

## **Editorial**

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In drawing together this special issue about the Public Understanding of Assessment, the contributors have been conscious of parallels that can be drawn with the established field of the Public Understanding of Science, which seeks to address the lack of science knowledge among the general public. The impact and meaningfulness of science in everyday life offers a common thread, which Jenkins (1994) highlighted as the importance of context and ‘knowledge in action’ (p. 603) rather than knowledge for its own sake. Perhaps the most important aspects of science education in an everyday sense are those that have direct implications for the individual or society, e.g. the environment or food safety. In a similar way, the papers collected here variously adopt Harlen’s people-focused view that ‘... what is important for everyone using or affected by assessment is not the details of definition but some general ideas, particularly about the trade-off between accuracy and meaning in assessment and the match of methods to purpose’ (1994, p. 8).

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Assessment of educational achievement, whether by traditional examinations or by teachers in schools, attracts considerable public interest, particularly when it is associated with ‘high stakes’ outcomes such as university entry or selection for employment. The usual

outcome for the individual examination candidate is to receive a 'result', generally a discrete score, mark or grade. Sometimes this will not chime with their or their teachers' expectations and doubts will creep in about the process of assessment that has arrived at this result.

However, educational assessment is a process that is made up of many layers of complexity, which are not always evident to the general public, including teachers, students and parents, and which are not easily understood outside the expert assessment community. These layers may be organised in highly co-dependent relationships that take in such matters as reliability, validity, human judgment and errors, and the uses and interpretations of the various types of assessment. No-one could reasonably argue that the principles and often nuanced complexities of educational assessment should be core learning in public education but there is a growing realisation that trust in the UK assessment system is under some threat as the media and others tend to sensationalise or politicise any problems that arise in the annual diet of examinations. This collection of papers offers the first comprehensive overview of how the general public is considered to perceive and understand a wide variety of aspects of educational assessment, and how this understanding may be improved.

The volume opens with O'Neill's exploration of public trust in assessment results and argues that it is not sufficient to pursue reliable and valid forms of assessment. She contends that published evidence about assessment must be provided in intelligible forms for those who need to decide whether or not to trust that evidence. This implies an intelligent form of accountability that can offer the general public a basis for placing or refusing trust in examinations (and in teachers and schools). Trust is also explored by Simpson and Baird, who report on how different stakeholders in the Advanced-level examinations process in England can have different expectations. They argue that many factors contribute to the generation of trust in examinations and that this makes it difficult to ensure that all of the stakeholders trust the system all of the time.

Klenowski's paper takes up the specific theme of trust in teacher's judgements, using the Australian experience of the impact of standards-based educational reforms. She argues that if the intention of assessment reforms is to improve educational outcomes rather than simply report them, then it is teachers that are the agents of change rather than the tests. As such, improved understanding of the value and process of teachers' judgement processes is a crucial focus in developing a public that is better informed about assessment.

Brookhart and Gardner both pick up the perception of objectivity underpinning much of the rhetoric around assessment scores. Brookhart, writing from a US perspective, recognises the problematics of objectivity but argues that, however much assessment experts

may wish public understanding to be more appreciative of the nuances and complexities of assessment, the resulting scores provide a pragmatic means of absolving politicians, policymakers and the general public from any guilt in their interpretation or decision-making. She concludes that it may be more difficult to improve public understanding of the limits of assessment than to improve the quality of existing tests. Gardner also addresses the perceived objectivity of assessment, arguing that a misapprehension among the wider public that educational 'measurements' have scientific accuracy and precision has created the illusion of objectivity. Research suggests that instead of recognising the inevitability of various types of errors, the public tends to see them as avoidable mistakes by examination bodies or examiners. He sets out the challenge for the educational assessment community to choose their interactions carefully with the public, to wean them off the notions of accuracy and precision and to become more aware of the uncertainty implicit in assessment processes.

Several of the contributors tackle the nature and quality of existing communication processes. For example, Newton argues that reliability is a technical concept that has little real-world significance, preferring to tackle the more relevant and easier understood concept of 'measurement inaccuracy'. He suggests that the educational assessment community should use what he perceives as the language of media reporting, by referring to the likelihood of students getting the wrong grades. His paper considers the threats to public confidence in examinations and suggests that educational assessors should more specifically address the culpability for inaccuracy from the perspective of its causes and impacts. Chamberlain continues the communication theme for improved understanding of assessment processes among the users of examinations results, for example students, universities, employers and parents. She draws her contribution from other fields that share the characteristics of assessment, namely high public interest but ill-informed public understanding, and factual and technical complexity. The strategies she proposes for improving public understanding include focusing on the application of assessment information and recruiting influential peers as information brokers.

Communicating assessment matters in the media is the theme of the papers from both Mansell and Murphy, from the complementary perspectives of the journalist (Mansell) and the academic (Murphy). Mansell sets out evidence that suggests that at best there is misleading and at worst wilful mis-interpretation of public assessment data by the media and by politicians. He makes a plea for better mediation of the concept of uncertainty in assessment and also for greater engagement between the assessment community and the media. Murphy echoes the calls for better communication and media strategies from

examination bodies, including making the key issues more accessible to the public, through utilisation of social networking to tap more effectively into the concerns of individuals, and encouraging the media to become better informed in their reporting.

The papers collectively highlight that there is much work to be done to ensure public confidence in educational assessment. In conclusion, it is important to endorse another tenet from the field of the Public Understanding of Science as a guiding principle. In seeking to improve the public understanding of assessment we must not ‘... imply a condescending assumption that any difficulties in the relationship between science [cf. the assessment community] and society are due entirely to ignorance and misunderstanding on the part of the public’ (House of Lords, 2000, para 3.9). The onus is very much on the assessment community to improve how they mediate the various processes and outcomes.

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