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# Assessment for Inclusion: rethinking inclusive assessment in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

How could assessment inclusively consider the diversity of students? In higher education, the most common answer is: through individual assessment accommodations. Inclusive assessment design has also been promoted to foster accessibility for all students. However, both of these approaches have largely drawn on the procedural understanding of 'inclusion' as 'enhanced academic outcomes'. In this conceptual study, a critical, socio-political approach to inclusive assessment is taken instead, considering assessment in its wider context of academic ableism. The rationale for Assessment for Inclusion (Afi) is formulated to harness assessment to promote the inclusion of marginalised students as fully accepted, agentic members of academic communities. Five practical principles for promoting Afi are introduced: rethinking accommodations, anti-ableist work, celebration of human diversity, student partnership, and interdependence. This study suggests that if mass higher education truly wishes to include students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, assessment needs to be rethought from the viewpoint of inclusion.

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Inclusion; assessment; assessment accommodations; inclusive assessment; student agency

## Introduction: inclusive assessment in the age of exclusion

Slee (2019) calls our time 'an age of exclusion' when discussing the inability of inclusive education to challenge the profound exclusion of disabled people. Slee's rather bleak essay provides an opportunity for reflection on higher education, as despite the massification of higher education and the diversifying of the student population that has followed, modern societies have been unable to truly include disabled people<sup>1</sup> in academia (Brown and Leigh 2018; Dolmage 2017). In higher education, disabilities are largely seen as deficits that need to be accommodated, rather than understanding them as something that enriches academia and should thus be celebrated (Moriña, Sandoval, and Carnerero 2020). In this study, 'inclusion' is considered as a radical, political quest to include disabled people in higher education: not as 'the Others' (Allan 2010) but as fully accepted, resourceful and agentic members of academic communities (Gibson 2015).

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Historically, *assessment* has struggled to meet the needs of student diversity in higher education (McArthur 2016), especially from the viewpoint of disabilities (Milic Babic and Dowling 2015; Fuller et al. 2004; Hanafin et al. 2007; Madriaga and Goodley 2010). In fact, assessment is deemed so inaccessible for disabled students that accommodations such as extra time or separate testing rooms are commonly administered in higher education institutions around the world. Often, support for disabled students is abridged solely for assessment-related accommodations (e.g. Brandt 2011; Nieminen 2021). Traditional forms of assessment such as exams carry heavy historic weight in higher education: ‘Under this weight, it is easy for the needs of disabled students to become invisible’ (Hanafin et al. 2007, 443). Indeed, exclusion is deeply woven into the fabric of what we call ‘assessment’. Through assessment, disabled students come to understand themselves as ‘different’, ‘special’, and ‘lesser than other students’ (Hanafin et al. 2007; Nieminen 2020), often in front of other students such as when the exam time is over and everyone leaves the exam hall – except the ones with extra time, who still remain seated (Goode 2007). This is ableism in practice: assessment is designed for a certain ideal of a normal, able student (Dolmage 2017). While assessment has largely contributed to the *exclusion* of disabled students, this study reconceptualises assessment as a vehicle for radical inclusion (cf. Allan 2010; Gibson 2015). This quest inherently understands assessment from a socio-political approach, within the ‘age of exclusion’.

The ways to address the inclusion of disabled students in assessment have traditionally been arranged into two approaches. First, individual assessment accommodations can be administered to ensure that all students have the same opportunity to succeed in assessment (Kivijärvi and Rautiainen 2020; Weis and Beauchemin 2020). This approach aligns with the *medical model of disability* that understands disability as an individual deficit that needs to be considered, cured, and fixed (Oliver 1996). In higher education, the medical model manifests as disabled students requiring a diagnosis, which is then aligned with appropriate accommodations practices; hence, the analogy to medical practices that are sought to cure individual illnesses (‘your bone is broken, so you need a cast’). In higher education, disabilities are largely seen as a negative feature that obscures the results of assessment, thus challenging its validity. Nieminen (2021) stated that the medical model might be overemphasised in contexts where assessment is characterised by traditional practices such as exams – and indeed such practices have been named to dominate in higher education in general (Boud et al. 2018).

It has also been emphasised that assessment should be designed to be inclusive for all students in the first place – not retrospectively (Hanafin et al. 2007). This idea aligns with the *social model of disability* which acknowledges that disabilities are constructed in their sociocultural and historical contexts (Gabel and Peters 2004). From the viewpoint of assessment, the social model emphasises that assessment *produces* disabledness rather than only reveals it. However, while many scholars have called for inclusive assessment design (e.g. Brandt 2011; Hanafin et al. 2007; Madriaga and Goodley 2010), to date, very few studies have reported such assessments (Nieminen and Pesonen 2020; Tai, Ajjawi, and Umarova 2021). Overall, in assessment, the social model-minded studies have emphasised inclusive assessment design through diverse assessment practices that provide multiple ways for students to represent their knowledge and thus reduce the need for individual accommodations (Tai et al. 2021; Waterfield and West 2008).

What is lacking is conceptual rigour in how two substantially different approaches to inclusive assessment – inclusive design and individual accommodations – could

contribute to inclusion. For example, assessment accommodations have been connected with ableism in how they internalise the structural issues of assessment in students' mental states (Nieminen 2021). At the same time, they are said to empower students by enabling them to show their true skills in assessment (Kivijärvi and Rautiainen 2020). What should teachers do: use them or not? How? Researchers have not reached a consensus in answering these questions (see Griful-Freixenet et al. 2020). Furthermore, the tension between individual accommodations and inclusive assessment is commonly presented as an issue about *assessment design*. Mechanical approaches to inclusive assessment (namely, the focus on which assessment practices to use and when) might undervalue the dominance of the medical model: assessment accommodations are commonly mandated in legislation, while inclusive assessment design is not. As Nieminen (2021) noted, disabled students are predominantly seen as the problem to be fixed, not the assessment systems themselves. Furthermore, procedural approaches to inclusion might overemphasise 'enhanced academic outcomes' rather than 'radical inclusion' as the ultimate goal of inclusive assessment.

In this conceptual study, the notion of Assessment for Inclusion (Afi) is formulated to harness assessment as a vehicle for inclusion, reconceptualising the division between inclusive assessment design and individual accommodations. Afi builds on the purposes of assessment as explored in earlier literature. Commonly, assessment is framed through the purposes of certification (*Assessment of Learning*), learning (*Assessment for Learning*) and sustainability (*Assessment as Learning*) (Boud et al. 2018). McArthur (2016) offered another crucial rationale for assessment that has greatly inspired the current study, Assessment for social justice, that emphasised the role of assessment in contributing to just societies. Afi adds the rationale of inclusion to this list of assessment purposes, reminding us that inclusion needs to be explicitly designed into assessment in order to truly consider the diversity of students. In this study, Afi is theorised through a socio-political approach, as assessment takes part in higher education, which is socio-historically situated in the 'age of exclusion' (Slee 2019; see also Dolmage 2017; Gibson 2015). Five Afi principles are identified as drivers of more inclusive assessment practice. First, Afi is defined, along with the theoretical frameworks of positioning and agency that provide an analytical background for the study.

## **A socio-political approach to assessment for inclusion**

In this section, (i) the importance of this socio-political premise is discussed, (ii) a resistance model of disability is introduced to align with the socio-political approach and (iii) the theoretical framework of student positioning and agency is presented to offer conceptual tools to, finally, (iv) formulate the framework for Afi.

Both traditional approaches to inclusive assessment – assessment accommodations and inclusive assessment design – are predominantly focused on finding mechanical solutions to foster inclusion, such as how to design effective assessment accommodations (Weis and Beauchemin 2020) and how to design inclusive and diverse assessment practices (Waterfield and West 2008). Both approaches, ultimately, have understood the exclusion of disabled students in assessment as an issue that can be solved through assessment design. Here, there is a danger of *pedagogisation* (Popkewitz 2008). Pedagogisation refers to the processes through which societal and political issues such as poverty,

exclusion and segregation are abridged into something that can – and should – be addressed through the modern expert knowledge on pedagogy and cognition. As such, the concept critically challenges a contextualised instructional design that has offered us the language of pedagogy in modern education, stripping ‘pedagogy’ of its critical and political roots. And indeed, inclusive design initiatives have been claimed to have forgotten the activist roots of disability rights movements (Hamraie 2013), trading activism with the promises of neuroimaging and cognitively-activating pedagogy (Nieminen and Pesonen 2020) and market-driven, performative approaches to inclusion (Stentiford and Koutsouris 2020). Unfortunately, mechanical practices alone are unable to challenge structural exclusion and enhance the life quality of disabled people (Hamraie 2013).

To prevent such pedagogisation, the present study draws on the resistance model of disability (Gabel and Peters 2004). This model emphasises disabled students’ collective agency in determining their own life and identity. It highlights the communal nature of resistance: ‘Resistance theory recognises agency in the sense that individual resistance operates across the individual and collective levels and is enacted through critical self-reflection coupled with action’ (Gabel and Peters 2004, 594). The resistance model rejects the understanding of disabled students solely as an oppressed minority and underlines the political struggle and system-wide assessment transformations *by* and *with* the disabled people themselves. Herein lies the risk of resistance: Resistance can be unpredictable, as students ‘push towards dominance while also attempting to pull society into disabled people’s way of seeing’ (Gabel and Peters 2004, 595). The resistance model does not reject the medical and social models but builds on them. The model recognises the crucial importance of medical knowledge, accommodations and embodiment (medical model), while also acknowledges that disabilities are constructed within their socio-historical contexts (social model). What it adds to the picture is the self-determination and agency of disabled people themselves. Next, the theoretical concepts that enable us to apply the resistance model in assessment are introduced: student positioning and agency.

### **Conceptual background: student positioning and agency**

The concept of *positioning* is used to analyse disabled students’ socio-cultural, -historical and -political roles and responsibilities in higher education and assessment. This concept is used similarly to Foucault’s concept of subject positioning, understanding positions as discursive positions through which students build understanding of themselves (Foucault 1982). These positions regulate what can be said, done, and thought through them (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2008). For example, the position of ‘the student’ offers students a certain socio-historical repertoire of discourses (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2008) in assessment, which differs from the one of ‘the teacher’. Such positions are understood as rather stabilised: the position of ‘the student’ takes different shapes in various socio-historical contexts (such as in different countries and eras), yet it is unlikely to change overnight. Often, positions are naturalised as they appear ‘normal’ and uncontestable.

A recent study (Nieminen 2021) outlined the socio-historical positioning of disabled students in assessment in Finnish universities, analysing the positions of ‘assessee’ and ‘impaired’. First, the position of ‘assessee’ understood disabled students as the *objects*

of assessment rather than as active participants. Through this position, disabled students could attend exams and *perform* rather than show their unique strengths through diverse assessment practices. Second, the position of ‘impaired’ framed disabilities through the medical model: disabled students were seen as ‘patients’, as adequate assessment accommodations needed to be validly paired with certain disability types. Moreover, an ‘othering’ discourse was identified to maintain this position, as disabled students were not only seen as disabled but substantially ‘different’ from other students. This study suggested that in order to attend higher education, disabled students need to take part in various assessment situations in which they must operate through the narrow positions of ‘the disabled’ and ‘the assessee’. Even though Nieminen’s study was conducted in Finland, the positions of ‘assessee’ and ‘disabled’ are likely to be rather universal. After all, assessment in higher education is largely based on exams globally (Boud et al. 2018), as is the medical model in providing support for disabled students (Järkestig Berggren et al. 2016).

Within positions, a certain kind of *agency* is constructed. Agency is defined through the repertoire of discourses that is enabled for students as they partake assessment through their positioning, and as students’ capacity to renegotiate their own positioning (Burr 2015). This concept enables critical tools to examine how assessment restricts disabled students’ agency by only offering them certain kinds of ‘othered’ and ‘special’ ways of participating in assessment, thus restricting their full inclusion in higher education. Discursive understanding of agency focuses on ‘the social, cultural, historical and political structures of assessment and feedback that either hinder or promote and construct “agency”’ (Nieminen et al. 2021, 11), thus focusing on the collective agency as constructed for disabled students. Nieminen (2021) argues that the dominant positionings of ‘assessee’ and ‘disabled’ restrict disabled students’ agency, as they only enable a predetermined set of social practices that exclude disabled students from the ‘other, capable students’. While these non-agentic positions are prevalent, they can be critically examined, challenged, and even redefined (Burr 2015; Foucault 1982). Thus, fostering disabled students’ agency in assessment becomes a quest to promote their possibilities to actively and meaningfully participate in assessment by disrupting the potentially harmful positions predetermined for them. This idea links to the resistance model of disability, and to collective acts of agency.

### **Defining assessment for inclusion**

Finally, the framework of Afi is formulated as a major contribution of the present study. This framework is student-centred as it places students at the very centre of inclusion work. While this study takes the specific focus of disabilities and disabling assessment practices, Afi holds promise for equity-driven inclusion work in assessment in general (e.g. anti-racist work). Similarly, even though the idea of Afi is formulated in the context of higher education, it also offers tools to understand inclusive assessment at lower levels of education.

*Assessment for Inclusion* (Afi) refers to the purpose of assessment as fostering radical inclusion by acknowledging marginalised students (e.g. disabled students) as fully included and agentic members of higher education communities. Afi draws reflexively on both individual accommodations and inclusive assessment design. Afi is a critical and resistive approach to assessment: it recognises the prevalent socio-cultural, -historical and -political

positioning of marginalised students in assessment and, if needed, explicitly disrupts such positioning by promoting student agency. Afl builds on a collective understanding of agency: it cannot be conducted *for* students but always *with* them.

## Assessment for Inclusion in practice: five principles

Next, five practical principles are presented in striving for Afl. So far it has been argued that Afl turns assessment into a vehicle of inclusion by disrupting the ableist positioning of ‘the disabled assessee’, and the restricted agency it enables for disabled students. Next, the theoretical framework of Afl is put into practice. The five principles, presented in no specific order, bring together relevant literature from various fields, such as assessment research and disability studies. The principles represent distinct yet overlapping strategies that need to be considered while implementing Afl. Each of them aims to contribute to the collective agency of disabled students in assessment. Table 1 sums up these principles.

### Rethinking the assessment accommodation system

In ‘an age of exclusion’, there is always a need for certain accommodations for disabled students; no disability activism would deny this (Gabel and Peters 2004). However, the dangers of overemphasising the medical model of disability are well reported (Oliver 1996). This criticism applies to assessment accommodations in higher education. The accommodation process relies on medical knowledge that overrides disabled students’ own knowledge about their condition (Hopkins 2011). Furthermore, accommodations have been stabilised as a certain menu of services that itself is rarely problematised (Nieminen 2021). This might in turn result from the stabilised menu of assessment practices. The first Afl principle recognises the need for accommodations for disabled students (and beyond) but problematises the dominance of the prevalent assessment accommodation model.

The menu of assessment accommodations should be expanded and diversified beyond the ‘traditional’ set of extra time and separate testing rooms, and so forth. Denhart (2008) shed light on the complexity of the needs of students with learning disabilities and identified the needs for (i) self-understanding, (ii) writing assistance, (iii) strategies for

**Table 1.** Assessment for Inclusion: five principles for practice.

Principle	How does the principle contribute to disabled students’ agency and inclusion?
Rethinking the assessment accommodation system	Widening the repertoire of accommodations enables many forms of participation and thus agency.
Anti-ableist work	Shifting the focus from assessment design into re-shaping the ableist contexts of assessment. Anti-ableist work provides a fertile ground for inclusive assessment to flourish.
Student partnership	Reminding that Afl is not done <i>for</i> students but <i>with</i> students. Co-designing assessment directly promotes accessibility and student agency.
Celebrating human diversity in assessment	Recognising marginalised forms of knowledge in assessment. The agency of students is promoted as they are enabled to grow as future professionals through assessment with their diverse strengths and needs.
Interdependence	Emphasising the communal aspect of Afl. Without interdependence, ‘inclusion’ is likely to remain individualistic and performative, creating a false sense of inclusion.



organising one's studies, and (iv) visual strategies, in addition to the need for traditional accommodations. In assessment, the traditional extra time and separate testing rooms are unlikely to address all these complex 'needs' or their socio-political and -historical origins. Of course, diversifying assessment practices offers a fruitful ground for developing assessment accommodations as well. For example, authentic assessment (Villarroel et al. 2018) that taps into authentic ways of being a professional in one's field, might offer possibilities for flexible, diverse and creative *authentic* accommodations. These kinds of adjustments would reflect the authentic flexibility that one might face after graduation, in opposition to 'inauthentic' accommodations such as 'extra time in exams'.

The overall accommodation system could be problematised from the viewpoint of *who it is for*. Currently, the assessment accommodation institution is administered almost solely for students with a diagnosis (be it psychological and/or medical; a specific learning disability, physical disability, mental health issue, chronic pain, illness ...). It must be asked: As we focus our gaze on diagnosis-based support, what are we not seeing? Intersectional approaches will be useful to shed light on systemic exclusions related to assessment. Often, the mere notion of 'individual needs' ignores the systemic discrimination in terms of, for example, race, gender, class, and disability, and their intersections. As written assessment has been shown to cause barriers for learning not only from the viewpoint of ableism but also racism (Mahboob and Szenes 2010), it should be asked whether a widened set of accommodations could be provided for marginalised students beyond 'disability status'. For example, might accommodations offer affordances for meeting the needs of first-generation students in written assessment with the required linguistic resources (cf. Mahboob and Szenes 2010)? This idea might sound out of place in modern higher education where institutionalised support in assessment is strongly tied with the idea of psychological and/or medical needs. However, the argument of 'some adjustments are always needed' (e.g. Griful-Freixenet et al. 2017) might ring true beyond what we now call 'adequate reasons for applying for assessment accommodations'.

Yet the accommodation system produces specific barriers for disabled students. As Goode (2007) aptly states, disabled students need to battle the system. Hopkins (2011) describes the path of least resistance that disabled students need to follow to thrive in higher education; often, staying on this path means that to prevent hassle and forced disclosure, disabled students choose not to apply for assessment accommodations. Aff initiatives should then strive to make individual accommodations easily available by drawing on *proactivity*. The current medical model requires students to initiate and maintain the accommodation process. It would be a strong message by higher education institutions if accommodations were offered in a proactive manner; if they were 'pushed a little', as a participant in Nieminen's study (2020, 41) put it. Proactive approaches are likely to be effective for marginalised students with less resources to initiate the accommodations process that includes both a diagnosis process and a further application process – both of whom might be both time- and energy-consuming (and in many countries, costly). Proactive approaches would reduce the risks related to student-initiated disclosure of disabilities as there is always a power imbalance in such situations (Nieminen 2020): to access support, students are required to disclose their personal information to staff which already creates an asymmetrical interaction, often repeated multiple times over one's studies (Goode 2007).



Assessment accommodations rely on ready-made, binary categories to describe students' medical and psychological states. Based on these categorisations, certain students are segregated from others in assessment situations, both socially and physically (Madriaga and Goodley 2010). Instead, Afl relies on the *fluidity* of disabilities and neurodiversity, as these are not dichotomous states but conditions that take their shape over various assessment environments during one's studies (Barnartt 2016). Barnartt (2016) challenges us to reconsider disabilities not as fixed categories but as roles and statuses that certain people need to undertake as they take part in disabling practices. While some disabilities and conditions are more stable than others, there is always a sense of fluidity in how disabilities are made visible in certain social practices: yet to access assessment accommodations, a student needs to undertake the fixed role of 'a student with a disability'. Perhaps flexible assessment accommodations could draw on options in both assessment and accommodations (Hanafin et al. 2007). There is a specific need for flexible procedures for situations in which students' needs change and intersect – without lengthy application processes. For example, a student on the autism spectrum might develop symptoms of burnout and depression during their studies. In this case, not only the categories of 'disability' and 'mental health' but also their fluidity and intersections should be met with adequate accommodations and support.

### **Key points for practice**

- Assessment accommodations are predominantly offered as a predetermined menu of practices. To meet the needs of the diversity of students, this menu needs to be diversified.
- Accommodations should be flexible to avoid simplistic and categorical approaches to student diversity.
- Proactive approaches to accommodations would prevent situations in which students do not apply for assessment accommodations.

### **Anti-ableist work**

To prevent the pedagogisation of inclusive assessment initiatives, Afl needs to include practices beyond assessment design, as inclusion is inherently a matter of politics (Gibson 2015). Active anti-ableist work is needed to render ableism in assessment visible and to challenge it (Baglieri and Lalvani 2019; Dolmage 2017). Such work is directed not only at assessment but at its socio-political contexts. Anti-ableist work builds more fruitful ground for inclusive assessment by turning the prevalent student positioning visible and by promoting student agency within such positioning. In contexts where assessment design already aligns with the purposes of learning and sustainability, anti-ableist work might be needed more than actual redesign of assessment to promote inclusivity. While the resistance model implies that disabled students themselves are important actors in activism concerning themselves, too often it is disabled students themselves who are responsible for anti-ableist work (Goode 2007). Afl extends this responsibility to teachers and higher education institutions. There is an extensive amount of research on critical pedagogies concerning disability to draw on in this

quest (Baglieri and Lalvani 2019). Here, some promising approaches are introduced specifically in the context of assessment.

AfI cannot rely solely on individual teachers' actions but requires faculty- and university-wide policies on anti-ableism. First and foremost, *disablism*, direct discriminating actions against disabled people (Dolmage 2017), needs to be challenged. For example, negative attitudes have been reported to lead to teachers not providing assessment accommodations even when they are officially administered (Brandt 2011; Nieminen 2020). However, such a scenario is not only about 'negative attitudes' but about systemic discrimination. What is needed is a critical and transparent conversation about disability, neurodiversity, accessibility, and ableism in relation to assessment (Baglieri and Lalvani 2019). Such a conversation needs to be maintained in faculty and department meetings concerning assessment, grading, and feedback policies, especially in contexts where the prevalent policies do not currently enable AfI. Who is the 'normal', 'able' student that assessment is designed for – and who might be excluded in the process? Assessment design should always include the viewpoints of disability, neurodiversity, and diversity more generally. Anti-ableism needs to rely on systemic top-down approaches: structural ableism needs to be challenged through systemic changes in assessment. For example, teachers need to be systematically trained about AfI and its socio-political underpinnings.

A crucial part of anti-ableism is the demystification and destigmatisation of assessment accommodations. Accommodations are predominantly mystified: there is often little information available on these 'special' practices for a small and seemingly insignificant group of students (e.g. Nieminen 2021). Inaccessibility and lack of information is an important factor for students not to apply for accommodations (Brandt 2011; Hanafin et al. 2007). The strong stigmatisation of disability and neurodiversity is reflected in assessment, and disabled students might not apply for accommodations amidst the fear of being labelled as 'different' (Goode 2007; Nieminen 2020). To reduce the risk of stigmatisation, assessment accommodations must be normalised. Information about the application process should be added to all course instructions and syllabi; accommodations should be explicitly *talked about*. This can be done by raising awareness and visibility of neurodiversity and by bringing it into the centre of assessment policy (Milic Babic and Dowling 2015).

A key mechanism for active anti-ableism is the representation of disabilities and neurodiversity. Brown and Leigh (2018) ask: where are the disabled and ill academics? The same could be asked about students. Disabled students might feel they are the *only* student with dyslexia, or the *only* one with depression – the 'special cases' (Nieminen 2020, 42). Problems arise as disabilities and neurodiversity are dominantly framed as a deficit in relation to assessment: they are only brought up when discussing support or hindrances. Representation can be promoted through teachers' own disclosures, as this sets a powerful example and shows that no student is left alone. Of course, teachers must also take part in risk-benefit analysis amidst the ableist structures of higher education and societies at large (Brown and Leigh 2018). Disabilities can also be represented in assessment tasks by diversifying the people represented in study materials such as in authentic assessment tasks. To summarise, as often noted, representation matters – and so it does in assessment.

### Key points for practice

- While striving for AfI, one needs to take part in socio-political discussions and activism about assessment policies.
- Teachers need to be trained in inclusion in assessment. Discrimination needs to be actively challenged – and framed as such.
- To work as intended, assessment accommodations must be destigmatised. This means that they must be actively framed as ‘business as usual’. Information about accommodations needs to be present and accessible.
- Representation of disabilities and neurodiversity in assessment breaks stigma.

### Student partnership

A profound issue concerning both assessment accommodations and inclusive assessment design is that these practices are predominantly designed *for* disabled students: students are the objects rather than active agents in the design process. Disabled students are rarely heard in assessment design in higher education, at least when it comes to reporting such initiatives in research (Nieminen and Pesonen 2020). The *Students as Partners* (SaP) philosophy offers a valuable approach to tackling such issues. SaP sees students as meaningful collaborators in teaching as partners (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011). While SaP has gained considerable attention, it has rarely been connected with assessment (Matthews et al. 2021). Matthews and colleagues (2021) highlight that combining assessment and SaP would disrupt the prevalent structures of power. Here, SaP is used as a mechanism to disrupt the positioning of ‘the disabled assessee’ by directly promoting disabled students’ agency over assessment design (cf. the resistance model of disability).

SaP could be incorporated into inclusive assessment design by drawing on dialogue and trust (Matthews et al. 2021). As both teachers and students are invited to co-design assessment, the prevalent roles of ‘the assessor’ and ‘the assessee’ are disrupted, opening a reflexive space to promote inclusivity. The SaP model could be used to develop novel, student-driven assessment practices that support many purposes of assessment – not only AfI but AfL and AaL as well. While all students should be welcomed to participate in inclusive assessment design, extra attention needs to be given to inviting marginalised students into the co-design process (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2019). Otherwise, equity work might only reach ‘the usual suspects’ (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2019). This is detrimental to determining whether the co-designed assessment and feedback practices are truly inclusive. According to Mercer-Mapstone and colleagues (2019), special attention must be paid to *advertising SaP* (accessibility should be noted through, e.g. plain language, readability with assistive technology), *student ambassadors* (disabled students hired as accessibility experts in assessment design), *recognition* (payment for the SaP process), and *targeted student invitation* (all students are welcomed to participate, but disabled students are specifically invited to share their views). SaP models should not, however, force students to disclose their disabilities (cf. Goode 2007). For example, SaP workshops could include opportunities for anonymous online participation. A warm and welcoming atmosphere around SaP models is crucial in equity-oriented initiatives (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid

2019). Importantly, the inclusivity of the SaP process itself should be evaluated by disabled students themselves.

Assessment accommodations can also be co-designed. This way, SaP enables disabled students agency over accommodation design. Co-design of accommodation challenges the strong boundaries between disabled students and the experts who traditionally make decisions over accommodations, understanding that students themselves have valuable knowledge about their own conditions. Accommodations have drawn on psychological approaches by determining whether disabilities and accommodation types match, and whether such alignment would promote student performance (as predominantly measured through summative tests; Nieminen 2021). Much less attention has been given to goals beyond academic performance, such as well-being, motivation, belonging and indeed inclusion. Overemphasis on ‘academic performance’ in assessment accommodations can be seen as ableist. This overemphasis distorts our understanding of what kind of support disabled students themselves need in order to be fully included in academic communities. Combining SaP and assessment accommodations provides an understanding of how these practices could be developed to consider these socio-affective aspects as well: how accommodations could promote disabled students’ belonging and positive identity construction. SaP might enable us to explore new possibilities beyond traditional accommodations, and to extend these from summative assessment to formative and sustainable assessment practices, as well (Brandt 2011; Hanafin et al. 2007).

While multiple SaP models have been introduced with various levels of student autonomy, it is inherent to all these approaches to include risks (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011; Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2019). As disabled students gain more agency over assessment, they might not simply do what we as educators would wish them to. Instead, students might disengage, slack, cheat, or completely redefine the purposes of assessment: partnership in equity work is a risky business!

At the same time, SaP offers valuable affordances for developing students’ assessment and feedback literacies (Smith et al. 2013). As disabled students are not simply the objects of assessment but engage meaningfully in co-designing disciplinary assessment practices (e.g. what do academic standards and criteria mean in certain contexts and how knowledge and skills could be assessed based on such standards), their agency in assessment is fostered (Nieminen et al. 2021). This is exactly what assessment and feedback literacies are about: not only procedural knowledge about how assessment works but critical reflexivity over the mechanisms and purposes of assessment (Smith et al. 2013). Through fostered assessment and feedback literacies, disabled students gain agency over the expert knowledge in assessment that has traditionally defined their educational pathways. Simultaneously, teachers can develop their assessment and feedback literacies while co-designing AfI practices. Certainly, teachers might learn valuable lessons about inclusivity of assessment from disabled students – the experts in the accessibility of assessment.

### ***Key points for practice***

- Students should be seen as partners while designing both assessment accommodations and inclusive assessment design.

- Teachers should make sure that disabled students have their say when co-designing inclusive assessment. This requires a safe environment.
- Inclusive student partnership offers affordances for developing the assessment and feedback literacies of both students and teachers.

## Celebrating human diversity in assessment

‘Celebration of human diversity’ is a catchphrase used by many higher education institutions (Stentiford and Koutsouris 2020). However, traditionally, disabilities have not been something to ‘celebrate’ in assessment; instead, student diversity needs to be ‘tackled’ through extra resources (namely, accommodations). To meet goals such as ‘inclusion’ or ‘social justice’ (McArthur 2016), assessment needs to value human diversity and capabilities.

This is where the study by Bearman and Luckin (2020) about assessment and Artificial Intelligence (AI) comes in useful. Bearman and Luckin argue that in the modern world, assessment needs to emphasise those complex and multi-faceted skills and capabilities that are inherently *humane*. If AI could succeed in an assessment task, the task does not fulfil this purpose. They pinpoint three elements of such assessment that hold promise for Afl: meta-knowing, evaluative judgment, and personal epistemologies. The elements are ‘very human – unique, contextualised, based on past experiences and full of personal meaning’ (Bearman and Luckin 2020, 56). These ideas are extremely powerful when thinking about student diversity, as higher education produces future professionals who need to apply their skills and capabilities in their own personal ways. When assessment allows disabled students to demonstrate their personal epistemologies, disabilities become strengths; diversity and neurodiversity become not obstacles but necessities, as all knowledge is always demonstrated through personal epistemologies (Moriña, Sandoval, and Carnerero 2020). The neurodiversity movement has resisted the stigma around disabilities and mental health by turning these into strengths. Future research could explore the affordances of personal epistemologies and meta-knowledge for inclusivity in authentic assessment that corresponds with real-life disciplinary practices (Villarroel et al. 2018).

Even though Bearman and Luckin’s (2019) study sounds promising for Afl, in certain disciplines their ideas might face resistance. For example, natural sciences have traditionally relied on positivist epistemologies: learning goals are predetermined, and knowledge can thus be easily measured and compared. The mere notion of ‘academic standards’ differs greatly between disciplines. Ashworth and colleagues (2010) conducted inclusive assessments for students with complex disabilities in creative arts, noting that similar initiatives might not be possible in contexts where the idea of knowledge relies on positivist, objective views. It has been questioned whether predetermined learning outcomes allow diversity to flourish at all (McArthur 2016, 968). However, it is not sustainable to implement Afl only in creative arts and similar disciplines, leaving ‘hard sciences’ an inaccessible venue for disabled students: this would further strengthen academic ableism by excluding disabled students from such academic venues. A possible solution is offered by Bearman and Ajjawi (2019), who suggest that academic standards (e.g. rubrics) could be seen as an invitation for students to engage in a discussion about

them. Students can participate in co-constructing rubrics to understand how knowledge is constructed in their discipline. Afterwards, students could practise their evaluative judgment by assessing their own and peers' skills communally with the co-constructed learning criteria. Such a process allows student diversity to flourish as students come to understand how certain learning goals can be met through deeply personal ways. An inspiring example is reported by Denhart (2008): 'James spoke of composing music 'with his hands' rather than with his thoughts, while Lea spoke of creating simple stories to grasp complex mathematical theories of economics' (493).

While promoting personal epistemologies and meta-knowledge is beneficial for all students, this approach is specifically inclusive for disabled students, as it promotes diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge. Assessment in higher education has traditionally been based on written language as the main form of communication. At the same time, academic standards have marginalised many forms of knowledge (e.g. embodied knowledge, cultural knowledge), positioning disabilities as a barrier to 'real' academic knowledge. As assessment celebrates diversity, assessment practices themselves must diversify and widen our understanding of the epistemologies of 'academic standards'. Traditional assessment has not allowed disabled students to show their true skills and knowledge, systematically limiting their agency as learners and knowers. This is why Afl must be based on diverse, dialogic assessment practices such as self- and peer-assessment and portfolios, and beyond. Digital formats offer many possibilities for inclusivity through flexibility in format and time (e.g. images, video, voice recordings, code, social media...). To summarise, celebrating human diversity through Afl enables a way to reposition disabled students as resourceful and agentic knowers and doers of their discipline (cf. the resistance model).

### ***Key points for practice***

- Students should be able to demonstrate their knowledge through diverse ways, drawing on diverse assessment practices.
- Many marginalised forms of knowledge (e.g. embodied knowledge) can be promoted in assessment that values human skills and knowledge. All forms of knowledge can be constructively compared with the learning criteria and discussed (evaluative judgement).
- The construction of knowledge in certain disciplines should be discussed with the students to promote inclusivity. This can be done, for example, by co-constructing rubrics.

### **Interdependence**

Any quest for radical inclusion must be a communal one. The principle of interdependence emphasises the profoundly communal nature of Afl (cf. the resistance model of disability). Often, disabled students need to battle the system themselves (Goode 2007; Hopkins 2011). The principle of interdependence reminds of the ethical urgency of understanding anti-ableist work as a communal goal. Stentiford and Koutsouris (2020) warn about individualised, performative, and market-driven approaches to 'inclusion'. Without



interdependence, the ‘inclusion’ in AfI is likely to remain individualistic and procedural, creating a false sense of inclusion. This warning holds particular value for assessment. Torrance (2017) discusses assessment as the main mechanism in modern education to place responsibility on individual learners. While learning has been conceptualised as a fundamentally social endeavour, assessment sets profound epistemic and ontic barriers to understanding disabled students as a part of learning communities: in the end, assessment in higher education is about grading and certifying individual students’ skills and competencies. AfI then draws on interdependence that understands students and teachers together as a learning community. Such a view might be called radical in the context of neoliberal higher education that values grades, competition and productivity. The quest to foster AfI then becomes a matter of answering Torrance’s call: ‘What might assessment involve if it focused on the development and identification of collective understanding, collaboratively produced through educational experiences?’ (Torrance 2017, 94)

Assessment research has scarcely characterised such communal aspects, especially from the viewpoint of inclusivity. Some important contributions can, however, be identified. First, peer assessment has been introduced as a practice that promotes communal learning (Merry and Orsmond 2020). Merry and Orsmond discuss peer feedback through the notion of ‘communities of practice’ and relational learning. As students engage communally with peer feedback, they need to co-construct the meaning of feedback. In the process, students build their professional identities communally with each other. Moreover, Wood (2021) showed that peer feedback communities can be fostered in online environments. Wood’s study emphasised the importance of dialogic feedback for the learning communities. In addition, peer feedback provided informal affective support for students. Future studies could examine the affordances that peer feedback offers for student diversity in such learning communities. For example, psychological safety and accessibility of digital feedback tools in peer feedback should be carefully considered.

Communal, inclusive assessment is not only a matter of how assessment is conducted, but what is assessed. Communities of practice can be promoted in meaningful project-based work that requires students to collaborate by using the diverse skills of the learner community. This idea is reminiscent of authentic assessment (Villarroel et al. 2018). Interdependence strengthens this approach by being a reminder that inclusivity is not something that authentic assessment provides for disabled students; instead, interdependence draws on two-way relations. Communal authentic assessment is not ‘authentic’ in terms of the task design but in terms of whether students can authentically learn from each other, as a learning community, and whether the assessment tasks authentically promote interdependence beyond the imminent classroom contexts. For example, Nieminen and colleagues (2021) introduce the concept of authorial agency in relation to feedback. Disabled students’ authorial agency is promoted, as they can author a relevant artefact that contributes to the learner community and beyond. In such projects, learning criteria could be communally determined and assessed (Ashworth, Bloxham, and Pearce 2010; Bearman and Ajjawi 2019). As authentic assessment often draws on collaboration with external organisations and agencies, such projects could be conducted in collaboration with disability organisations. An inspiring example is the study by Thompson (2009) who describes authentic assessment in statistics education. The students worked together with disability agencies to determine what kind of data should be collected and analysed to support the independent living



of blind adolescents and adults. This way, students' collective authorial agency in assessment can be used to directly enhance the life quality of marginalised people within and beyond the boundaries of higher education, connecting assessment meaningfully and authentically with 'the real world'.

Interdependence should be promoted in assessment research, too, by involving disabled students in assessment research. This way, research itself could be a mechanism for interdependence by offering marginalised students access to the production of expert knowledge about themselves (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2019). Interdependence fosters collaboration between various fields of research (e.g. psychological interventions and socio-political analyses) and involvement of disabled scholars themselves (see Brown and Leigh 2018).

### **Key points for practice**

- Afl build on interdependence by drawing on collaboration rather than solely on individual assessment tasks.
- Peer feedback provides opportunities for both formal and informal support for diverse learners.
- Through careful design and facilitation, authentic assessment enables disabled students to collaborate meaningfully and inclusively in assessment. Authentic assessment should aim for a relevant product that contributes to the learner community, and beyond, to promote interdependence and social good.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, Assessment for Inclusion has been formulated as a crucial purpose for assessment. As assessment has been shown to drive students' learning and studying, its role in systematically excluding students should not be neglected. In order to challenge such exclusion, assessment needs to explicitly draw on Afl amongst other crucial purposes of assessment. For example, the validity of Assessment *of* Learning might be enhanced by greater accessibility due to student participation in assessment design. Afl reaches beyond assessment accommodations and inclusive assessment design by challenging pedagogised, procedural approaches to inclusion. It ties assessment to its socio-political and -historical context of academic ableism (Dolmage 2017) and to the resistance model of disability (Gabel and Peters 2004).

This conceptual study has its limitations. First, the focus has been mostly on disabled students, given the systemic exclusion of disabled people both from and within higher education (Dolmage 2017) and assessment in particular (Nieminen 2021). However, Afl holds promise for marginalised students in general, and future research could widen the discussion through intersectional approaches. Furthermore, the focus has been student-centred. Teachers and other staff members in higher education are also diverse, and Afl should indeed be inclusive for disabled teachers as well. Of particular interest for future studies is the exploration of teacher agency, as in many contexts teachers might face barriers of culture and policies while striving for Afl. The five principles as depicted in this conceptual study are of course speculative: empirical research is

needed to enhance the inclusivity of assessment in practice. In this quest, collaboration between the fields of assessment and inclusion research is essential. Assessment research is already promoting promising practices for inclusion, such as authentic assessment (Villarroel et al. 2018) and peer feedback (Merry and Orsmond 2020). This field could greatly supplement research on inclusive practices with up-to-date knowledge on assessment. On the other hand, the field of inclusive education could foster assessment research through a greater understanding of student diversity.

In the times of the massification of higher education, the value of this ‘higher’ level of education is measured by whether it is successful in promoting the learning and inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds. If higher education truly aims to ‘celebrate diversity’, assessment simply needs to align with the goal of inclusivity given its pivotal role for learning and studying. Afl contributes to building inclusive higher education by understanding diversity as something that enriches academia. Boud and colleagues (2018) argue that changing assessment is not easy; yet reshaping the ableist contexts of assessment is not exactly a simple task either! The extremely important quest to render assessment – currently a vehicle for individualisation, comparison and exclusion – as a tool for inclusion will not be a simple one. This study has outlined some future directions for inclusive assessment, which will hopefully find their way to actual classrooms.

## Note

1. ‘Disabled students’ is used rather than ‘students with disabilities’ to address the active role of assessment in disabling students – rendering them as ‘less able’ and as ‘the Other’ (Allan 2010; Dolmage 2017). Thus, the focus is on assessment practices that *disable* rather than on the categorisation of students as disabled. This study employs a broad definition of ‘disability’ to consider various kinds of disabilities, illnesses, mental health issues, and impairments, and their intersections, while acknowledging the social, historical and political underpinnings of what counts as ‘disability’.

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