% of the 3,499 learners provided accommodations by the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) required support for testing in the form of extended time. An additional 41.3% required other accommodations related to testing situations. This is the number of learners who chose to register with CAL for a letter of accommodation (LOA). It does not take into account those learners who are unaware of the challenges the post-secondary classroom may present.

## Stages in supporting learner variability

There are three stages that can be identified in the process of supporting learner variability (See Figure 1: Three stages in the process of supporting learner variability).



**Figure 1:** Three stages in the process of supporting learner variability

As Figure 1 shows, the three stages in the process of supporting learner variability are

1. **Mandatory:** Taking the minimum steps required to support individual learners who present a Letter of Accommodation (LOA). Being done on a case-by-case basis, this creates additional work for the instructor and often relies on existing services, such as the test centre, to ensure the accommodation is provided.
2. **Responsive:** Once a specific instance of learner variability is encountered, a specific barrier is removed from the learning environment. The support developed may be ad-hoc or piecemeal initially and then it is stabilised for future use in the learning environment. The workload peaks every time a new instance of learner variability is encountered.
3. **Proactive:** Working to improve the learner experience for all learners, this stage seeks to remove barriers in advance by providing multiple means of Engagement, Representation, and Action & Expression following the UDL principles. There may be some upfront work involved in re-designing the learning

experiences, but the rewards come from a more inclusive learning environment and a reduction in the need to make accommodations throughout the semester.

## **Supporting learner variability for tests and exams**

The suggestions that follow focus on strategies for supporting learner variability that are either reactive or proactive.

A learning goal for individual instructors could be to progress methodically through the application of these suggestions, moving towards proactive support for learner variability.

### **I. Begin discussions around rules and expectations for tests early in the semester**

Communicate clearly and directly with learners about testing practices from the very beginning of the semester.

Things to share with learners include rules or expectations around minimum time limits (i.e., learners cannot leave the test until x number of minutes have passed), the maximum time available, the type and quantity of questions that will appear on the test, behavioural expectations such as seating arrangements, storage of personal belongings and mobile devices.

Not only will this communication help to reduce some of the anxiety associated with tests, it also allows learners to prepare for the experience in a way that is as comfortable for them as possible, such as leaving personal belongings in a locker rather than bringing them to class. The open communication also allows learners to engage instructors on matters of personal concern in advance of a scheduled test date.

### **II. Design tests and exams with extra time available for all learners**

Prepare tests and exams that do not require all the available time to complete. A standard rule of thumb for extra time accommodation is time and a half, so for a three (3) hour class or testing time, the test would be designed to be completed in two (2) hours.

Providing extra time for all learners removes some barriers by allowing all learners to remain with the instructor during the test rather than having them take the test at another time and in another location. The extra time also supports learners with variability that is not visible, such as anxiety.

In order to appreciate the time requirements for a test or exam, it is a good idea for instructors to take their own tests. This may also help to identify questions that may require revision.

### **III. Explore alternatives in the weighting and evaluation of test results**

Testing does not always effectively support learning because the feedback component is not always strong and is often removed from the completion of the test. Learner engagement with the test begins to fade as soon as the test is completed.

One option for improving the learning that takes place during a test is to include questions at the end of the test, for marks, that asks learners to reflect on both their preparation for the test and the experience of taking the test. The weighting of the self-reflection questions can be adjusted to re-arrange the focus of the exercise.

Another option would be to allow learners, after the test has been marked and returned, to correct their test for an improvement in their mark. The opportunity to correct their mistakes could be a valuable learning moment as they consolidate their knowledge on a particular topic.

Learners could also earn marks towards the test result by generating questions that would be part of the test.

#### **IV. Question whether closed-book, timed testing aligns with the learning goals for the course**

In our experiential learning environment, the confines of closed-book, timed assessments rarely, if ever, align with the learning goals captured in course outlines or program-level outcomes.

Questioning closed-book, timed testing as an assessment strategy and looking for greater alignment with the learning goals can reveal other options that can reduce barriers and support learner variability. If they have to be used, tests and exams can be open-book, take-home or broken down into smaller quizzes. All of these options take preliminary steps to reduce barriers.

#### **V. Use assessments that address variability**

One of the best ways to support learner variability is to use other assessments instead of tests and exams. This will reduce the time and effort required to manage test-related accommodations for learners.

Many different forms of assessment, such as presentations, projects, reports, in-class assignments and case studies, have opportunities to support learner variability built-in through options for multiple means of Engagement and multiple means of Action & Expression. Changing the format for the delivery of a report or a presentation can be quite simple when compared to managing test-related accommodations.

## **Additional Resources**

As part of the progression towards proactive support for learner variability, the following resources could be consulted.

CAST, "Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2 [graphic organizer]," 2018. [Online]. Available: [http://udlguidelines.cast.org/binaries/content/assets/udlguidelines/udlg-v2-2/udlg\\_graphicorganizer\\_v2-2\\_numbers-yes.pdf](http://udlguidelines.cast.org/binaries/content/assets/udlguidelines/udlg-v2-2/udlg_graphicorganizer_v2-2_numbers-yes.pdf). [Accessed 29 August 2019].

J. Black and E. J. Moore, UDL Navigators in Higher Education: A Field Guide, Wakefield, Massachusetts: CAST, 2019.

K. Coy, "Post-Secondary Educators Can Increase Educational Reach with Universal Design for Learning," *Educational Renaissance*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 27 - 36, 2016.

L. Sokal and A. Wilson, "In the Nick of Time: A Pan-Canadian Examination of Extended Testing Time Accommodation in Post-secondary Schools," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 28 - 62, 2017.

Many other resources can be found on the internet. Learning and Teaching Services (LTS) also provides consultations for instructors looking to remove barriers from their assessment practices.