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Inclusive Assessment in Higher Education: Reasonable Accommodation and the Integrity of Academic Standards

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive assessment requires universities to distinguish the competence they intend to evaluate from the conditions through which students must demonstrate it. Without that distinction, institutions may defend avoidable barriers as academic standards or approve adjustments without considering whether the intended learning outcome remains assessable. This conceptual and comparative article develops a structured approach to that problem through selected scholarship on disability accommodation, participation assessment, diagnostic access and professional competence. It proposes a sequence of decisions addressing the assessment construct, the functional barrier, the proposed adjustment, evidential equivalence and review. Particular attention is given to unseen disabilities, confidentiality, professional programmes and institutional appeals. The analysis argues that academic integrity depends on transparent reasoning about essential competence, not uniformity of assessment conditions. Inclusive design and individual accommodation are complementary responsibilities. Neither can substitute for appropriate support, clear criteria and a credible opportunity to challenge decisions. The framework is normative and requires evaluation within the legal and educational circumstances of individual institutions.

Keywords- inclusive assessment; reasonable accommodation; disability; academic standards; higher education; procedural fairness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities frequently encounter a difficult question: when does changing an assessment condition improve fairness, and when does it alter what the qualification certifies? The question cannot be answered by treating identical conditions as inherently equitable. An assessment can apply the same rule to everyone while measuring an avoidable barrier rather than the intended competence. Equally, an adjustment that removes an essential requirement may produce a result that no longer supports the academic claim being made. The distinction is especially significant in programmes preparing students for professional responsibility. Business graduates may need to interpret financial information; law students must distinguish relevant authorities; education students must demonstrate appropriate instructional judgement. These requirements need careful specification. A familiar assessment format does not become essential merely because an institution has used it for many years. This article argues that inclusive assessment should be organised around evidential equivalence: different arrangements may be legitimate when they provide sufficiently comparable evidence of the same essential achievement. Equivalence does not mean identical experience, identical difficulty in every respect or guaranteed success. It means that the assessment decision remains defensible in relation to the competence being certified.

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II. ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND SCOPE

The article develops a conceptual framework through a purposive reading of six scholarly contributions published by Cambridge and Oxford university presses, combining educational studies, disability scholarship and legal analysis. Cameron et al. (2019) analyse reasonable adjustments in British higher education, particularly for students with unseen disabilities. Harkin et al. (2015) examine screening and assessment practices in Irish higher education. Levin-Banchik (2022) proposes a written alternative to conventional participation grading. Roulston et al. (2022) investigate the experiences of social work students who failed practice placements.

These sources address different problems and do not constitute a comprehensive review of disability law or educational assessment. British and Irish experiences provide comparative material, not a statement of the law governing every university. In particular, the legal obligations of a Guyanese institution require separate examination of applicable legislation, contractual commitments and regulatory requirements. The present contribution concerns the quality of institutional reasoning and assessment design. The argument proceeds by distinguishing standards from procedures, identifying an accommodation decision sequence and examining its implications for professional education. Proposed practices are analytical recommendations. They are not presented as interventions whose effectiveness has been demonstrated by the selected studies.

III. ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT CONDITIONS

A standard specifies the level or kind of achievement required. An assessment condition specifies how evidence of that achievement is obtained. The distinction is straightforward in principle but difficult in practice. A timed written examination may assess knowledge, analytical speed, handwriting endurance and performance under pressure simultaneously. Unless the programme identifies which elements are essential, it cannot explain whether additional time changes the relevant standard. Consider a hypothetical business-law assessment intended to evaluate the application of contractual principles to a commercial problem. If rapid written production is not an intended outcome, an insistence on identical writing time requires justification beyond administrative convenience. If a separate professional exercise explicitly evaluates urgent decision-making, time may carry substantive significance. Even then, the institution must identify the actual professional demand rather than assume that any time restriction reproduces it.

This analysis requires specificity. Statements that a course is rigorous, professional or demanding do not establish the relevance of every assessment condition. The programme should identify the competence, explain why it matters and show how the assessment generates evidence of it. Such reasoning improves the assessment for all students because it exposes tasks that reward incidental advantages. Cameron et al. (2019) emphasise the complexity of individual adjustment decisions and the limitations of blanket approaches. Their analysis supports resisting both automatic refusal and automatic entitlement to a particular arrangement. The framework proposed here extends that insight into a practical question: what barrier is operating, and what adjustment would reduce it while preserving the evidential purpose of the assessment? De Sabbata and Pearson's (2025) case comment on the Abrahart litigation gives this distinction practical significance. Their analysis examines whether an oral assessment was itself a competence standard and criticises institutional paralysis while formal support procedures remained incomplete. They also recognise the continuing importance of evidence and appropriate procedural formality. For assessment governance, the resulting question is whether the institution can justify the essential competence being tested separately from the habitual format used to test it. This is a comparative lesson drawn from English litigation, not a statement of Guyanese legal obligations.

IV. A STRUCTURED ACCOMMODATION DECISION

The first decision concerns the construct being assessed. Staff should specify the knowledge, skill or judgement that a successful performance must demonstrate. Where a task measures several outcomes, those outcomes should be separated. This prevents an adjustment designed for one difficulty from being rejected because another, poorly defined requirement has been invoked retrospectively. The second decision concerns the functional barrier. A diagnostic label can be relevant without explaining precisely how a student encounters a particular task. Two students with the same diagnosis may experience different barriers, while students with different diagnoses may require similar arrangements. A proportionate process should therefore connect relevant evidence to the assessment activity rather than rely exclusively on categories. The third decision concerns the proposed arrangement. Possibilities may include accessible materials, assistive technology, changes to timing, a different response format or an appropriately structured environment. These are examples rather than universal entitlements. The institution must consider whether the arrangement addresses the identified barrier, whether an alternative would be more effective and whether implementation is feasible within the applicable obligations. The fourth decision concerns evidential equivalence. Staff should identify what the adjusted performance will establish and what it may no longer establish. If an oral response replaces a written task, the substitution may be appropriate when disciplinary reasoning is the intended outcome. It may be insufficient when the course separately certifies professional written communication. A

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combined or redesigned task may then preserve both access and valid assessment. The fifth decision concerns review. The student should receive an intelligible explanation, an implementation timetable and a route for raising practical problems. An approved arrangement that is unavailable on examination day has not provided effective access. Review must therefore examine delivery as well as the initial decision.

V. INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Inclusive design reduces predictable barriers before an individual request is made. Clear instructions, accessible documents, transparent criteria and appropriately varied assessment opportunities can improve participation without requiring students to disclose sensitive information. These measures should be embedded in ordinary quality assurance rather than treated as exceptional concessions. Levin-Banchik (2022) proposes brief written takeaways as an alternative way to assess classroom participation. The contribution is valuable because it questions the assumption that frequent spoken interventions provide the best evidence of engagement. Its scope should remain clear: a written technique is a proposed assessment approach, not proof that all forms of oral participation are dispensable. Where oral advocacy is an explicit learning outcome, students still need an appropriate opportunity to demonstrate it. Universal provision also has limits. Offering several formats does not guarantee that every student can access one of them. Some barriers emerge only through individual discussion, and some essential tasks require tailored arrangements. Institutions should therefore avoid presenting inclusive design as a reason to close their accommodation processes. The general system and the individual process perform different functions. Choice requires careful management. If students select between tasks of substantially different intellectual demand, apparent flexibility may conceal inconsistent standards. Common criteria, comparable evidence requirements and moderation are necessary. The relevant comparison is the academic achievement demonstrated, not whether every task takes precisely the same form.

VI. EVIDENCE, CONFIDENTIALITY AND ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Documentation requirements can themselves create access problems. Harkin et al. (2015) describe variation in screening and assessment practices across Irish higher education institutions and identify concerns about the cost and scope of formal assessment. Their study does not determine what evidence a particular institution must accept. It does show why documentation policies should be examined as part of the access system rather than treated as neutral administrative preliminaries. A proportionate institutional approach should distinguish evidence necessary for a decision from information that is merely available. Academic staff often need to know the approved arrangement and its educational implications; they may not need detailed clinical histories. Unnecessary circulation of sensitive material can undermine trust and discourage students from seeking support.

The process should also address timing. A student may identify a difficulty only after encountering a new assessment demand. A late request should be evaluated according to the circumstances and applicable rules, rather than automatically interpreted as an attempt to gain advantage. At the same time, institutions need workable arrangements for examinations already completed and decisions already released. These tensions require reasoned procedures, not informal negotiation dependent on personal influence. Communication matters because students may not understand which office makes a decision, what evidence is required or how long the process takes. A clear sequence of responsibilities reduces duplication and contradictory advice. An institution should not require students to repeatedly recount sensitive circumstances simply because its internal responsibilities are fragmented. The design of eligibility procedures requires similar scrutiny. Waddington and Priestley (2021), drawing on disability-assessment practices across 34 European countries, argue for attention to social context and human rights rather than diagnosis or individual functioning alone. Their subject is assessment of disability status, not grading academic achievement. The distinction is important. Applied cautiously to university support, their analysis encourages staff to investigate how an impairment interacts with assessment conditions while retaining a separate judgement about the academic evidence a student must provide. Diagnostic documentation can inform that investigation without substituting for it.

VII. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE AND DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Professional programmes must protect the credibility of their qualifications and, where relevant, the interests of clients or service users. Inclusion does not require certifying competence that has not been demonstrated. It requires a fair opportunity to demonstrate competence, appropriate support and a decision based on relevant evidence. Roulston et al. (2022) explored the experiences of eleven social work students who failed placements. Their qualitative findings draw attention to relationships, power, feedback and assessment processes. The study cannot establish the prevalence of unfair decisions across professional education. It nevertheless shows why institutions should examine how concerns are communicated and how students understand the evidence used against them. A placement assessment should distinguish a demonstrated shortfall from a lack of opportunity. A student cannot fairly be judged unable to perform an activity that the placement never permitted

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them to attempt. Conversely, repeated performance below a clearly specified threshold cannot be resolved merely by substituting general encouragement for an assessment decision. Support and evaluative candour are complementary responsibilities. Where safety is material, the institution should identify the relevant risk and the conditions under which competence can be assessed responsibly. Generalised assumptions about disability are inadequate substitutes for evidence. A proposed adjustment may be insufficient, but the reasons should explain the relationship between the activity, the risk and the standard rather than invoke professionalism as an undefined veto.

VIII. GOVERNANCE, APPEALS AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

Credible accommodation decisions require shared responsibility between academic staff, disability support personnel and designated decision-makers. Academic expertise is necessary to identify the construct. Specialist support is necessary to understand barriers and possible arrangements. Neither perspective should automatically displace the other. A documented process allows the institution to identify where disagreement concerns facts, educational judgement or legal interpretation. Appeals should permit review of procedural failure, relevant evidence and the reasoning connecting the decision to the standard. They need not convert every academic judgement into unrestricted reassessment. Their purpose is to ensure that a student can challenge a decision through an identifiable process that is sufficiently independent of the original determination. Institutional monitoring should examine more than the number of approved requests. Useful questions include whether arrangements were implemented, whether decisions were timely and whether particular assessment formats repeatedly generated avoidable difficulties. Aggregate analysis must protect confidentiality, especially in small programmes where individuals can be identified from combinations of characteristics. Future research could compare the clarity of accommodation rationales before and after staff development, examine whether students understand decisions and investigate the relationship between adjusted assessment and subsequent performance. Such studies should avoid treating equal pass rates as the sole definition of fairness. Different outcomes can be consistent with fair assessment, while similar outcomes can conceal serious procedural weaknesses.

IX. CONCLUSION

Inclusive assessment and academic standards are mutually reinforcing when institutions specify what achievement means and distinguish it from incidental assessment conditions. The proposed framework requires clear constructs, functional analysis of barriers, justified adjustments, evidential equivalence and review. Its central demand is reasoned accountability: universities should be able to explain why an arrangement preserves the competence being certified or why a proposed alternative fails to do so. That discipline provides a stronger foundation for academic integrity than either procedural uniformity or unexamined flexibility.

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