Designing Assessment Activities for All: Presenting the Perspectives of 'Historically Excluded' Students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, the University of Bristol

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Overview

Assessments are the cornerstone of the Higher Education (HE) experience, yet they are "neither value-neutral or culture-free"[1]. The parallel phenomena of universalisation and massification have increased diversity in the student body, yet assessment practices have not evolved at the same speed to promote genuine inclusion. Despite efforts to widen participation, marginalised groups continue to face poorer graduate outcomes. Furthermore, negative experiences with assessment and feedback may contribute to a sense of exclusion through mechanisms of alienation, loss of agency, and self-esteem[2]. This research employs the term 'historically excluded' to refer identification with groups that have been historically excluded from full participation and engagement with the rights, privileges and opportunities afforded within HE[3].

This exploratory study aims to promote the student voice within the development of inclusive assessment practices. The Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching's 'Student Fellowship' scheme employs students to work on existing strategic priorities – such as 'Designed for All Assessment Activities' in this case – ensuring that the student voice is not only heard but actively shapes culture and practice at the University of Bristol. This research output is a product of co-creation with students that seeks to contribute to the broader conversation on transforming assessment practices to promote inclusion and fairness.

Methods

Inclusion criteria for the study was current undergraduate and postgraduate taught students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, the University of Bristol who self-identified as 'historically excluded'. Participants were recruited via campus posters, email bulletins, and student society networks.

Data were collected through semi-structured focus groups with a single-category design, emphasising shared experiences rather than segmented identities. Questions centred on definitions of 'inclusive assessment', experiences relating to different types, formats, and timings of assessment, and evaluation of feedback and grading rubrics. A card sorting exercise (Fig. 1) was used to facilitate more in-depth discussion on these three key features of assessment.

Data from the focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using Thematic Analysis[4].

RQ1. How do historically excluded students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol define inclusive assessment?

RQ2. How are the types, formats, and timings of assessment activities related to inclusivity by historically excluded students within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at the University of Bristol?
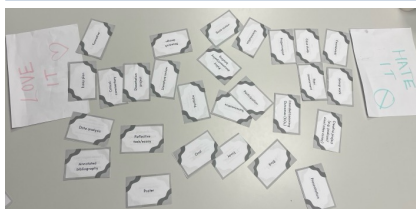

Fig. 1 Card sorting exercise

Results

RQ1: Broadly, students' experiential definitions of inclusion were related to four criteria:

- **Accessibility:** Students operationalised 'accessibility' in terms of the clarity of information received in relation to assessments, such as question wording and assessment criteria.
- **Empowerment:** The data identified choice and freedom as key substantive mechanisms through which empowerment might be actualised in assessment practices.
- **Sense of belonging:** Students made a conceptual link between assessment practices and the sense of belonging to an academic community at the University of Bristol. This was based upon the institutional values that assessment practices communicated to students and how this constructed in-groups and out-groups.
- **Wellbeing:** Linking non-inclusive assessment practices with negative wellbeing outcomes, students emphasised that design of assessment ought to consider the psychological effect on students.

RQ2: The data evidenced that differences in experience, culture, and social circumstances produced distinct learner identities, which points to the need for variety and flexibility in learning approaches. Insights were generated in relation to three features of assessment.

- **Assessment types (learning purpose):** 'Historically excluded' students feel less able to translate the expectations of assessment to their own performance. The data reinforced the value of formative assessment but pointed to the need for these to better link to summative assessments within the same unit, as well as developing assessment literacy in a broader context.
- **Assessment formats (task):** 'Historically excluded' students understood that different assessment formats assess different skills, however felt that prevalent expectations of prior learning disadvantaged them. They also felt that skills development was often secondary to learning content in the classroom, which translated into a negative view of variation in task as this broadened the suite of skills they were expected to demonstrate without the appropriate support.
- **Assessment timings (temporal spread):** Generally, 'historically excluded' students cited factors such as expectations of prior learning and lack of clarity on the expectations of assessment as influencing a preference for regular, lower-stakes assessment. Furthermore, end-of-unit summative assessments were linked to rote learning, which purportedly made students feel less able to make links between units in a modularised curriculum.

Recommendations for practice

The data conveys user-end perspectives on inclusive assessment. Recommendations for practice are developed in conversation with the literature on inclusive assessment in the UK HE context. This discussion is structured by three key elements that form students' experiences of assessment (Fig. 2).

Learning culture: Assessments occur within a prevalent learning culture. An inclusive learning culture promotes equitable access, collaboration, and belonging, which impacts assessment practices and outcomes. The growth of online learning and growing staff-student ratios has had a negative effect on student engagement and belonging. The data suggest that physical space and effective working relationships with student-facing staff are critical in shaping student experiences of assessment.

Communicating expectations: The data provides evidence for the existence of a 'hidden curriculum'[5], which disadvantages 'historically excluded' groups. Communicating the expectations of assessment, through instruments such as ILOs and assessment criteria, are vital for inclusivity but often lack clarity and
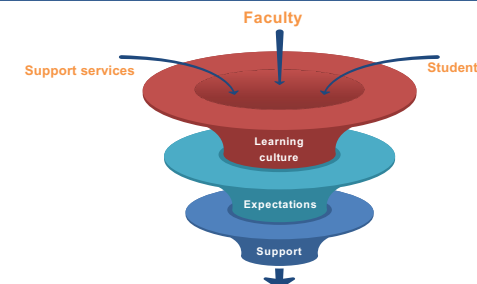

Fig. 2 A relational view of students' experience of assessment

accessibility. Relatedly, feedback couched in jargonistic terms was found to be disconnected with the practical aspects of improving work. Co-creative practices can address these issues through better integration of the perspectives and needs of end-point users.

Asking for help: Access to support is crucial for equity and inclusivity in assessment, yet not all students feel able to navigate the system on an equal footing. Where differentiated sources of support are available, their diffuse nature makes it harder for students to find the right support from the right service at the right time. Better integration of support services into teaching could make these more intelligible for users. Furthermore, pedagogic approaches that promote active learning and metacognitive development may help to improve understandings and navigation of support.

Conclusions

This study highlights the need to operationalise inclusive assessments in a manner that reflects the understandings and requirements of end-users. Students' success is linked to their experience of assessments, their understandings of expectations, and ability to navigate the appropriate support, making it imperative that these processes are inclusive. More work is needed to ensure that expectations of prior learning and normative learning cultures do not create means of disadvantage for certain groups of students. Further research should be conducted across different disciplinary contexts to deepen localised understandings of how features of assessment relate to inclusivity.

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