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## PROMOTING EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH ASSESSMENT FOR INCLUSION

*Joanna Tai, Rola Ajjawi, David Boud,  
and Trina Jorre de St Jorre*

Assessment in higher education is inescapable; it assures competence, drives learning, and shapes learners. It is something that students must undertake if they wish to succeed and graduate. While they might be able to evade other aspects of the higher education experience, they cannot escape assessment (Boud 1995). However, while all students might be required to participate in assessment, their experiences of assessment may differ significantly, particularly if they are from non-traditional backgrounds (Tai et al. 2022b).

In the move from elite to widespread higher education, the diversity of students has increased (Marginson 2016). Different students come with different goals and aspirations: some are primarily career focused, others wish to learn to change the world, yet others want to keep their options open. Thus, equity of opportunity within higher education is important to ensure its purpose is being fulfilled. Efforts to promote equity and social justice have focused mainly on entry and participation and have been successful in increasing the proportion of equity students entering higher education (Department of Education Skills and Employment 2020a). However, evidence suggests that equity students are not as successful as “traditional” students in terms of completion and employment (Department of Education Skills and Employment 2020b; Li and Carroll 2019; Tomaszewski et al. 2019). Given we accept diverse students into universities, it is a moral obligation that universities do not act directly or indirectly to disadvantage those it has enrolled (Burke, Crozier, and Misiaszek 2016). This is not just about avoiding discrimination: universities must value the full range of characteristics of their students, which contributes to the rich fabric of the social and academic world.

Assessments are purposefully developed to judge students’ capabilities based on educational criteria and standards represented by explicit learning outcomes. By its very nature, assessment excludes challenges and discomforts. It needs to discriminate between those who have and who have not met the appropriate

outcomes at the requisite level. Underperformance in assessment is frequently positioned as a problem of the student and attributed to student diversity and/or background characteristics. However, the assessment might also be inequitable and therefore excludes students inappropriately. This requires a shift in the way we think about assessment, to become more aware of the disparity in experience and opportunity that students have in present-day assessment, and then, a shift to better assessment systems, designs, and processes, that do have inclusion in mind.

This is important not just for reasons of justice and equity but also to ensure assessment methods maintain their validity: institutions and their staff must be able to evidence that assessment has done its job of determining which students are suitably qualified to progress to the next course, or to graduate, and which students have not sufficiently demonstrated their capabilities. Poor performance is often assumed to be a problem with the student rather than the assessment. This deficit framing meant that the “problem” could be resolved through student-focused measures such as individual accommodations and/or additional support (O’Shea et al. 2016), rather than considering what could be problematic about the assessment. Though accommodations for assessment are required by law in Australia and elsewhere for groups of students with protected characteristics (principally physical disability) (Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021), this approach ignores the potential for assessment to be made more inclusive from the outset. This may still unintentionally exclude students for reasons other than attainment of the outcomes being judged, which then requires alterations for potentially multiple students. When this does occur, it calls into question the validity and reliability of assessment for all students.

Therefore, we argue here for adopting the concept of assessment for inclusion (Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021; Tai et al. 2022a, 2022b), which seeks to ensure diverse students are not disadvantaged through assessment practices. We contend that assessment should recognise diversity in student learning and endeavour to ensure that no student is discriminated against by virtue of features other than their ability to meet appropriate standards (Tai et al. 2022a).

Moreover, assessment for inclusion necessarily recognises that:

- Diversity has many dimensions, including overlapping/intersectional qualities.
- Assessment performances and decisions are always made within specific contexts, which has an impact on generalisability.
- There will always be new frontiers on which to make inclusive advances (i.e. into the future, we will not only accept the present reductive categorisations when considering something to be inclusive or not).

### **Positioning assessment for inclusion within fields of research and practice**

Assessment for inclusion builds on a growing consideration of equity and social justice in higher education, and particularly, within assessment. Much of this work has been done since widespread acknowledgement about equality has made

its way into national and international legislation and policy (e.g., *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* 2006; *Disability Discrimination Act* 1992; *Equality Act* 2010). Early work in higher education assessment focused on the logistics and implementation (Waterfield and West 2006). However, prior to this, the concept of inclusion was already used frequently within the school sector, representing initially the consideration of special needs students, and had also already shifted to considering any student who faced barriers to participation in education (Hockings 2010).

The term “inclusive assessment” has been defined as “the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do” (Hockings 2010, 34) which speaks mainly to the certification aspect of assessment, rather than considering how assessment interacts and is entangled with curriculum and learning and how assessment may also contribute to future learner trajectories and identities. While a good starting place for assessment design work, a more expansive purpose is required.

McArthur (2016) more recently introduced the concept of *assessment for social justice*, which seeks to achieve the broader purposes of “justice of assessment within higher education, and to the role of assessment in nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society as a whole” (968). She argues that considering social justice in assessment is a necessary move, since previous ideas of justice in assessment focused on fairness of assessment procedure, rather than considering if the outcomes of assessment were just. This constrains possibilities for inclusion, since the greater potential for societal impacts, which are related to just *outcomes* of assessment, are largely ignored. McArthur continues this discussion in [Chapter 2](#), identifying synergies and distinguishing the differences between *assessment for social justice* and assessment for inclusion. Similarly, in this chapter, we take assessment for social justice as a broader philosophy and argue that “assessment for inclusion” might be positioned at the nexus of the procedural and outcome aspects of assessment, through which social justice might be achieved. This is to say, we are focusing on the specific and overall design of assessments, albeit framing assessment design more broadly than just the task, to also consider interactional processes, policy, people, spaces, and materials (Bearman et al. 2017).

Within the broader philosophical notions of social justice, we already see two conceptualisations of assessment for inclusion in the literature. Nieminen (2022) calls for “radical inclusion” of marginalised groups of students. He positions assessment for inclusion as reflexively drawing on individual accommodations and inclusive assessment design. Assessment for inclusion is positioned as “a critical and resistive approach to assessment: it recognises the prevalent socio-cultural, -historical and -political positioning of marginalised students in assessment and, if needed, explicitly disrupts such positioning by promoting student agency” (5–6). Nieminen’s conceptualisation comes from a program of research underpinned by social justice and critical theories (see also [Chapter 6](#)). Our own positioning for assessment for inclusion is more pedagogical in flavour,

seeking to mainstream assessment for inclusion for all students, by making inclusion an everyday lens of assessment design. Student agency should certainly be a key pillar of any assessment design, but we are perhaps more pragmatic. We suggest “‘assessment for inclusion’ captures the spirit and intention that a diverse range of students and their strengths and capabilities should be accounted for, when designing assessment of and for learning, towards the aim of accounting for and promoting diversity in society” (Tai et al. 2022a, 3). There is room for both conceptualisation in overcoming the entrenched nature of structural inequality and traditional practices in our assessment regimes.

We now turn to contemplate how inclusion should be considered. Within the higher education literature, inclusion can refer to both disability inclusion and social inclusion. Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) remind us that “inclusion is an elusive concept, intertwined with difficult to resolve tensions” (2245). Inclusion can refer to many equity groups that are usually named in relation to disability access (including physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental and physical health conditions) and widening participation initiatives (including students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous peoples, and mature age students). Thus, we adopt the word inclusion in all its meanings. While there may be an ever-growing list of categorisations to consider when thinking about assessment, students are not just the groups they belong to, and they may consider themselves as belonging to several groups and sub-groups (Willems 2010). Therefore, we should focus not so much on whether students are members of any given equity group (which may be a heuristic that deflects attention from specific structural issues), but on the underlying issues commonly represented within these groups. That is, assessments as currently constructed do not lead to equitable assessment processes, experiences, and outcomes.

Being “fair” in assessment might have once been about ensuring that all students face equal – that is, the same – conditions. However, with an inclusion and equity lens, what is considered “fair” in assessment is the subject of ongoing discussion (O’Neill 2017; Riddell and Weedon 2006). Fairness can also depend significantly on the perceptions of individuals. Even students themselves are concerned that accommodations or adjustments give students with disabilities or other conditions some kind of “unfair” advantage (Grimes et al. 2019a). Addressing one disadvantage might be seen by a different student as inappropriately advantaging another. Though accommodations and adjustments are deliberately made to construct as level a playing field as possible, they can only respond to existing barriers or impediments which can be readily identified. An equity and social justice focus calls on us to do more than identify barriers, instead, we should design assessment proactively to enable all students to demonstrate their learning in suitable ways without the need to reveal personal characteristics which may not be apparent and gain reactive accommodations. “Fairness” may then not be enacted through equal treatment – rather, it can take advantage of and draw strengths from diverse student backgrounds, goals, and capabilities.

## How assessment can exclude

Contemporary assessment tends towards solo, unaided performance with few opportunities to work with others (Lipnevich et al. 2021). Further, it removes students from the normal resources (e.g., Internet access, the advice of colleagues) that graduates would typically access in everyday practice. These unchallenged limitations are likely to have more of an impact on the success of those who might gain the most from an inclusive approach to assessment. The lack of authentic scaffolds, those that would be available in the real world, such as use of a calculator or an Internet search engine, or even a keyboard and screen, is itself a threat to validity (see [Chapter 10](#)).

The various assumptions we hold dear about assessment practices may prove exclusionary. For example, the predominance of closed book exams that advantages those who can recall information quickly under pressure. These may not be characteristics necessary to demonstrate the specific outcomes being judged (Tai et al. 2022a). Further, strict timed exams advantage students who can concentrate immediately, maintain focus for the duration of assessment, perform the task quickly, and/or perform well under stress. Students who have physical or cognitive conditions that prevent them from doing so are disadvantaged, as are students that have not been schooled in undertaking such tasks. Rigid deadlines disadvantage students with multiple demands on their time including caring and work commitments, or students with fluctuating chronic medical conditions. Ironically, the procedures, designed to afford students accommodations, are likely to add greater burdens on time-poor students, who must usually disclose personal information, submit additional paperwork, and demonstrate proof of a special condition (Grimes et al. 2019b). Restrictions around time and access to resources were traditionally thought to level the playing field by creating equal conditions for all students to perform. However, these types of restrictions ignore intrinsic characteristics of students as well as contextual factors outside of assessment, and so may form actual threats to validity. Our focus on assuring reliability through uniform conditions should not be allowed to undermine the validity of assessment.

These and other problematic notions related to assessment design that may lead to failure and exclusion persist for three key reasons (see Tai et al. 2022a, for a detailed explanation). First, assessment design often draws on tradition rather than recent evidence and scholarship. Research shows that there are entrenched practices and fixed perspectives that perpetuate these types of assessment design (Ashworth, Bloxham, and Pearce 2010). Second, standards such as learning outcomes are beholden to a transparency agenda where learning outcomes can easily become rigid, fragmented, and inflexible. This cements particular assessment practices in place when it is the learning outcomes themselves that need to be challenged. Third, the near-hysteria and reverence within which a specific view of assessment security is held within the academy has flow on effects to poor and discriminatory assessment practices. For example, remote proctored exams

have been criticised as ableist due to features like eye tracking that expect to see unobstructed neurotypical eye movements (Logan 2020).

What this brief tour through common assessment practices shows is that educators and assessment designers need to be more critical of their assessment practices and see them in a wider context. In turn, universities need to create critical appraisal mechanisms of common assessment practices, and how they act to exclude and to identify alternatives. In the next section, we identify current practices that seek to promote inclusionary practices of assessment.

## Perspectives on assessment for inclusion

Research in assessment about inclusion is growing. The many different lines of enquiry which could be pursued under assessment for inclusion include assessment design, assessment outcomes, and even broader work on the decolonisation of curriculum (incorporating the decolonisation of assessment). However, alongside this, we suggest that the relationship between theory and practice needs to be challenged. Rather than holding the two in a dichotomy, a spectrum of praxis should be considered, to suit particular aims in particular contexts. One thing that is clear in previous work is that there is unlikely to be a single solution that will solve all problems with inclusion, since both assessment and inclusion always occur within a context, with particular people, involving specific interactions (Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021; Tai et al. 2022a, 2022b).

Enactments of inclusion in assessment have so far taken two main paths: drawing on Universal Design for Learning principles within assessment design (termed Universal Design for Assessment, UDA (Ketterlin Geller, Johnstone, and Thurlow 2015)), or seeking to make accommodations for individual students (Kurth and Mellard 2006). UDA is defined as an integrated system with a broad spectrum of possible supports to provide the best environment in which to assess students' capabilities (Ketterlin Geller 2005). UDA aims to support proactive designs of assessment that allow students choice and flexibility, but these have not been widely adopted (Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021). Meanwhile, accommodations tend to be personalised and take an assessment design as a given. They typically are marginal and procedural including changes to timing, duration, or rooms for students completing the assessment. These approaches could function together to improve inclusion overall, as Johnstone et al. (Chapter 12) argue. This can occur through increased adoption and formalisation of UDA through institutional policy, strategy, and evaluation, and supporting teachers to provide more latitude for accommodations, both in terms of who can access them, and the types of accommodations themselves.

It is worthwhile to consider what else could be drawn upon to improve the inclusivity of assessment. The review by Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova (2021) identified that several published inclusive assessment endeavours focused on mitigating language-based differences. Here, students were able to negotiate or choose different formats of assessments, or even the language in which they completed the

task. The option to choose the assessment format has been perceived positively by most students (Chapter 18; Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021). However, careful consideration of how these options align with learning outcomes is necessary, both within a unit/module of study, and across the entire program/course. Consideration could also be extended to what types of capabilities students may require beyond university and this may lead to an emphasis on, for example, authentic assessments (Chapter 6) or assessments that encourage and celebrate distinctiveness (Chapter 13).

A programmatic approach to assessment (Schuwirth and Van der Vleuten 2011) is also likely to be helpful when explicitly used, to establish a shared understanding of when and how learning outcomes will be assessed, across a collection of assessments which have been subject to wider and deeper scrutiny. Programmatic assessment design teams should involve those who know about the exclusionary effects of various assessments, so that the needs of all perspectives are met. When assessment is supported appropriately (i.e. scaffolded tasks with increasing complexity/difficulty), this certainty may also allay anxiety, stress, and pressure which many students report (Craddock and Mathias 2009). This may be especially important in light of the prevalence of mental health conditions amongst students (Grimes et al. 2017).

However, to genuinely disrupt current notions of assessment, we need to look to broader theoretical perspectives which interrogate the taken-for-grantedness of much assessment discussion and the hegemony of ableist, positivist discourses. Philosophical and sociological examinations of the purposes of assessment for inclusion may help to open new ways of thinking, for example critical disability perspectives such as Jain (Chapter 3), and Whitburn and Thomas's ontological perspective (Chapter 7), the decolonial approaches posed by Lambert, Funk, and Adam (Chapter 5), Indigenous ways of knowing by Gleeson and Fletcher (Chapter 4), or Burke's invocation of timescapes (Chapter 8). In order to see how assessment may have inappropriately exclusionary effects, it is useful to have conceptual and metaphorical levers to draw sharp attention to the effects of taken-for-granted assessment practices and ways in which alternatives might be imagined.

Action on inclusion should not be left to individuals and their good will and commitment. Understanding how policy at different levels shapes the way that assessment does or does not serve inclusive purposes also sheds light on what might be refined (Chapter 9). Meanwhile, limited regulatory and ethical frameworks around artificial intelligence in assessment might be leading to exclusion and bias (Chapter 11). We also need to privilege research and development with students to understand their needs and mobilise their agency to effect change. For example, we need to understand students' needs and experiences in more nuanced ways (Chapters 14–16) and as genuine partners in this endeavour of education (Chapters 19 and 20). Finally, we need further exploration and evidence generation in naturalistic settings to consider what works, and what does not work, how and why, to promote inclusion (Chapters 17 and 18).

## Conclusion

Inclusion looks different in different contexts, for different people in different cultures. A constant reminder that there is no “one size fits all” approach is necessary to continue work in this space. Shutting down possibilities, or not exploring potential avenues for inclusion too early, is likely to lead to a similar situation to that which we find ourselves in currently: where we have settled on one approach (accommodations and adjustments) which leaves assessment practices unexamined and unchanged, without seeking alternative paths which may serve more students – and indeed universities – better. Instead, what we are calling for with the concept of *assessment for inclusion* is not just a pragmatic fix. By interrogating assessment, we begin to view the whole curriculum differently through considering what may promote inclusion, equity, and participation. What we hope to achieve is to open new challenges to ways in which we think about not just assessment but higher education practices broadly, and the implications that choices in adopting theory, designs, or practices of assessment have for diverse learners, both now and into the future.

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