

ASSESSMENT FOR INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Promoting Equity and Social
Justice in Assessment

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



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“HOW TO LOOK AT IT DIFFERENTLY”

Negotiating more inclusive assessment design with student partners

Joanne Dargusch, Lois Harris, and Margaret Bearman

There is increasing impetus to make assessment in higher education more inclusive of diverse student populations. This reflects a broad social movement; for example, Australian higher education institutions are legally obliged to cater for students with disabilities (SWDs) in socially just ways (Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2005). According to Hockings (2010), inclusive assessment is “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” (34). For assessment practices to be inclusive, there is a need for students to be allowed to show learning in differing ways, with options for flexibility and choice (Morris, Milton, and Goldstone 2019). Despite use of tools such as the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (CAST 2018), designing inclusive assessments in higher education remains a challenge (Grimes et al. 2019; Lawrie et al. 2017). There are real world challenges to creating inclusive assessment practices, with assessment processes at universities often highly bureaucratic and perceived as inflexible, reacting to SWDs’ diverse needs through assessment accommodation systems which are sometimes not responsive or make decisions that are not appropriate (e.g., Bessant 2012). Concerns about workloads for staff and the need to align with university and industry expectations impact on assessment design decisions and remain an obstacle to more inclusive and flexible assessment design (e.g., Morris, Milton, and Goldstone 2019). Against, this backdrop of challenge, it is important to look for meaningful processes that can support more inclusive assessment.

It is our contention that real understanding and response to the needs of SWDs is only possible when students have input into the conversation about assessment in ways that influence practice. If assessment is to be designed in inclusive ways that “enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential” (Hockings 2010, 34), teaching staff should be supported to understand the challenges these

students face as they navigate the complexities of higher education assessment requirements and practices. Educators must also be motivated to overcome real and perceived institutional barriers to designing inclusive assessments. Without student engagement, educators must make assumptions about the impact of assessment decisions on students.

Students as partners

Students as partners (SaP) presents a promising way forward in creating a dialogue, where student needs can be better understood and therefore incorporated into assessment design. Described as process-oriented, SaP is “focused on what students and staff do together to further common educational goals” (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017, 2). The call for SaP has been growing in strength, with attention turning to how the inclusion of student voice and partnership practices can influence traditional ways of working in higher education, including assessment practices (Dwyer 2018; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2016; Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2021).

Underpinning successful SaP projects in higher education is what Cook-Sather and Felten (2017, 5) refer to as an “ethic of reciprocity”, foregrounding mutual voices and contributions between students and staff with equal importance attributed to all (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Such a process has the potential to subvert traditional power arrangements and allow participant roles to be renegotiated through dialogue that includes differing perspectives (Matthews et al. 2018). These are worthy and valuable aims, and the outcomes of existing studies have largely been reported positively (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). However, SWDs appear to be seldom included in the small-scale, institutional-level SaP partnerships and projects (Bovill et al. 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017) reported in Australian higher education.

Assessment may present particular challenges for a SaP approach, with strong contextual influences on design processes, such as departmental norms (Bearman et al. 2017). However, including SaP in a dialogue may help lecturers better understand how assessment design impacts students and their learning, potentially bringing new ideas and insights into the design process. Likewise, students may feel more invested in assessment processes, understanding that their perspectives are heard and valued. There are, however, tensions between the various stakeholders’ assessment expectations, including external accreditation requirements, university rules and processes, and students’ understanding of what is fair and reasonable (Tai et al. 2022).

Power inequality is a key challenge for all students. The SaP literature acknowledges the challenge of power imbalances with some researchers describing the “reinforcement of power asymmetries between students and staff” in SaP projects (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2021, 229), framing these as an obstacle that needs to be overcome (Matthews et al. 2018). SWDs may also be unsure how to articulate their problems/challenges in public forums, in ways

that other students understand. Diverse students need to be included in order to address questions of inclusion and equity (Bovill et al. 2016; Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2021). The interactions between staff and students are therefore foregrounded in this chapter, in order to highlight the practical issues that impact on achieving change.

While embracing the potential and necessity for SaP, this chapter examines some of the complex, ambiguous, and inevitable challenges of including diverse student voices in assessment design. While the literature provides a mainly positive view of students as partners, with many advocates discussing benefits (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017), existing empirical studies do not clearly show how change is negotiated between participants in SaP research projects. This chapter draws on data from the project *Reimagining Exams: How do assessment adjustments impact on inclusion* (Tai et al. 2022) to explore how SWDs engaged in workshops and how their suggestions contributed to the more inclusive redesign of exams and other timed assessments. In this project, funded by the Australian National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), students were asked to share their personal experiences of exams and offer suggestions about ways exams could be changed to better suit their needs. We consider instances where students and staff at times struggled to establish a mutuality of purpose and exchange, examining the different outcomes achieved. We present an analysis of these data focussing on the participation process, followed by our reflections on how the aspirational notion of partnership might take account of some of its complexities.

Context of the project

The project took place at two Australian universities, different in physical locations and structures, but both serving diverse student cohorts. In Phase 1, 40 SWDs were chosen to participate in interviews, with those not selected invited to provide a written or oral submission in response to prompts. This chapter draws on Phase 2 data from a series of five “participatory” online workshops conducted at each university, bringing together SWDs, unit co-ordinators/chairs (UCs), accessibility/inclusion staff, and assessment researchers. To explore how exams could be reimagined in more inclusive ways, SWDs were positioned as consultants (Bovill et al. 2016) whose insights might help stakeholders understand the issues and become motivated to change and improve assessments. There were practical goals, including bringing about change within two subject units at each university and the development of a framework to evaluate exam inclusivity and guide change. Students were invited to take part in reflection activities after the workshop series had concluded, designed to elicit their perceptions of the workshop process.

Workshop design

Online workshops were designed to elicit suggestions and recommendations, generating ideas for change. They provided opportunities for participants to speak

openly, valuing the mutual voices and contributions that underpin successful SaP projects (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Participants were sent written materials (e.g., short student narratives), and asked to anonymously reflect/respond in a Microsoft Teams worksheet, allowing alternative forms of interaction and recording thoughts generated outside of each workshop. Workshops 1 and 2 were designed to build relationships and share exam experiences. In workshops 3 and 4, participants considered specific units' exams/timed assessments and discussed potential changes in format, conditions, and mode. Workshop 5 focused on reviewing a draft framework for generating more inclusive exams and future directions.

After workshop 5, students were invited to reflect on their workshop experiences. Set questions were posed about the workshop process and structure, students' level of comfort, workshop resources, and suggestions for other ways to involve students in the work of improving assessment. Additional information about the project's methodology and outcomes can be found in the NCSEHE report (Tai et al. 2022).

Data analysis

The aim of this current analysis was to understand how successfully the SaP had promoted practical dialogue, with all students and staff given pseudonyms. We wished for insight into how participating SWDs, Dalton (Psychology) and Veronica (Psychology) from University 1 (U1), and Pete (Business) and Francine (Allied Health) from University 2 (U2), engaged in workshops designed around SaP principles and how their interactions contributed to the group (see Table 19.1).

Analysis of workshop transcripts was focused on the interactions between participants and the roles of students. We took student utterances, understood here to mean every spoken contribution in the conversation, as our unit of analysis and sought to examine what prompted students to speak, what they said, and how staff reacted to what they said. A general thematic analysis was conducted on the reflection transcripts to gain insights into participating students' perceptions of the process. Table 19.2 lists the codes applied for each different analytical focus.

TABLE 19.1 Workshop student participants

<i>University</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Discipline area</i>	<i>Workshops attended</i>	<i>Completed reflections</i>
1	Dalton	Psychology	5	Y
1	Veronica	Psychology	5	Y
2	Pete	Business	3	N
2	Francine	Allied Health	2	Y

We employed thematic analysis, with some supplementary counts of prevalence. Data sources were: transcripts of workshop 3 (U1, $n = 8$ participants; U2, $n = 11$) and workshop 4 (U1, $n = 8$; U2, $n = 9$); and written ($n = 2$) and spoken ($n = 1$) student reflections.

TABLE 19.2 Analysis focus and related codes

<i>Analysis focus</i>	<i>Codes</i>
How did students join the conversation? What contributions did they make and how did staff respond?	Response to a direct question; unprompted Contribution: affirmation/agreement; personal story; comment; suggestion Staff responses: problematise; consider, accept; ignore; revoice
How did they feel after the workshops?	Affordances (e.g., being heard), challenges (e.g., lack of student voice)

How students joined the conversation

Each conversational turn that occurred directly prior to student contributions was coded in order to identify any patterns in how students entered, or were invited to enter, the conversation. Three of the four students (Veronica, Pete, and Francine) responded to questions asked specifically of them in the majority of their turns. These questions were predominantly from the research team, with some questions posed by unit coordinators.

Unprompted contributions were infrequent for three of the four participating students (Pete, Francine, Veronica), indicating the level of hesitancy for these students in entering the conversation uninvited. Dalton's approach contrasted sharply with his peers, and he was confident and willing to make frequent unprompted contributions, responding to questions posed to all students in the workshops, as well as those asked of the whole group. At times, Dalton interrupted staff members and other students, but these interruptions may have occurred due to difficulties arising in the on-line workshop environment where it was sometimes difficult to hear others and see whether other participants were waiting to speak.

Student contributions and staff responses

Data show that student contributions to the workshops were rich and varied, and included pleasantries, affirmations/agreement, personal stories, comments, and suggestions. Pleasantries helped to establish relationships, while affirmations and agreement usually blended into suggestions or personal stories designed to help other participants understand the speaker's feelings about assessment. The following personal story was offered in response to one UC's exploration of the need for shorter exams, including splitting exams into two parts:

Dalton: The idea of going into a room and sitting there for two or three hours or even doing it ... It is painful. Also, because you've got this huge stress that what if something goes wrong, and I get a headache, or I get a nosebleed? Whatever the scenario goes through one's head, you end up, I think, losing so much productive time and effort that you could have been studying effectively, just worrying about concerns that could be addressed in another way, I think, that would eliminate those concerns.

TABLE 19.3 Proposed changes to assessment

<i>Categories of change</i>	<i>Examples – student suggestions</i>	<i>Examples – staff suggestions</i>
Assessment – structure/content	Break up exams into separate parts/chunks Smaller, interrelated assessment pieces Multiple opportunities to meet the same outcomes	Break up exams into two parts Allow students choice between paper based and computer formats in exam Include scenario-based questions Reduce number of questions Ensure topics are not unnecessarily assessed Changes to task language
Assessment – task type/mode	Replace large exams with weekly tests or one-on-one discussions	Open book exams Option to read questions aloud (practical exams)
Assessment – conditions/timing	Flexible exam start times Breaks between exam parts	Flexible exam start times Give students more time to complete exams Short breaks during exams as a standard feature Additional set up/reading time before exams
Assessment – conditions/access	Different modes of assessment instructions	
Assessment – conditions/use of technology	Use of interactive, automated online quizzes for exam preparation	Automated online quizzes embedded in weekly tutorials
Improvement – study advice	Explicit exam preparation instructions	Completion of practice exams for formative feedback
Assessment design roles		Student input into question design

Students took on the role of expert in the workshop, with weight given to the value of their lived experiences in understanding the challenges SWDs negotiate within assessment. Given this framing, comments like the following were a common contribution:

FRANCINE: I feel like all my assessment tasks have been pretty relevant to what I've had to go out and do.

Students and staff also provided a range of concrete suggestions for changes to timed and other types of assessments, with categories of suggestions shared in [Table 19.3](#). There were some common suggestions from the two groups, with most suggestions related to task structure, types/modes, and conditions.

Illustrative examples of staff responses to student suggestions

Across workshops at both institutions, the group most readily took up student suggestions when they offered easily actionable ideas or when the students were

perceived as having discipline-specific insight. Persistent challenges included staff concerns about academic integrity and discipline/accreditation requirements and institutional policy was frequently cited as a roadblock to change. As presented in Table 19.2, staff reactions were coded as: problematise, consider, accept, ignore, revoice. However, these reactions themselves could lead to different outcomes. For example, when ideas were problematised, the student suggestion was debated, leading to a discussion of various possibilities.

Two contrasting excerpts are shown here from the category of problematise. In the first excerpt, the student suggestion for change is listened to, but the ideas are lost in the subsequent discussion:

DALTON: ... for one of the level two psych units, ... there were 10 or 12 small assessment pieces. I think that in a way works better, because then each piece feeds into the next, and because each piece is fairly small, you get the feedback really quickly. ... could you break some of the assessments into smaller pieces, smaller chunks, where the person knows that this is the content for the two weeks they've got to do, and they'll do an assessment on it?

Unit Coordinator 2 considers Dalton's suggestion, indicating she will "think about it, for sure", ultimately, the idea was blocked by other participants, including a comment that "our policy goes against that". While no clear actions for change resulted from this part of the conversation, alterations to the structure of the exam grew from suggestions at other points in the workshops. These changes did not involve major adjustments to assessment across the unit (as suggested by Dalton). Planned possible changes included introducing an exam break and using short answer, rather than essay-style questions to reduce the overall exam time. As was witnessed in many exchanges across the workshops, policy/imposts on lecturers took priority over students' suggestions.

A contrasting excerpt is offered here to illustrate how interactions between students and staff could lead to a more collaborative outcome.

FRANCINE: Sorry, I don't know if this is right, but I know when I was doing my practical exam something that I really wish I could've done was read out that form out loud ... I couldn't speak it, it wasn't going into my head.

UNIT CHAIR/COORDINATOR 1: In the past students have gone into a room at the very start and have been able to set themselves up in there. That could possibly be an option.

RESEARCHER 2: I'm wondering, I don't know how the practical exams take place, but the examiner could simply just ask the student if they wanted to read it out loud as well too, the prompt.

UNIT CHAIR/COORDINATOR 1: They're all in, for optometry, they're all in a hallway quite close to each other. If they did read things out, the person next to them will hear it. We can't let that before they go in but definitely when they enter the station, it's an option. They might not be aware that they can do that.

RESEARCHER 1: Yes. I wonder how things will go if there is still a need for more online versions of these things versus face-to-face things because obviously, like what Francine said about reading it out, if you're at home by yourself then there's no barrier to being able to talk through stuff, which there obviously is if you're in a crowded space with other students around.

The participants problematised Francine's practical solution in order to identify how this could be implemented. In contrast with excerpt 1 (above), participants saw possibilities for change that did not compromise the assessment's integrity. In the next offering of the unit, students were permitted to read aloud each practical exam scenario (one of several changes made in response to suggestions).

Staff suggestions

Staff proposed substantive changes to assessment designs during the workshops (see [Table 19.3](#)). In three of four units discussed, assessment changes were planned for the next term in direct response to workshop suggestions. In the fourth unit, the UC's concerns about academic integrity meant the exam remained the same, with the approach to exam preparation being the focus of change. In most cases, and particularly at U1, planned changes did not need formal permissions through academic committees, but could be changed by unit coordinators/chairs as part of routine updates.

How did students evaluate their SaP experience?

Students' reflections indicated that they valued the opportunity to have their voices heard, with few feedback mechanisms available for SWDs within the university system. For example, Dalton indicated that in the past, "I have felt voiceless in many ways as a student".

Students commented that there was a need for more sustained focus on student stories, case studies, feedback, and interactions in the workshops, with a strong message that more collaboration with SWDs would provoke change. As Francine asserted, there was a need for:

More students in meetings. I understand others were invited but did not attend but it seemed trying to fix issues without those who suffer the issues in the room is kind of counter-intuitive, although I also understand the research team does have this information from surveys.

Whilst students indicated that they personally felt comfortable and unintimidated when engaging the workshops, they hypothesised that to get greater participation from a range of SWDs, "other" ways for students to interact would be needed to ensure that workshops were a "safe space" (Veronica).

Reflections on SaP in designing inclusive assessment

The project presented in this chapter had at its core aspirational notions of partnerships promoted in current research (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2021) and sought to include SWDs as partners to address questions of inclusion and equity (Bovill et al. 2016). The research was underpinned by the understanding that inclusive assessment design is only possible when SWDs are deeply involved in the process in an environment where all participants are committed to change. It was anticipated that SWDs would use their lived experience to help lecturers recognise the impacts of assessment design on students and their learning, bringing new ideas and insights to the design process, helping re-imagine the ways in which assessment could be more inclusive. However, our results show that this aspiration was variably and incompletely achieved.

Power imbalances can create obstacles in SaP projects (Matthews et al. 2018), and structural issues of power were evident in this project at the level of relationships within the group, as well as at a university systems level. Despite trying to create an environment that foregrounded mutual voices and contributions between students and staff, students [with the exclusion of Dalton] predominantly waited for questions/statements to be directed at them from the researchers to enter the conversation. In many instances, teaching staff members problematised student suggestions as a first response. There is a need for more active listening, and a focus on unpacking and understanding, in keeping with Cook-Sather and Felten's (2017, 5) "ethic of reciprocity". At the same time, it may be necessary to recognise the limitations of SaP, that not all partnerships will be fruitful, and it is hard for any educator to open their work for scrutiny.

This study also illustrated how university processes can act as roadblocks to change. The motivation for change was tempered, and often dampened, by long timelines required for approvals, reviews, and committee procedures. It is noted that one of the universities in the study (U1) was more process-driven, with UCs giving heavy emphasis to policy and compliance. It followed, therefore, that the immediate changes that were made to assessments at U1 were restricted to assessment design aspects within the UC's control. System and institutional-level change is necessary to address equity problems; long term changes should not be ad hoc, or exist in discrete units, and tensions between responsiveness and compliance should be acknowledged and rectified. Prioritising equity within assessment, rather than equality (Harris and Dargusch 2020; Tierney 2013), may assist with this shift. It is also worth considering that sometimes staff perceptions of policy may not be the same as the policy itself; departmental engagement may also be necessary (Bearman et al. 2017).

SWDs' substantive and useful contributions in our SaP project demonstrated the importance of their input into assessment decisions if we want to move towards equity. However, when involving diverse SWDs, physical and psycho-social challenges that might exist around their participation must be proactively addressed. The online workshops in this study were scheduled with consideration

of students' work and study commitments, and included other affordances (e.g., physical safety during the pandemic, participants' choice to have their camera on or off). Despite these advantages, it is possible that the online environment may have impacted group cohesion. Consideration should therefore be given to how to involve SWDs in ways that allow them to engage comfortably in various modes and spaces/places. This might include, as these students suggested, different ways of interacting (e.g., writing into the chat instead of speaking); it might also mean more flexibility around attendance. Consistent with our SaP methodology, we believe future projects would benefit from student involvement in the project design to ensure that eventual mechanisms for student engagement with staff allow full participation for all within the group.

There are many reasons to continue research into, and use of, SaP processes. The types of discrete, small-scale studies reported in the literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017) are limited in scope and generalisability. Studies such as this one provide insights into the ways in which SWDs can be invited to help staff overcome assumptions about how assessment design impacts on students, and the ways in which issues of power can influence such exchanges. If, as Dalton remarked, SWDs such as himself are "voiceless" in HE, then partnership practices are a key first step to providing a more inclusive university experience, but all partners must be committed to encourage students' ideas and actively listen to them. To reach this aim, universities must overcome a tendency to generalise about student needs and provide many more opportunities to include diverse student voices in co-generative, dialogic approaches to assessment design.

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