

Current influences on changing assessment: implications for research to make a difference

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Recent years have seen the convergence of many challenging ideas from curriculum, pedagogy, and indeed economics, into the mainstream of assessment research. These have refreshed and renewed the field of research on assessment in higher education in particular and provide a new agenda for our studies. The keynote address examines the current international context that is prompting changes in assessment. It identifies a number of key moves, including, for example: emphasis on assessment of learning outcomes against explicit standards, the decentring of measurement, a focus away from unilateral assessments, a shift in the unit of activity from course units to programs, recognition of what feedback requires to be effective, new affordances of digitalisation and the potential of learning analytics.

These have been influenced by new demands on educational institutions to be accountable for what they do for students, and longstanding considerations of the influence of and interrelationships of assessment with both student learning and the design of programs. They are being increasingly influenced by moves away from face-to-face encounters to digital spaces and diverse working environments. Traditional practices of assessment by unseen written examinations, while still widespread, are looking even more archaic.

Each of these moves has led to new challenges for assessment itself, with consequences for the nature of research activity. While some can be readily accommodated in existing research practice, for example, research on learning gains, others shift our agendas, for example, moves to sustainable assessment or embedded forms of assessment. What should be our priorities in assessment research that makes an impact on higher education? What do we need to emphasise and why do we need to do so? What challenges does this leave us to confront?

The presentation will be illustrated by decisions made about priorities for the agenda in the formation of a new research centre: the Centre for Research on Assessment and Digital Learning. Discussion will focus on what assessment research is needed to make a difference in the world of higher education given the exigencies that face universities at a time of mass participation, rapid change and public accountability.