

Ashworth, Mary, Bloxham, Susan and Pearce, Leonie (2010) Examining the tension between academic standards and inclusion for disabled students: the impact on marking of individual academics' frameworks for assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35 (2). pp. 209-223.

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**Examining the tension between academic standards and inclusion for disabled students: the impact on marking of individual academics' frameworks for assessment**

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**Abstract**

This article draws on developing theory regarding assessment and marking to explore the impact of staff values regarding widening participation on grading decisions. It reports on an innovative creative arts module delivered for students with complex disabilities. Data collection included observation of teaching, interviews with staff, students and learning support staff, recordings of two academic team discussions and a questionnaire on moderation issues completed by staff. Whilst the students were very positive about the experience, the data identified pace of learning, the role of support workers and issues in authenticating student learning as aspects for future development. In particular, the research suggests that staff tackled the tension between valuing academic standards and inclusion by recasting student achievement as different rather than inferior, interpreting assessment rubrics in the light of their individual 'frameworks' for assessment. The article considers whether this recasting of standards illuminates the problematic nature of standards and assessment criteria in higher education.

# **Examining the tension between academic standards and inclusion for disabled students: the impact on marking of individual academics' frameworks for assessment**

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## **Introduction**

Recent developments in higher education have brought with them a tension between widening participation and maintaining academic standards (Riddell et al. 2007). What constitutes appropriate ways to safeguard academic standards has been subject to considerable debate amongst both policy makers and researchers (QAA 2006; Bloxham 2009) challenging many of the assumptions that underpin current practices. This article draws on developing theory regarding assessment (Shay 2005; O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008; Sadler 2009) to explore the impact of staff values regarding widening participation on marking. Whilst drawing on a specific case of a creative arts module for students with complex disabilities, it identifies issues of wider relevance in terms of how values regarding inclusion articulate with manifestations of academic standards such as assessment criteria. This is a pressing issue for universities as they seek to maintain confidence in their

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academic standards whilst opening up higher education to under-represented sections of the community.

## **Disability and higher education**

Disability legislation and guidance in the UK regarding education has been influenced by approaches in other English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA where policies are underpinned by strong equal opportunities and human rights perspectives. In the UK, the number of disabled people in higher education has recently increased, but they are still under-represented as a proportion of the population as a whole.

Moreover, studies examining the participation of disabled people in higher education are less numerous than those concerned with other underrepresented groups (Riddell et al. 2007, 616) and the scale of such studies has often been relatively small (Fuller et al. 2004).

Following campaigns by disabled people and legislation, researchers in the higher education context have commonly adopted the social model approach (Oliver 1996) which emphasises the barriers erected by society to restrict the opportunities of disabled people and prevent their participation. In higher education, this model implies a fundamental re-appraisal of the way disabled students are positioned as disadvantaged and dependent. Recent studies have frequently examined the experience of disabled students from the perspective of the students themselves (for example, Jacklin et al. 2007).

Much of this research has focused on access to and participation in higher education, and the physical and socially constructed barriers confronting disabled students on arrival at university. Interviews with disabled students in longitudinal studies in particular (Jacklin et al. 2007; Fuller et al. 2004; Riddell et al. 2007) have exposed their potential vulnerability in the first year, when becoming a student also involves 'becoming' and 'being' a disabled student, and the effects of this on the student experience (Jacklin et al. 2007, 9).

More recently the research emphasis has moved away from the social barriers model to 'a more pluralistic approach' (Goode 2007, 35). Citing Williams' (2001) study, Goode recognises the need to embrace the implications of both medical and social models if the personal and collective experience of disabled people in 'negotiating' their everyday life, is to be thoroughly understood. Fuller et al. demonstrate the range and diversity of disabled student populations in higher education. Other researchers have considered the multiple identities of disabled students; for them, as for non-disabled students, a learner identity and a person with impairment identity are only two of many temporally constructed selves, and at any one time may not necessarily be a disabled student's main concern (Jacklin et al. 2007).

This recent recognition of pluralities has led some contemporary researchers to a different model in which arguments for inclusion centre on a recognition

of difference, and the belief that 'good practice for disabled students is generally good practice for all students' (Adams and Brown 2006, 4). Inclusion is conceptualised as a response to an increasingly diverse student population. Students with disabilities and non-disabled students become equal members of a learning community where diversity is pre-eminent.

### **Disability and assessment in higher education**

The Quality Assurance Agency in the UK (QAA 1999,17) states 'Assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures should provide disabled students with the same opportunity as their peers to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes'. This policy drive is supported by The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001, SENDA) which places a legal obligation on all higher education institutions to make 'reasonable adjustments' for students with disabilities, including adjustments to assessment. Following the implementation of the amended Disability Discrimination Act Part IV, in 2002, it became unlawful to discriminate against disabled students through failing to make such adjustments. However, there has so far been relatively little systematic analysis of assessment practice relating to students with disabilities.

In an examination of what is perceived as conceptual confusion informing the practices of assessment boards, Stowell (2004) considers equity, justice and academic standards in the assessment of the full range of different social groups. She criticises a superficial conceptualisation of 'equity' which, in

relation to disabled students, confuses 'fairness' with 'sameness'. Special arrangements for disabled students can be perceived as differential treatment 'justified in terms of fairness'. In her view, in the context of assessment, 'fair treatment' means 'openness and transparency', together with consistent application of 'objective and verifiable criteria' (497).

Indeed, disability legislation protects the paramount importance of maintaining academic standards. '*Reasonable adjustments*' are not considered to change or lower standards to accommodate students with disabilities; the focus is on designing or adjusting assessment methods so that students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their learning against the *same* standards.

The assumption is that tutors can identify exactly what is being assessed by each assignment (learning outcomes) and fair adjustments can be agreed. On this basis, as Robson (2005) argues, genuine alternatives can assess the same learning outcomes, but allow students to demonstrate their learning in ways that suit their preferences. This assumption and interpretation of 'equity' is manifested in policy arrangements for the inclusion of students with disability. Modification of learning requirements in the creative arts is becoming a well-established component of inclusion (Being Inclusive in the Creative and Performing Arts (BICPA) 2002-2005).

In practice, however, the situation appears less straightforward. An investigation of institutional responses to widening participation policy (Riddell et al. 2007) considered how four different higher education institutions interpreted the concept of reasonable adjustments. Some interviewees expressed a sense of 'irreconcilable' tension between the agendas of widening access and quality assurance (Riddell et al., 624). Institutions, individual departments and staff members varied widely in their willingness to adapt teaching and learning practices, and some felt the difficulties encountered in trying to accommodate certain types of impairment through adjustments to assessment might be 'conferring unfair advantage on disabled students' (625-626). Reflecting themes in Stowell's discussion of the conflicting and contradictory practices pervading the formal assessment process, the authors noted the comments of some academic staff on the pre-eminence of professional judgement in decisions on the adaptation of assessment methods, and the concerns of others relating to 'laxity' in marking adjustments made by individuals, which was seen as 'in danger of positively discriminating in favour of disabled students'.

A similar picture emerges from an Irish study (Hanafin et al. 2007). Noting the relatively well-documented detrimental effects of written assessment for many students with impairments, the researchers draw attention to the 'competitive individualism intrinsic to an assessment structure' (Hanafin et al. 442), which relies on an implicit expectation that the student's own motivation will result in their acquiring materials necessary to succeed. In



this environment, many disabled students have no choice but to become 'recipients of charity', to be granted 'special privilege' or, 'at worst, to become 'a nuisance', one more item on an academic's task list. Many of the difficulties experienced by participants in this study arose directly from assessment (444).

Hanafin et al. call for the critical analysis of longstanding assessment practices and of the unquestioning assumption of their 'objectivity'. Invoking Eisner's rejection of such objectivity: "a concept built upon a faulty epistemology" (Eisner 1992, 14), the authors claim such willingness to take assessment practices for granted can conceal discrimination in which achievement and underachievement can be explained 'in terms of individual deficit rather than in unjust and partial institutional practices'. Accordingly it is recommended that 'embedded epistemologies of assessment' (443) be made explicit. While hidden, assessment practices can be assumed to have no effect on students, and any negative effects can be assumed as similar for disabled and non-disabled students. In practice, they consider that choices about assessment practices made by higher education institutions clearly affect students differentially and frequently negatively. It follows that current assessment practices impinge even more negatively on disabled students.

From Hanafin et al.'s perspective, as for Jacklin et al. (2007), the solution is inclusive assessment for all. More inclusive assessment practices, the

continuing availability of a range of assessment options, rather than the substitution of one in preference to another, are seen as likely to benefit many students. Academic standards are perceived to remain intact if inclusion is realised through opportunities to demonstrate learning which match diversity in individual students' ways of learning and the expression of that learning.

While Hannafin et al., Stowell and others' recommendations for assessment appear to have inclusion at their heart, they continue to rest on particular views of the nature of knowledge, academic expertise and transparency in standards which may not stand up to scrutiny. It was just such concerns which emerged, unexpectedly, from the research reported here. The research examined a module in the creative arts which aimed to work towards inclusion through adjusting curriculum and assessment design for students with complex disabilities.

### **The creative arts: an appropriate curriculum for inclusion**

The creative and performing arts may present greater opportunities than other subject disciplines for the education of students with complex disabilities. Post-modern theory recognises that interpretations and perceptions of work in the creative arts are based on individual experience (Jackson 2007; Nicholson 2005). This allows for differences in ability and point of view in practitioners as well as spectators. Disabilities may present

physical constraints in creating work, but positively contribute to the range of points of view which may be expressed. At the same time, the arts also offer scope for teamwork and the development of communication skills. Fuller et al.'s study (2004) found that of the 12% of disabled students whose choice of discipline had been influenced by their disability, this was most frequently the case for students in the arts. Within a much smaller sample, Hanafin et al. also noted that arts degrees were among the most popular choice for students with disabilities.

In relation to assessment, the challenges of measuring creativity are well-documented. A recent analysis of 'assessing highly-creative ability' by Australian researchers (Cowdroy and de Graaff 2005) offers a perspective that may be relevant to assessment of creative art and the quest for some kind of reliable criteria. Although the educational focus is generic and theoretical, the authors' recommendation of 'authenticative assessment' (515) may resonate with the present research, in which defining the 'authenticity' of students' work in order to gauge the measure of their achievement emerged, as we shall see later, as an intractable problem for academic staff, and a pressing question for further investigation.

Recent research has also drawn attention to the complexity of the relationships between disabled students, academic and support staff in art and design courses (BICPA 2002-2005). The authors in the BICPA study outline the difficulties of defining the 'authenticity' of students' work in cases

where students may be dependent on support staff for the presentation or execution of their original ideas.

### **The module**

The module emerged from a collaboration between a university and a specialist further education college as part of a drive to widen participation at the University. It was designed specifically for six students from the College with no formal qualifications but who were experienced in creative work and who were invited to apply for the course on the strength of their aptitude and ability in this respect. The students all have multiple disabilities caused by cerebral palsy, which severely affects their speech, mobility and motor skills. The module was delivered alternately at the College and the university campus using the specialist university studios particularly for the fine art work and the final performance. Students were accompanied on the university campus by their individual key workers.

Working methods were based on an existing university module with an emphasis towards practical work on a 'theme' which the students explore as a group. The module combined fine art and drama, using the prints from the students' designs as projected backdrops for the final performance. Art techniques were selected which might appeal to students' creativity whilst matching their level of manual dexterity and hoists were used in the drama

studio to enhance the students' opportunities for creative expression through movement.

### ***Assessment***

Formative assessment and feedback took place as normal in studio-based courses, the main difference being 'making sure the support workers know as well as the students themselves what needs to be done' (college tutor) in order to tailor their support to allow the students to demonstrate their learning.

Summative assessment comprised the final individual and group performance pieces and the students' completed portfolios. Adaptations to the assessment were designed to enable these students to demonstrate their learning; for example, students were able to record their individual pieces on film in advance, in order to allow them sufficient time to produce their best work. In addition, they were offered the opportunity to produce a 'video diary' as an alternative to a portfolio. However, it became apparent that this was not necessarily any easier for some students, and a traditional portfolio was produced with help from the students' support workers. In order to clarify the extent of the support workers' role, all support staff completed witness statements explicitly identifying of the extent of their involvement in students' assessments.

### **The research**

A research study tracked the progress of the module in order to make a detailed body of data available to staff for critical evaluation. It took an ethnographic approach and adopted the form of a case study. The aim was to investigate a specific case in detail in order to explore and illuminate the complexity of its nature from the perspectives of all participants. Certain features emerged along the way which it was felt might be relevant to wider educational contexts.

According to Winston (2006), case study can be particularly appropriate for research in the performing arts. It 'can challenge and disrupt our common sense understandings; it can help us see problems where we had not seen them before, question what had hitherto remained unquestioned, [and] understand a familiar experience viewed from other perspectives' (Winston 2006, 44). As in creating a piece of theatre, this open-ended approach to methodology involves the researcher in the process of designing, adapting, reviewing and refining as the work proceeds. In this case, the exploratory and open-ended research design matched the explicitly experimental nature of the project as a whole. It was not the original intention, for example, to interview the support staff, but the importance of their role, especially regarding the authenticity of students' work, emerged during observations of the workshops, and with their consent, they were included in collection of the data.

### ***Data collection***

The research was conducted according to the University's code of conduct for research. A range of data collection methods were deployed:

- a review of the literature and other documents relevant to the study;
- observation of the programme in action;
- interviews with academic staff, students and support staff;
- recordings of two academic team discussions (university and College tutors);
- a questionnaire on moderation issues for the two university tutors.

With a case study, as Winston points out (47), it is worth bearing in mind that triangulation implies you are seeking a single 'correct interpretation', when you may need to report alternative understandings of the same event.

The approach taken here involved Geertz's concept of 'thick description' (1993, 27), that is, recording the meaning which particular social actions have for the individuals whose actions they are.

The method for obtaining the students' informed consent for the interviews was of particular importance. It was essential firstly that they understood the principles of informed consent and the purpose, methods and anticipated outcomes of the project, and secondly, that they also understood that their views would make an active and valuable contribution to the development of the module. As some of the students did not read, an oral explanation was provided by the college tutors, and time was allowed for the students to

discuss the project with them and their support workers and to ask questions. The students' consent was obtained in a form appropriate to individual communication skills.

In terms of subjectivity, it was important to acknowledge and avoid as far as possible any preconceptions or assumptions on the researcher's part in relation to perceptions or interpretations of students' disabilities. This was a priority throughout the project, and the guidance of the two College tutors was significant in this respect.

## **Findings**

This article focuses particularly on the findings in relation to assessment but a brief summary of other findings is included as important contextual information. There was a generally positive attitude towards the module outcomes from all those involved. From the perspective of the individual students, the thrill of the higher education experience was a recurring theme. In spite of difficulties with access and the demands of deadlines, they were undoubtedly impressed with their taste of university life. One student's comments were telling:

Don't get me wrong ... but we're here at college day after day ... it's good to get the experience of going to the university when you're in a wheelchair ... to be like the other people there.



What they appeared to appreciate was being part of the 'real world', working in an institution with a professional purpose and the facilities to match.

### ***Pace and timing***

The overall timetable and the pace of learning within sessions emerged as significant factors in perceptions of students' ability to succeed. The course comprised a normal pattern of 3 hourly workshops over ten weeks but, in retrospect, tutors considered that the inflexibility of the timescale denied the students the extra learning time they needed to explore their potential to the full.

The sessions in the art studio underlined the importance of allowing extra time to make the students comfortable. Observation of both art and drama sessions appeared to support the contention that students with complex disabilities may have difficulty with concentration, because of physical and, or, mental fatigue, rather than because they lack intellectual capacity for the level of work. Consequently, they may need more time than other students to cover the same ground and to assimilate new learning and longer time for comfort breaks.

One 'reasonable adjustment' was felt to have worked particularly well. This was the decision to film the individual performance pieces in advance rather than present them live. This released the students from the pressure to

sustain concentration within a designated time span, and allowed them the time they needed to demonstrate skills and knowledge in the subject.

'Reasonable adjustments' to pace and overall timescale emerged as a priority for planning any future modules.

### ***'Authenticity' and the role of the support worker***

The role of the students' support workers as learning facilitators in this project was crucial; however, the nature and extent of their involvement in the students' portfolios was a matter of concern. With regard to research, the support worker's role was to facilitate electronic access and help to transfer chosen materials to the student's portfolio. In eliciting responses from the students, in order to support critical reflection, the support workers themselves were acutely aware of the difficulties of retaining the 'authenticity' of these responses, which could be jeopardised by inappropriate prompting or leading questions.

Identifying the authenticity of student achievement proved equally exacting for tutors. Staff expressed concern regarding the extent to which the quality, for example, of the execution of portfolios rested on the skills of the support worker and how much they had influenced choices over its construction. The data revealed the almost insuperable dilemma for tutors trying to categorise achievement in terms of conventional marking standards in such a specialised local context. The discussion will return to marking in more detail later.

The student's support workers perceived themselves as inadequately prepared for their role as learning facilitators on an higher education level course. They said they would have appreciated some specific guidance in advance to help them understand the nature and the limits of such an exacting task and to explain how best to help the students to develop independence and initiative. Defining the role of the facilitator has emerged as a key recommendation in other studies involving disabled students in art and design courses in higher education (BICPA 2002-2005) especially when, as here, many of the 'facilitators' have no personal experience of higher education or of the discipline in question.

### ***The difficulty of capturing evidence of learning***

The tutors faced the familiar challenge in the creative arts of capturing and assessing the cognitive process as well as the product, but for this module they also had to find ways to elicit evidence of a learning process all the more elusive in students for whom the standard methods of communicating learning are largely inappropriate.

At the College, although there are expected outcomes to ensure that each student is making progress, the emphasis is on 'distance traveled', the assessment of progress and achievement in relation to the individual student's initial starting point. It is also accepted that 'evidence of learning' may be completely inaccessible in relation to some students; College staff

are very experienced in looking for 'evidence', which may be 'fleeting' and almost impossible to record. What is produced is film, image and performance, but very little about the students' own generation of evidence because, although they may be 'cognitively' able to do it, many students cannot generate the words:

... one sign means a lot, but you can't actually write that down and show it easily'. (college tutor)

Scaffolding students' learning on the course demanded considerable sensitivity to nuances in their response:

It's difficult to know. Just looking at it, you'll see the struggle I had which was...I asked her the quest...the open-ended question or whatever, and this is what she gave me and then I asked her this and so she...then, gave me that, so it's quite complex. So it's a fine art actually, knowing how to support somebody, to acknowledge for evidence and accreditation.  
(college tutor)

The articulation of a single word, or even a significant gesture, in a particular learning context, might encapsulate a student's ability to recall and apply earlier learning in new contexts:

Yes, but it's still... the fact Rebecca said one word that led on to something else ... that one word is really critical ...that she's acknowledged saying ... and that idea came from her even if it was one word .... Do you know what I mean? ... Because that's critical, that that's captured, and it's not put into a sentence ... but it's her word that she said which started something else happening ... (college tutor)

Accordingly, apparently small indications of engagement or assimilation of content were given considerable value.

***Interpreting the assessment criteria: an alternative framework***

Given the sensitivity required for capturing evidence of learning, marking students' work involved academic staff in continuing debate. As suggested above, the difficulty these students faced in expressing themselves orally or in writing led the staff to use subtle and ephemeral forms of expression as testimony of significant thinking. They also drew on professional experience regarding students' disabilities in their discussion of potential achievements.

But that's to do with the nature of her disability, the hydrocephalus and spina bifida. ... It's often a limit for them for their creative flow ... tends to be because of the, you know, the nature of the disability. You often find that someone who's got hydrocephalus struggles with that. (college tutor)

Effort and working to one's strengths were clearly valued in the learning outcomes, and it was seen as fair to give the students credit in this respect.

Well, I mean, things like attendance, time-keeping, awareness of group needs, self-discipline, focus and concentration ...they are all in the criteria, so the students should be credited for that. (university tutor)

However, just how far a student's disability, or any medication they were taking, affected motivation and commitment could be very difficult to determine.

It's always very hard to know to what extent...well, we have some background knowledge as to how someone's diagnosed ..... disability impacts on their learning or their way of being ... but then it's very difficult to say where that stops and where someone has ... perhaps just not done very much anyway towards the performance or ...but then ... you've got a lot of students on medication that can affect their motivation levels so ... it's a very difficult...there's layer upon layer of things that can impact on the way the student is at any one time ... (college tutor)

Interestingly, this college tutor referred to the 'intuitive knowing of how much a student has given or put effort into it'. This 'intuitive knowing' seemed to underline the special importance placed on professional knowledge and experience, and the tutor-student relationship, when a student's commitment and engagement might only be discernible intermittently through single words or fleeting gestures.

The staff discussion seemed to question the distinctions between ability and disability, and there was debate about equivalence with marking on similar university modules. At the moderation stage, academic staff resolved the difficulties of deciding marks, and maintaining university marking standards, by seeing the process as different:

I think we had this discussion last week.....whether it would be on a par with the level 1 students and you felt it was, didn't you?

(university tutor)

Yes, I mean in terms ...they...(university tutor)

Given the limitations...(university tutor)

The college students...yeah, because of their disabilities, hadn't got the kind of cognitive academic skill...well, speed of....(university tutor)

Speed of processing? (college tutor)

Processing, thank you, that's it, yes. (university tutor)

But I don't think we're marking like with like. (university tutor)

While they felt the students were disadvantaged by the speed at which they were able to assimilate new concepts, the university tutors commented on the 'freshness' of the students' approach to their learning. Their perspective seemed to be less 'streetwise' than that of their non-disabled peers, and consequently very open and receptive to new experience:

I guess what they haven't got is the kind of conventional vocabulary that students here will pick up ... how? Through reading I guess.  
(university tutor)

Reading and usage and application. (university tutor)

Usage.... contact with other students ... sort of almost like ... the jargon. (university tutor)

The buzzwords and the ...(university tutor)



They express things differently which *is extremely fresh and innovative*. (our italics) (university tutor)

This perceived difference in the students' perspective allowed the tutors to recast student achievement as different rather than inferior. They did apportion marks based on normal grade descriptors for Level 4 (year 1) modules but they altered their interpretation of the assessment criteria to take into account the new context of working with students with complex disabilities.

So ...we would think here, we look at quite a wide context when we're marking work but we're looking at specific things that they can do and whether they meet the criteria there. Because any other students possibly could move round the stage freely and locate where they are ... (college tutor)

They would experiment, try things out different ways. (college tutor)

Where we realise that some students actually can't do that so we're working specifically in choreography work with specifics, where they can travel from particular spaces ... (college tutor)

As the tutors saw it, the students were disadvantaged in the context of the module criteria, as in the example above, by the impact of their physical impairments on their practical work, and by their 'speed of processing', the relatively slower speed at which they were able to assimilate new learning. Consequently, they narrowed the expectations to what they considered fair.

In terms of the reflective element of the coursework, the tutors directed their assessment towards the students' ability to select resources, and the way they applied their thought processes to the work in relation to the theme. This reorientation of approach foregrounds their need to think more laterally in order to assess students unable to demonstrate depth of conceptual and imaginative engagement through the physical application of a technique. In the case of some students, as here, who have no access to oral communication, this becomes even more difficult.

However, in spite of reasonable adjustments, incorporated in advance and in practice, the tutors perceived undeniable limits to what the students could achieve within the criteria and standards of this particular module:

a first would be 'the work shows an outstanding level of professionalism in process and performance. Flair and originality are combined with use of well-structured and appropriate material.' I don't know. I don't think we would put anyone in that band.  
(university tutor)

that's where we didn't quite make it work for John because he will never be able to do what we were expecting him to do really, because of his permanent visual impairment. (college tutor)

The second comment above describes the way one student's visual impairment caused spatial (dis)orientation which presented difficulties for final assessment of his performance. Recommendations from an audit of a programme at Rose Bruford College (BICPA 2002-2005) included the provision of alternative opportunities for students to communicate and express themselves, through sign language as well as 'in writing and through oral and practical work'. The experience of students with disabilities in both that case and this implies a need for changes in curriculum and learning outcomes, as well as in assessment, if these students are to be offered equal opportunities in higher education.

## **Discussion**

The introduction identified the tensions between central initiatives for widening participation and their interpretation by individuals and institutions. It hinges on the notion of 'reasonable adjustments' to teaching and assessment which opens up educational opportunity but does not lower the criteria by which students' work is judged.

This study suggests that such an approach oversimplifies the problem and does not acknowledge the barriers that complex disabilities present for students in learning and in being able to demonstrate their learning. Nevertheless, the staff did manage to negotiate this tension between valuing the student achievement and a loyalty to academic standards. It is worth exploring how this was achieved in order to investigate the controversial role of 'validating practices' (Shay 2004) in safeguarding academic standards.

The validating mechanisms that Shay refers to are 'the mechanisms that academic communities put in place to ensure the validity of their assessment of student performance' (309). In the UK context, they include tools such as statements of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and grade descriptors or marking schemes. As Gonzalez Arnal & Burwood (2003) argue, the advocates for these tools believe that they help assure the quality of programmes by making explicit what is involved; a 'process of 'exteriorisation' [which] makes judgements publicly grounded and thus objective' (p380). They argue that this approach, which equates publication with explicitness, does not stand up to scrutiny. It:

is based on a model of knowledge that ought to be resisted and that is, at its core, false. Assessment consists in the exercise of an applied skill, and there are core aspects of this knowledge practice that *cannot be captured by a mere propositional description* of them, thus making

them unavailable for publication' (Gonzalez-Arnal & Burwood: 382, emphasis from the original)

This view is supported elsewhere by researchers who challenge the notion that it is possible to make explicit the tacit knowledge involved in assessment decisions (Shay 2005; Orr 2007; O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008; Sadler 2009).

The 'hidden' and inexpressible nature of this tacit knowledge is compounded by the complex nature of work being assessed at higher education level which allows for a wide range of satisfactory student responses. For example, students may respond to an essay question or design brief in very different, but equally effective, ways. This requires tutors to use their judgement, based on their tacit knowledge, in order to allocate grades.

Eisner (1985) refers to this process as the use of 'connoisseurship'; the well-informed subjective judgment which accrues through immersion in a subject discipline. It is an 'interpretivist' view of assessment which recognizes the power of the local context (Elton & Johnson 2002; Knight & Yorke 2003).

Indeed Shay (2004, 309) describes higher education assessment as a 'socially situated interpretive act' and Stowell, in discussing equality in higher education, reinforces this view in arguing that 'in reality what constitutes merit or academic achievement is a social decision and a product of social relations' (p 498). Thus connoisseurship, and its implicit subjectivity, has been criticised by researchers as a threat to widening participation (Hannafin

et al.) as individual's values and habitual practices appear to put objectivity and fairness at risk.

However, Shay (2005) argues that although such judgement is subjective at one level, it gains objectivity from being informed by the tacit standards, norms and rules of the particular academic field. Nevertheless, it allows for an element of professional and local interpretation and there is considerable evidence that inconsistency in marking exists (Bloxham 2009). From this perspective, written assessment criteria have limited power to secure national standards as their interpretation will be determined locally by tutors drawing on their experience and therefore their differing tacit knowledge of disciplinary standards (Knight and Yorke 2003; Price & Rust 1999; Ecclestone 2001).

One explanation of what took place in this module might be that academic staff interpreted semantically 'loose' learning outcomes and grade descriptors in the light of a new shared 'standards framework' for interpreting the existing criteria. This framework appears to combine a need to maintain 'standards' with positive values regarding inclusion, a willingness to change expectations in the light of students' disabilities and an openness to recognising learning however it reveals itself. It could be argued that the staff values in relation to widening participation have articulated with the 'validating practices', in order to accredit the 'opaque' achievement of students with complex disabilities. From this analysis, it is possible to see

why the staff, despite some concerns regarding marking, were able to use the published assessment standards of the institution in making their judgements because, in a sense, those written standards only take on meaning once the staff apply their personal standards framework to them.

### **Implications for the sector**

This article is based on a case study examining experiences at the further ends of inclusion. Yet it could be argued that the acuteness of the case makes visible the processes which are hidden in more conventional attempts to offer and grade assessment in an inclusive manner. Perhaps, the 'veneer of objectivity' (Orr 2008) provided by tools such as assessment criteria is hiding a significant opportunity for flexibility in making judgements about student achievement. Are tools designed specifically to create consistency in standards giving staff permission to create new frameworks in order to make judgments in a more inclusive way? Or could it be that ambiguities in criteria disguise a lowering of standards for students with complex disabilities? From this standpoint, the concept of 'reasonable adjustments' does not take into account the complexities of academic judgment and therefore the legal requirement, while sound in intention, is considerably more contentious in application.

The moral authority of assessors is currently derived from an idea of expert knowledge and judgement but, as discussed above, knowledge and

associated judgements by assessors appear socially constructed. That social construction will be influenced by their individual values; in the case of this module, those values predisposed them to ensure their judgement favoured inclusion. This led them to approach marking by recasting student achievement as different rather than inferior, altering their interpretation of the criteria and adjusting expectations.

The research may add an additional perspective to the debate regarding tensions between academic standards and widening participation. It does reinforce the argument (Stowell; Hanafin et al.) that unquestioned assumptions about higher education assessment may impact on opportunities for students, but in an unexpected direction; that is that manifestations of standards are sufficiently open to interpretation that staff can use them to positively reflect their values regarding widening participation possibly, as Riddell et al.'s research suggests, at some 'threat' to standards.

There are pressing questions for further inquiry. If disabled students experience a flexible approach to assessment, will they be at a disadvantage if they pursue their studies, finding later that they face a less favourable or flexible approach to assessment (Leach et al. 2001). On a more general note, the research contributes a specific perspective to continuing debates about the nature of standards and, as Shay (2004) highlights, the choice between an objectivist or relativist rationality. Whilst studies (including this



one) are increasingly revealing the relativism in higher education assessment, policies and practices to secure academic standards continue to rest on a fairly 'objectivist' rationality. As Shay suggests, assessment in practice is neither 'objectivist or relativist. It is contextual, experiential, and, perhaps most importantly, value based' (p.325). And while values may be particularly transparent in relation to the assessment of students with complex disabilities, perhaps this case serves to highlight the role of values in many marking judgements in higher education.

*6977 words including abstract and references*

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The definitive version was published in *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 35 Issue 2, March 2010.

doi:10.1080/03075070903062864 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070903062864>)

