

Opportunities for Social Justice Within & Through Assessment

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I wholeheartedly welcome and endorse this important contribution to the scholarship on assessment and social justice within higher education. For too long there has been a failure to submit assessment practices to rigorous enquiry from a social justice perspective. Such social justice necessarily goes beyond simple notions of ‘fairness’ and assumptions that treating all students the same is a guarantee of fair outcomes. The high stakes nature of assessment, including its role in the formal accreditation of learning, has rendered it immune to the scrutiny that other parts of the higher education teaching and learning processes are rightly subject to. Reports such as this thought-provoking Occasional Paper help to rectify such oversights.

The authors of *Equity and Assessment* pose a simple, but important, challenge: if our higher education colleges include an increasingly diverse and global student population, then why have our approaches to assessment not reflected these changes? Assessment can be a sticky practice, immune to innovation and academics can feel nervous of change lest it be seen as having negative consequences for standards. But actually, it is the contrary situation that we must be wary of: we must be alert to the dangers of any failure to consider changes in how we assess students despite clear changes in who our students are, along with changes in the wider world. In such a situation we fail to adequately prepare our students for that world and its challenges. Assessment practices do not exist in isolation from the world around, and it is critical to social justice to understand such practices as socially situated and socially relevant.

A report such as this provides a much-needed wake-up call to be more aware of the ways in which dominant practices privilege certain forms of learning, and certain types of students. This creates a necessarily uncomfortable position for academics to consider and review their own identity and common practices. No longer is it enough to treat all students the same way and to assume this means practices are ‘fair’. The notion of difference is itself more complex than such an approach recognises, and a key contribution of this report is to problematize the notion of difference within our student population. We must recognise and challenge established practices in which, as the authors argue, ‘different can often be marked as wrong’ (p. 15).

Equity Response

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Central to this Occasional Paper is the idea of culturally responsive assessment, which means far more than simply recognising diversity. Indeed, the authors demonstrate the narrowness and inflexibility that has given rise to, on the one hand, an acknowledgement that students learn in different ways and, on the other hand, an insistence that all students demonstrate their learning the same way. Thus there is a privileging here of certain types of students which goes unacknowledged under the guise of fairness as sameness or identical treatment.

In order to more genuinely reflect the differences among our students the authors suggest we should focus on culture rather than diversity. The argument is compelling: culture offers a more historically-situated breadth of human experience, privilege and marginalisation. Key here is the notion of intersectionality which demands that we appreciate the inseparable nature of different aspects of a person's identity, to provide a more complex and responsive appreciation of who our students are. This is the foundation of culturally-responsive assessment. Such assessment appreciates the complex histories and identities students bring with them to their assessment experiences. It does not see assessment as something done to students, but necessarily involving students in all aspects of the assessment processes.

There are three questions that emerge from this report which I particularly think deserve to be the focus of on-going conversations about how to achieve greater social justice within and through assessment. The first relates to learning outcomes. This paper makes a cogent case that in order for the outcomes of assessment to be equitable and inclusive, students must have some say in the development of those outcomes. There is no way of genuinely claiming to have been responsive to diverse student cultures without their involvement. However, I'd like to go one step further and problematize a little the notion of pre-determined learning outcomes. There is an argument that such outcomes fit well within an audit driven higher education in which we can measure outputs by carefully defining them beforehand. The pursuit of easy, demonstrable measurement becomes an end in itself and learning a poor second. I believe that what I term 'assessment for social justice' requires a loosening of our commitments to pre-determined learning outcomes (McArthur, 2016). If student engagement is to be authentic, perhaps we need to think of spaces for the genuinely unexpected and surprising to emerge? Here we can build on the term *responsive* which is so important to the arguments in this Occasional Paper. Surely assessment must be responsive not only to who our students are, but to what they do while engaging with knowledge within higher education? The processes of learning should be transformative, and thus tricky to predict fully in advance. This is not to argue that there are not reasonable professional or disciplinary standards that must be met, but in the process of doing so our students might surprise themselves and us. We should remain open to such unexpected insights, achievements and perspectives.

The second point for further discussion relates to the increasing use of rubrics in assessment. In many national contexts there has been a significant growth in the use of rubrics within higher education assessment. Rubrics are seen to offer a welcome form of clarity and shared understandings about the components of assessment. However, they can be restrictive and atomise the complexities of higher education learning, breaking complex knowledge into lots of unconnected bits. They can, indeed, also fit well with an audit culture in which minute measurement is more highly valued than complex and diverse achievements. Here the problem rests on pressures to be able to come up with highly precise and differentiated grades. But the research evidence is not persuasive that such precision is possible or indeed desirable (see, for example, Bloxham, den-Outer, Hudson, & Price, 2016)

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Thus, finally, the role of highly differentiated grades needs to also come under greater scrutiny. What happens when students are acculturated through years of education into believing that a mark or grade is a valid reflection of their achievements, rather than the actual skills, knowledge or understandings they have developed? We need to help our students to truly value their achievements as they learn, and as demonstrated through assessments, and to place these in a social context. The narrow focus on marks, or grade point averages, takes attention away from the more important social contributions that students can make through their learning. Here I believe is a major challenge to our prevailing assessment cultures, but one that is fundamental to furthering social justice within and through our assessment practices. In the words of this paper, assessment needs to ‘tell the stories of what students know and can do’ (p. 15).

To be genuinely inclusive of all students requires more than simply their greater involvement in assessment, although that is vitally important. It requires a questioning of a myriad of taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and purposes of assessment. Documents such as this Occasional Paper do not make easy reading, even for those of us committed to greater social justice within and through assessment. We must not under-estimate the magnitude of the changes being suggested here. The challenges are huge. The idea of fairness through assumed sameness is pervasive within society and within our assessment practices, however, this paper ably demonstrates the fallacious nature of such assumptions. The challenge for us as faculty is to comprehend and embrace the transformation of our role if our students are to be more involved in all aspects of assessment. Reforming assessment is not something we do to students: it involves changes not simply in our assessment practices but in how we understand our roles as assessors and as university teachers, and how we understand our relationships with our students.

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References

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