

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 25, No. 6, pp. 1068-1085, June 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.6.46>
 Received Apr 18, 2026; Revised Jun 5, 2026; Accepted Jun 16, 2026

Equity-Oriented Assessment in Higher Education: A Conceptual Framework for Assessment, Academic Standards, and Professional Judgment for Students with Learning Disabilities

Hanada O. M. Abzakh* 

Department of Special Education,
 Al-Balqa Applied University, Jordan

Abstract. Assessment is a central mechanism through which higher education institutions make judgments about student competence, progression, and the maintenance of academic standards. For university students with learning disabilities, inclusion debates have largely focused on accommodations, while assessment itself remains under-theorized. This paper presents a critical conceptual analysis of scholarship across assessment studies, inclusive higher education, and disability research to examine how equity, fairness, academic standards, and professional judgment are framed in assessment discourse. The analysis identifies four recurring patterns: fairness framed as procedural consistency; academic standards positioned as institutional safeguards; reliance on discretionary professional judgment; and enduring tensions between inclusion and academic standards. The paper argues that equality-based notions of fairness may constrain equity-oriented assessment design, while standards discourses can legitimize cautious practices that narrow valid ways of demonstrating learning. By conceptualizing assessment as a socially embedded evaluative practice, the study proposes a framework that clarifies how equity, fairness, academic standards, and professional judgment interact in inclusive higher education. Importantly, the study builds on these insights by providing a practical framework for inclusive assessment. The framework offers guidance on redesigning assessment tasks, recognizing different ways of demonstrating learning, supporting professional judgment, maintaining academic standards while allowing flexibility, and informing institutional policies for students with learning disabilities.

Citation:
 Abzakh, H. O. M. (2026).
 Equity-Oriented
 Assessment in Higher
 Education: A Conceptual
 Framework for
 Assessment, Academic
 Standards, and
 Professional Judgment
 for Students with
 Learning Disabilities.
*International Journal of
 Learning, Teaching and
 Educational Research*,
 25(6), 1068-1085.
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.6.46>

*Corresponding Author: Hanada O. M. Abzakh; habzakh@bau.edu.jo

Keywords: inclusive assessment; learning disabilities; equity; fairness; academic standards; professional judgment; higher education

1. Introduction

The process of assessment plays a critical role in defining the progress, competence, and maintenance of academic standards of students within higher education institutions. In contemporary higher education settings, assessment is viewed as a value-free and objective process. However, recent research findings indicate that assessment is a social construct, reflecting disciplinary, institutional, and professional values, with varying impacts on different student groups (Bearman et al., 2021; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Torrance, 2017). For university students with learning disabilities, assessment practices have offered limited opportunities to showcase different forms of knowledge, resulting in consistent concerns over equity, fairness, and assessment outcomes (Hockings, 2010; Tai et al., 2023).

Over several decades, there has been a significant increase in academic research related to learning disabilities within higher educational settings, with a notable emphasis on access, inclusion, and the facilitation of accommodations (Lombardi et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2012; Tai et al., 2023). A significant proportion of this literature has focused on policy and procedural aspects, including disclosure and faculty attitudes toward learners with learning disabilities (Brown & Leigh, 2018). While this literature provides valuable understanding with regard to the policy and attitude aspects of inclusion, there is a notable assumption that accommodation alone can ensure a fair and effective process of assessment, with the evaluative processes underpinning this process remaining somewhat under-researched (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bloxham et al., 2016).

Recent research argues that assessment should move beyond providing individual accommodation. Instead, it should focus on creating inclusive assessment practices for all students by addressing barriers within the assessment system and viewing inclusion as an issue of equity rather than simply improving outcomes (Nieminen, 2024). Assessment is an important locus of tension in inclusive higher education, where equity considerations must be balanced against those of standardization, comparability, and validity (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Sadler, 2010). Tensions around assessment can be seen with regard to learners with learning disabilities, where assessment format, flexibility, and criteria often rest on the judgment of professionals, which can obscure the evidence base for competency judgments (Dawson, 2023; Price et al., 2011; Tai et al., 2023).

Conceptualizations of fairness have been closely related to equality-based paradigms that promote the idea of equal treatment and equal conditions for all students (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012). Equity-based approaches, on the other hand, promote a more complex understanding of fairness while maintaining academic standards (Hockings, 2010; Sadler, 2010). However, there is a scarcity of conceptual and theoretical studies that explore the relationship between equity, fairness, and academic standards within the context of assessment reasoning and

their impact on the use of evidence for assessment decisions (Biesta, 2020; Schildkamp, 2019).

While existing scholarship has examined accommodations, disclosure, and policy responses for students with learning disabilities, conceptual work on how assessment practices themselves construct equity, fairness, and academic standards in this context remains scarce. This paper addresses this gap by conducting a critical conceptual analysis of scholarship in the assessment of university students with learning disabilities. Rather than treating such assessment as a purely technical activity, the paper conceptualizes it as a socially located evaluative practice in which inclusion is negotiated, interpreted, and justified. Through this analysis, the paper develops a conceptual framework that clarifies the interrelationships between equity, fairness, academic standards, and professional judgment, and articulates their implications for evidence-based assessment practices in inclusive higher education.

The focus of analysis is on three interrelated dimensions, namely, (a) the effects of assessment practices on the academic lives of students with learning disabilities; (b) the nature of equity and fairness in the reasoning underpinning assessment; and (c) academic standards in informing assessment of assessment decision-making. The analysis of these dimensions contributes to the ongoing debates in the field of assessment, learning disabilities, and evidence-based approaches to academic evaluation.

The study focuses on broader debates about academic assessment, highlighting the role of evaluative judgment, feedback literacy and academic standards in supporting inclusive assessment, helping students understand academic expectations and develop self-regulated learning (Boud, 2018; Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The conceptual focus, therefore, is on the increasing need to clarify the theoretical underpinnings of inclusive approaches to academic assessment in informing evidence-based approaches to academic evaluation.

2. Equity and Equality in Assessment

In the discourse on assessment, equity has often been used interchangeably with equality, thus leading to equality-based approaches in assessment. The equality-based approaches in assessment are underpinned by the argument that equality in assessment is achieved through ensuring uniform conditions in assessment for all students, regardless of their differing needs, experiences, and access to resources. However, recent studies suggest that equality in assessment does not necessarily ensure equity, as it may not take into consideration structural and pedagogical differences in student opportunities to learn (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Tai et al., 2023).

In this way, an equity-centered approach to assessing student learning takes into consideration that students come into higher education with a variety of backgrounds that may require different forms of evidence for student learning. In terms of learning disabilities, equity does not mean reducing academic standards, but rather "the removal of barriers that are not necessary and which hinder a valid

demonstration of learning" (Bearman et al., 2021; Dawson, 2023; Madaus et al., 2012). Thus, equity shifts the focus from equal treatment to equitable treatment by highlighting the flexibility inherent in the design of student learning assessments while maintaining defensible judgment and reasoning for scholarly evaluation.

3. Fairness as a Contested Concept in Assessment

Fairness has been a contested and complex concept within the realm of assessment scholarship and has been most commonly employed as a rationale for promoting standardized practices that stress the importance of consistency, transparency, and comparability. Nonetheless, both empirical and conceptual research has shown that fairness perceptions vary between students and academic staff and between institutions, highlighting differences in assessment cultures and foundational beliefs about merit, ability, and achievement (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011; Sadler, 2010). The varying nature of fairness perceptions highlights that fairness cannot be thought of as a matter of procedural uniformity, but rather as an interpretive and contextualized process within the context of assessment.

In the context of students with learning disabilities, fairness is socially constructed through institutional policy and the assessment judgment process. Determinations regarding flexibility, format, deadlines, and standards are sometimes based on the discretionary judgment of professionals, sometimes implicit and not well articulated (Bloxxham et al., 2016; Tai et al., 2023; Dawson, 2023). While such discretionary judgment can be beneficial for promoting fairness, it can also lead to confusion and perceptions of arbitrariness, especially in systems where there are formalized commitments to fair assessment and where there are operational variations.

Therefore, the concept of fairness requires consideration of both institutional policy and the judgment process used in assessment decisions, emphasizing the need for clear concepts regarding the interrelationship between fairness, equity, and academic standards (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Shay, 2021). Studies on assessment standards show that it is difficult to maintain consistency across disciplines while also responding to learner diversity (Knight, 2006; Price, 2014; Sadler, 2014). This suggests that fairness in assessment is not only about following procedures, but also about balancing academic standards, professional judgment and inclusion.

4. Academic Standards and the Politics of Assessment

Academic standards feature prominently in discussions of inclusive assessment, given that higher learning institutions are constantly being asked to prove the quality, credibility, and comparability of their qualifications. In this regard, the role of assessment extends beyond being a measure of student learning to encompass gatekeeping, which entails issues of competency, progression, and legitimacy (Bearman et al., 2021; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Shay, 2021). In other words, discussions of inclusion are often tied to issues of academic standards and the dangers of assessment flexibility, leading to academic standards being viewed as both educational and regulatory constructs.

Concerns about the maintenance of standards are also a significant factor in the formulation of institutional policies and the actions of staff in relation to the implementation of assessment accommodations for learners who are identified as having learning disabilities. While there are overall support bases for assessment accommodations, there are still concerns and anxieties about the possible effects of the use of alternative assessment methods on the maintenance of standards and the overall value of qualifications (Dawson, 2023; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Sadler, 2010). Thus, the more conventional assessment methods are prioritized over more innovative methods, even though the latter methods might actually produce more effective and accurate assessment evidence of the learning of the students (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Biesta, 2020).

5. Assessment as a Site of Negotiation

The integration of these concepts reconfigures assessment as a space in which equity, fairness, and academic standards are in a constant process of negotiation, rather than being universally defined and fixed. In this sense, assessment becomes a critical juncture for students with learning disabilities, where inclusion may be facilitated or constrained through the very processes of evaluation in everyday practice. This, in turn, reflects the institution's priorities, professional judgments, disciplinary cultures, and the power relations that underlie the knowledge and competency being recognized and valued (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bearman et al., 2021).

The use of a conceptual framework that centers on the social construction of assessment practices can also shed more light on the embeddedness of assessment within the overall discourses of inclusion, accountability, and academic standards. The use of a conceptual framework that centers on the interdependence of the dimensions of equity, fairness, and academic standards can also allow for the analysis of assessment to go beyond the technical dimensions and encompass the ethical, professional, and institutional dimensions of assessment in higher education (Dawson, 2023; Shay, 2021; Tai et al., 2023). The use of the evaluative practice of assessment can also be seen as a means of interpreting, justifying, and enacting inclusion, rather than its implementation.

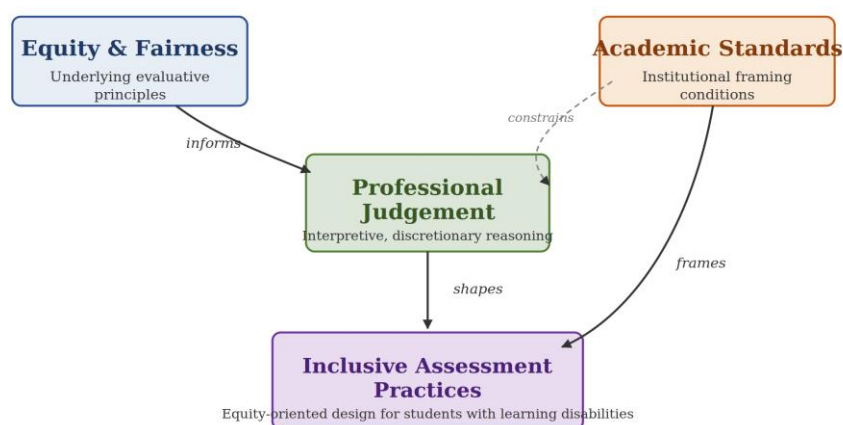


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating how equity and fairness

It informs professional judgment, while academic standards frame inclusive assessment practices in higher education. The framework, illustrated in Figure 1, positions inclusive assessment as an evaluative process shaped through professional judgment, with academic standards providing framing conditions for practice.

6. Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How are the concepts of equity and fairness in assessment for university students with learning disabilities conceptualized within higher education scholarship?
2. How are academic standards theorized, interpreted, and negotiated in relation to inclusive assessment practices for students with learning disabilities?
3. How does literature conceptualize the role of professional judgment and discretionary decision-making in shaping assessment practices within inclusive higher education contexts?

7. Analytical Approach

7.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative conceptual research design with a critical interpretive analytical perspective. This is particularly pertinent in investigating constructs like equity, fairness, and academic standards, which exist in professional discourses. It is not a quantitative study that seeks to produce original data, but one that critiques existing discourses on how assessment of university students with learning disabilities are theorized, justified, and debated. An interpretive perspective is appropriate in understanding assessment processes since they exist in a socially constructed manner. As Creswell and Poth (2018) and Denzin and Lincoln (2018) highlight, qualitative interpretive research is particularly appropriate in understanding processes of meaning-making in complex social systems.

Consistent with this, the overall objective of this research is not to produce any form of empirical generalization, but to create a theoretically informed understanding of how equity, fairness, and academic standards exist in assessment discourses in higher education. Furthermore, a conceptual research design is appropriate in creating a framework that links diverse strands of literature from assessment discourses, inclusive higher education, and learning disabilities. This is particularly pertinent in developing a conceptual understanding of relationships between key constructs and understanding the evaluative processes that exist in inclusive assessment discourses.

7.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study has relied on the available peer-reviewed literature from the domains of assessment studies, inclusive higher education, and learning disabilities. This literature has been used for the analysis and interpretation of the concept and meaning of equity, fairness, and academic standards within the broader context of assessment. For this purpose, literature has been identified through structured searches conducted on prominent academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. These searches have been conducted by using a combination

of relevant keywords such as "inclusive assessment," "learning disabilities," "higher education assessment," "equity," "fairness," "academic standards," and "professional judgment." Further literature has also been identified through citation tracking and reference screening for prominent conceptual and theoretical contributions to the field.

The literature selection focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and books that examined assessment practices in higher education and addressed one or more of the key concepts that informed the development of the framework. This selection has been made with a focus on the interpretive nature of the study and the need for the representation of a range of perspectives that are relevant and pertinent to the concept and meaning of inclusive assessment.

7.3 Sources of Literature

The study draws upon peer-reviewed literature from higher education research, assessment literature, inclusive education, and learning disabilities literature. Literature was selected based on its relevance to assessment practices, the theorization of concepts of fairness and equity, academic standards, and the assessment experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education settings. This theoretical framework informs the analysis of assessment as a socially embedded evaluative practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

The literature review was guided by the most theoretically significant and commonly cited literature to provide depth of understanding, along with more recent literature that reflects the changing face of debates in inclusive assessment judgment. A systematic review was not considered necessary, as the study utilizes a purposive and interpretive approach to engage with significant literature that dominates the conceptual landscape of assessment judgment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Tracy, 2010). This allows for critical synthesis of the literature while considering the complexity of the constructs of interest.

7.4 Analytical Procedure

The study adopted a critical interpretive method to analysis, which was geared toward the identification of patterns, tensions, and assumptions within the selected body of literature. The methodological approach involved an iterative and comparative review of the literature, focusing on how procedural fairness, equity-oriented assessment, academic standards and professional judgment are defined, applied and connected within higher education assessment (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Maxwell, 2013).

As a result of the interpretive method, higher-order thematic dimensions emerged, which are geared toward the illumination of the tensions that exist within the context of inclusive assessment practices. Interpretive conceptual inquiry benefits from the process of repeated thematic engagement and reflexive synthesis, where the identified body of literature can be used to locate patterns and assumptions within the context of the broader study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2010). In treating the literature as an objective source of knowledge, this approach examines how concepts such as fairness, academic

standards and inclusion are understood, shaped and legitimized within higher education assessment.

These themes informed the conceptual framework by positioning assessment as a space where inclusion, professional judgment and academic standards intersect, moving beyond a focus on procedural accommodations (Biesta, 2020; Shay, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis supported this process by identifying conceptual tensions, synthesizing diverse perspectives and developing theoretically informed interpretations of the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2010).

7.5 Methodological Rigor

Rigor in this conceptual inquiry was pursued through a systematic examination of the literature, the explicit identification of analytical choices, and critical reflexivity. Analytical coherence was maintained through continuous comparison across sources and alignment of the research questions, conceptual framework and key concepts, strengthening the consistency of interpretation and theory development (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Credibility was further supported by transparency in the analytical path, making visible the theoretical traditions and interpretive decisions through which the framework was developed (Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2010). Drawing on diverse perspectives strengthened the depth and trustworthiness of the analysis by highlighting important conceptual tensions. Ongoing reflexivity further enhanced the rigor of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Patton, 2015).

8. Analytical Themes Emerging from Literature

A critical review of the literature reveals that there are four interrelated conceptual themes, which throw significant light on the assessment practices of university students with learning disabilities, and they are framed and negotiated within the broader context of higher education discourse, rather than the findings being informed by the data (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bearman et al., 2021; Dawson, 2023). Table 1 summarizes these four themes, their core ideas, and the key supporting literature.

Table 1: Summary of the Four Conceptual Themes in Equity-Oriented Assessment

No.	Theme	Core Idea	Key Supporting Literature
1	Fairness as procedural consistency and uniformity	Fairness is commonly equated with sameness and standardization, reflecting an equality logic that may constrain equity-oriented responses to learner diversity.	Hockings (2010); Tai et al. (2023); Nieminen, Moriña, & Biagiotti (2024)
2	Academic standards as institutional safeguards	Standards discourse can legitimize cautious practices and the "lowering of standards" trope, narrowing the valid ways students may demonstrate learning.	Sadler (2010); O'Donovan et al. (2024); Dawson (2023)
3	Informal and discretionary	Assessment decisions rely heavily on discretionary	Price et al. (2011); O'Donovan et al.

No.	Theme	Core Idea	Key Supporting Literature
	judgment in assessment practice	professional judgment, enabling responsiveness but also producing variability across courses and disciplines.	(2024); Ajjawi et al. (2022)
4	Enduring tensions between inclusion and rigor	Inclusion commitments are continually held in tension with concerns about comparability and credibility, a tension confirmed in recent empirical work on standardization and diversity.	Boud & Falchikov (2007); Biesta (2020); Nieminen, Dollinger, & Finneran (2025)

8.1 Theme 1: Fairness as Procedural Consistency and Uniformity

A dominant idea in this body of work is that fairness is understood in terms of procedural consistency, with a focus on aspects such as transparency, clear marking schemes, and student comparability (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Sadler, 2010). Under this understanding of procedural fairness, fairness is equated with sameness, thereby justifying assessment by means of identical processes.

However, this understanding is more in line with equality logic than equity logic. Current research highlights that fairness is equated with sameness, particularly with respect to students with learning disabilities, resulting in a degree of confusion with respect to how differentiation can be achieved in a manner that is fair (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Hockings, 2010; Tai et al., 2023). Research shows that standardized approaches to fairness can disadvantage students whose ways of demonstrating learning differ from traditional assessment formats, reflecting ableist assumptions about time, space and assessment methods (Nieminen, Moriña & Biagiotti, 2024).

8.2 Theme 2: Academic Standards as Institutional Safeguards

The academic literature uniformly describes academic standards as protective measures that maintain the credibility, integrity, and legitimacy of higher education qualifications (Bearman et al., 2021; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Dawson, 2023; Shay, 2021).

The “lowering of standards” trope regularly features in discussions of assessment adaptations, including those that are inclusive in nature. While support for assessment accommodation is widespread, it is typically granted only to the extent that underlying learning objectives are maintained (O'Donovan et al., 2004; Sadler, 2010).

In other words, academic standards are both procedural and symbolic in nature, informing a conservative approach to assessment innovations and favoring the continued use of traditional approaches despite the potential for richer evidential bases of learning to be obtained (Biesta, 2020).

8.3 Theme 3: Informal and Discretionary Judgment in Assessment Practice

Despite the presence of formal institutional frameworks, the literature emphasizes the significance of professional judgment in the process of assessment (Ajjawi et al., 2022; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011; Tai et al., 2023). In the process of assessment, there may be the use of interpretive judgments in the application of criteria, the use of flexible deadlines, and the development of strategies for students with learning disabilities.

Professional judgment may result in the development of diverse experiences for students due to the differences in disciplines and courses. In literature, the undertheorized nature of professional judgment in the development of an inclusive assessment process and the use of informal decision-making in the absence of a coherent framework of equity-oriented assessment has been emphasized (Dawson, 2023; Shay, 2021).

8.4 Theme 4: Enduring Tensions Between Inclusion and Rigor

The last theme concerns itself with the perennial tension between commitments to inclusion and concerns about maintaining academic rigor. While inclusive assessment principles argue for flexibility, alternative forms of demonstrating student learning, and a recognition of learner diversity, these principles, in turn, are often tempered by concerns about comparability, credibility, and standards (Biesta, 2020; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Tai et al., 2023). Recent empirical work reinforces this conceptual tension, demonstrating how the standardization of assessment can constrain the very diversity that inclusive higher education seeks to value (Nieminen, Dollinger & Finneran, 2025).

Thus, inclusive assessment practices are introduced with caution, with a focus on their exceptional nature, rather than their integral role in assessment design. Alternative assessment modes, including oral assessment, multimodal demonstration, and evidencing, are introduced with a focus on their scrutiny in terms of validity and legitimacy. All of this is an indicative of a conceptual tension, pointing to a need for frameworks that can bring together inclusion with academic standards and evaluation logic in a clear manner (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Dawson, 2023; Shay, 2021).

9. Discussion

The analysis reveals how understandings of fairness are often linked with notions of procedural consistency and uniformity, highlighting equality-based logic that may inadvertently limit more adaptive and inclusive approaches to learner diversity. Simultaneously, academic standards are identified as powerful reference points that inform assessment decision-making processes and may encourage more cautious approaches to inclusive assessment practices and further reinforce the socially constructed nature of assessment.

One of the most important findings of the study is its identification of the role of discretionary and informal professional judgment in mediating the translation of organizational-level commitments to inclusion and diversity into assessment practices. While promoting flexibility and responsiveness in assessment practices, this may also introduce variability and uncertainty in assessment experiences for

students with learning disabilities. Such findings highlight the need for conceptual and structural frameworks that are capable of supporting educators in their negotiation of the interplay between inclusion and academic standards.

This study contributes to the debate on inclusive assessment in higher education by promoting a shift from reactive, individual accommodations to proactive and equitable assessment design that recognizes learner diversity as a normal feature of higher education. It also advances assessment scholarship by explaining how equity, fairness and academic standards are understood and negotiated in the assessment of students with learning disabilities. In doing so, the analysis reveals the contested nature of assessment practices, highlighting how dominant understandings of fairness, academic standards, and professional judgment in assessment for inclusivity can be complex and even contradictory (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bearman et al., 2021).

By examining assessment as an evaluative practice, as opposed to a technical process, the study reveals the significance of the role of norms, traditions, and professional judgment in the translation of inclusivity in assessment (Biesta, 2020; Shay, 2021). This adds to the existing body of assessment scholarship in the following ways: the study reveals the significance of the conceptual and institutional challenge of inclusivity in assessment, which requires further development of frameworks for the integration of equity, judgment, and academic standards in the assessment process (Dawson, 2023; Tai et al., 2023).

A key feature of the literature was the emphasis on procedural consistency as a driver of fairness perceptions. Fairness was often described in relation to the presence of consistency in student evaluation, including the use of similar criteria, transparent procedures, and comparability between students (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011). While such approaches are often justified on the basis of objectivity and transparency, the analysis above suggested that a preoccupation with consistency may limit responsiveness to learner diversity. In relation to students with learning disabilities, equality-based notions of fairness may exacerbate exclusionary tendencies by favoring specific modes of evidencing student knowledge (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021; Hockings, 2010; Tai et al., 2023).

The literature also presented academic standards as a feature of institutional accountability and symbolic legitimacy. Academic standards are presented as having a regulatory function beyond their use as a pedagogic device, whereby institutions use them to convey their academic "rigor" and "legitimacy" (Bearman et al., 2021; Sadler, 2010; Shay, 2021). Issues of "lowering of standards" are therefore seen to be more than simply a pedagogic concern, highlighting the symbolic function of academic standards in relation to institutional reputation (Biesta, 2020). This framework also explains the cautious introduction of inclusive assessment strategies, particularly in relation to contexts in which assessment flexibility may be seen to challenge evidential expectations and shared perceptions of student competence (Biesta, 2020; Dawson, 2023).

A further important finding is the central role played by informal and discretionary professional judgments in the assessment decision-making process. The discretionary approach may be helpful in being more responsive to individual student needs, but it may also lead to variations across courses and disciplines, thus affecting the assessment experiences in an uneven manner. The emphasis on professional judgments may be seen in relation to the complex nature of inclusive assessment and the lack of appropriate and coherent equity-oriented frameworks that could facilitate more consistent decision-making in the assessment context (Ajjawi et al., 2022; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011).

These aspects may be seen in relation to the broader literature on feedback, assessment relationships, and professional learning in higher education settings (Bearman et al., 2021; Carless, 2020; Nicol, 2009). These findings, thus, indicate the need to transcend binary thinking, where the notions of equity and academic integrity are seen as mutually exclusive concepts. Inclusive assessment, thus, requires a conceptual shift in the way we understand the role of assessment as an evaluative function where notions of inclusion, professional judgments, and academic integrity are seen as interconnected aspects.

Moving beyond the accommodation approach to more appropriate approaches to assessment, where the reality of learner diversity is seen as a normative feature of higher education settings, is an important step toward more coherent and defensible approaches to assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Shay, 2021; Tai et al., 2023). Inclusive assessment may also be seen in relation to broader debates on learning disabilities frameworks and multi-tiered support systems, where the emphasis is on proactive approaches to supporting learner diversity (Fletcher et al., 2019; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Graham, 2020).

10. Implications for Policy

At the policy level, the analysis highlights the need to move beyond accommodation-centric approaches to more explicit and coherent institutional policy guidance on equitable assessment design. While there is a proliferation of higher education institutions that articulate a commitment to equity and inclusion, assessment design is still subject to individual discretion, resulting in variability across disciplines and programs (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Hockings, 2010). This, in turn, underscores the need for policy frameworks that frame assessment not only as a pedagogical issue, but also as a locus of institutional coordination, accountability, and evaluative reasoning. This aligns with broader analyses identifying the institutional and structural factors that perpetuate inequality in higher education and constrain fairness and social justice, which call for clearer policy directives and coordinated institutional action (Pillai et al., 2025).

For policy to be effective in this respect, there is a need to articulate shared principles of equitable assessment that distinguish fairness from procedural uniformity, while also recognizing learner diversity as a normative characteristic of higher education. There is a need to explicitly connect equity with academic integrity in order to mitigate tensions between inclusion and rigor, while facilitating more consistent decision-making across institutional contexts

(Bearman et al., 2021; Sadler, 2010; Shay, 2021). In this respect, policy frameworks need to move beyond reactive accommodation to more proactive assessment design, integrating equity considerations with mainstream assessment design. There is a need to develop evidence-informed policies to increase the transparency of assessment design, including the use of professional judgment, evidentiary expectations, and inclusive design principles.

11. Implications for Assessment Practice

With respect to assessment, this analysis highlights the need to provide support to teachers in making complex decisions in assessment. Professional development should move beyond procedural support in making accommodations to include critical engagement with the purposes of assessment, definitions of fairness, and interpretations of academic standards. Opportunities for dialogue can provide teachers with a means of scrutinizing the values and assumptions that underpin assessment decisions and can provide a means of developing a shared form of evaluative reasoning among teachers (Ajjawi et al., 2022; O'Donovan et al., 2004).

The literature has highlighted the benefits of developing inclusive design principles in assessment. Instead of viewing flexibility as an exception, assessment systems can be designed to provide multiple valid means of demonstrating student learning, while maintaining alignment with key learning outcomes and evidentiary expectations (Dawson, 2023; Tai et al., 2023). This can be seen as a way of integrating inclusion with assessment, rather than viewing inclusion as a form of accommodation. Institutions may also experience benefits in the form of reduced uncertainties and increased confidence in assessment decision-making processes. Equity considerations may be included in the collective processes of assessment decision-making, which may provide a means of supporting the development of both inclusive practice and the maintenance of academic standards, thus supporting the concept of assessment as a collective professional responsibility (Bearman et al., 2021; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Shay, 2021).

Collectively, the implications of the above considerations suggest that the concept of inclusive assessment should be viewed as an ongoing process of evaluative reasoning that requires coordinated support, professional dialogue, and assessment design. These insights position inclusive assessment not as a peripheral accommodation strategy, but as a core dimension of educational quality and evaluative practice in contemporary higher education.

12. Practical Application of the Framework

The proposed framework can be operationalized in higher education settings by guiding the design and evaluation of inclusive assessment practices for students with learning disabilities. At the course level, academic staff can use the framework to redesign assessment tasks to allow multiple forms of demonstrating learning, align assessment criteria with diverse evidentiary approaches, and make professional judgment processes more transparent. At the institutional level, the framework can inform the development of policies and guidelines that support equitable assessment while maintaining academic standards. This positions the

framework as a practical tool for bridging conceptual understandings of equity with real-world assessment practices in inclusive higher education.

12.1 Operationalizing the Framework in Practice

To operationalize the proposed framework, higher education institutions can translate their conceptual dimensions into a set of practical guidelines for inclusive assessment for students with learning disabilities. First, assessment design should begin with a careful review of intended learning outcomes to distinguish between essential academic standards and modifiable modes of demonstrating learning. This ensures that increased flexibility in assessment does not compromise core expectations of student competence.

Second, academic staff should critically evaluate whether existing assessment tasks privilege limited forms of performance, such as time-constrained written production or highly standardized formats that may disadvantage some students with learning disabilities without being integral to the learning outcomes. Where appropriate, alternative but equivalent modes of evidencing learning—such as oral, multimodal, staged, or scaffolded assessments—should be incorporated. Such alternatives should nonetheless be approached critically rather than as an automatic remedy, since even authentic or non-traditional assessment formats carry their own assumptions about validity and inclusion that warrant scrutiny (Fawns et al., 2025).

Third, fairness should be understood not only as a procedural consistency, but also as equitable responsiveness to learner diversity. This requires making explicit the rationale underpinning assessment decisions, including the use of adjustments, formats, and conditions, thereby enhancing the transparency and defensibility of professional judgment.

Fourth, institutions should support educators through clear policy guidance, collaborative moderation practices, and targeted professional development focused on inclusive assessment design. Such support can reduce overreliance on informal or inconsistent decision-making and promote greater alignment of assessment practices across courses and programs.

Finally, assessment review processes should incorporate equity as a routine criterion within quality assurance systems. Rather than treating inclusion as an individual accommodation issue, universities can position inclusive assessment as a core dimension of academic quality and maintain standards while broadening valid opportunities for students to demonstrate achievement.

13. Conclusion

This study is a critical conceptual analysis of the assessment practices of students with learning disabilities at the university level, focusing on the interlinked concepts of equity, fairness, professional judgment, and academic standards. Moving beyond the traditional focus on accommodations, this conceptual analysis conceptualizes the assessment practice as a socially embedded evaluative practice, where inclusion is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted through

professional judgment. This conceptual analysis indicates that the dominant concept of fairness is primarily defined by the consistency of procedures, while academic standards are the dominant regulatory/symbolic reference points that guide the assessment practice. On the other hand, conceptual analysis highlights the significance of the role of professional judgment, as the core mechanism that facilitates the translation of inclusive policy into practice.

Most significantly, assessment must be understood as an evaluative practice within learning disability and diversity, requiring systems that balance learner diversity, institutional accountability and academic judgment in an increasingly diverse higher education sector. This conceptualization places inclusive assessment at the core of considerations of educational quality, rather than on the periphery of these considerations.

14. Future Research

Future studies should aim to explore the operationalization of equity-oriented assessment frameworks across different disciplines, as well as the role of institutions in supporting educators in making transparent and defensible assessment judgments. This, in fact, is a crucial step toward moving the policy rhetoric of inclusive assessment into embedded academic practice. In this sense, the present study aims to provide a conceptual base for the development of a more coherent, transparent, and defensible approach to inclusive assessment that seeks to integrate the policy rhetoric of inclusion with the maintenance of academic standards.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the use of AI tools (Claude, Anthropic) for editorial assistance, including document formatting and preparation of the reviewer response form. No AI tools were used in generating the academic content, arguments, or conclusions of this manuscript.

Funding Statement

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics Statement

This study is based on analysis of existing literature and did not involve human participants; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Date Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study; data sharing is not applicable.

15. References

- Ajjawi, R., Tai, J., Boud, D., & Jorre de St Jorre, T. (Eds.). (2022). *Assessment for inclusion in higher education: Promoting equity and social justice in assessment*. Routledge.
- Bearman, M., & Ajjawi, R. (2021). Can a rubric do more than be transparent? Invitation as a new metaphor for assessment criteria. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(2), 359–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1637842>
- Ajjawi, R., Bearman, M., & Boud, D. (2021). Performing standards: A critical perspective on the contemporary use of standards in assessment. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 26(5), 728–741. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1678579>
- Biesta, G. (2020). *Educational research: An unorthodox introduction*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bloxham, S., & Boyd, P. (2012). *Developing effective assessment in higher education* (2nd Ed.). Open University Press.
- Bloxham, S., den Outer, B., Hudson, J., & Price, M. (2016). Let's stop the pretence of consistent marking: Exploring the multiple limitations of assessment criteria. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(3), 466–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1024607>
- Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (2007). *Rethinking assessment in higher education: Learning for the longer term*. Routledge.
- Boud, D., Ajjawi, R., Dawson, P., & Tai, J. (2018). *Developing evaluative judgement in higher education*. Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Brown, N., & Leigh, J. (2018). Ableism in academia: Where are the disabled and ill academics? *Disability & Society*, 33(6), 985–989. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1455627>
- Carless, D. (2020). From teacher transmission of information to student feedback literacy: Activating the learner role in feedback processes. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 23(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787420945845>
- Carless, D., & Boud, D. (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: Enabling uptake of feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), 1315–1325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Dawson, P. (2023). *Defending assessment security in a digital world: Preventing e-cheating and supporting academic integrity in higher education*. Routledge.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Fawns, T., Bearman, M., Dawson, P., Nieminen, J. H., Ashford-Rowe, K., Willey, K., Jensen, L. X., Damsa, C., & Press, N. (2025). Authentic assessment: From panacea to criticality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 50(3), 396–408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2404634>
- Fletcher, J. M., Lyon, G. R., Fuchs, L. S., & Barnes, M. (2019). *Learning disabilities: From identification to intervention* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (2017). Critique of the national evaluation of response to intervention: A case for simpler frameworks. *Exceptional Children*, 83(3), 255–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402917693580>
- Graham, L. (2020). *Inclusive education for the 21st century: Theory, policy and practice*. Routledge.

- Graham, L., & Slee, R. (2020). Inclusion and exclusion in the era of educational reform. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(4), 747–762. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3605>
- Hockings, C. (2010). *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: A synthesis of research*. Higher Education Academy.
- Knight, P. (2006). The local practices of assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(4), 435–452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930600679126>
- Lombardi, A., Murray, C., & Dallas, B. (2015). University faculty attitudes towards disability and inclusive instruction: Comparing two institutions. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 28(3), 229–243.
- Madaus, J. W., Scott, S. S., & McGuire, J. M. (2012). Acknowledging the transition to college: Accommodation needs of students with disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 25(4), 365–378.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Nicol, D. (2009). *Transforming assessment and feedback: Enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year*. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland.
- Nicol, D., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572090>
- Nieminen, J. H. (2024). Assessment for inclusion: Rethinking inclusive assessment in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(4), 841–859. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.2021395>
- Nieminen, J. H., Moriña, A., & Biagiotti, G. (2024). Assessment as a matter of inclusion: A meta-ethnographic review of the assessment experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. *Educational Research Review*, 42, 100582. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100582>
- Nieminen, J. H., Dollinger, M., & Finneran, R. (2025). ‘There was very little room for me to be me’: The lived tensions between assessment standardisation and student diversity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 49(8), 1158–1172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2388699>
- O’Donovan, B., Price, M., & Rust, C. (2004). Know what I mean? Enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and criteria. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9(3), 325–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356251042000216642>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Pillai, D., Tapas, P., & Kulkarni, K. (2025). An integrative review of the genesis of inclusiveness in higher education. *Asian Education and Development Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-07-2024-0159>
- Price, M. (2014). Assessment standards: The role of communities of practice and the scholarship of assessment. *Quality in Higher Education*, 20(3), 215–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2014.904270>
- Price, M., Rust, C., O’Donovan, B., & Handley, K. (2011). *Assessment literacy: The foundation for improving student learning*. Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.
- Sadler, D. R. (2010). Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 535–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930903541015>
- Sadler, D. R. (2014). The futility of attempting to codify academic achievement standards. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(3), 273–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.795518>
- Schildkamp, K. (2019). *Data-based decision making for school improvement*. Springer.

- Shay, S. (2021). *Assessment reform in higher education: A critical perspective*. Routledge.
- Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Bearman, M., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Jorre de St Jorre, T. (2023). Assessment for inclusion: Rethinking contemporary strategies in assessment design. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42(2), 483–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2057451>
- Torrance, H. (2017). Blaming the victim: Assessment, examinations, and the responsibilisation of students and teachers in neo-liberal governance. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38(1), 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1104854>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>