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Promoting potential through purposeful inclusive assessment for distance learners

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ABSTRACT

The number of students with disabilities, which covers a range of conditions including physical and cognitive impairments, is on the rise. Further and higher education institutions are obliged to ensure that teaching and assessment is inclusive. This is particularly pertinent since the pandemic as many students have missed social opportunities that may have offered academic capital. We conducted a systematic review of relevant United Kingdom literature on how assessment for distance education in further education and higher education can be made inclusive in practical and purposeful ways. Assessment is the fundamental way that we measure students' understanding and progress; it is only through demonstrating knowledge against the set criteria and learning outcomes that students can pass assessments and earn credits toward completion of their degree. We found three key themes in promoting student potential: (a) purposeful and accessible feedback, (b) online group work opportunities, (c) student agency over assessment format.

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Introduction

The term *disabilities* can cover a wide range of conditions, including physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive impairments, that affect an individual's daily behaviors and functioning (Meleo-Erwin et al., 2021). It must also be noted that people with disabilities may have two or more conditions comorbidly, and thus may have a highly diverse range of accessibility needs, both physically and in terms of how they can access academic material (Meleo-Erwin et al., 2021).

An agenda of widening participation in higher education (HE) has led to an expansion in the number of students attending universities and, therefore, an increase in the diversity of these students (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). This is supported by statistics showing that the number of students with disabilities enrolled in HE is on the rise (Pino & Mortari, 2014). The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has shown an increase in

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the number of students with social phobias and anxiety (de Figueiredo, et al., 2021; Loades et al., 2020; Meherali et al., 2021) and that students who endured their further education (FE) studies during the pandemic missed out on social opportunities that may have offered academic capital (Aristovnik et al., 2020). These factors demonstrate the importance, now more than ever, that we ensure our teaching and assessment are as inclusive as possible.

Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) conducted a scoping review of inclusive pedagogies in HE yet deemed the term itself problematic, and question whether inclusive pedagogies should just mean good teaching for all. An inclusive educational experience aims to make FE and HE accessible, relevant, and engaging for all (Thomas & May, 2010) and it is essential that institutions fulfill their obligation to all students to promote progress. Underpinning this is a recognition that assessment is a major aspect of learning (Race, 2014) where an understanding of students' differences must be valued (Hockings, 2010). Students must, therefore, be given the chance to demonstrate their achievement using assessments that are fair and appropriate to them (Thomas & May, 2010).

Assessment in FE and HE is underpinned by the *Equality Act* (Government of the United Kingdom, 2010), which for a practitioner means having a legal duty of care to both anticipate and make reasonable adjustments in teaching for any student with protected characteristics, which includes for example age, disability, race, sex, and religion or belief. In FE, direct observation of assessment is included within the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2019) inspection framework. Within the context of HE policy, inclusive assessment sits as part of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2018) assessment framework. In the framework is a requirement that assessment should be "inclusive and equitable" (p. 5), which outlines that students' needs should be considered in the design of an assessment and that no individual or group should be at a disadvantage (Office of the Independent Adjudicator, 2017). Specific groups mentioned that may require reasonable adjustments include students from different cultural or educational backgrounds, those with additional learning needs, or those with protected characteristics (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2018).

Assessment is the fundamental way that we measure students' understanding and progress; it is only through demonstrating knowledge against the set criteria and learning outcomes that students can pass assessments and earn credits toward completion of their degree. In distance education, where face-to-face contact is limited or non-existent, and for students with disabilities for whom access may be increasingly challenged, it is fundamental that tutors make the most of feedback (Kasch et al., 2021), offering formative opportunities, ensuring students are assessed on the task, and given clear grading criteria.

It is essential that educators include and empower students through the inclusive nature of the assessments they set. Self-assessment, peer assessment, and then tutor feedback on formative assessment are all useful tools in a student's journey toward the summative submission (Alqassab et al., 2018). There are several steps that can be taken to ensure that assessment is inclusive and equitable. Plymouth University (2014), for example, created a seven-step approach to assessment design, which places choice

and diverse methods at its center, along with underlying principles of good assessment design, use of technology, student participation, and reflection. These steps demonstrate that there can be flexible methods of assessment that meet the needs of students (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2018) and benefit more than just the intended students (Hockings, 2010).

Educators must ensure that inclusive practice helps feed into assessment. Accessibility on online platforms is key (Baguma & Wolters, 2021). It is important that students can access their virtual learning environment (VLE) to read content as well as work on, and submit, assessments. VLE spaces must be accessible and should help encourage a feeling of community which can be done through guiding students through the spaces, ensuring uniform layout, and using the announcements tool to boost important documents. For students who may not voluntarily engage much in online communication, it is important that when they do engage, the VLE is clear and easy to navigate (Michel et al., 2021).

Research questions and methodology

Following a brief scoping review of the literature forming the introduction for this article, the following research questions were posed:

- What does an inclusive online assessment look like in terms of supporting distance learners with disabilities?
- How does the role of peer learners and the peer relationship fit into inclusive distance education?
- How can assessment feedback be inclusive and relevant for distance learners?

Utilizing systematic review

Once these questions had been formed, it was necessary to design a systematic review to ensure as much recent and relevant literature as possible was identified, appraised, and synthesized. Systematic reviews must adhere to a clear design based on certain criteria to be able to carry out this process.

Step 1: Preliminary scoping of research and question validation

The preliminary scope of literature, as outlined above, helped to ensure validity of the proposed idea and the feasibility of the research questions. A simple search on EBSCOhost and Google Scholar confirmed that there was adequate material for review.

Step 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To be eligible for inclusion in this review, papers needed to be student-focused, include considerations of students with distance learning or disabilities, and be of recent date and appropriate geographical location (ideally based in the United Kingdom). Exclusion criteria were unavailable full texts; abstract only papers; dated

publications >10 years. While most of the literature is from <5 years, some older sources were also included if relevant to help answer the research questions.

Step 3: Search strategy and article identification

Search terms were defined in light of the earlier scoping review: assessment, students with disabilities, inclusion, inclusive distance education.

Step 4: Database search, library created, and results imported onto an Excel spreadsheet for thematic analysis

This literature review was conducted in ERIC, Scopus, and EBSCOhost, with a focus on collecting relevant peer-reviewed journal articles. Any articles deemed suitable for further analysis were added to an online library and then imported into an Excel spreadsheet for review.

Thematic analysis

This literature review used a thematic approach. The thematic approach seeks to draw upon recurrent themes to explore alternative perspectives within a field of study, giving the researcher agency in project design (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the literature was gathered, themes were explored through thematic analysis (TA). TA is perhaps a tool rather than a methodology in itself (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Due to the autonomous nature of TA, which gives the researcher agency in project design, it is therefore essential that the research is conducted in a way to provide rigor and trustworthiness, achieved through collaboration between authors as the co-researchers for the literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

Work by Moriña and Biagiotti (2021) highlighted that for students with disabilities who complete their courses and make progress, qualities of self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-esteem were key. In response to the three posed research questions (presented earlier), three key themes emerged around promoting outcomes for distance learners with disabilities. These three themes were drawn from the literature and illustrate how educators can promote student potential in distance education through the inclusive assessments that are provided at tertiary level:

- purposeful and accessible feedback
- online group work opportunities
- student agency over assessment format.

Purposeful and accessible feedback

Feedback and indeed *feedforward* are both terms that are commonly used in FE and HE. These can be defined as being types of information given to the learner about their achievement in relation to agreed learning expectations and should be aimed

specifically at fostering improvement (Black et al., 2003; Broadfoot et al., 2002). For feedback to be effective and move the learning forward, it must direct the student's attention to what is next rather than focusing on how the student performed (Wiliam, 2011), be accurate, and focus on the learning outcomes and success criteria that have been shared with the students (Hattie, 2012). Feedback should be given promptly (or as soon after the learning as possible), but learners will also need to be given the opportunity to reflect and act on any feedback they receive to improve. When it comes to positive feedback, there is value in praise as part of the feedback comments; offering a student two or more points of praise helps foster a positive relationship with their education (Wulandari, 2022).

Feedback can only function formatively if the information given to the student is used by them to improve performance. However, there is evidence that written feedback and feedforward are not much used to improve future work (Sambell, 2011). Personalized assessment support in the form of student and staff tutorials can be seen as a positive approach to feedback and feedforward that helps to ensure that this information is used to favorable effect. Staff-student dialogues where there is a conversation about assessment are seen by learners to be fundamental to increasing student assessment literacy. A dialogue "shifts the balance of responsibility" (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010, p. 292) onto the student by ensuring the conversation is about aspects of the assignment that are important to them. This is supported by Alexander (2017), who suggested that the benefits of this type of talk support deeper learning. This contrasts with the focus on providing written feedback and feedforward, which can be monologic and potentially casts the student in a passive role.

Johnson and Cooke (2016) highlighted that for distance learners, employing a range of feedback formats may best meet the needs of all students, with opportunity for engagement with a variety of technologies. While written feedback sheets may be helpful, the use of audio and video feedback for students has gained impetus in recent years (McCarthy, 2015). Audio feedback offers expression, pronunciation, and emphasis for students (Middleton et al., 2009). Students may find audio feedback as being easier to engage with and understand, may have more depth, and may also be more personal than written feedback (Merry & Orsmond, 2008); building the personal bond can be key in keeping students engaged with their studies when on a distance program. In support of this, Ribchester et al. (2007) found that students engaged better with their tutors following the receipt of audio feedback, as the feedback felt more personal and it often allows tutors to embroider the discussion with feedforward steps due to the conversational narrative style of the feedback being given. Video feedback has also been shown to be useful for students in tertiary levels of education. One important point from the literature is that, due to the connection that may be made through the active engagement for the viewer, video feedback may be easier for students to act upon (McCarthy, 2015). For some students, being able to see or hear their tutor may help make the feedback more accessible as not only does it mean they can digest the comments without reading them but the tone and expression are present to aid understanding and support delivery. An overview of these three assessment feedback format types is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. An overview of three assessment format types (adapted from McCarthy, 2015, p. 153).

Feedback format	Time implications	Affordances	Limitations
Audio	Fast to record feedback. May be slow to distribute.	Can be conceived as more personal than written feedback. Vocal tone and emphasis can improve understanding of feedback. Strong comprehension of feedback.	Comparatively large file size. Slower to distribute. Requires digital access to listen to feedback. No visual element involved.
Video	Slow to record and render feedback. Slow to distribute to students.	Feedback is engaging. Feedback is dynamic. Can be conceived as more personal than written feedback. Vocal tone and emphasis can improve understanding of feedback. Greater insight into student performance. Strong comprehension of feedback.	Comparatively large file size. Greater staff workload to produce feedback files. Slower to distribute. Requires digital access to view to feedback.
Written	Fast to write feedback and distribute to students.	A rubric can allow for faster interpretation of specific assessment criteria. Small file size. Fast to produce and distribute. Can be conceived as more formal. Can be printed out and read at any time.	Feedback is limited to text: no visual or aural element involved. Feedback is static. Can be conceived as less substantial or detailed.

The communicative act of dialogic feedback (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018) can also be fostered in a context of peer assessment. When the context of the learning and assessment, interaction between peers, and relationships is built into the feedback (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019; Telio et al., 2016), feedback becomes more than just giving information and more about creating a dialogue. When coupled with access to learning and assessment criteria, rubrics (grading schemes), and other assignment resources, this can foster students' understanding of quality, allowing them to make judgments based on their knowledge of the criteria (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018; Boud & Molloy, 2013; Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019).

In support of this, the planned and integrated use of the online learning platform for distance education for learners with disabilities is essential. In place of face-to-face contact time, carefully designed structure, and additional content, are needed to engage and educate the users. Examples of essays and assignments, and the associated assessment criteria and mark scheme, can be made available to students on the platform and provided in online sessions for them to analyze in small groups (Sadler, 1989, 2010). Clear written instructions and checklists for the assignments can also be presented on the module pages, as well as being delivered verbally in online sessions (Anglia Ruskin University, 2022; Teeside University, 2022). These measures will enable students to voice any concerns about the assignments, understand the standard to aim for, and see where they might need to improve (Sambell et al., 2013). Another benefit of online learning platforms is that formative feedback and marking opportunities are integrated. Written feedback and feedforward can be differentiated for students by using different colors (e.g., for content, grammar). This is something that is recommended for students with dyslexia (Anglia Ruskin University, 2022; Teeside University, 2022) but may be beneficial for all.

Online group work opportunities

Wang (2022) stated that value and meaningful learning is found through the social presences that can be fostered online in distance education. Difficulties in FE and HE have arisen in recent years because of the ongoing pace of technological development, owing in part to social media demands, putting pressure on education systems (Castro, 2019). As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, additional barriers to group work and engagement, as well as overcoming obstacles to accessing the materials online, were experienced (Goodrich, 2021). The causal effects of the pandemic on education systems have meant governmental, institutional, and policy initiatives in supporting learners and maintaining quality teaching and assessment have been a high-priority focus with universities (Watermeyer et al., 2021). It is essential that institutions support students and staff with digital illiteracy, particularly within teaching and support in HE to further improve student agency with the usage of digital technologies.

An example of the impact on educational systems during the pandemic is a study by Paterson and Prideaux (2020) on how positive interdependence, individual accountability, teaching presence, authenticity, and group skills development were used to reduce group work issues and encourage collaborative group work within a HE online environment. Paterson and Prideaux found that group work issues identified by students included having a lack of group work skills and negative perceptions of group work. By using distributed online group-based assessment tasks across six subjects, students were enabled to work in real-world scenarios and work was peer assessed, which allowed workloads and the contribution requirement to be balanced. This led to the promotion of real-world relevancy, industry-like experiences, and the contextualization of employability skills, which resulted in personal and professional development in the students.

The online learning experience should be tailored to the needs of the students, including their disabilities. However, colleges and universities fail to address equitable access, particularly for disabled students. Compare this to open educational resources (OER), which enable educators to create materials for a diverse set of individuals, including disabled students, which can be freely shared with communities online (Zhang et al., 2020). Although researchers have focused on developing authoring tools for accessible OER, many of the resources are still not fully accessible. Instead, focus should be put on developing tools that can help educators create and publish OER for disabled students as well as providing specific competencies and training for the educators to improve the impact of functional and accessibility diversity on the education system (Zhang et al., 2020).

Student agency over assessment format

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022, p. 1), student agency is defined as the “capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change”; this implies that students not only have the ability to positively influence their own individual life but also those around them. Student agency can be obtained through building upon foundational skills, which allow the student to

exercise their agency. This can include employability skills, collaborative skills, digital competences, and a capacity for lifelong learning. Agency has evolved as an increasingly integral idea in education, both as a goal and as a process to lead learners and to assist them in navigating the unknown. A social-cognitive perspective is one factor which focuses on agency as the mediating element connecting intentionality, self-reflection, and self-efficacy (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022).

Co-agency is another factor to consider when it comes to creating student agency, as it allows tutors to realize the potential for student idea, interests, and questions. Tutors can build upon student ideas and experiences to enact their agency. Vaughn (2020, p. 109) highlighted how “Ms. Reyes seized this moment and reshaped her instruction to support her students’ interests and incorporate students’ background experiences into the lesson. Her flexible and adaptive approach was essential to cultivating this opportunity for student agency.”

Distance education offers an interesting phenomenon where connections must be made in virtual spaces; students whose habitus is at odds with that of their online peers or the values of the FE and HE institutions may feel they do not belong or fit in, and this can affect their engagement and connection to their learning (Thomas, 2012). Having a personal tutor can help to bridge this gap and promote engagement, providing a gateway for students’ learning, yet there is the downside that a tutor can be too personal, and this may have negative connotations for professional boundaries. Limits or restrictions of content during interaction, set by the institution, can help prevent this, especially if parameters are set to only discuss general issues, current events, and cultures for instance, rather than anything too personalized (Barron, 2021). Personal distance must be maintained, yet there is a fine balance finding this distance in distance education where the tutor may need to often make the first move to engage students in conversation (Barron, 2021).

Student agency plays an important role for learning particularly in the assessment literature within HE (Chong, 2021; Gravett, 2022; Nieminen & Hilppö, 2020). Student agency therefore needs to be factored into assessment and feedback for the student to actively engage with feedback rather than educators using feedback to deliver information to the student. The notion that students should have agency in the feedback processes to then be able to read, interpret, and use feedback reaches beyond FE and HE and becomes “a core capability for the workplace and lifelong learning” (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1315). Tai et al. (2021) shared three strategies for making assessment more inclusive:

- offering choice for students in how to present their work
- programmatic approaches to the assessment
- co-design of policies and assessment tasks that promote inclusion.

This agency over assessment is particularly valuable when students may have disabilities that make certain activities more challenging. Offering choice (Tai et al., 2021) allows students to choose a format in which they are most comfortable; for some, this may be an independent solo presentation, for example, while for others with social anxiety, a written essay or PowerPoint presentation may be preferable.

Suggestions for practice

The three key suggestions for practice drawn from our findings are as follows.

Advocate for student agency in assessment format

Ensure that appropriate nonacademic time is built into the program, perhaps at the start of the academic year, either through online group sessions, 1:1 personal tutorials or a task whereby students create a poster about themselves and their interests which is uploaded to the VLE. By getting to know students and their interests, a better relationship may be formed, which will encourage students with disabilities to share their academic experiences, so that they can be best supported. Ask students about past assessments they have undertaken during previous study: Which did they most enjoy and why? Which were least accessible and why?

Factor formative assessments into each assessment cycle that draws upon ungraded group work

Incorporating group work activities into formative assessments allows for both peer learning and peer assessment; distance learners can benefit from engaging in online, or virtual, communities of practice, learning from others, and self-checking their understanding of the module content (McLaughlan, 2021).

Use a range of feedback delivery and do not forget the value in positive feedback

As mentioned, try to use a variety of written, audio, and video feedback from the tutor as appropriate. Remember to always include at least one praise point, although two or more are preferred (Wulandari, 2022).

Areas for future research

There must be further studies into accessible assessments for neurodiverse students in both FE and HE, as well as consideration of the practices of neurodiverse staff. We encourage further research into the benefits of video and audio feedback for students with disabilities at both FE and HE levels.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the literature to consider how purposeful assessment can promote potential through engaging and support students with their learning at tertiary level. Three themes have been considered through how feedback can be made accessible, such as through the use of audio or video recordings as opposed to written documents, through the support of online group work opportunities, and through the promotion of student agency and offering choice in assessment to promote this agency. Spaces that are created on distance learning programs, such as on the institution's VLE, offer online communities of practice for students to aid their learning and understanding

(McLaughlan, 2021). Educators must remember that it is essential now more than ever to ensure teaching is as inclusive as possible; putting student agency at the core of assessment and feedback may be one of the key steps to achieving this goal.

Notes on contributors

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