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## MOVING FORWARD

### Mainstreaming assessment for inclusion in curricula

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The book has focused on assessment because assessment shapes and directs student learning; it is the assessment system that formally defines what is worth learning. The chapter authors have brought together a diversity of perspectives to explore, conceptualise, and problematise assessment for inclusion as well as showcasing good practice. In this final chapter, we make some concluding remarks and draw themes from across the book to reflect ways forward for assessment for inclusion.

Assessment for inclusion has both pragmatic and conceptual features. Focussing on immediate practical solutions alone is unlikely to be sufficient, given the philosophical roots of inclusion in the promise that education will contribute to a better world for both the individual and society more widely. Concomitantly, only working in abstract or theoretical spaces will not help to change practice. There is a great need to collaborate across disciplinary and organisational boundaries to build upon ideas, rather than operating in silos, if we are to mainstream assessment for inclusion. Given the diversity we seek to acknowledge and support within higher education, there are likely to be many people who can contribute to re-casting assessment for inclusion, from a range of perspectives. Academics, researchers, practitioners, academic developers, industry, professional bodies, and students themselves. The backgrounds, philosophies, theories, and practices, these people bring will also be diverse – beyond those which we have outlined within research fields. At this early stage of considering assessment within a broader goal of inclusion, we should be open to what each can bring, and work on finding resonances and commonalities to make substantial advances in assessment.

It is also important to note that this work cannot exist solely within academic research journals, or handbooks for assessment design, or even student advocacy agendas: it must promulgate across these spaces to achieve change in what happens on the ground. It is of no use to talk about wonderful new types of assessment designs which might improve inclusion, if they are never implemented or proven

to be effective. It is not just wide sweeping changes, due the pandemic, that have made an impact for diverse students already (Tai et al. 2022a). We should also look to our own “backyards” and see what can be done incrementally, since these small things may make the difference between students choosing a different course (or worse – discontinuing study) or persisting with their chosen course/degree. In the end, it is not educators who determine what is inclusive, it is the students and their future trajectories or their absences from them. We need to be observant about not only who is present in our courses, but as importantly, who is absent or under-represented.

Assessment design is often simply an accretion from tradition (Dawson et al. 2013), and yet, academics often justify specific designs by referring to the “real world”. Assessment’s fabricated constraints, and thus currently allowed adjustments, do not withstand scrutiny when we consider this juxtaposition: after all, the rules are themselves social constructions and can therefore be subject to alteration (McArthur 2016). Therefore, in this book and beyond, we call for engagement and involvement at every level to improve assessment for inclusion.

While the chapters in this book have focused primarily on assessment, we also need to reflect on inclusion in other aspects of the curriculum. We cannot look at assessment independently of what else is happening in the course. The backwash effect of assessment is on learning and all aspects of the curriculum: the intended learning outcomes and learning and teaching activities (Biggs and Tang 2011). So, while we might start our focus on assessment we need to look backwards to learning and teaching activities, the context in which they occur, and the learning outcomes desired. Intended learning outcomes should be formulated in ways that are not so limited that they do not permit students to work on different things and still meet the learning outcomes. They may not need to be so dependent on specific subject content that they exclude equivalent demonstrations of meeting learning outcomes as is currently assumed. Some current learning outcomes may be inappropriately exclusionary and need to be rethought. It is also worth noting that while we have adopted the language of inclusion in this book, inclusion can be tokenistic if a student is merely counted but does not feel like they belong or are active participants with a voice. Inclusion is not just a technical requirement, it encompasses students being part of what is being assessed.

As editors, in reflecting on the various chapters, there are common refrains that we can draw out: 1) that students should take an active and agentic role in assessment; 2) that inclusion needs to become a mainstay of regulatory frameworks that govern assessment from design through to evaluation; 3) that teachers need to adopt ethical reflexivity; and 4) that more diverse discourses need to be embedded to disrupt positivist and ableist discourses of assessment.

### 1. Students as agentic

Several chapters in this book showed how students needed to be positioned as active actors in the assessment process in order to be included. This can be as partners involved in the design of assessment (Chapters 19 and 20), as actively

choosing the assessment method (Chapter 17 and 18), or as contributing to the evaluation of the effects of assessment (Chapters 15 and 16). Nieminen (2022) argues that it is only when students are positioned in an agentic role within assessment that we can disrupt traditional practices in which assessment may be experienced as being foisted on or done to students.

While feedback has not been explicitly addressed in this book, it often occurs in conjunction with assessment, and we recognise that it has an important role to play in ensuring that assessment is inclusive. Feedback is a key opportunity for tailoring the curriculum to individual student needs and work. If feedback is designed well, then it too should position the student as active in the processes of seeking, interpreting, and taking action on feedback to inform learning. Lambert, Funk, and Adam (Chapter 5) remind us that feedback that acknowledges diversity and culture should not come from a deficit discourse. Johnstone, Ketterlin Geller, and Thurlow (Chapter 12) note that universal design for assessment includes improving the accessibility of feedback through multiple means of delivery.

However, as cautioned by several of the authors in the book, any changes to assessment regimes can lead to student anxiety and stress. We caution about offering too many options to students to avoid inappropriately overloading them. O'Neill recommends offering two options (or alternatives) only. However, that change might cause stress should not stop us from improving assessment. Instead, it behoves us to advise and support students so they understand why changes were made and how their new role in assessment might benefit their learning. Chapters in the book pay attention to specific student groups: Indigenous (Chapter 4), mature age students living in regional and remote areas (Chapter 16), students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (Chapter 13), international students (Chapter 14), and students with disabilities (Chapters 19, 20), showing a diverse range of students and needs. However, we agree with Crawford, Emery, and Baird (Chapter 16) that this is not about stereotyping “types” of students, rather, our intention is to highlight diversity, while also acknowledging that students have complex identities and can belong to other groups that may impact their experiences of assessment.

## 2. Regulatory frameworks of inclusion

Course handbooks and unit guides prompt teachers to construct defensible descriptions of assessment tasks. If these are not regularly questioned by colleagues, traditional practices are perpetuated. This benign neglect can harm students through unaware exclusion.

Brett and Harvey (Chapter 9), in their policy analysis, show that inclusion is often absent from assessment policy statements and that there are weak accountability and evaluation frameworks for assessment for inclusion. Worryingly, they show that reporting frameworks for equity groups have remained mostly static for the past three decades. These policy frameworks require augmenting “with a more nuanced understanding of how inclusion

and diversity play out within the student experience”. Beyond this, we must look to how the increasing manifestation of artificial intelligence and educational technology (e.g., proctoring) in assessment are unwittingly embedding bias and exclusion through taking highly selected groups as representing the whole. New forms of accountability and regulation might be needed to prompt ethical decision-making around these new technologies (Chapter 11). These are not simply administrative tasks. We should have more scrutiny of assessment practices that are educational rather than bureaucratic.

Any form of scrutiny can be misused and can perpetuate conservative practices. Whitburn and Thomas (Chapter 7, 76) remind us how “regulatory compliance is at the fore when compelling students to disclose disabilities to institutions, as a way to ensure that they can then expect reasonable adjustments to be made to their programs of learning, rather than to consider the inclusiveness and accessibility of courses”. Following the rules is not good enough: ethical reflexivity and flexibility are required alongside regulation.

3. Ethical reflexivity, relationality, and flexibility to influence assessment practices  
A broad survey of the higher education landscape suggests that student diversity has increased (Marginson 2016). Assessment philosophy has also changed, moving beyond testing what was taught to include assessment for learning and sustainable notions of assessment (Boud and Soler 2016). This implies that we need a different relationship between students and teachers. Gleeson and Fletcher (Chapter 4) remind us that education is fundamentally relational – it occurs through people working together. Strong student-teacher relationships foster inclusion (Tai et al. 2022b). The big challenge is to get educators to think differently about assessment. And to think carefully about who their students are and who is and isn’t being accommodated by current assessment regimes.

Part of the inertia that surrounds the design of assessment is that assessment regimes are set within rigid systems of quality assurance. Decisions about assessment must be made well in advance of knowing which students are enrolled. These early decisions, made without direct knowledge of who will be affected by them, cannot be unmade or revisited and so the main recourse for inclusion are individual accommodations that are peripheral to task design (e.g., extra time, breaks or rooms). We need more flexibility in the system and allowance for professional and ethical decision-making by academic and course teams.

Many authors have argued that assessment should orient towards social justice, including the key proponent of assessment for social justice Jan McArthur (Chapter 2). Working out what social justice might involve requires considerable prompting to encourage conversations about what this might look like in particular disciplines and how this can be embedded in courses. The implication that follows is that this would lead to greater satisfaction for staff as well. Fostering communities of praxis and ethical reflexivity may be needed to reimagine inclusivity not through the lens of deficit

but through the collective interrogation of whose knowledges, values and experiences are included and excluded in assessment frameworks (Chapter 8). There is also a need for better education of institutional staff, from academics, support staff, and web designers through to senior managers, on the legislative requirements and moral imperatives of inclusion (Chapter 9).

#### 4. Alternative discourses and ways of knowing

Many authors in the book sought to disrupt hegemonic ableist discourses of assessment that draw on linear Western models of education (Chapters 2–8), systematically dismantling practices that might on the face of it appear neutral, but that perpetuate systemic disadvantage. The theoretical frameworks invoked include decolonialism, critical disability theories, social justice, Indigenous ways of knowing, ontology, and internationalisation. For example, giving all students a fixed length of time assumes that time itself is equal for all students including those who might have caring or work responsibilities or those with chronic conditions that ebb and flow in severity. The main recourse for these students at present is through individual accommodation to make the system seem fairer. And yet this requires more paperwork, doctor visits and emotional work to disclose and convince what may seem to be unsympathetic ears (Chapter 12). Why have a discourse that creates additional burdens on those students who may already have the greatest burdens to bear? An assessment discourse that starts from the premise that all students should be able to demonstrate how they meet learning outcomes without additional requirements for some is needed.

Continued adherence to the traditional notions of failure and success as they are presently embedded within institutional processes can restrict the capacity for more nuanced, inclusive assessment and risks further excluding candidates whose understandings fall outside these narrowly defined positions (Chapter 15). Indeed, O'Shea and Delahunty (Chapter 15) critique practices of grading as pinning self-worth to a score – which McArthur (Chapter 2) argues is a degrading act.

Dawson (Chapter 10) tackles the big question of whether our present exclusionary assessments practices are a fundamental threat to the validity of assessment. If assessment misrepresents what some students are capable of, how can we accept it as valid? He suggests that we need to reconceptualise notions of fairness in assessment in higher education to focus on equity not equality. Are assessments able to judge who and who has not met the learning outcomes of a course rather than who can answer questions oriented to students with certain characteristics? We need to consider whose notion of validity is valid and who contributes to the definition of validity. Alongside this there needs to be reengagement with the discourse of fairness in assessment – beyond procedural fairness (i.e., transparency) and measurement fairness (i.e., absence of bias) to being receptive to diversity (Tierney 2013). Research by Valentine et al. (2021, 2022) suggests that fair assessment should accept subjectivities and privilege a more narrative approach to assessment.

No matter how thoroughly the notion of inclusion is debated and enacted, there will continue to be a need for both universal design for assessment and accommodations for individual students (Chapter 12). However, the balance is currently tipped far towards individual adjustments in our systems (Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021) and not enough on what will work for all. Critical universal design is an on-going process that takes ableism seriously (Chapter 3).

The book has been mostly silent about the pandemic. That is because the problems with inclusive assessment well and truly predate COVID-19. However, it is likely that the shift to emergency remote teaching and assessment highlighted the multiple sources of inequity arising from difficult home situations and the digital divide (Bartolic et al. 2022). The aftermath of the disruption caused by the pandemic might be an opportune time to challenge that which has been taken for granted in our assessment practices. One prediction that is particularly appealing to us comes from Peters et al. (2020, 720):

Universities have the possibility to emerge from this pandemic as places of compassion, of wisdom and worthiness. ... [to] become places where prior privilege does not give priority in engagement, where international respect flourishes for their students, not for their bank accounts, where recognition of diversity, equality and inclusion are the premises of formalised education and where humanity can flourish with the transdisciplinary humility the rest of our world is owed. The opportunity is a new educative focus not a new business model.

In conclusion, we hope that this book opens new conversations and investigations about assessment for inclusion. We ask educators to take courage in changing assessment and to work with students to take on this challenge. We urge the sector to fund and support continued research and development in assessment for inclusion. Finally, we look forward to the flourishing of new collaborations and conversations about assessment for inclusion.

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