

Inclusive assessment as participatory action: A longitudinal critical action research study in higher education

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Abstract: This study adopts a participatory, action research approach to inclusive assessment, conceptualising challenges in student performance not as individual deficits but as outcomes of institutional assessment practices that require collective scrutiny and redesign. Through a six-year longitudinal critical action research project in an international business programme, lecturers, undergraduate students, and employers collaboratively examined and reconfigured assessment practices to support inclusive participation and the development of employability-related capabilities among linguistically and socio-economically diverse students. Through iterative cycles of collaborative planning, enactment, and reflection, lecturers, students, and employers engaged in redesigning assessment practices at programme level. These findings demonstrate not only that assessment was socially situated, but also how its redesign reconfigured the conditions of participation and recognition in ways that supported more inclusive and professionally oriented learning trajectories. The study demonstrates how sustained action research can support institutional transformation in higher education while maintaining academic standards.

Keywords: Action research, Inclusive assessment, Participation, Employability capability, Higher education, Institutional transformation

La evaluación inclusiva como acción participativa: Un estudio longitudinal de investigación-acción crítica en educación superior

Resumen: Este estudio adopta un enfoque de investigación-acción participativa para la evaluación inclusiva, conceptualizando los desafíos en el desempeño estudiantil no como déficits individuales, sino como resultados de prácticas de evaluación institucionales que requieren un análisis y rediseño al nivel colectivo. A través de un proyecto longitudinal de investigación-acción crítica de seis años de duración en un programa de negocios internacionales, docentes, estudiantes de grado y empleadores examinaron y reconfiguraron colaborativamente las prácticas de evaluación para fomentar una participación inclusiva y el desarrollo de capacidades de empleabilidad entre estudiantes lingüística y socioeconómicamente diversos. Mediante ciclos iterativos de planificación colaborativa, implementación y reflexión, docentes, estudiantes y empleadores participaron en el rediseño de las prácticas de evaluación a nivel del programa. Los hallazgos demuestran no solo que la evaluación estaba situada socialmente, sino también cómo su rediseño reconfiguró las condiciones de participación y reconocimiento, favoreciendo trayectorias de aprendizaje más inclusivas y orientadas a la profesión. El estudio demuestra cómo la investigación-acción sostenida puede apoyar la transformación institucional en la educación superior manteniendo, al mismo tiempo, los estándares académicos.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción, Evaluación inclusive, Participación, Capacidad de empleabilidad, Educación superior, Transformación institucional

1. Introduction

Action research has long been recognised as a powerful approach for addressing complex educational challenges through collaborative inquiry, reflection, and practice-based change. Rather than treating educational problems as technical issues requiring externally imposed solutions, action research emphasises the active participation of stakeholders in identifying problems, implementing interventions, and critically reflecting on outcomes (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Across diverse educational settings, action research has been used to support professional learning, strengthen participation, and facilitate institutional transformation through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Eriksson et al., 2017; Wittmayer et al., 2021).

Within higher education, assessment represents one of the most influential institutional practices shaping students' learning experiences, participation, and perceptions of success. Assessment does not merely measure learning outcomes; it communicates what forms of knowledge, behaviour, and capability are valued within academic communities (Boud, 2020; Sadler, 2010). Consequently, assessment plays a significant role in determining whose knowledge is recognised, how students engage with learning and what opportunities they have to demonstrate achievement.

These issues become particularly important within internationalised higher education environments characterised by increasing cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. Students studying in a second or third language often encounter challenges in demonstrating their capabilities through traditional assessment formats, particularly high-stakes written examinations. While such approaches are frequently justified as mechanisms for maintaining curriculum requirements, they may unintentionally privilege students already familiar with dominant academic conventions and forms of communication (Ajjawi et al., 2017; Nieminen, 2025). Assessment may therefore function simultaneously as a mechanism of quality assurance and a source of exclusion.

Recent scholarship on inclusive assessment argues that assessment should be understood as a socially situated practice that enables diverse learners to participate meaningfully in learning and demonstrate achievement through multiple pathways (Tai et al., 2018; Nieminen, 2025). Rather than lowering scholarly standards, inclusive assessment seeks to remove unnecessary barriers to participation while maintaining rigorous expectations. However, much of the existing literature focuses on assessment design principles, isolated innovations, or short-term interventions. Comparatively little research has examined how inclusive assessment practices are collaboratively developed, negotiated, and sustained through longitudinal action research at programme level.

A similar gap exists within the action research literature. Although action research has been widely applied to teacher development, curriculum innovation, and inclusive pedagogy (Coghlan, 2019; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), assessment remains a comparatively under-examined site of participatory institutional transformation. In particular there is limited lon-