Chapter 8
Catering for Diversity in the Digital Age: Reconsidering Equity in Assessment Practices

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> *Assessment is used to provide a rationale and legitimacy for the social structures and power relations of modern day societies, and for one's place within these.*
> Leathwood (2005, p. 307–308)

Abstract While the affordances of the digital age certainly enable more diverse students to access higher education, higher education assessment is often underpinned by notions of equality rather than equity. Drawing together key literature and data from interviews with 53 first year undergraduate students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, this chapter identifies three potential causes of assessment inequity which appear to persist into the digital age: student assessment self-efficacy, prior preparation, and external pressures. It then identifies how the affordances of modern technology can be used to help combat these challenges.

8.1 Introduction

There is no question that the affordances of the digital age are making higher education accessible to populations who previously would not have been able to study for geographic, health, family, or financial reasons (Bearman et al., Chap. 3, this volume). Online learning platforms and video conferencing software, among other developments, have enabled universities to increase offerings at regional satellite

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campuses and via blended and fully online modes of study. Hence, these technological tools allow universities to more effectively reach learners at home and in their workplaces.

Governments worldwide have supported the growth in flexible study options as it aligns with national goals of increasing human capital and equity (Burke 2012; Leathwood 2005; Pitman et al. 2019). For example, within Australia, the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008), subsequent higher education policy (e.g., demand driven student places), and available funding sources [e.g., Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), and the National Priorities Pool (NPP)] have all encouraged universities to increase non-traditional student enrolments, particularly those from low-socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds. Internationally, governments have gone about attempting to widen participation in different ways (Burke 2012) and issues of context should not be ignored given complex social and system differences (Younger et al. 2019). Pitman et al. (2019) argue that support for these kinds of policies appears based on the "general assumption that increased access and participation for disadvantaged students will lead, ipso facto, to consequential post-graduation benefits" (p. 46).

However, research suggests that growth in non-traditional student enrolment numbers does not automatically translate to more equitable higher education outcomes (e.g., Giani 2016; Pitman et al. 2019; Webb et al. 2017). As Altbach et al. (2019, p. viii) note "making higher education more inclusive requires not only moving historically underrepresented groups into higher education, but also meeting their unique needs". There is also a need to better understand "the enduring influence of social class and family influence on participation and outcomes" (Webb et al. 2017, p. 138). It is important to examine equity considerations across all phases of higher education: access (who gets to enter); survival (who gets to remain as long as they wish); output (who can achieve well on assessments); and, outcome (who gets improved income, employment, and political power as a result of their studies) (Farrel 1999), and assessment results (whether from high school assignments, entrance exams, or undergraduate course work) influence student outcomes during all phases. In research into equity, access and survival (i.e., admission and retention rates; see See et al. 2012 and Younger et al. 2019 for systematic reviews) are more frequently the focus than the outputs and longer term outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Giani 2016; Li and Carroll 2017; Pitman et al. 2019). This chapter seeks to contribute to the literature examining equity in relation to output.

However, creating equitable assessment outcomes is complicated. The notion that assessment systems are impartial and fairly reward those with ability and sufficient effort has contributed to discourses which often position students from non-traditional backgrounds as responsible for their own lack of assessment success due to insufficient effort, commitment, preparation, or ability (McKay and Devlin 2016; O'Shea et al. 2016). This chapter explores how assessment systems in the digital age might need to change if equity is a major goal of higher education. Drawing on student voice data from the HEPPP funded Supporting Students' Assessment Success (SSAS) project, it identifies potential sites of assessment inequity for low SES students which persist within the digital age, proposing possibilities which

may help diverse students more effectively and accurately demonstrate their learning.

8.2 Walking the Tightrope: Balancing Assessment Accountability and Equity

While assessment sits as part of a larger pedagogical system, there is no question that it often drives student learning. As Boud (2000, p. 155) notes, summative assessment "provides an authoritative statement of 'what counts' and directs student attention to those matters. It tells us what to learn". There is evidence that many students strategically prioritise their learning around assessment expectations (Harris et al. 2018). If students are to experience deep learning via their assessment tasks, long-standing calls for tasks to be authentic and sustainable, and to include opportunities for formative assessment and feedback seem well grounded (Boud 2000).

However, how do quality assessment practices simultaneously promote deep learning and student equity? While the terms equity and equality are often used almost synonymously within policy, they have different theoretical underpinnings and meanings which have significant implications for assessment. Espinoza (2007) explains:

> The 'equity' concept is associated with fairness or justice in the provision of education or other benefits and it takes individual circumstances into consideration, while 'equality' usually connotes sameness in treatment by asserting the fundamental or natural equality of all persons. (Espinosa 2007)

Within an assessment context, Tierney (2013) suggests that "equality is maintained with the same tasks and criteria for all learners, while equity involves differentiating according to students' needs" (p. 133).

The idea that equity might require consideration and differentiation based on individual difference is clearly at odds with the notion of standardisation which underpins most higher education assessment policies. Higher education course designers must consider accountability concerns, including, but not limited to: satisfying accountability and accreditation requirements from the institution, government bodies, and external industry stakeholders; ensuring tasks are resistant to academic dishonesty; and creating comparability across varying study modes. These powerful accountability systems are usually underpinned by the 'equality' notion that standardisation (i.e., everyone experiencing the same task under the same 'equal' conditions) is the most appropriate way to promote fairness. The notion that identical treatment is 'fair' runs deep. Studies indicate university staff and students struggle to see how assessment and its conditions can be altered for individuals without impacting its validity, even when adjustments are made for legitimate reasons (e.g., disability) (Meyer et al. 2010; O'Shea et al. 2016).

Equity, however, might require us to move beyond notions of standardisation as fairness. McArthur (2016) argues that it is important to consider the fundamental inequalities between students as they participate in university assessment practices

and how these can be redressed in ways which allow all to demonstrate learning. For example, when discussing assessment extensions, she points out that while illness is viewed as legitimate grounds for special consideration, negative impacts caused by poverty (e.g., having to undertake paid work or do without necessary books or computer access) are unrecognised. She argues that:

> … these supposedly 'fair' systems are themselves highly selective and based on socially constructed notions of what should and should not count, and these may deserve rethinking. (p. 973)

As Leathwood (2005) identifies:"'Standards', 'quality' and 'assessment' are not neutral and value-free" (p. 320). Given the many newly possible affordances of technology, it seems timely to reconsider these socially constructed meanings within the context of the digital age.

8.3 Gathering Data about Assessment Inequity

While there are many potential markers of disadvantage within higher education (e.g., First Nations background, rural or remote location, language status, women in non-traditional areas), this chapter will focus on those who are of low SES, given the Australian government's current attention to this group. However, it is important to note that many low SES students carry multiple potential markers of disadvantage. For example, in Term 1, 2017 of our study, of the 420 student participants categorised as low SES, 389 (92%) were also classed as regional or remote, 11 (3%) reported a disability, 19 (5%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, 18 (4%) were from non-English speaking backgrounds, and 154 (37%) were women studying in non-traditional areas [percentages rounded to the nearest whole number]. Hence, student categorisations are seldom clear cut or discrete.

To examine potential examples of assessment inequity persisting into the digital age, a review of literature from the past 18 years (2000–2018) was drawn upon when examining new empirical data from the HEPPP funded Supporting Students' Assessment Success (SSAS) Project. To gather literature, major search engines (e.g., Scopus, Google Scholar) were examined using combinations of key words such as "low SES", "assessment", "higher education", and "equity". Relevant papers were also obtained from the reference lists of papers reviewed.

Through the collection and analysis of empirical data, the SSAS project sought to explore first year students' experiences of assessment, with a focus on low SES students. These data informed interventions including changes to tasks and the creation of support materials with the goal of improving assessment equity at a multi-campus Australian university (for more results from this study, see: Dargusch et al. 2017a, b; Harris et al. 2018; Taylor et al. 2017). From the project's wider data set, this chapter draws primarily upon data gathered from n = 53 telephone interviews with low SES students to highlight the challenges which must be overcome to achieve equity within the digital age. Drawing on categorical analysis (Coffey and

Atkinson 1996), interview data were first read multiple times by the first author before codes were developed relating to potential assessment inequities these students faced. Particular attention was paid to interactions between assessment and student characteristics which might be related to low SES (e.g., income, employment, preparation). Themes generated from the empirical data were then matched with themes derived from the reviewed literature; three major types of potential inequity were identified in relation to assessment.

However, within our data and the greater literature, the heterogeneous nature of low SES students soon became apparent; hence, we encourage readers to use these categories as a starting point for considering common challenges such students may face. While Harvey et al. (2016) identify that "… the primary cause of underrepresentation of low SES students remains low school achievement" (p. 70), work by McKay and Devlin (2016) reminds us that many low SES students perform well and exhibit extraordinary resilience in the face of challenge. Interviewed students varied greatly in age (17 to 55), previous educational experiences (early school leavers to those with university degrees), industry knowledge and experience, and personal responsibilities (e.g., work, family, community involvement). Students also had different ideas about the purpose of assessment and their role as a student. Hence, the sites of potential assessment inequity we identify do not impact upon all low SES students equally (or even at all) and are unlikely to constitute an exhaustive list. Instead, they illustrate some of the most prevalent challenges which may disproportionately impact upon low SES students studying in the digital age, many of whom also share other markers of disadvantage.

8.4 Examining Potential Causes of Assessment Inequity

Across our own data and the wider literature, we identified three potential sites of assessment inequity for low SES students which persist within the digital age: student assessment self-efficacy, prior preparation, and external pressures. Drawing on our own qualitative data and examples sourced from the literature, we will illustrate the practical problems these can create for students as they attempt to complete university assessments, particularly for the first time.

8.4.1 Assessment Self-Efficacy

One major challenge low SES students may experience is around their self-efficacy in relation to assessment situations, particularly within their first year. Jury et al. (2017) report the presence of many inappropriate and negative stereotypes of low SES students. When staff and students internalise these, this can lead to lower student self-efficacy and/or possible discrimination from staff. For example, students

coming from lower income backgrounds may feel like they do not belong or deserve to be at university (often referred to as the imposter phenomenon, Parkman 2016).

Our data contained numerous examples of students reporting low self-efficacy in relation to assessment. For example, Ellen, an Engineering student, described her initial reactions to the assessment task saying "Like what have I done? What have I got myself into? There's no way I can pass, there's no way I can keep up." Within the interview, she appeared to display elements of the imposter phenomenon (Parkman 2016), clearly questioning if she belonged in higher education:

> I – I just didn't have the experience that my peers had…. I was like the mum in the group… I was quite intimidated at, you know, the level of experience that, you know, my team mates had.

For many students within our study (including Ellen, who ultimately achieved a Distinction in the unit), these negative beliefs were unfounded. However, when students lacked confidence, they were also less likely to seek necessary help, particularly if initial requests were not handled in a supportive manner ("I didn't want to go and cause any more issues [by asking more assessment questions]" Imogen, Business and Law).

As assessment experiences shape students' views of their own competence as learners (Christie et al. 2008; O'Shea 2014), it seems particularly important to support them through their first experiences of university assessment. As Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) identify:

> the impact of what are perceived to be poor assessment results on those with low self-esteem, who already feel that they can never be good enough or never get it right, can be profound. (p. 609)

Hence, when seeking equitable assessment outcomes for low SES students, it is necessary to consider the interaction between students' personal beliefs about themselves as learners (and their place within a university) and their assessment experiences and results.

Additionally, within our data, most interviewed low SES students did not challenge or criticise the assessment tasks and conditions, instead taking responsibility for their own lack of success if they had not done well. Student comments include:

> I clearly hadn't met the marking rubric in that particular area and that was very clearly my own folly and nothing to do with the assignment. (Noah, Engineering)
>
> I, myself, was not prepared I suppose and that's my fault. (Imogen, Business & Law)
>
> I hadn't realised that they [quizzes] had a cut-off date…. But that could be partially my own fault too for not particularly paying attention to where they say it may be cut off. I'm not too sure. (Eloise, Business & Law)

The only time assessment's validity or appropriateness was questioned was around peer-assessment results. Students voiced concerns about whether they were sufficiently competent and impartial to act as assessors, a concern which has been documented extensively elsewhere (Panadero 2016). Hence, a challenge to equity seems to exist around helping students from low SES backgrounds feel empowered and able to meet assessment expectations and avoid negative patterns of self-blame if initial results are not as hoped.

8.4.2 Uneven Preparation

An additional source of assessment inequity may stem from students' uneven preparation for study. For example, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) found that many of the non-traditional students in their study felt they "had been left to sink or swim" (p. 610). In relation to assessment, work consistently highlights the need to help students develop assessment and feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018; Haggis 2006). Devlin and O'Shea (2012) found that low SES students particularly noted the importance of lecturers clearly explaining assessment tasks and providing exemplars to help them visualise expectations, with many recommending such scaffolding and support is necessary (e.g., Bearman and Ajjawi 2018; Broadbent et al. 2018; Dargusch et al. 2017b). However, as Haggis (2006) notes, there is sometimes lecturer resistance to providing scaffolding, with some describing it as 'spoon feeding' (p. 532).

SSAS project data highlighted that many low SES students had exaggerated strengths and weaknesses. For example, professional experience meant some had extensive prior knowledge of subject matter and skills ("We did the Clinical in the Res School and I breezed through that. That was things we do every day [in her aged care job]" Alice, Nursing). However, despite this extensive industry experience, Alice, who explained "I have a special needs child and a baby and I work full time", still had to travel over 1000 km to attend a mandatory residential school to demonstrate her 'every day' skills. Conversely, many were underprepared for some of the demands of higher education assessment. As Noah from Engineering explained "I sort of had a bit of a knowledge gap in some areas."

The students we interviewed often described their first assessment experiences as challenging and daunting as they struggled to unpack the assessment task and marking criteria. As Elsa, a Business and Law student, explained "it's your first semester so you need time to understand the expectations of what a university assignment requires." Students often described being unable to gauge whether their work met expectations: "I was pretty nervous… even when I had submitted my second one, I still didn't know whether it was a pass or a fail" (Ned, Education). As Ned explained:

> I was going in completely blind.… I had no idea if I was even answering the question right… I like simpler words so when I read the criteria sheet, I'm like "oh my god, this is overcomplicated. I don't know if this is right. I am answering the right questions?"

Ned is representative of many of the students we interviewed who experienced difficulty understanding what was expected of them, demonstrating the need to bring such students "into the guild of professionals" (Sadler 2009, p. 57) through the development of assessment and feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018). Given the potential gaps in experience, low SES students in particular may need additional support to understand common genres within higher education and be helped to unpack and visualise task expectations. However, it is also important to remember the heterogeneous nature of these low SES students in relation to preparedness and avoid stereotypes about areas of strength and weakness.

8.4.3 External Pressures

Data from both our study and the wider literature indicate that low SES students are likely to be balancing assessment requirements with other professional and personal obligations. Studies have identified that students with complex work and family responsibilities often have difficulty finding time to complete learning and assessment tasks, particularly when multiple pieces of work are due at the same time or when unexpected events occur such as illness, increased work demands, or family emergencies (Christie et al. 2008; Harris et al. 2018).

Within our study, work seemed to particularly impact upon assessment success. For example, Business and Law student Roxanne explained, "I submitted my assignment early because I had work commitments on and I probably, in hindsight, I should have looked over that, because I didn't get the mark that I wanted." Students working part-time jobs also experienced variations in hours which did not always work well with peak study times within the term. Yana, another Business and Law student explained:

> I work at a real estate agent and I fill-in for other staff so, at a moment's notice, it can become full-time. And in the middle of the course, I ended up having to do three weeks' full-time work as well as trying to do three weeks' full-time university and have assignments due in at the same time. So, I know the third week got pretty messy ….and I definitely did less – that was probably my lowest quiz.

Low SES Business and Law student Alyssa described how her unanticipated move from part- to full-time work in the middle of term made it impossible for her to submit her final assignment, dropping her unit grade from a High Distinction to a Pass:

> I was granted an extension only to the point that [the course coordinator] could grant it and it just became a bit – well, I've already passed it and Ps get degrees…. I would have loved to have submitted, but it just wasn't a realistic timeframe for me…. I don't feel that I've failed in any way, I just feel that if we're trying to be reflective of what life is really like,… perhaps would have been a little more leeway.

Alyssa was one of the only students within our entire study who questioned the appropriateness of current practices around assessment extensions, arguing for 'leeway'. Clearly, non- or under-performance on assessment like this has serious implications for students' survival within their courses of study as well as their potential for employment at the end. In Alyssa's case, the Pass she received for the unit clearly does not reflect her actual capabilities, yet it may impact upon her employment chances on graduation given grades can be seen as a proxy for capability.

Within our study, some staff recognised the challenges that such students were experiencing and made minor adjustments to deadlines. For example, Business and Law student Elsa reported:

> I emailed him [the course coordinator] once saying, 'Hey, I thought the quiz was today, so I've logged on now, but it actually finished yesterday. Can you reopen it?' And he was like, 'Yep, no worries. It's reopened as a once-off.' So I reached out at one point and I got some assistance that I required.

However, while this lecturer's decision was clearly in the best interests of this student, it does have implications for 'equality'; other students may have forgotten or been unable to complete the quiz, but did not have the courage to ask for extra time. It also potentially represents a breech in the university's assessment protocol, where any such adjustments should be in response to a formal extension request supported by appropriate documentation. These two examples (one where the lecturer intervened and overrode policy and one where the lecturer did not) illustrate the tensions between complying with policies and systems and supporting students when they need it.

8.5 Harnessing the Affordances of the Digital Age to Improve Assessment Equity

The data from our study and the larger research literature highlight common challenges low SES students may experience when navigating assessment, particularly in first year courses, in relation to self-efficacy, prior preparation, and external pressures. In this section, we propose ways the affordances of the digital age may be better harnessed to address these inequities via more nuanced recognition of prior learning opportunities before students begin, better mechanisms to help students identify and receive academic support during their first year, and more flexible timelines within units of study throughout their degree.

8.5.1 Using Technology to Make Recognition of Prior Learning more Nuanced

Our data showed that some low SES students are wasting valuable time and resources demonstrating knowledge and skills they already have. While universities may have mechanisms in place for recognition of prior learning (RPL), it is important to make sure students are aware of these opportunities and consider how digital technologies (e.g., ability to assess student participation in practical tasks, experiments, group work via digital assessment modes, Katz and Gorin 2017) could make them far more nuanced. For example, while a student may have excellent practical knowledge and skills, there may be gaps in theoretical knowledge, so exempting students from entire units or years of study may not be appropriate. If equity is the goal, perhaps assessment systems can be developed where evidence of prior learning and competency (or a set of pre-tests prior to the unit) can be used to exempt students with prior industry or educational experience from individual assessments tasks within particular units. Such mechanisms may enable time poor students to devote additional time to areas of need and potentially spare them from some costly on-campus assessments. It might also encourage students who may have low self-efficacy to formally

acknowledge their areas of strength. A more nuanced approach to RPL might also be supported via a move from more traditional grades and reporting to reporting by learning outcomes or by digital credentialing (see Jorre de St Jorre, Chap. 19, this volume) as this would potentially allow students to draw on pre-existing, as well as newly generated, evidence of learning to address criteria.

8.5.2 Using Technology to Help Students Identify and Address Academic Needs

While students may be aware of some gaps within their preparation and know about resources available via student support units (e.g., help with academic literacy, mathematics, computing, etc.), unless the student is referred to services due to assessment failure, most current approaches require the student to identify needs and seek help. It seems vital that students are supported to become aware of any potential gaps and have opportunities to learn 'assumed' knowledge and skills before submitting their first assessment; this could occur in different ways. There are already many different ways technology is being used within online and blended enabling programs, but as Rienties et al. (2012) identify, more work is needed to make sure use of technology is clearly linked to learning objectives and pedagogy, maximising the benefit these programs have for aspiring higher education students.

Opportunities for formative feedback could be present within the first few weeks of a unit via a low-stakes early assessment task (Shields 2015), ideally directing students to specific tutorials and resources to upskill them in the areas of need. For example, online quizzes can provide students with immediate feedback on their understandings of content, although clearly this is an inappropriate way to assess many important facets of knowledge and skills students must develop during their studies. Online peer-assessment systems can also help students gain useful feedback from peers via Mobile Response Technology (MRT) and software packages (Rotsaert et al. 2018).

Another possibility is via online diagnostic testing, like that currently being developed by Jason Bryman, Timothy Cleary, and Heidi Andrade in the United States (for more information, see http://daacs.net/). Their open access Diagnostic Assessment and Achievement of College Skills (DAACS) tool allows students to complete short diagnostic tests in self-regulated learning, reading, mathematics, and writing. These provide students with feedback about current competency in these domains and link students with resources to help them develop in specific areas of need, allowing them to improve via use of self-paced, open-access materials. It is vital that students with potentially low self-efficacy are empowered to feel that they can improve and tools like this can provide them with the pathways through which to do so. Early findings exploring DAACS' impacts on student university success indicate that having students simply take the test is not enough to improve outcomes (Bryer et al. 2019). Students and/or their advisors must meaningfully engage with

the results and invest the time needed to work with resources designed to help students improve in areas of need. Bryer et al. (2019) found that academically weaker students were less likely to engage meaningfully with DAACS feedback and resources, suggesting that such students may need additional forms of support.

In addition to support for students around global areas of strength and weakness in their prior knowledge and skills, there is also potential need to focus student attention on how to participate effectively in higher education assessment processes (Smith et al. 2013). Students from equity group backgrounds may require additional support to help induct them into "the guild" (Sadler 2009). During our project, students identified many forms of scaffolding which can help students self-assess their progress against goals including checklists, exemplars, and rubrics. Of particular value were short videos shared on the Learning Management System (LMS) which featured the lecturer unpacking the assessment task (Taylor et al. 2017); these on-demand videos allowed students to view them when and as many times as they wished as they sought to understand expectations. Likewise, many students reported that seeing an exemplar, particularly when a type of task is new to them, made it much easier to visualise assessment expectations, consistent with the literature (e.g., Bearman and Ajjawi 2018). Technological affordances can make exemplars far more interactive than they have been in the past (e.g., links within the document to lecturer video or audio comments about the work; on-demand videos walking students through an exemplar) and such possibilities should be further explored.

Students also benefit from formative feedback (with many new online modes being developed for such delivery, Gikandi et al. 2011; Henderson and Phillips 2015). However, they also need the time and space to make use of it (including that gained via their own self-assessment using tools like rubrics and exemplars or feedback from peers). Regardless of what tools and scaffolding are selected, students need to be supported to understand and use them in the ways intended.

8.5.3 Using Technology to Create Flexibility in Course Timelines

Finally, it is vital to move beyond the notion that standardization equals equity to a philosophy which recognises the importance of giving each student the conditions and time needed to demonstrate learning objectives. Particularly within distance education environments, which can be more self-paced as they are less reliant on weekly scheduled contact between teaching staff and students, there is no fundamental reason why assessment completion must be confined to the 10–12 week conventional university term. While giving students longer periods of time to complete unit assessment tasks may mean major changes to the bureaucracy, rules, and procedures around higher education assessment, it seems important to be realistic about the complex lives and pressures many equity group students (and others) experience and work with them in supportive ways to help them achieve the best possible results.

Some institutions are already experimenting with this model, but primarily at the post-graduate level within Australia (e.g., CQUniversity MBA (Leadership) program, Deakin University's Start Anytime units). However, Open Universities Australia has also adopted this model for its Unilearn bridging program. While such an approach may work best for more experienced and self-regulated learners, there are potential ways of applying the model at all levels which could be explored.

In Australia, we can also learn from some of the successes and challenges reported by American universities employing more flexible and self-paced undergraduate and post-graduate degree models, often referred to as Competency-Based Degrees (McDonald 2018). The flexibility and potentially lower costs offered by these models may be of great help to students who are juggling complex priorities. However, research indicates that this way of studying places high expectations on students (e.g., students need to be able to motivate themselves in the absence of external deadlines, self-assess their own learning competencies and needs, possess good time-management skills, McDonald 2018). Staff operating such programs may also face increased challenges (e.g., such programs may lack alignment with other university timelines and procedures, face additional regulatory hurdles, experience resistance from staff, Dragoo and Barrows 2016). Additionally, research identifies constant tensions reported between keeping institutional and student costs down, while simultaneously creating high quality student learning environments and experiences (Dragoo and Barrows 2016; McDonald 2018).

Clearly, while some changes to system rules may be relatively easy to address (e.g., having more points within the calendar year when grades are verified), more work is still needed to further explore and mitigate the many challenges noted by those trying to create more assessment flexibility within their degree programs. In the interim, it at least seems logical to carefully examine university assessment extension policies, making sure that these are sufficiently flexible so that lecturers and students can work together to create reasonable deadlines which allow students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

We are only starting to scratch the surface of what may be possible via digital assessment (Katz and Gorin 2017) and how these kinds of experiences may allow more flexibility for distance learners particularly (e.g., assessing distance students on their completion of an experiment in a digital environment while on-campus students complete the task during a laboratory session), keeping focused on what learning objectives students are demonstrating rather than how this is being accomplished or under what conditions. At a minimum, we suggest following the recommendation of Luzeckyj et al. (2015) that assessment deadlines across programs are examined to make sure they are spread across the term and that submission times do not encourage students to act in ways which are detrimental to their health and well-being (e.g., a 9:00 am submission time may encourage students to stay up all night working on an assessment).

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter poses the question of how assessment might need to change if equity is a major goal of higher education. It identifies key considerations which are needed around student assessment preparation, task and scaffolding design, and assessment conditions. The affordances of the digital age are certainly helping break down barriers to study for those living in regional and remote areas and juggling complex personal and work commitments. However, there is clearly more which can be done to utilise technology in ways which will serve the interests of students from equity group backgrounds. Meyer et al. (2010) recommend creating policy at a university level, outlining how assessment practices will best promote equity, with a focus on examining how student needs are accommodated, reflecting on whether chosen genres are likely to privilege particular groups, and monitoring and troubleshooting around the progress of students from non-dominant groups. It is also worth reconsidering how grades are distributed; if assessment is conducted in reference to standards, all students have the opportunity to demonstrate mastery and experience success, potentially rendering norm-based approaches like grading on the bell-curve as obsolete.

Within higher education, there are competing ideas about equality on one hand (which many interpret as standardisation) and equity on the other. We believe that equity is about acknowledging the challenges students may be experiencing and making appropriate changes in our own assessment design, conditions, and implementation to allow each to achieve his or her best possible results. Technology has already allowed us to make great inroads into this process. We look forwards to seeing how it can help open up even more equitable assessment possibilities in the future, acknowledging that "To achieve equity—justice—may require structured inequalities, at least temporarily" (Samoff 1996, p. 267).

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