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## **The Hidden Aspects of Academic Assessment and its Unintended Outcomes: the Perspective of Students**

### **Introduction**

The assessment system is a system of elements including: degrees, procedures, methods for verifying knowledge, criteria and examination requirements. Most of them are described in educational curricula (syllabuses) and made available to pupils, students and parents, etc. It is assumed that thanks to all these carefully designed elements it will be possible to reliably and accurately measure educational achievements planned in official curricula. It is also assumed that the assessment process will be compatible with the didactic process. Meanwhile, the elements enter into dynamic relationships and interact with each other, and their implementation is subject to numerous modifications and distortions. Therefore, it is impossible to predict or plan everything, especially as information on assessment is embedded in different contexts of the learning environment, comes from various sources and is communicated to learners in an informal way. Day after day, they learn to recognise the tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and reactions of their teachers, which reveal, for example, their approval for the answer given and give a hint about the right or wrong solution. Teachers send informal hints – how to get a positive grade, pass a course or pass an exam – when, for example, they display some content and omit other content, praise only those who use scientific language, use logical argumentation and hide emotions and their own opinions, and ‘turn a blind eye’ to various manipulation strategies or unfair practices during examinations (Bergenhengouwen, 1987; Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991; Meighan, 1993; Pauluk, 2016).

On a daily basis, students are subjected to the impact of all these elements as they are part of the so-called hidden curriculum: ‘Assessment messages are coded, not easily understood and are often read differently and with different emphases by staff and by students’ (Bound, 1995: 39). Philip Jackson, who first used the concept of a hidden curriculum to describe the second life of a school class, considered assessment as one of its important elements. He pointed out that it is not only a student’s achievements, but also his or her character traits and ability to adapt to the school’s requirements that are assessed (Jackson, 1968). Students also evaluate each other, develop strategies to maintain good relationships with their peers at school and adapt to the expectations of teachers (Jackson, 1968; Dreeben, 1968).

Many scholars dealing with the problem of assessment do not approach this issue from the perspective of a hidden curriculum. Nevertheless, they also note that many of its aspects are beyond the conscious control of teachers and authors of educational programmes. The learner's perception of various elements of the assessment system – in its explicit and hidden dimensions – affects their approach to learning and, consequently, determines their educational achievements (Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Joughin, 2010; Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons 2002; Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens, 2005; Pauluk, 2016). Graham Gibbs states that assessment can have a greater impact on the approach to learning than teaching (2006). In turn, by learning the truth about the assessment system, we gain an insight into the functioning of the education system (Rowntree, 1987).

In the assessment system, grades and their outcomes deserve special attention. Learners constantly hear about the importance of good grades, which are treated as a measure of educational success and a predictor of high social status in modern societies. Although the development of social competences is promoted in official curricula, in educational practice, competition is fostered as grades force students to compare themselves with each other, which may also affect positive relations between them. The negative effects of assessment include decreased interest in learning aimed at satisfying cognitive curiosity. Excessive emphasis on grades leads to the disappearance of internal motivation and permanent motivation, which makes students return to tasks without the supervision of a teacher or a parent (Dembo, 1997). Students strive for good grades to avoid negative consequences (Meighan, 1993). Assessment is accompanied by fear and anxiety. While children are afraid of punishment from adults (excuses, claims, comparisons with siblings and peers), students feel the pressure that if they do not finish their studies with good results, they will be in a worse position in the competitive labour market than their peers achieving academic success (Pauluk, 2016).

Teachers also believe in the magical power of grades. They are subject to external evaluation. The quality of their work is measured by the number of students achieving high scores in tests and subject competitions. In their work, they focus on preparing students to pass tests in accordance with the applicable key. For them, ranking lists are a source of knowledge about the student's position against others, and they also receive ready-made and simplified diagrams concerning talented and weak students. The label of a talented student is like a magnet attracting further positive qualities: nice, cultural, friendly. In turn, the label of a poor student also generates a sequence of subsequent, but negatively associated features: naughty, unpleasant, problematic. Even reflective teachers, who are aware of these schemes, address different messages, expectations and tasks to these types of students using different teaching styles, which in turn affect their actual educational achievements (Dembo, 1997; Meighan, 1993; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968).

The unintended consequences of grades also result from the fact that pupils and parents consider them objective and indisputable because they are granted by a teacher – an authority in the field of knowledge. Education institutions teach us that authorities should be uncritically trusted and their opinions should be valued (Meighan, 1993). Similar effects of assessment in higher education institutions,

resulting from a rigid model of competitive examinations and classification procedures blocking development and critical thinking, are indicated, among others, by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) and Michael Crozier (1996). Crozier notes that French students must be conformists, reject that which is uncertain and courageous, and conceal their own reasoning in order to pass exams positively (Crozier, 1996).

The knowledge that is subject to assessment is often perceived by pupils and students as uninteresting and unrelated to life. Therefore, they use various strategies to survive and 'outsmart' the assessment system (Holt, 1969; Jackson, 1968; Snyder, 1971; Woods, 1980; Pauluk, 2016). Where learning efforts, individual searches for solutions and learning from mistakes are underestimated, learners focus more on satisfying teachers and on answering correctly (Holt, 1969; Meighan, 1993).

It can be assumed that experience with the assessment system acquired at earlier stages of education is a kind of educational heritage for future students. When beginning their studies, they are well versed in informal guidelines, more or less accurately read informal expectations of individual lecturers and react to them; they also notice gaps and imperfections in the assessment system. This is confirmed by research results. Becker et al. (1968) show that students defined academic classes as situations in which good grades are obtained for doing what teachers want. They learned to read their preferences, quirks and assessment methods. They regarded grades as the institutionalised form of good, an equivalent of money and a type of payment for the work done. Good grades brought them tangible benefits, raised personal prestige and even increased their chances of a date with the opposite sex. These experiences diverted their attention from learning to satisfy cognitive curiosity to 'earning' degrees (Becker, Geer, and Hughes, 1968).

Benson Snyder points out that in addition to official goals such as independence, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, there are simultaneously a number of opposition demands and expectations embedded in the context of academic life that are informally communicated to students, who recognise and adapt to them. During their studies, students learned that they should strive for grades. Informal assessment requirements determined their approach to learning and 'overloaded' curricula prompted them to choose between different coping strategies, including learning for grades with little time expenditure and self-involvement in learning (Snyder, 1971).

Another study has proved that non-substantive factors, such as the ability to read informal cues from lecturers and examiners, determine the final results. Students referred to as 'cue seekers' tried to learn the preferences of their lecturers and examiners and make a good impression on them to obtain the potential examination content. In turn, cue conscious students were able to listen carefully and read hints sent to them by lecturers. They learned selectively, paying attention only to certain parts of the material. In contrast to both these groups, cue deaf students – not sensitive to informal signals – received worse grades (Miller and Parlett, 1974).

## Materials and methods

The aim of the study was to identify the hidden aspects of the academic assessment system and the unintended outcomes based on the subjective experience of pedagogy students at one of Poland's universities. It was assumed that in their free statements, research participants would present their personal knowledge, tacitly accepted assumptions about their educational environment and assess situations and phenomena. The study was conducted using the qualitative variation of an unreactive technique, i.e. content analysis (Babbie, 2004; Mayntz, Holm, and Hübner, 1985; Holsti, 1968; Krippendorff, 1980; Pauluk, 2016).

## Procedure

The presented results come from material collected between 2011 and 2014. During this period, students wrote free statements about: *What does studying teach?* When writing about the real effects of studies experienced, they simultaneously indicated various elements – embedded in the academic educational environment and not included in syllabuses – which generated them (hidden curriculum). The contents were separated into simpler elements, i.e. units of analysis, which were thematic threads separated from the content of the students' free statements and classified according to the categorisation key (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1968; Krippendorff, 1980; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2001). When constructing the categories, care was taken that each category includes the most similar thematic themes (judgements, opinions). The categories were then grouped based on evident differences between them (Mayring, 2000; Kluge, 2000). The categories were introduced to the QDA Miner software and subjected to quantitative and then qualitative analysis (Pauluk, 2016).

The results collected showed that students indicated assessment as one of the various elements of a hidden curriculum. As these contents appeared in different contexts, they were only subjected to qualitative analysis and interpreted with regard to the so-called units of context in which they appeared (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2001). In order to identify thematic threats related to assessment, selected contents were repeatedly analysed. Moreover, during the analysis of students' free statements, particular attention was paid to guiding key words, their various grammatical variations and synonymous concepts, such as: assessment, grades, evaluation, colloquium, diploma, test, oral answers, essay, pass, exam, European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) points, criteria, expectations, requirements, passing, cheating in the exam, plagiarism, strategies, stress, session, unfair/fair assessment. To increase the credibility of the research, original students' statements were used to illustrate the relationship between various elements of the assessment system as perceived by students and the consequences experienced by them.

## Participants

The source material, i.e. 319 free statements, was collected from pedagogy students at one of Poland's universities, including 142 students of bachelor's degree programmes majoring in: social care pedagogy (P), social rehabilitation (R), cultural

management (M), and 177 students of master's degree programmes majoring in the same subjects. Pedagogical studies are feminised and so the participants included 272 women (F) and only 47 men (M).

Participation in the study was voluntary. Due to the nature of the research, the students were assured of anonymity. They were told that research results may be used to modify the assessment process and may have a real impact on improving quality of education.

## Results

### Academic assessment as a mirror of the educational environment

The experience related to assessment reported by students indicates many of its unintended outcomes reflect the situation in the academic learning environment. According to the research participants, it is important for them to have information about both the explicit and implicit dimensions of assessment. They pay attention to the criteria related to grading, methods of assessment and examination conditions, which are described in syllabuses, expecting them to be followed by teachers. They also search for suggestions about assessment in the context of the educational environment. Information on how, what and how much to learn are derived from their experience at earlier stages of education and from older students. The source of knowledge is also their personal experience related to examination successes and failures or fulfilling the informal expectations of academic teachers. For example, they pay attention: 'to what extent teachers are flexible and consistent in adherence to the set assessment criteria and examination requirements' (M, R/27). They note that they are not as strict in their assessment as they threaten to be at the beginning, and that they assess even more leniently at higher years of study.

Academic teachers attach great importance to grades for mastering academic knowledge. From the students' perspective, grades are more important than the content to be assessed. They believe that this is one of the factors that is responsible for their instrumental and superficial approach to learning and academic knowledge: 'Teachers do not convey the ideal that knowledge is something valuable; what they convey is that so much material is required for a grade of 4 or 5, and everyone, depending on his or her individual ambition, has to learn for a given grade' (F, P/227).

Students notice different relationships between the assessment system and the academic didactic process. A teaching style provides suggestions for how to learn. If the passive transmission of textbook knowledge prevails in the classroom, it is a message for them that the same teacher will expect them to recreate this knowledge during an exam. It also affects their approach to learning: 'Students are focused to note down everything that might possibly appear on the exam. It takes their full attention. ... Students are often unable to repeat the topic of a lecture even 15 minutes after its end' (F, A/27).

Their subjective experience with academic assessment tells them that examination success is determined by their knowledge of scientific concepts, theory and classifications. Moreover, they should use the proposed literature and behave safely during exams because: 'Intelligent, unruly students, all individualists are not

appreciated. ... an ideal student is systematic, unreflective, conformist, passive and nodding' (M, P/92).

What they conclude from their university days is that each lecturer thinks that his or her subject is the most important. Therefore, each teacher asks students to read a lot of content in a short time. They admit that it is often beyond their psychophysical abilities. These situations discourage them from learning and provoke them to use various survival techniques and take to superficial learning, particularly when examination requirements are too burdensome: '...there is too much knowledge, syllabuses burst at the seams, and the examination literature has a rigid frame and there is no space and time to look for information in other sources that are more interesting for students' (F, A/16). They also see the negative consequences of learning material that does not interest them and does not satisfy their expectations: 'Students are often simply flooded with content, a multitude of topics and definitions that they will learn, pass an exam and then simply forget, they are not useful to them and will not provide them with any skills' (F, R/157). They do not hide that, under such conditions, they are focused on passing the exam, often putting in as little effort as possible. They take a minimalist approach to learning according to the principle: just to pass and not to fail the exam.

### **Deficiencies and inconsistencies in the academic assessment system and their outcomes**

Students experience a discrepancy between what they would like to be assessed and what is subject to formal assessment in the university, i.e. primarily academic knowledge. They note that at the university great importance is attached to grades while their additional activity, such as volunteering, extracurricular activity, which develops their passions and interests, is not graded. They note that workshops are also definitely lower in the academic hierarchy than the 'canonical' classes, focused on theory. This lower position is evidenced by the fact that neither knowledge nor skills are verified and no grades are obtained after completing apprenticeships. Meanwhile, classes developing professional skills are particularly valuable to them.

Students experience inconsistencies between what is assumed in the official content (for example in educational outcomes) and the assessment methods, which are their negation. For example, they note that during studies, the importance of independent and critical thinking is emphasised, yet traditional methods of assessment are used in practice: 'You hear a lot about not learning by heart and then... you receive a test with tasks to supplement quotes with missing words' (F, R/191). At the same time, they note that they will not fill in gaps in sentences and circle correct answers in real life.

Students perceive inconsistencies between what lecturers declare during classes and what they expect from them during exams: 'On the one hand, students are required to be creative, think independently and have original judgements and opinions. On the other hand, however, knowledge is uniformised. It is impossible to write an essay without referring to a dozen or so publications' (F, P/317). They discover paradoxical situations when a teacher chooses an essay instead of tests and

assesses it by confronting students' opinions with the views of scientific authorities. They do not understand the purpose and meaning of writing free statements when they are judged in the traditional way:

I wrote an essay about my professional identity. I knew the exact criteria and the title itself indicated that I should refer to my personal thoughts on this topic. I received a poor grade. I was disappointed because it turned out that there were too many personal threads in the paper and too few references to literature. But then it would not be the presentation of 'my' professional identity, but the vision of the textbook's author (F, A/101).

Other irregularities related to the assessment system, which were noticed by the research participants, included: too high and too low requirements, too few points (ECTS) for a subject, unclear or ill-considered criteria and exam requirements, changing them just before an exam (e.g. a written exam is replaced by an oral exam), taking a long time to publish results (e.g. the day before a retake exam), grading papers that teachers have not read, no feedback on errors, stressful forms of knowledge verification (multiple-choice tests), too little time for exams, exam questions not matched to the subject matter of a course: 'The form of colloquium leaves much to be desired. Questions are unspecified, based on the principle 'what the author meant', too detailed and inadequate. There is not enough time to answer them' (F, R/202).

The research participants suggested more frequent use of more attractive forms of examination, such as games or modern technologies (e-learning). They also pointed out that: 'Evaluating your own activity is not the best solution' (F, A/10).

### **Peer relations from the perspective of academic assessment**

Exams and preparation for them are factors regulating relationships between students. They pointed out that thanks to team work they get to know each other better and learn cooperation. Official curricula also assume that the use of this form in the classroom will contribute to the development of social competences. The research participants admit that they conceal the fact that they are not prepared for classes and are lazy. Parasitism of some at the expense of the hard work of others leads to a sense of unfair assessment: 'Group work ... an interesting mechanism in which one person works for the assessment of several others...' (F, P/290).

It turns out that team work can develop a wrong approach to learning. Too much material to master and the belief that learning it is beyond the psychophysical possibilities make students focus primarily on the collection of material and sharing it with each other to save time and effort when preparing a presentation or preparing for an exam. Their learning style consists in assigning one person a piece of material for elaboration, but without consulting the other members of the team. Although they receive positive grades, as is clear from their statements, this way of learning deepens their belief in the chaos of academic knowledge, which is fragmented and unrelated.

Exams also reveal the development of specific relations between students. As they combine studies with professional work and additional extracurricular

activities, they particularly value their time and try to manage it well. They need the support of other students to obtain notes from classes, information on the requirements of lecturers and find a convenient place at the exam. However, they need peers who are well-prepared, provide the correct answers and allow them to copy their answers. Therefore, the preparation period for exams and the exams themselves are perceived as a time of rapid development of apparent friendships: 'A common strategy is to pretend friendship with students who do not regularly attend lectures. During exam sessions, everyone is suddenly friendly, wants to photocopy notes, talk about their problems and experiences, and after the sessions they do not speak a word' (F, A/284). Before exams, students often do each other favours: 'If you want help, you often have to repay, but in a significant way. ... those who have older friends and who know where to look and what to do are important. Individualists can rarely enjoy their success because it leads to complete rejection' (F, A/284). From the perspective of the research participants, exam success depends on collective cooperation, even if it is only momentary and lasts only during this difficult time.

From the students' perspective, an exam itself and the accompanying anxiety have many positive aspects, and they treat experiencing failures as an inseparable element of student life. They admit that in this way they learn determination and perseverance in pursuing a goal and preparing to deal with the challenges of adult life. Thanks to such situations, they discover their strengths, various types of self-reinforcement (positive thinking, sense of humour, distance to themselves and problems), which allow them to familiarise themselves with difficult situations. They also admit that university exams teach them 'to do a lot in the shortest possible time' (F, R/304) and thus prepare them for a fast-changing social reality.

### **Coping strategies as a feedback response to irregularities in the academic assessment system**

Subjective experience related to academic assessment, as well as deficiencies, inconsistencies and shortcomings observed in this area are among the factors that generate manipulative strategies and many unfair practices. According to students' statements, academic teachers perpetuate them when they do not respond strongly enough to phenomena such as plagiarism, cheating and copying from others in examinations. In turn, their personal experiences with the various manipulative tactics used in relation to teachers confirm the effectiveness of some of them, such as making a good impression and learning to meet a teacher's expectations. For example, one of the students convinces: 'You do not need to learn everything; you only need to know what topics the teacher is particularly interested in' (F, P/53). Another effective strategy consists in pretending that you know something and: 'absorbing the teacher's attention with yourself, particularly to distract him or her from your ignorance' (M, A/102).

Students also notice the unintended consequences of non-substantive factors that determine the assessment of their work: 'studies and the way our knowledge is checked really show who can survive and adapt to the expectations of academic teachers' (F, R/23). They realise that high grades are not necessarily determined



by the amount of knowledge they possess, but by the ability to move in academic reality: 'There are people among us who may not attend classes for half a semester, but a pretty smile, some compliments and they pass the semester with high grades ...' (F, P/32), or: 'You show off with your eloquence ... in front of your lecturers and examiners – you are labelled smart and clever' (F, R/2). Students note gaps in the grading system, which underestimates honest individuals and praises those who can cheat, do not attend classes, but are resourceful. Such situations give rise to a belief in unfair assessment, discourage learning and encourage the use of various manipulation strategies:

Studies. What else do they teach us? They give us quite a painful lesson that it is not worth it. It is not worth swotting till late at night, it is not worth trying, learning and understanding. Those who do not do this but have instead acquired the ability to cheat do better or like those who write exams using knowledge which has its source in the head (F, R/23).

Another person stated:

Where is the justice? One student can honestly learn all the material and, for example, he gets a 3 and another student who cheated because, for example, he wrote a colloquium with the help of the Internet, gets a 4 or a 5. Why, then, does the educational system not do anything about it (F, P/256)?

As students notice the causes of this unethical behaviour, they can easily explain and justify them.

They admit that they also cheat in examinations for other reasons: 'Many of us use crib sheets. Why? Most often when the material has not been well explained, or when the questions look the same each year. This does not motivate us' (F, P/290). Organisational errors also lead to such behaviour: 'Studies teach us survival and cunningness. Two exams in one day and four in one week preclude reliable preparation and satisfactory grades' (F, A/166). Students also point out that the large number of unfair practices makes them an element of student culture.

## Discussion

Students who are subject to assessment remain on the margins of the debates that directly concern them. Meanwhile, as the research results show, their perception of the educational environment, including their experiences related to assessment, determines their approach to learning and the actual learning outcomes (Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons, 2002; Gibbs, 2006; Pauluk, 2016). From their perspective, there are many irregularities related to the explicit and implicit aspects of assessment that generate unintended consequences, including the approach to learning and knowledge, relationships with others, as well as ethical behaviour in an academic learning environment. Sharing students' subjective experiences makes it possible to discover the various gaps and inconsistencies between assessment and the didactic process, and to identify the informal expectations and requirements of academic teachers perceived by students.

The subjective experiences of students with the assessment system and its consequences may constitute an important element of the evaluation of the quality of education conducive to undertaking corrective actions. It seems reasonable to replace the testing culture model, which to some extent emerges from the statements of the research participants and treats assessment and education as isolated activities, with a model of assessment culture supporting the process of effective learning (Dochy et al., 2007). In the context of students' statements, it is important to ensure greater coherence of both processes. Assessment requires close integration with the educational model, in which learners are genuinely active entities who influence the process of their own education, participate in the creation of curricula and selection of education content, and are responsible for the evaluation of their own work (Bound and Falchicov, 2006).

This requires creating a new educational environment from the earliest stages of education, which will assess more complex cognitive activities, social competences and the non-academic activity of students, and will constantly emphasise the importance of applying ethics in one's own and peers' behaviour.

In designing the assessment and education systems, it is helpful to know the pedagogical and psychological patterns of effective learning by students as adults, who need clearly formulated expectations and assessment criteria, feedback on deficiencies and progress, self-regulatory learning, monitoring and self-learning control, learning from experience and personal knowledge, and understanding the meaning of one's own learning and the effects of one's own work (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Dembo, 1997; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2009; Dochy et al., 2007; Bound and Falchicov, 2006; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Norton, 2009). In the light of the research results presented, twenty-first-century academic education also needs academic teachers who will be aware of the hidden aspects of assessment and are sensitive to the unintended outcomes they generate.

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## **The Hidden Aspects of Academic Assessment and its Unintended Outcomes: the Perspective of Students**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to describe the hidden aspects of the academic assessment system and the unintended outcomes. In official curricula, academic teachers include an assessment system which contains, among others, methods, criteria for verifying knowledge and skills, requirements needed to obtain a certain degree and examination conditions. The results of research on the hidden curriculum show that various elements of this system lead to many unintended consequences. Assessment is embedded in a broad educational context, and the elements of the educational process and assessment enter into mutual relations. Moreover, the implementation of planned assessment elements by teachers is always connected with errors

and irregularities. Students are constantly evaluated and so they experience the unintended outcomes of this evaluation on a daily basis. Based on my own study – a qualitative analysis of the content of free statements of pedagogy students at one of Poland's universities – certain shortcomings, inconsistencies and gaps in the scope of assessment as perceived from their perspective have been identified. Based on their subjective experience related to assessment, research participants discovered the unintended outcomes of assessment. They concerned, inter alia, their approaches to academic knowledge, learning, coping strategies and peer relations.

**Keywords:** hidden curriculum, assessment, students, unintended outcomes

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