

Transforming inclusive assessment

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Inclusive assessment? Can it be inclusive?
Should it be inclusive?

1. Inclusive assessment as fair procedure
2. Towards transformative change
3. Strategies for policy change
4. Final words by students



Inclusion in tertiary education?

Reproduction: widening access to the same learning opportunities for more diverse cohorts

Transformation: seeing diversity as enriching society – new ways of being, doing and knowing



Assessment as an engine for inclusion

Assessment 'drives' learning and defines futures – it determines how we think about success

Assessment is often the last frontier for inclusion, but what if we started equity work from assessment?



The paradox of inclusive assessment

Assessment is largely considered as an act of measurement – not as a matter of inclusion or equity
(McArthur, 2016, 2018; Nieminen, 2025)

Just assessment relies on fair procedures that provide the same opportunities for all students

All students complete the same assessments against the same standards, marked similarly



Adjustments as a part of fair procedures

Who *deserves* adjustments?

Are they *reasonable*?

Do they provide an *unfair advantage*?

Are they *cheating*?

” The University has a tradition of encouraging academically qualified persons with disabilities to seek admission to its programs. (...) In assisting students with disabilities, the University’s *criteria for academic excellence will not be compromised*.

Nieminen & Eaton, 2023



Yet procedural justice has not led into the inclusion it promises

Assessment continues to be cited as an exclusionary practice

Review spanning 42 qualitative studies with the voices of 868 disabled students – historically accumulated knowledge about inclusion



Access to unjust systems of assessment

” When I found out about the possibility of adjustments, and when I finally got the permission, I cried out of relief. (...) Thank you so much for assessment adjustments. I don't know what I would do without them, if I would even study here anymore.

Kaarna, a student with dyslexia in Nieminen, 2023



Exclusion through inaccessible assessment

“ I wish I could have more breaks during an exam and not have to sit still for 3 hours in front of the computer...
Anna in Kourea et al. 2021, p. 117

“ Accessing assessment adjustments as “a troublesome process” in itself
Goegan et al., 2020, p. 5

Marginalisation: diversity as a threat to assessment

” It does cause physical separation in that respect. You don’t get to do things the way everyone else does. Writing them with extra time and not writing them with class. You can’t fix that but it’s always a little frustrating because you don’t want to be ‘abnormal,’ you want to be ‘normal.’ You want to fit with the rest of the class.

Terry in Ertem, 2011, p. 108

Time for new approaches?

Despite decades of investment in fair assessment procedures, assessment too often fails to recognise the diversity of students' abilities

These 'fair' systems often even *cause* inequities: diversity is seen as a problem to be managed rather than a source of novel value

This failure is *not* because of effort but because we have been unable to think about the 'inclusivity' of assessment beyond fair procedures

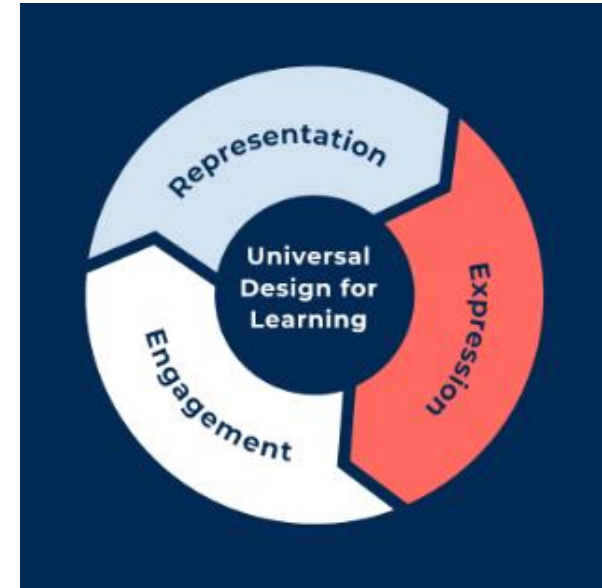
Kleinlein, 2026; Lingard et al., 2014 McArthur, 2016; Nieminen, 2020, 2023, 2025; Ydesen et al., 2022



Push towards inclusive design

There has been a growing, inspiring body of work on inclusive assessment design, aiming to *design out* the accessibility barriers in assessment (Graham et al., 2018; Tai et al., 2023)

- Accessible language and notations
- Digital accessibility of assessment
- Multimodality of assessment
- Multiple forms of assessment beyond testing
- Formative assessment for student engagement



www.cast.org/what-we-do/universal-design-for-learning/

...yet these approaches often remain as *non-performatives*

British tertiary education deploys institutional mechanism that substitute social justice action with *messages*

UDL often remains non-performative, unlike assessment adjustments, which lead to “procedural and compliance-based mechanisms”

(TAPPS Project Output 2)

Koutsouris et al., 2025 – referring to Sara Ahmed’s work

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

BERJ  BERA

The absent presence of disability in British higher education

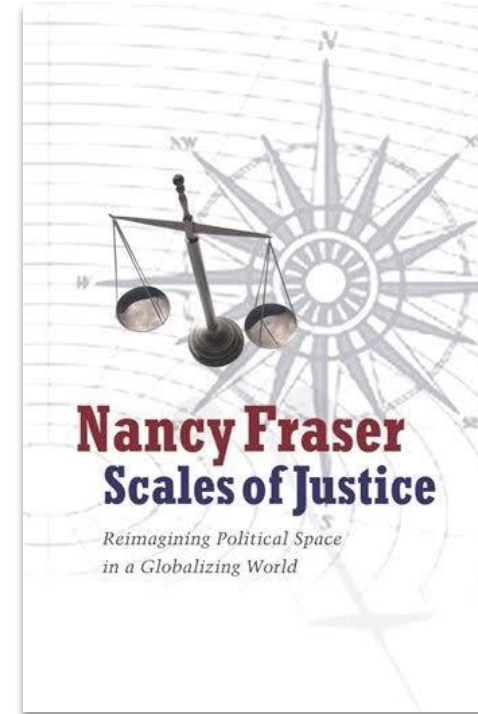
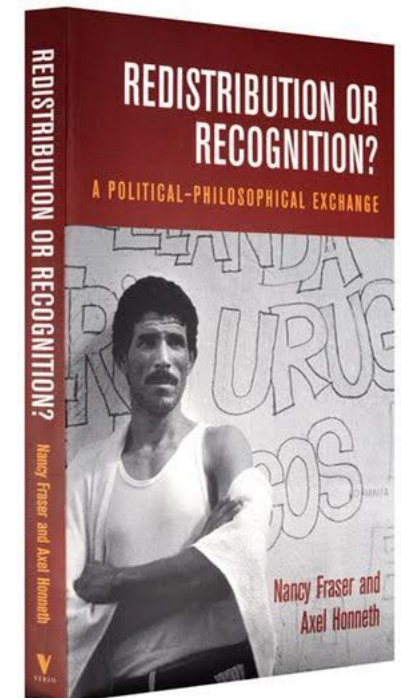
G. Koutsouris¹  | L. Stentiford¹ | E. Dimitrellou¹  | Z. Yu¹ |
Pujaningsih² | N. Azizah²



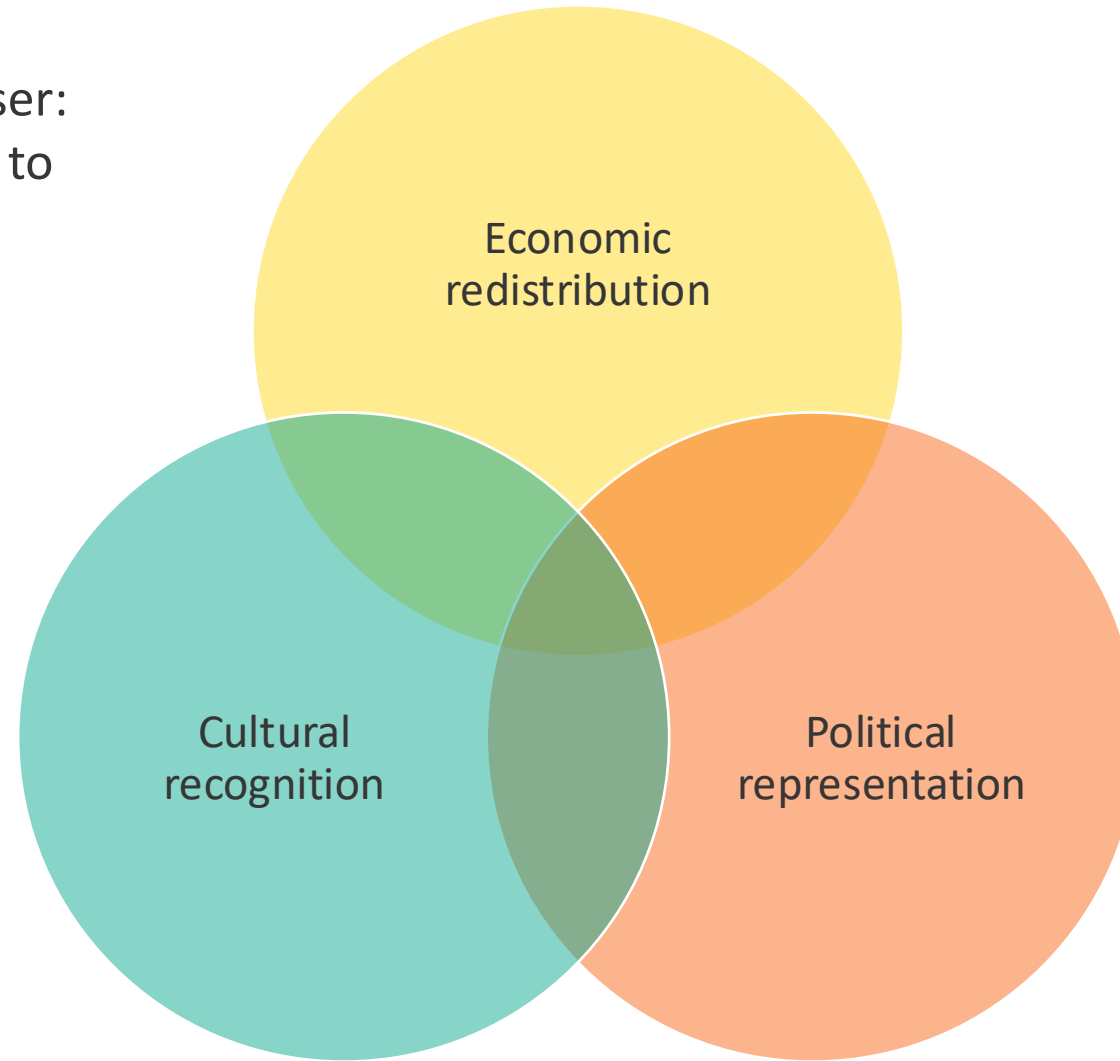
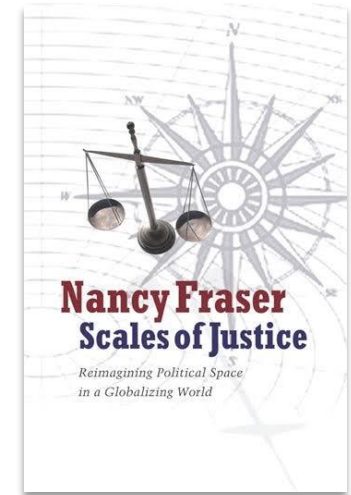
Change so far has been largely **affirmative**, leaving assessment regimes as they are with adjustments – such as providing disability adjustments in testing without questioning tests and exams themselves

Further affirmative change might add to our workload with little change in action and outcomes

Time for **transformative** change – questioning the regimes of assessment?



Thinking with Nancy Fraser:
what can assessment do to
promote social justice?



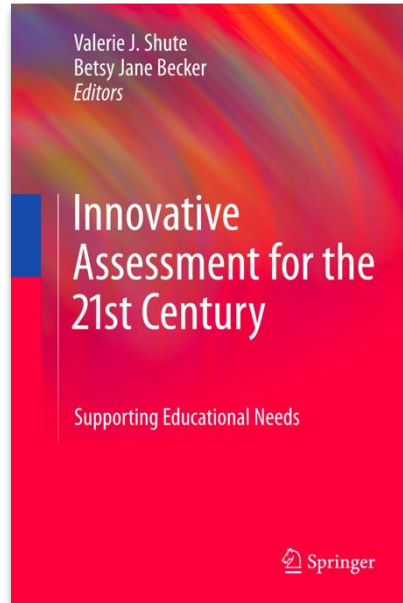
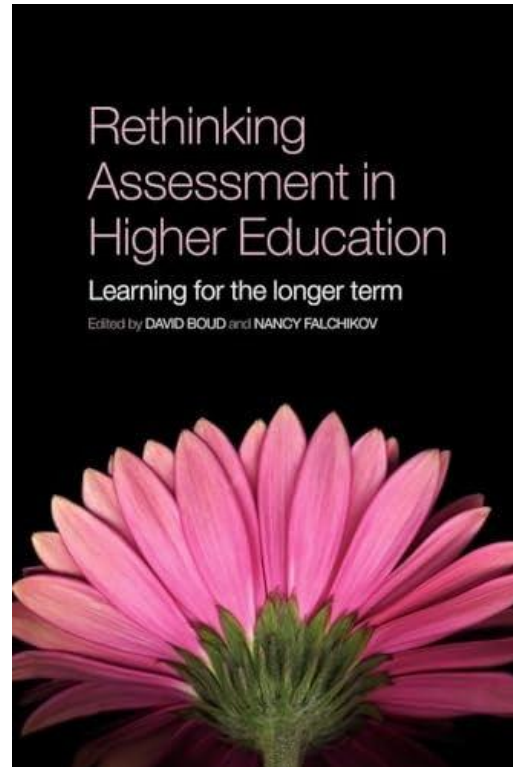
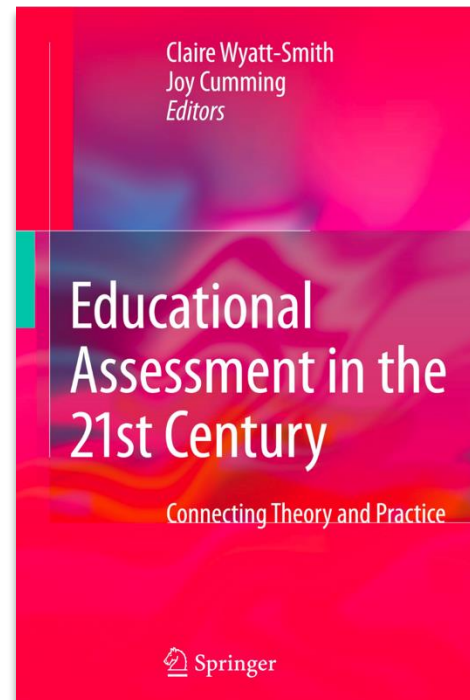
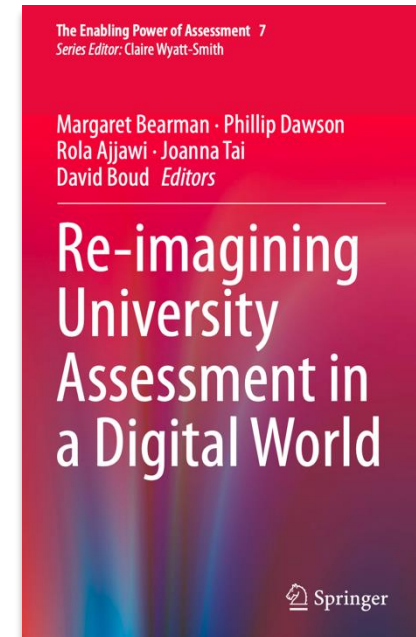
Towards transformative change in assessment

Assessment transformation is already taking place: opportunity to 'rethink' with equity, justice and inclusion in mind



The great assessment rethink

How to measure learning and protect academic integrity in the age of ChatGPT



POLICY ARTICLE

HIGHER EDUCATION

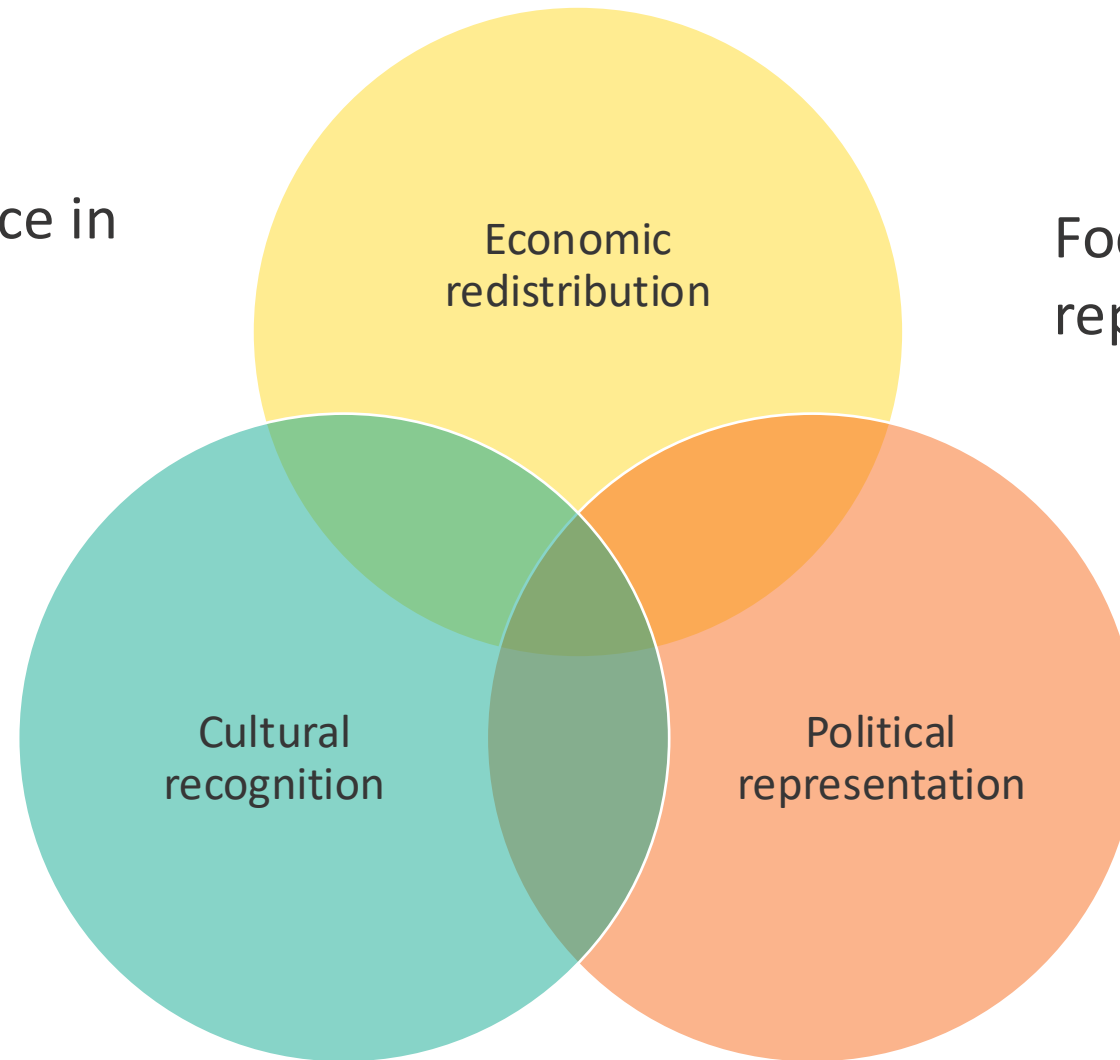
Generative AI use and misuse call for assessment reform in higher education

Growing misuse of, and unequal access to, AI tools requires universities to rethink how they evaluate learning

Igor Chirikov¹, Ivan Smirnov^{2,3}, René F. Kizilcec⁴



How to promote justice in
assessment beyond
procedure?

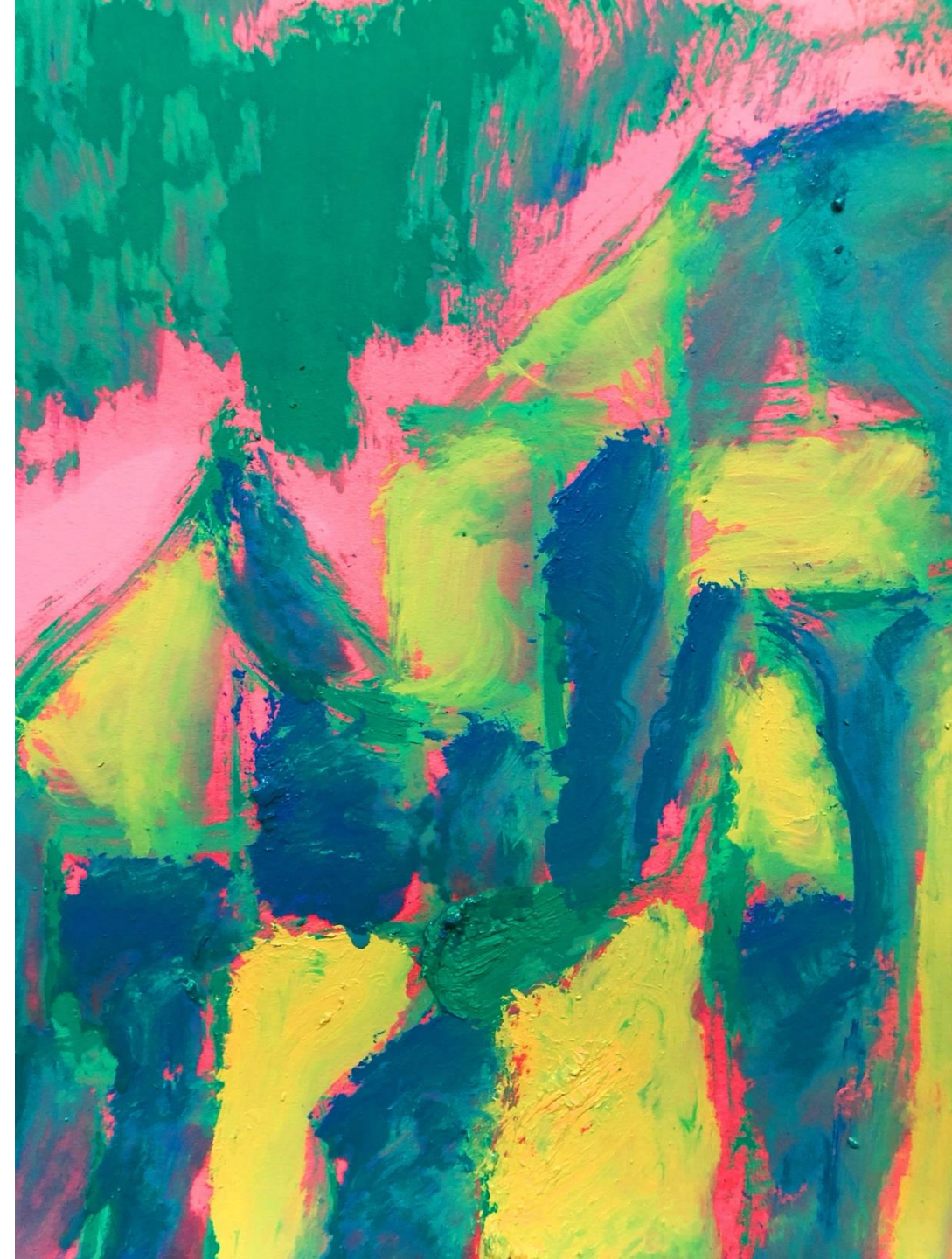


Focus on recognition and
representation

These goals have to be designed into the daily, mundane
practices of assessment

Cultural recognition

Redetermining whose ways of knowing, being and doing are recognised in achievement



Recognising students as individuals

” I was forced to conform to this box. It doesn't depend on our abilities, our disabilities, anything. It's just, 'Do this. Every other student has to do this.' I feel like there was very little wiggle or room. *There was very little room for me to be me.*

Riley in Nieminen, Dollinger, & Finneran, 2024

There's often little room in
assessment for embodied
knowledges, disabled knowledges,
Indigenous knowledges...

Revisiting diverse assessment
approaches: self- and peer-
assessment, portfolios, images,
videos, podcasts, performances...

Diversity Is an Asset to Science Not a Threat

Margaret A. L. Blackie

Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University



” Pictures and colours help us, students with dyslexia, a lot. Nowadays, I colour-code my materials, particularly if there’s much mathematical yarn. I use green, turquoise... All the colours are in use. It’s much easier to read than just black and white. (...) An image can be worth more than a thousand words.

Yö in Nieminen, Reinholz, & Valero, 2024



Toward authentic adjustments

Rarely do adjustments signal to our students that their diverse ways of being, knowing and doing are appreciated

In your discipline/context, how could assessment adjustments be rethought as authentic, disciplinary practices, that prepare students for their futures?



Choice, flexibility and optionality

“Flexibility remains largely procedural, reactive, and compliance-driven”
(TAPPS Project Output 2)

The potential of flexibility for recognising diversity

Student agency and reflection: why did I choose this assessment format and how does it allow me to represent my skills?



Political representation

Redefining who has a say in how, why and when assessment is conducted – something that students can very rarely influence



Assessment and reasonable adjustments are predominantly designed *for* students, not *with* them

The principle of inclusive design:
nothing about us without us



Student partnership is not an intervention but a risky, ethical practice

The outcomes of student partnership are always uncertain but can be optimised:

- Safe participation
- Training and support
- Iterative design over time

REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

Review of Education ■ BERA

Student partnership in assessment: What works, for whom, why, and under what circumstances?

Juuso Henrik Nieminen¹  | Mollie Dollinger² | Tracy X. P. Zou³



Assessment: *to sit beside*

As much as you can, watch students... but also, don't just watch as if you are behind a glass screen, but actually get in there and engage with the student while they're doing things. It's always infinitely better when you have your assessor hearing your thought process and asking questions as you go, rather than just standing back watching the skill and then going, 'Mm, you did this wrong, you did that wrong'.

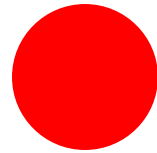
Remy in Nieminen, Dollinger & Finneran, 2025



Strategies for transformative change in policy

Towards program-wide approaches

How to promote inclusion within a given module or task?

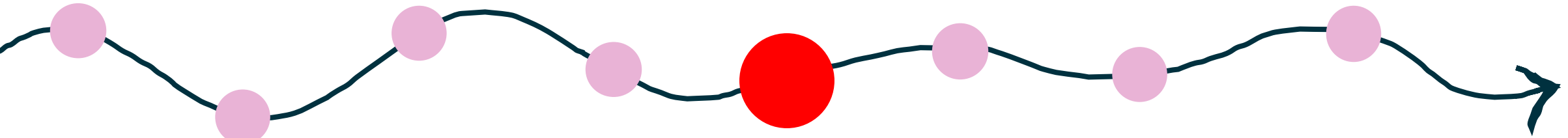


How do adjustments support a student to succeed in a particular task?



Towards program-wide approaches

For staff: Across a *program*, where are the opportunities for inclusive assessment? How are module and program outcomes mapped?



For students: What does this particular task or adjustment tell me about myself as a future professional?

Reward, document and publish innovative practices

How to provide meaningful incentives for staff members to redesign their assessment practices?

What are the assessment-specific challenges at the sector?

Good work might already take place in disciplinary/professional contexts!

Very little evidence of inclusive assessment policymaking processes and *actions*

Opportunity to provide globally impactful case studies and to share good (and bad!) practices

Nieminen & Ruttenberg-Rozen, 2026

Nieminen & Moriña, 2026



Build clear indicators for success

How would we know assessment is inclusive?

How would we know an inclusive assessment policy is of high quality? How would we know it is enacted in practice?

What counts as evidence? Who decides?

What are baseline expectations, what are markers of excellence, or signs of risk?

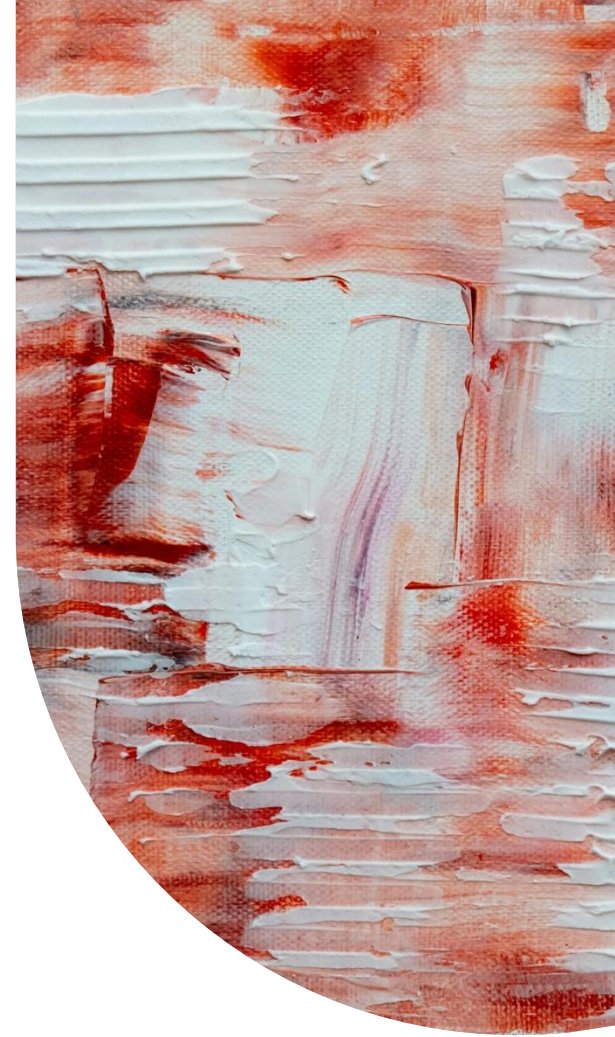


Provide space for gatherings

Arrange space for gatherings, for different people, tools and ideas to come together – students included

Researchers can help, but probably cannot solve your problems!

Prepare to work with dissensus



Inclusive assessment for *staff*

Assessment must be inclusive for staff, too!

Asking teachers to do *more* is unlikely to lead to sustainable, equitable change

Transformative change is likely to involve shifts in workload allocations and priorities

My two cents:

Something has to go, and that something is grading/marking on a fine-detailed scale...



Radical honesty

Not every assessment task will nurture diverse ways of being, doing, knowing

In many cases, assessment must *exclude*

The duty to explain all perspectives and to problematise claims to knowledge so that students can evaluate these claims

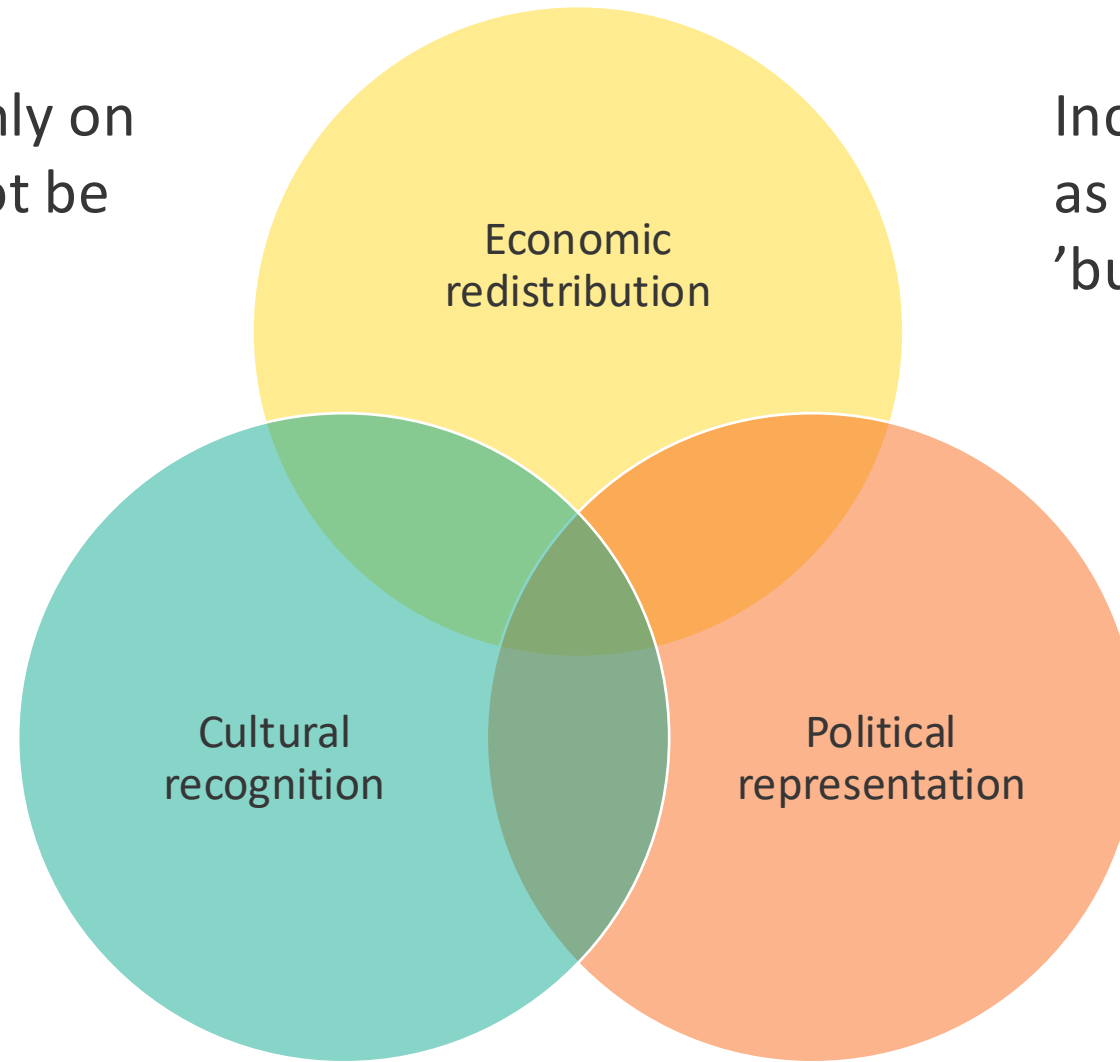
Bruce Macfarlane, 2025



Wrapping up

Attempts to focus only on redistribution will not be enough to transform assessment

Inclusive assessment not as a spectacle but as a 'business as usual'



Time to think big?

It is ... peculiarly ironic ... that at the very time when these institutions are facing a challenge to change on what is arguably an unprecedented scale, they are being caught up as never before in the trammels of formal assessment which are binding them ever more tightly to the status quo.

Broadfoot, 1998, p. 157



When asked about how assessment could be made more inclusive, 139 disabled university students did not wish for fancy tools or expensive technologies but...

Nieminen 2025



From bureaucracy to human contact

” In university, I’m always, and in every situation, lost in the crowd. Individual encounters with teachers are rare. Personally, I’d need proper conversations, perhaps in a small group with a professor... We could propose targeted questions, perhaps even meta questions about studying, and engage with academic discussions and debates. (...) Currently, it’s easy to feel a strong sense of not belonging here.



From busy work to meaningfulness

”

Assessment should support working life. It should target the particular competencies of one's profession, related to whichever direction each student is heading towards. (...) This way, you'd actually remember what you learned after a month, or maybe even a year! A traditional exam guides you towards a pressure to perform, and when you're done, you can simply forget everything you've learned.



From tradition to critical thinking

”

It's interesting, the times we're living in. I've often thought about the university as an institution. Is it possible to reform it so that it would better serve the present and the future? (...) I wish assessment weren't so strongly focused on performativity, as the purpose [of university] is that we grow up as learners and produce new knowledge, something that was never there before us. Assessment should enable a space where new knowledge can be created.



Real opportunity for change

What do you *care for* in assessment?

What would you place *value* on?

What should be valued *less*?



Thank you!

Any thoughts, questions, ideas?

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