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MORE THAN ASSESSMENT TASK DESIGN

Promoting equity for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds

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What is the problem?

Investment in widening participation initiatives has significantly improved the participation of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Raciti 2019), but they continue to have poorer educational outcomes, both in terms of academic achievement and graduate employment (Harvey et al. 2017). As students, they face challenges related to belonging and engagement throughout their degree (Burke et al. 2016), and are more likely to discontinue study and achieve poorer grades (Harvey et al. 2017). As graduates they benefit less in the labour market than their peers from medium and high SES backgrounds (Li and Carroll 2019; O'Shea 2016; Richardson, Bennett, and Roberts 2016), having poorer rates of overall and full-time employment, and reduced salaries after graduation (4–6 months, QILT 2019; 5–15 years, Tomaszewski et al. 2019). Some causes have been identified, but more research is needed to fully understand and address inequities that cause disadvantage, especially with regards to the suitability of assessment.

Attempts to address inequalities for students from low SES backgrounds have primarily focussed on their transition into university, including transition pedagogies to address gaps in academic preparedness, self-efficacy and belonging as students move into and through their degrees (Devlin and McKay 2017; Kift 2015). This has led to improvements in understanding and practice, but gaps in academic achievement and retention remain, and few studies have focussed on the equally challenging transition that the same vulnerable cohorts face as they enter the highly competitive graduate workforce. Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the contribution of assessment to gaps in retention, success or employment outcomes.

There is ample evidence that the ways in which universities represent the achievement of graduates provides poor evidence of capabilities and outcomes valued in the workplace (Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021). This presents

challenges for all graduates, because they need to look to experiences beyond what is assessed to convey their capabilities to employers (Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021). However, the shortcomings of assessment pose a greater problem for students from low SES backgrounds because they tend to be less aware of opportunities to improve their employability (Doyle 2011; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Harvey et al. 2017), and this contributes to disadvantage in the graduate labour market (Li and Carroll 2019; O’Shea 2016; QILT 2019; Richardson, Bennett, and Roberts 2016; Tomaszewski et al. 2019). Equitable employment opportunities are essential to improving social mobility and stopping cycles of intergenerational disadvantage for students from low SES backgrounds, so this aspect of assessment needs to be addressed urgently.

Why does assessment matter?

Assessment impacts what students learn and serves as a gateway to progression and entry into professions. Despite its importance, numerous scholars have expressed concerns about assessment failing to meet its potential and lagging other curriculum reform (Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021; Knight 2002; Shay 2008). Of equal concern, is the unchallenged influence that assessment has in legitimising certain capabilities, knowledge, and ways of knowing (Bullen and Flavell 2022; Leathwood 2005; Shay 2008). Assessment is a socially constructed practice, that is interwoven with relations of power (Leathwood 2005; Shay 2008). With that in mind, it is appropriate that we carefully examine the purpose of assessment and whose interest it serves.

There is growing evidence that assessment perpetuates dominant social structures and power relations. For example, stereotype threat (the predicament in which individuals from a stigmatised social group are or feel at risk of confirming a negative stereotype) is known to negatively impact the test performance of people from minority groups and women (Nguyen and Ryan 2008), and it is well documented that unconscious bias in the assessment of learner performance disadvantages minority performance in medical education (Lucey et al. 2020). Thus, it is somewhat surprising, that assessment has not been scrutinised more as a source of the inequity that contributes to persistent gaps in academic achievement and employment outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds.

The shortcomings of current assessment strategies and how they might be addressed

Assessment privileges dominant cultural practices and perspectives

Assessment supports individualism and competition, and those who “understand the game” are advantaged by that knowledge and encouraged by early success. Whereas those who don’t, need to learn the rules, and overcome the

de-motivating potential of negative emotions associated with failure or disappointing grades (Leathwood 2005). These experiences impact some individuals more than others, but more concerningly, they can systemically discriminate against entire groups in ways that are insidious and predictable given common experiences of past inequalities.

Assessors strive for consistency and accuracy in the judgement of student work. However, they are rarely experts in assessment design, and grade integrity is compromised both by the scope and soundness of assessment design, and the subjectivity of judgements made about performance (Hailikari et al. 2014; Sadler 2009a). In reality, assessment is largely informed by long-standing disciplinary norms, and what educators have themselves experienced (Bearman et al. 2017). As such, it is designed and constructed in accordance with the social and cultural backgrounds of academics, whose experience of higher education may differ considerably from how it is experienced by contemporary students, or those from other sociocultural backgrounds (HEFCE 2015).

Qualitative research shows that students often feel that what they see in the curriculum, and thus assessment, does not reflect their identities (HEFCE 2015). However, students from middle and high SES backgrounds are more likely to be familiar with, and therefore be advantaged by, dominant cultural codes and practices (cultural capital) and social relationships which provide access to resources (social capital) relevant to their navigating assessment. Thus assessment “norms” and traditions advantage those who can relate to, or are familiar with, the values and practices reflected in standards and assessment tasks, particularly aspects that involve subjective elements (Sadler 2009a, 2009b; Yorke 2011).

The articulation of standards and criteria are meant to help with assuring accuracy and transparency in assessment. However, the way in which criteria are formulated and communicated provides insufficient clarity for students or those who contribute to assessment, leading to inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the judgement of achievement (Woolf 2004). Some argue that to strive for greater accuracy is fruitless, because the application of criteria necessarily requires subjective interpretation, and understanding therefore needs to be co-constructed (Shay 2008). This is especially important for students from low SES backgrounds, because they often feel underprepared academically and less assured in co-constructing knowledge. There is evidence that both university staff and students recognise the importance of accessible language and examples, especially with respect to assessment requirements (Devlin et al. 2012).

Assessment that is not inclusive is demotivating and enables social closure

Where students from low SES backgrounds are confused by assessment requirements, doubt their ability to succeed, or compare themselves to more advantaged peers, they are likely to be demotivated. Students who are demotivated are likely to engage less with activities of importance to assessment because expectations

and personal efficacy are mediators of achievement related choices. Individuals are more inclined to engage with activities when they have high expectations of success and their own self-efficacy (Eccles 2009). Achievement-related choices are also influenced by internal and external comparison processes: people assess their skills across different tasks or contexts, and in comparison to others (Eccles 2009). Interpretive processes, such as the amount of effort attributed to success or failure, and social influences (people who reinforce whether they are good or not) are also important (Eccles 2009).

In addition to limitations imposed by students' perceptions of themselves and how they relate to assessment tasks, their aspirations can be further limited by how they are treated by others. "Social closure" is a phenomenon which describes the tendency of privileged groups to limit access to resources and opportunities in ways that sustain social hierarchies (Harvey et al. 2017). Harvey et al. (2017) raise concerns about social closure in relation to the employability strategies implemented by universities. They argue that institutions need to think more carefully about what, and who, are rewarded by such strategies. For example, it is well established that students from low SES backgrounds are less likely to engage with opportunities to gain experience relevant to employment – using career services, non-compulsory work-integrated learning, extra-curricular experiences valued by employers, and student clubs and societies – that can provide valuable networks and experience (Doyle 2011; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Harvey et al. 2017).

Concerns about the impact of social closure are equally relevant to assessment. Students who interact more with their teachers tend to do better, but students from low SES backgrounds are more reluctant to seek academic support than their more privileged peers, because they often lack confidence and self-esteem, and are more likely to question the validity of their questions and how staff might respond (Devlin et al. 2012). Greater focus on inclusive assessment could help to address inequities that lead to disparities in both academic achievement and employment outcomes. For example, scaffolded low stakes early assessment, enables students to develop skills and confidence, and formative feedback and self and peer review can be embedded into assessment processes to ensure that all students have opportunities to learn the rules of the game. Assessment can also be used to ensure that all students engage with learning relevant to developing their vocational aspirations and understanding of the skills and experience relevant to gaining those opportunities (Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021; Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018).

"Fairness" at the expense of equity

The notion of fairness is integral to the design and improvement of assessment practices, but scholars have primarily been concerned with the challenge of constructing "neutral" and "objective" assessment tools (Leathwood 2005). For reasons of fairness, assessment strives to consistently measure student achievement

of learning outcomes, irrespective of the student assessed or the assessor responsible. Historically, and ironically, examinations have been explicitly introduced to eliminate patronage and mitigate advantage afforded by social standing. However, the conditions under which assessment takes place are not identical and assessment that treats all students the same, is by definition, not equitable (Stowell 2004). Students have unique personal histories and lived realities which influence what they know (including their familiarity with the assessment processes) and can do, and opportunities for growth and expression. Those differences influence how students experience and perform during assessment.

Under some circumstances, inequities associated with assessing all students the same are acknowledged, for example, special arrangements are put in place to provide students with obvious and accepted disabilities with fairer opportunities to demonstrate achievement. Likewise, ill-health, family bereavements, and personal crises are commonly regarded as legitimate reasons for special arrangements, such as deferral or reassessment (Stowell 2004). However, other circumstances which are more likely to adversely affect the performance of students from low SES backgrounds are not acknowledged or written into policy. These include the impact of competing family and work responsibilities, which persist throughout a student's enrolment, or the impact of geographical distance which makes it more difficult and time consuming for students to access learning resources and environments. With these examples, one could argue that students have opportunities to adjust their own enrolment to accommodate competing demands (e.g., they can enrol in part-time study). However, other inequalities are not so easily dismissed. For example, students from low SES backgrounds commonly have less educational opportunity prior to entering higher education, and those who are first-in-family, have less support for understanding the "rules of the game".

It is not necessary for students to undertake identical assessment tasks or to produce identical artefacts to demonstrate equivalent achievement of the same learning outcomes, but that is the way in which assessment is most often designed (Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021). While it is commonplace for students to generate a variety of outputs with respect to project work, the same thinking is needed with all major summative assessment tasks. Assessment must enable judgement of whether a student has met the necessary learning outcomes, but the mechanisms or tasks they use to demonstrate those can vary.

Lack of opportunity to understand and portray meaningful achievements

Assessment for learning is a well-established concept, which recognises that assessment can, and should be used to direct students' attention to the achievement of important learning outcomes. Numerous authors have pointed to assessment as a means through which educators can engage students with learning important to employability (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018; Kinash, McGillivray, and Crane 2017), and this is especially relevant for students from low SES backgrounds

because they more often lack awareness of the skills and experiences employers value, or networks that can provide careers advice or connect them with relevant opportunities (Doyle 2011; Richardson, Bennett, and Roberts 2016). Thus, it is especially important that assessment is designed to direct this vulnerable cohort to learning of importance to careers. Unfortunately, research has also shown that students rarely link assessment to employability (Ajjawi et al. 2020; Kinash, McGillivray, and Crane 2017).

As more students graduate from large cohorts, assessment that fails to capture unique achievements becomes increasingly questionable. In addition to failing to account for differences in opportunity and expression, homogenised assessment that involves identical tasks for all, provides students with poor opportunities to demonstrate achievements that distinguish them from peers or predecessors with the same or similar qualifications (Jorre de St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021; Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018). Instead of providing opportunities for distinctive achievement, common assessment practices encourage “sameness” which, beyond the necessary purpose of assuring threshold achievements, has little additional value to students, employers, or society.

Graduates with the same or similar qualifications do not all need to have the same strengths, because they will inevitably gain different roles in which different subsets of skills and personal attributes are most valued. Unlike assessment, employers judge graduates based on different characteristics and standards, because their preferences and the requirements of different job roles and organisations are highly variable. Thus, the ideal candidate for one employer will not necessarily be the best candidate for another.

Given that assessment signals that which is important, what does assessment that values sameness, say about the value of diversity in the workplace, our society and our learning environments? In requiring that students perform the same tasks and be judged against the same standards, homogenised assessment fails to acknowledge the value of different perspectives, skills, personal attributes and experience. This is in direct contrast with professional contexts in which individual differences can be a valuable source of competitive advantage, and diverse collaborations can be leveraged to solve complex problems, drive innovation and build new knowledge (Adams et al. 2011; Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004).

To enable students to utilise assessment for distinctiveness, we also need to rethink the ways in which we enable students to verify and portray their personal achievements to different audiences, for different purposes (Jorre St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021). For example, representation of achievement through academic transcripts provides insufficient detail to enable identification of what a graduate can do. Likewise, where university awards are solely grades based (e.g., based on a Grade Point Average), they provide no context for what was achieved, and only recognise a small number of students, rather than all of those who meet a specific standard. Digital credentials can, however, be constructed to convey the context of achievement, including the standards assessed, and rich artefacts curated by students to evidence their achievements, such as portfolios or videos

(Miller et al. 2017). Valuing distinctiveness may require students from non-traditional backgrounds to be reassured that they do not need to always conform to the norm.

Fostering engagement with assessment

While the shortcomings of assessment can inappropriately limit students, other attributes can foster fuller engagement. The subjective value attributed to a task is important to motivation and the decisions made about engagement with specific tasks (Eccles 2009). Student engagement is bi-directional: curricula that increase achievement and satisfaction through fostering interest, enthusiasm and effort can lead to more of the same, that is, “engagement breeds engagement” (Kahu 2013). Thus, to be inclusive, assessment needs not only to provide equal opportunities for students to succeed, but it also needs to be equally meaningful to them. This requires that students understand the relevance of intended learning outcomes, and that these consider the values and aspirations of learners, and the communities to which they seek to belong. Eccles (2009, 82) suggest that four components contribute to the value of a task: (1) interest value: interest in, or enjoyment gained from the task itself; (2) attainment value: the value an activity has for affirming one’s personal and collective identities; (3) utility value: utility of the task to achieving long term goals or to obtaining rewards; (4) perceived cost: the financial and emotional costs associated with engaging with the activity, as well as the potential opportunity cost, and the potential meaning of the behavior for confirming or disconfirming a salient personal or social identity.

The components proposed by Eccles align with factors known to be important to the retention and success of students. Being intellectually engaged with study, feeling a sense of belonging and feeling supported and able to succeed, are factors that incentivise students to study, whereas fear of failure, emotional health and financial stress, contribute to attrition (Naylor, Baik, and Arkoudis 2018). The costs associated with study tend to be less for students from middle and high SES backgrounds. Such students also have more opportunities to develop identities which support their expectations of success, their sense of belonging in higher education and help to develop their aspirations for life beyond higher education: factors which are likely to contribute to advantage in regards to retention, academic achievement and graduate employment outcomes.

We suggest that assessment which helps students develop their professional identity and understand the relevance of the curriculum and other opportunities to their future aspirations, can help to engage and address gaps in achievement for students from low SES backgrounds. Student-focussed research has shown that students perceive the involvement of industry or the professions in the design or delivery of their learning with credibility and relevance, and suggests that involvement of employers, professionals and recent graduates, and exposure to industry-related experiences can make the curriculum and the achievement of learning outcomes more meaningful (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018). Other studies have shown

that experiences in the workplace can change how students approach learning on campus, because they help students to understand the relevance of their skills and knowledge, and orientate them to careers (Johnson and Rice 2016). Other research examining students experience of extra-curricular strategies designed to recognise and engage students in articulating and evidencing capabilities of importance to employability (i.e. video pitches and digital credentials requiring students to curate portfolios) has shown that students can gain confidence – in themselves, their employability and in their ability to articulate themselves to employers – and greater appreciation for learning throughout their degree (Jorre de St Jorre, Johnson, and O’Dea 2017). While the majority of students enrol in higher education for employment related reasons, employment outcomes are particularly important to students from low SES backgrounds (Raciti 2019).

Assessment that emphasises the relevance of learning outcomes to careers may also contribute to students’ sense of belonging. Students have been shown to perceive teachers who emphasise employability as caring (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver 2018). Positive correlations have been observed between students’ perceptions of their employability, and their perception of their employability skills, knowledge and attitudes acquired through completing their degree (de Oliveira Silva et al. 2019). Thus, in addition to ensuring that students from low SES backgrounds proactively engage in activities that are important to expanding their understanding and development of employability, assessment which develops students’ professional identity, such as through simulation or modelling activities, will likely also contribute to how they value and engage with their broader learning experience and with the assessment itself.

Conclusion

Assessment needs to ensure that all students meet appropriate high standards. However, it must do so in ways that do not provide additional privilege to certain social groups, or which place unnecessary barriers in the way of students meeting these standards. Inclusive assessment means not giving hidden advantage to those who have already benefited. Consideration of assessment for inclusion also provides an opportunity to rethink what is needed to motivate students and engage them in activities which aid their employability.

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