The future of assessment in Higher Education

El futuro de la evaluación en la educación superior


Abstract

The pending challenge of assessment in higher education, although also at other educational levels, continues to be its effective link with student learning. Students’ strategic learning could and should be achieved by the assessment. This paper arises from the attempt to answer the question about what would be the future of assessment in higher education and it is presented under the form of a collaborative text that was elaborated by all the authors who sign it. This contribution offers a joint reflection by various authors from different contexts and regions on three essential aspects. First, the need for reflection and a change in assessment based on current trends that are demonstrating their timeliness and validity is highlighted. A second issue focuses on the value of technology for the changes that are taking place on assessment, but as long as it adapts to its principles and, therefore, does not imply a return to the last century under the dominance of models today widely overcome. Together with the use of technology-enhanced assessment, the interrelationship between assessment and learning implies to redesign assessment practices, to incorporate proposals from the fields of social justice and sustainable assessment, the design of authentic assessment tasks, to promote feedback and encourage students’ participation. In brief, to collaborate to develop the students’ evaluative judgment in order to achieve free, socially responsible and fair citizens.

Keywords: Assessment; Assessment as learning; Sustainable assessment; Assessment tools, Feedback; Participation; Assessment tools; Technology enhanced assessment; Higher education

Palabras clave: Evaluación; Evaluación como aprendizaje; evaluación sostenible; tareas de evaluación; Retroalimentación; Participación; Medios de evaluación, Tecnologías que mejoran la evaluación; Educación superior

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We believe education, particularly Higher Education because of its broad scope, to be the prime engine of change and transformation towards a more just, responsible and equitable society for all. Consequently, our fundamental tenet is that learning should be at the centre of education, meaning that the success of Higher Education should not be measured by the quality of teaching offered by institutions, departments, courses or lecturers, but by the quality of student learning. Until now it has been more common, as well as easier, to focus primarily on teaching and learning. Assessment has been relegated to a secondary level or, at least, considered as an issue where effecting change is more difficult. But what should assessment in Higher Education mean in the years to come? What are the challenges? Where should future research and innovation in assessment be focused? How can assessment contribute to the development of responsible citizenship?

These questions involve rethinking assessment based on new approaches and perspectives, considering and analysing the technical and technological opportunities and modifying current assessment practices from a critical and creative perspective.

Rethinking assessment

If, at the end of the last century, interest was focused on the technical dimension of assessment processes (validity and reliability), in recent years we have witnessed the progressive conceptual development of assessment which has generated new ways of conceiving and understanding assessment in Higher Education. Approaches such as assessment for learning (Sambell et. al., 2013), learning-oriented assessment (Carlless, 2015) or assessment as learning (Dann 2014, Earl 2013) have provided a new vision on assessment that is crystallizing in a rethinking of the role and nature of assessment in Higher Education. Based on this important concept new and interrelated approaches are now contributing to essential changes in assessment.

In sustainable assessment (Boud & Soler, 2016) the emphasis is placed on the need for assessment to contribute to student learning beyond the narrow spatio-temporal limits of a specific course or subject. It is about offering students the opportunities and the necessary preparation to be able to autonomously satisfy their future learning needs and develop their evaluative judgment (Boud et al., 2018), that is, their ability to make judgments about their own work and that of others.

Assessment as learning and empowerment (Rodríguez-Gómez & Ibarra-Sáiz, 2015) highlights, among other aspects, the collaborative nature of assessment through the participation of students in decision-making in each and every one of the phases and stages of the assessment process, from the initial design to the final qualification. In short, it is the students themselves, both individually and as a group, who assess their own work, are critical of the assessment practices used and are creative in offering alternatives to those proposed.

Assessment, analysed from the critical prism of social justice, leads us to the need to understand it as a social practice that develops within an environment plagued by multiple contradictions and tensions in which it is necessary to rethink basic concepts such as trust, honesty, responsibility, forgiveness and responsiveness (McArthur, 2018). To consider the issues from this perspective, as this author has emphasized, invokes the idea of challenging accepted practices and of looking for alternatives and the possibility of doing things differently. This requires preparing for the discomfort, the pain and the danger of questioning conventional practices, whilst also enjoying the benefit of collaborating for a more just society.

Assessment will only be useful insofar as it is relevant for students, politicians, leaders and institutional managers, tutors, academics and society in general. Collaborative processes need to be established in which different interest groups participate (professional associations, social agents, accreditation agencies, etc.) to identify and define what, in the light of these new approaches, is really significant in assessment and encourages the transition from assessment considered from an
individual perspective led by academics, to a truly collaborative and shared method of assessment.

**Technology at the service of assessment and learning**

The use of technology has been shown to deliver efficient and consistent assessment, but little attention has been paid to its contribution to rethinking the relationships between learning and assessment and the role that technology can play in supporting vital changes (Timmis et al., 2016). It is increasingly possible for learning systems to be designed efficiently and to ensure that students complete their programs by knowing and doing what is required of them. However, new tools need to be developed that reflect innovative pedagogical principles, harnessing technologies that support more democratic, equitable, creative and socially just methods of assessment.

Students will have to face new and challenging problems for which the solutions cannot actually be taught because no one has ever faced them before. In this context, technology should incorporate collaborative and participatory assessment modalities; provide students with opportunities to make decisions within contexts of uncertainty; offer assessment alternatives that allow them to demonstrate their achievements in creative and novel ways; develop skills and abilities that prepare them for employability and citizenship (Brown, 2015); support the development of their evaluative judgment (Boud et al., 2018) and thus enhance their self-regulation and lifelong learning.

**Redesigning assessment practice**

Although assessment practice has shown strong resistance to change, it is important to consider some aspects related to the quality of the method and instruments of assessment used and of the assessment task themselves, so that the process is technically convincing. In addition, questions must be asked about the sustainability of the assessment itself, its viability, its efficiency and its implementation over time at a reasonable and appropriate personal and professional cost.

There is already a well-established international movement that calls for more authentic assessment tasks, real and contextualized challenges that students will face in the world when they leave Higher Education (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Boud & Soler, 2016; Dann, 2014; McArthur, 2018). This trend will accelerate, and it will soon become the norm for assessment tasks to be seen and felt as activities undertaken in the real world. Likewise, assessment tasks will increasingly reflect professional scenarios, so that students learn what is meaningful for themselves and for the social and professional world they are entering. The progressive development and use of virtual reality or computer simulations will contribute to the authenticity of these tasks.

Educational research has identified the crucial importance of feedback and its role as mediator of learning (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020). Previously attention has been paid to aspects such as the speed, level of detail, clarity, structure or relevance of the information provided. But attention needs to be refocused onto what feedback means to students and on the interaction between the students and those who deliver the feedback (teachers, peers, tutors). The current unidirectional character of feedback (from tutor to student) needs to transform into a process of collaborative communication with multiple channels through which teachers and students interact and enable a dialogue between all participants with the clear intention of making learning happen (Nicol et al., 2014; Rowe, 2017).

In short, as indicated by Boud (2019), any assessment activity that does not serve to develop in ever more effective ways the ability of students to assess their own work and that of others, that is, their evaluative judgment, cannot be considered as sustainable assessment. This implies using assessment as an activity to shape and develop the evaluative judgment of learners, and not just to make
unilateral decisions about them. How will students learn effectively if they are not able to assess the quality of their own work? If students cannot collaborate and help each other to assess the quality of their work, how can they work effectively as a team?

This reflection has focused on the assessment of learning (micro level), but logically the challenges highlighted also involve rethinking and modifying both institutional assessment policies and the assessment of entire educational programmes (meso level). Although the changes in assessment practice are required at these two levels, it is also essential that policies and commitment exist at the macro level, that promote the transformation of assessment based on sustainability and social justice so as not to put at risk the integral development of future citizens.

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1. Widely spread homeschooling approach. Due to the need to give education more individual approach, the priority will be given to homeschooling. Students will be able to study and learn what they want, when they want, and for as long as they want. The study indicates that children who have taken part in Forest Schools showed a significantly higher pro-environmental attitude than those who have not.

5. Project-based learning & Rise of EdTech in the classroom. Games that help kids code, toys which teach robotics, and various apps for teachers to efficiently deliver information to students will become common.

In higher education settings, assessment tasks get the attention of students, but once students submit their work they typically become disengaged with the assessment process. Hence, opportunities for learning are lost as they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes. Future-learning oriented assessment engages students in the assessment process to improve both short- and long-term outcomes by requiring students to make sophisticated judgments about their own learning, and that of their peers. In this paper, we describe and critique three initiatives that experimented with future-learn Assessment is a systemic process in higher education that uses empirical data on student learning to refine programs and improve student learning. As a continuous process, assessment establishes measurable and clear student learning outcomes for learning, provisioning a sufficient amount of learning opportunities to achieve these outcomes, implementing a systematic way of gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches expectations, and using the collected Assessment is a big part of today’s education landscape. Most states use high-stakes assessments to measure student growth and proficiency at the end of each school year. But is this really the best way to use assessments? The future of assessment in education needs to change. In order to really reimagine the future of assessment, we must ask ourselves what the purpose of assessments really are. In their current form, assessments are used to measure everything students have learned. High-stakes end-of-year assessments are used to determine whether students pass or fail a class. These same asse...