



Equity in Assessment in Tajikistan: Language Minority Students and Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The education systems of the three Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan that were chosen as focus area of this book have been going through various reforms over the last thirty years in an attempt to maintain the positive education achievements these countries had enjoyed before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Silova, 2002). Additionally, adjustment was needed to shift from the centrally funded and controlled education economy to align with market economy goals, political agendas, globalization, and demands of state-building (Jonboboev, 2010). However, the transformation process for Tajikistan was slow compared to other post-soviet countries, as the brutal Civil War from 1992 to 1997 resulted in a high brain drain of qualified education

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personnel and the destruction of infrastructure, and severe psycho-social consequences impacted the provision of education in the country.

However, all the central Asian countries except Turkmenistan started the Education for All (EFA) country assessments as part of the post-soviet transformation agenda and set forwards strategic goals in education that would improve enrollment rates for primary, secondary, and higher education and ensure access to quality education in the later years (Silova, 2002). The countries have prioritized education reforms to ensure equitable access to education with the joint attention and support of international donors and local education authorities to initiate inclusive education. Inclusive education is believed to contribute to overall social justice and harmonization in society; thus, the enrollment and quality education provision for students from diverse backgrounds such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status (Makoelle & Somerton, 2020) is the main rationale of inclusive education in Central Asia. Inclusion is part of the broader concept of “equity.” Research shows that, in general, socially vulnerable groups are deprived of decent support in education and face social isolation, alienation, and marginalization (Nadirova, 2023). Currently, the legislation of Kazakhstan identifies the need for quality education provision for students with special education needs (Kazakhstan, 2007), defining them in Article 19–2 as “those who experience constant or temporary difficulties in education due to health reasons.” Other policy documents include the 2015 Conceptual Approaches to the Development of Inclusive Education, the 2002 Law on the Rights of Child, and the 2002 Law on social and medical-pedagogical correctional support for disabled children in Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also ratified analogous international human rights conventions and amended the laws on education to support inclusion in access and quality. Gender and ethnic-linguistic diversity are considered central to inclusion in education and thus need legislative and policy acknowledgment. Recognizing this and the extremely distinct nature of Central Asia in terms of languages and ethnicity (Bahry, 2005), Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan give the right to obtain education in the native languages, while making the state language as a priority. However, this picture changed in the later years with the pursuit of state-building goals. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan adhered to the revitalization of the titular languages, thus they give preference to education in Uzbek and Tajik languages, respectively (Bahry et al., 2017). As of 2022, 5040 school groups are taught in Uzbek, 559 in Kyrgyz, and

55 in Turkmen languages in Tajikistan¹ (EMIS Tajikistan, 2022). These groups are mainly established in the areas where the respective minority populations are concentrated. Despite the inclusive approach to equitable education, educational funding and policy implementation are focused on developing textbooks and curricular, teaching and learning materials in the state languages only (Bahry, 2005). As for students with disabilities, their proportion in higher education in Tajikistan makes 0.0008%, that is, 2041 students with disabilities currently study in higher education in Tajikistan. However, the number of pupils with disabilities in schools is nearly three times more (7132) than the students with disabilities in higher education in Tajikistan (EMIS Tajikistan, 2022). Furthermore, language minority students and students with disabilities face unequal opportunities during admission to higher education through the unified testing systems that all three countries use. Ethno-linguistic minority students demonstrate “low performance rate in standardized examinations” (Kazimzade, 2011, p. 9). Since admission examinations are run only in the state languages, ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in Central Asia (Watkins, 2007). The current national education development strategies for the period until 2030 and the three countries’ mandates of SDG 4 of the United Nations Organization prioritize the accessibility of infrastructure, teacher capacity building regarding equitable education, textbooks, and curricula reconsideration for minority and disability students in higher education (National Strategy for Education Development of the Republic of Tajikistan for the Period until 2030, 2020). Therefore, questions arise as to whether students belonging to linguistic minorities are as successful as their counterparts both at university and later in the job market. The level of academic success, competencies, and knowledge of students is determined by assessment which also plays an indisputably crucial role in their path to graduation. In Western countries, students’ assessment experiences have been reported to be drastically different if they are from non-traditional backgrounds (Tai et al., 2021). This chapter aims to analyze how language minority and students with disabilities experience the assessment policy in higher education in Tajikistan. It opens the discussion about the need for equitable assessment and its implications for social justice and inclusive society in the region.

¹ Tajik is a Persian language, Russian is Slavic, while Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Uzbek are Turkic and use different alphabets. Therefore, they greatly differ from each other and are not mutually intelligible.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Education research focusing on equity and inclusion in Central Asia is largely silent on assessment but instead focuses on general policy analysis (Maulsharif et al., 2022; United Nations, 2000), teachers and pedagogy (Makoelle & Somerton, 2020; Moshenskaya, 2012), parental perceptions of inclusive education (Khamidulina, 2018), language inequality (Bahry et al., 2017; Niyozov & Shamatov, 2010). Furthermore, research is concentrated on primary and secondary education compared to higher education. Assessment is an important component of higher education which is conducted to (a) compare students with each other, (b) ascertain if students meet a particular standard, (c) help improve student's learning, and (d) check if the teaching program is doing its job (Baxter & Seligson, 1997). An equitable-minded approach requires equity in all four assessment objectives. The assessment process that does not include equity can contrarily promote inequities (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). The overlapping nature of the terms "equity" and "inclusion" in assessment has led to the use of various terminology such as *inclusive assessment* (Hockings, 2010), *assessment for social justice* (McArthur, 2016), *culturally-responsive assessment* (Ford & Kea, 2017), and *equity-minded assessment* (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Nevertheless, all these terms refer to an assessment that recognizes diversity in student learning. In the center of such an assessment approach is always the student whose diversity and uniqueness are recognized, valued, supported, and further improved. Equity-minded assessment calls for main education stakeholders, those involved in policy development and policy implementation, to be aware of assessment either becoming a source of inequity or the route through which equity can be achieved. The issues faced by students with disabilities or linguistic minority students during assessment were resolved through inclusive assessment accommodations and designs such as additional time allocation during the examination, technological support, and separate rooms. However, Nieminen (2022) argues that the traditional ways of "inclusive assessment" focusing on individual needs lead to systematic discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and their intersectionality. These students are seen as a problem in the institution and the policy acknowledges their limitations during assessment and provides them with targeted solutions which is not considered as equitable approach. Therefore, the debate is needed to be raised toward highlighting the true problem of assessment as opposed to only

accommodating tools for ensuring inclusion and equity. Systematic top-down changes in assessment are required, especially in the contexts where the policy does not embed an equitable assessment approach in grading, tests, and written examinations (Nieminen, 2022). To avoid the perpetuation of inequitable assessment experiences, the overprioritized traditional assessment approach should be complemented with opportunities to incorporate the voices of students and lecturers at the policy development stage and faculty (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; Nieminen, 2022).

While serving a strong conceptual basis for the study of the perception of lecturers and students about assessment in universities in Tajikistan, Montenegro and Jankowski's (2020) and Nieminen's (2022) concepts of equity in assessment need to be complemented by a political-economy lens to better understand the overall picture of the issue in the region. Therefore, I combine the concept of "equity-minded assessment" with the social justice theory of Nancy Fraser (1995) to examine the experiences of students and lecturers of the assessment policy. I draw on Novelli et al. (2019), who combined Nancy Fraser's 3Rs, Redistribution, Recognition, and Representation, with the fourth "R" of Reconciliation to study social justice and equity issues in education systems in contexts of violence and fragility.

The study examined the views of students and lecturers based on the 4Rs by checking whether students have equitable access to the assessment tools, resources (technology, stationery, space), and their equal distribution to all students. It checks if the tools of assessment ensure equitable outcomes/results for all students. With Recognition in mind, the study explored whether the language of assessment is inclusive and understandable and if disability is considered in the assessment tools and methods. Equally, the biases and subjectivity of those conducting the assessment (Prince & Levy, 2017) were studied. Recognition was examined through how the context of the institution, the person(s) conducting the assessment, and the learners being assessed are understood and reflected in the assessment tools (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Representation helped to identify if students' and lecturers' voices and perspectives are heard and considered before designing an assessment policy and implementing it. Representation is ensured through whether the learning outcomes are developed based on the vision and understanding of lecturers and students, and if the voices of those historically silenced (ethnic, gender, language, disability) groups are listened

to and heard (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Moreover, decision-making and university governance processes regarding learning outcomes and assessment involve multiple stakeholders and their voices which were also testified. Finally, reconciliation directed the research focus on examining lecturers' and students' opinions regarding reconciling the historical experience of having been colonized and how it is reflected in the assessment policy. More specifically, language reconciliation through assessment practices and the extent to which the students and lecturers trust the assessment policy were examined. It was crucial to understand the content of the summative assessment tests and their compliance with the needs and understanding of the students.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods research design (Tashakkori et al., 2021) was employed to expand the breadth and range (Greene et al., 1989) of the perspectives of students and lecturers regarding equity-minded assessment. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken to understand lecturers' views on the assessment policy in higher education in Tajikistan. Students' perspectives were collected via a questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three sections and included sections on the 4Rs analytical framework. Both structured and open questions based on the 4Rs were included to ensure alignment through the two types of data sets.

Ethical approval of the study was granted by Ulster University. The participants were first introduced to the aims and objectives of the study with the participant information sheet and were given a choice to withdraw from the interviews and questionnaires if they wished so. All participants gave oral consent. Confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants were ensured by using codes and numbers instead of their actual names.

SAMPLING

Lecturers and students were recruited from three higher education institutions, two in the capital city, Dushanbe and one university in Khujand city, in roughly equal numbers across the three universities. Purposive sampling was used for interviewing lecturers, and quota sampling was used for selecting students.

In total, ten lecturers were interviewed. Two interviews were conducted online and eight in person. Criteria for choosing lecturers included their years of professional experience in education. All questionnaires were administered in person, and a total of 215 questionnaires were completed. The sample size was defined based on the minimum sample number for statistical significance to make a meaningful analysis. Students of second and third year in bachelor programs were selected since they had already experienced the assessment policy.

DATA ANALYSIS

As Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight, the credibility and validity of thematic analysis as a flexible and useful research tool being able to make any theoretical and conceptual assumptions for a study transparent, the author decided to analyze the opinions of lecturers shared in the semi-structured interviews toward themes and codes as required in thematic analysis. The ten interviews with lecturers were conducted in a language they felt confident in (i.e., either Tajik or Russian) and were fully transcribed. After adding the data to NVivo software, the analysis involved immersion in the data and its repeated reading in the search of meanings, patterns, and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As for the students' responses to the survey questionnaire, frequency distribution was conducted using SPSS.

FINDINGS

Demographic and Background Information

All the lecturers came from social sciences disciplines except one Math lecturer. There were two Psychology lecturers, two Philosophy, two Foreign languages, one Political Science, and one Pedagogy lecturers who specialized in inclusive education and teaching students with special needs. Seven lecturers had been teaching at higher education level for 10–13 years, while three lecturers had from 20–25 years of teaching experience. Regarding the demographics of the responding students, 46% were men and 54% women. Around 49.3% students were in the third year and 50.7% were in the fourth year of the academic curriculum. The students came from a range of disciplines within these ten faculties (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Students' disciplines

<i>Faculty/schools</i>	<i>Percent of students</i>	<i>Faculty/schools</i>	<i>Percent of students</i>
Foreign Languages	24.1	Philology	8.8
Philosophy	18.1	Journalism	6.0
Psychology	13.5	Mathematics	5.6
Economics and Management	11.2	History	1.5
Physics	9.8	Biology	1.4

Regarding the medium of instruction at school, most students went to a Tajik-medium school. Although about 5% and 7% students in the sample ($n = 215$) studied at school in Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages, respectively, their university program is taught in either Russian or Tajik. It was important to see the difference between the language taught during the graduate program and the one students know the best. Tajik language is well understood by the majority (70.2%) of students. Surprisingly, 11.2% of students claimed being fluent in Uzbek which is more than the proportion of those who have Uzbek as a medium of instruction at school (6.5%). This signifies that Uzbek-speaking minorities do not choose Uzbek medium school even if they are fully competent in it. It might be because of the lack of university programs in Uzbek language. On the other hand, universities now offer graduate programs in English language and 2.3% of the students studied in English medium programs, although none of them claimed having a good knowledge of that language (Table 10.2).

Table 10.2 Language of instruction at school, university, and language the students know better

<i>Students</i>	<i>Language of instruction at school</i>	<i>Language of instruction at university</i>	<i>Language they know best</i>
Tajik	83.3	74.9	70.2
Russian	5.1	22.8	14.0
Uzbek	6.5	0.0	11.2
Kyrgyz	4.7	0.0	4.2
Kazakh	0.0	0.0	0.5
English	0.5	2.3	0.0

As for disability, the number of respondents with physical disabilities was equal to 11.6% and 0.5% had mental disability.

Assessment Tools and Methods

As for assessment practices that define the learning outcomes of students, the study aimed at identifying and checking the main tools of assessment used at higher education institutions in Tajikistan. The types of assessment tools are divided into summative examination and formative assessment practices in the questionnaire. For summative assessment, the so-called rating is used twice a semester to add up 50% to the final ESTC credits obtained during final examination. Starting from 2022, higher education institutions were given autonomy to reintegrate the traditional oral examination method for the first time since the ECTS were introduced in Tajikistan in 2008. In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to rate the frequency of currently used and preferred summative and formative assessment tools on a three-point scales *never* and *rarely*, *sometimes* and *often* and *always*. The analysis illustrated that the most frequent forms of formative assessment that are used by lecturers were written papers in the form of a 10-page report *referat*² and independent work, active class participation, checking notebooks for word-to-word notes of lectures *konspekt*,³ and individual presentation (Fig. 10.1).

Although largely practiced, students rated writing assignments in the form of *referat* as a less preferred form of assessment. Group presentations are not widely used to assess students learning, but students expressed a high preference for this type of assessment (Table 10.3).

The differences between the rest of the assessment strategies currently being used and those which the students prefer are not wide. Regarding summative assessment, students prefer oral exams as opposed to computer-based tests. Rather surprisingly and carrying grave implications for equity, summative assessment involves assessing the appearance of students. The students rated it the most frequently used assessment tool, although the students' clothing does not reflect the learning outcomes in any programs. It is a widely used practice in Tajikistan to strictly

² Referat is a short report or presentation on a particular topic, which gathers information from one or more sources.

³ Konspekt is an outline, a summary of the content of something, for example, summary of a lecture.

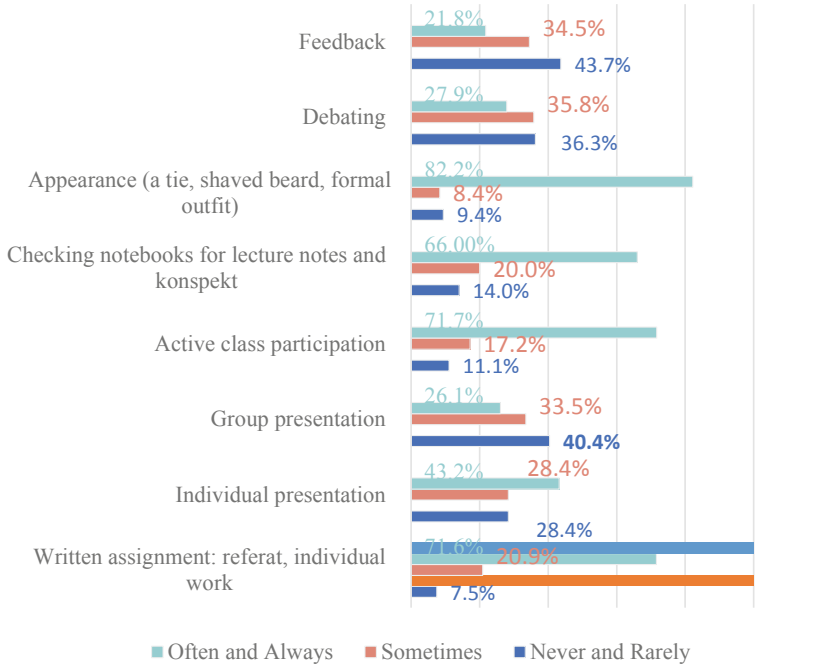


Fig. 10.1 Percentage distribution of forms of assessment that are currently used at the graduate program

control students’ appearance with specific clothing guidance and requirements. Over the last 15 years, ministries and rectors of certain universities ordered decrees on banning jeans, sneakers, any casual clothing, hijab, wearing a beard for students, and heels (not higher than 15 cm), which later was embedded into assessment policy. The aim is, on the one side, to fight against alienation (Arabization and Westernization) and, on the other side, to forcefully maintain secular societal practices through education (Thibault, 2016). Such a practice undeniably brings negative implications for equity in assessment for students with disabilities, students from poorer backgrounds and female students. Formal clothes are not comfortable for students who have physical disabilities. Students from poorer backgrounds cannot afford the clothing. Thus, they have to prioritize buying uniforms for books and other educational needs. Female

Table 10.3 Forms of assessment currently in use compared to what students would prefer

<i>Form of exam</i>	<i>In use in HEIs (always & often) percentage</i>	<i>Preferred by students (always & often) percentage</i>
Summative assessment forms		
Oral exams	43.3	57.2
Rating tests	41.8	46.6
Computer-based exams	50.7	48.8
Continuous assessment forms (formative)		
Written assignment: referat, individual work	71.6	49.8
Individual presentation	43.2	54.5
Group presentation	26.1	43.2
Active class participation	71.7	73.5
Appearance (a tie, shaved beard, formal outfit)	82.2	57.2
Checking notebooks for lecture notes and konspekt	66	49.7
Feedback	21.8	37.2

students particularly suffer from the ban on hijab, which brings both equity issues and equality in access to higher education.

Students' Understanding of Equity in Assessment

To prepare students to respond accurately to questions involving their perceptions of the extent to which different forms of assessment include equity, students' understanding of equitable assessment was first checked by an open-ended question. The students' responses demonstrate that students, in general, well understand equitable assessment (Fig. 10.2). They reflected on the assessment type that is fair and transparent and considers the exclusive capabilities and skills of a student regardless of gender, economic well-being, nationality, physical appearance, and level of disability.

The responses to the open-ended questions included various interesting points of view on the definition and the experiences of students with the assessment policy.

One of the responses well articulates tolerance toward diversity in students:

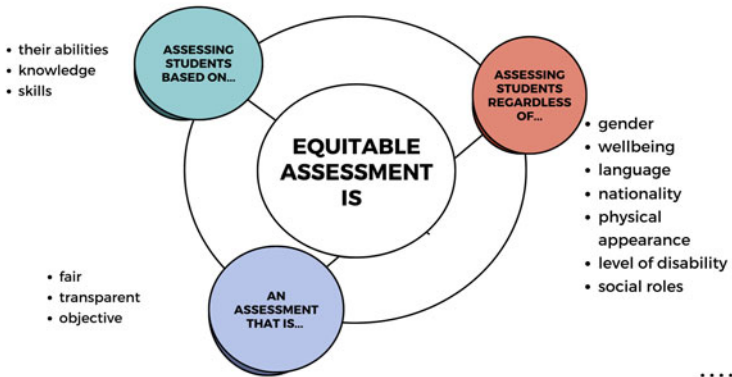


Fig. 10.2 Students’ understanding of equitable assessment

Equity-minded assessment is to create opportunities for students’ personal growth and giving real mark to students learning outcomes regardless of gender, language, nationality, level of disability and socio-economic condition of the students. (Student 111)

Another student raises the issue of nepotism and kinship and their implication for providing equitable assessment and equity in education in general.

For example, we have such cases when a lecturer and a student both come from one region and one ethnicity, and the lecturer puts better marks for him/her in comparison with me studying better and always participating actively in classes. Equitable assessment is to assess students’ knowledge without paying attention to their gender, ethnicity, nation, and other indicators. (Student 108)

Students mentioned that oral examination is more equitable (60%) in comparison with tests performed on a computer (51.2%) (Fig. 10.3). Tests on computer appear to be a very challenging type of assessment based on the survey results. Many students mentioned that when passing tests, the computers do not work properly (9.5%), there are a lot of

spelling mistakes in the tests (7.3%), test answers in computer do not match with the test questions (5.7%), the test questions are difficult to understand (7.6%), the internet is very slow for test taking (3.8%), and students from minority languages do not understand the test (3.4%).

When questioned about the issues that students with disability encounter during examinations, the answers given by 215 students differed. Some of the responses were that visually impaired student cannot view test content on a computer (5.6%), they are unable to see the board in class (2.8%), they may have difficulty accessing upper floors for classes and exams (6.6%), and there are no ramps on the university premises for students in wheelchairs (5.6%). These examples illustrate how insufficient infrastructure can restrict students’ access to fair assessment resources. Particularly, students with disabilities do not have access to assessment tools, especially computerized examinations, and especially blind students cannot independently pass tests without the support of others.

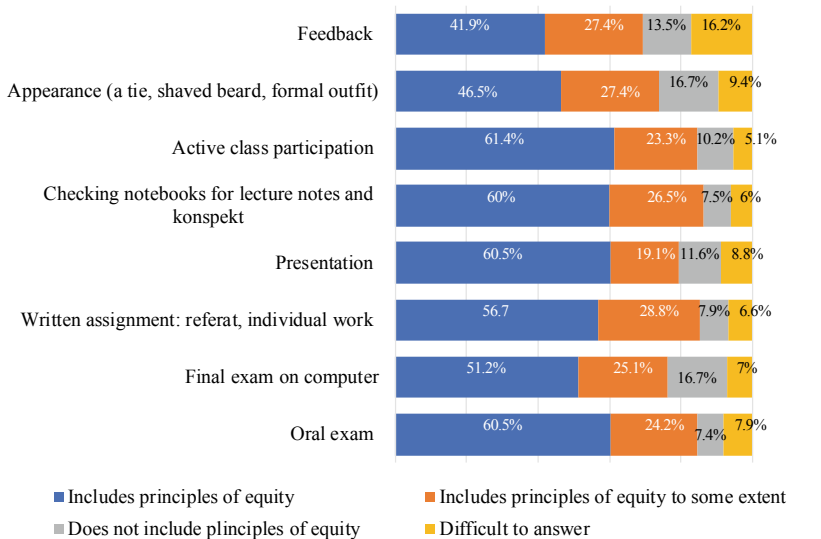


Fig. 10.3 Percentage distribution of students’ understanding of forms of assessment that are most equitable

Lecturers' Experiences of Assessment

The above issues were reflected in the semi-structured interviews with the lecturers. The interview questions were structured around three themes (a) experiences of lecturers in assessing learning outcomes of diverse students, (b) assessment forms and tools that are used to assess minority languages and disabilities students, (c) platforms that give students and lecturers opportunities to raise their voices toward assessment policy and practice. Three themes emerged from the analysis of lecturers' transcripts: lecturers' readiness for inclusive education, equity in assessment through *lecturer-driven* inclusive assessment accommodation, and emerging platforms for lecturers and students.

Lecturers' Preparedness for Inclusive Education

It appears lecturers were not ready for inclusive assessment since the majority expressed surprise and uncertainty toward the fact that students with disabilities are enrolled in higher education institutions in Tajikistan. Half of the lecturers referred to the lack of conditions for students with disabilities at their university.

I have never noticed that blind students had any special conditions. I think that they are assessed through oral examination only because they are not familiar with using the assessment technology. During the examination, lecturers give them marks without the student actually sitting the test. These students should be at boarding schools. (Lecturer 3)

This demonstrates that lecturers had little to no capacity to work with students with disabilities. Some lecturers also mentioned that they should have seminars and pilot classes on how to work with students with disabilities. Of the ten lecturers interviewed, only one was fully equipped with the knowledge and competency to teach and assess students with disabilities.

Students with special needs are supported in all aspects during the examination and thus, their marks do not reflect the real knowledge they have. This is not correct since these students will be considered fully graduated students of their chosen profession. I apply the main principles of inclusive education in my assessment approach, which are access, participation and support. (Lecturer 9)

Lecturers report that students who do not understand Tajik or Russian have increased over the last three years. There are reports that students from remote regions have limited knowledge of the language used for instruction. This could be due to the poor quality of education they received in primary and secondary schools, which is attributed to a significant shortage of qualified teaching staff.

Equity through Lecturer-Driven Inclusive Assessment Accommodation

The assessment policy of the sampled institutions does not provide inclusive assessment accommodation. This issue is repeatedly reported by lecturers who take the initiative to provide support for students who struggle because of either disability or lack of language competency. Issues related to providing translation and recruiting additional lecturers competent in the minority language were not particularly striking in the interviews. However, two interviewees mentioned that they hire Uzbek language lecturers. Lecturers implement various measures to address the challenges faced by minority language students. These measures include assigning extra lecturers during exams, having fellow students provide oral translations of tests, grouping students from the same minority language together, and having a lecturer who understands their language lead bilingual classes, and designating a fellow student to assist disabled or minority students during exams. This process requires additional time and effort from lecturers, and it does not bring equity in assessment. For example, Lecturer 1 mentioned:

We finally have to put these students passing marks only if they at least attend the classes, and do homework on his/her notebooks and respond to any exam questions. We put 52-53 scores for them. It does not mean that the students acquired the learning outcomes required by the curriculum. We just pass them from one level to another with minimal scores.

*Redistribution, Recognition, Representation, and Reconciliation
of Assessment Policy*

The majority of students mentioned that they have equal access to all tools and resources of assessment (technology, stationery, space, other infrastructure). Kyrgyz- and Uzbek-speaking students also mentioned that they have equal access to assessment resources. One-fourth of the respondents

claimed to have equal access to assessment resources of their institution which is also true for students with disabilities ($n = 22$) (Fig. 10.4).

In the open-ended questions, students shared a range of challenges they experienced or observed students with disabilities experienced, including difficulties in reaching the needed floor ($n = 19$), lack of ramps ($n = 16$), inappropriate classroom setup ($n = 14$), taking a test on computers ($n = 16$), absence of specific literature for blind students ($n = 8$), and lack of ability to work with electronic board ($n = 8$) and exams that ended too late ($n = 9$).

Surprisingly, lecturers' opinions differed. A recurrent theme in the interviews was the assessment accommodation for students with disabilities. Universities' senior management and lecturers decide to put students with disabilities on the first floor even if their faculty is located upstairs because the university is not equipped with an elevator. In some cases, the whole class is moved to the first floor because of one student with a physical disability in the group.

Most participants seem proficient in the language used for assessing their academic program, but there are concerns about Kyrgyz- and

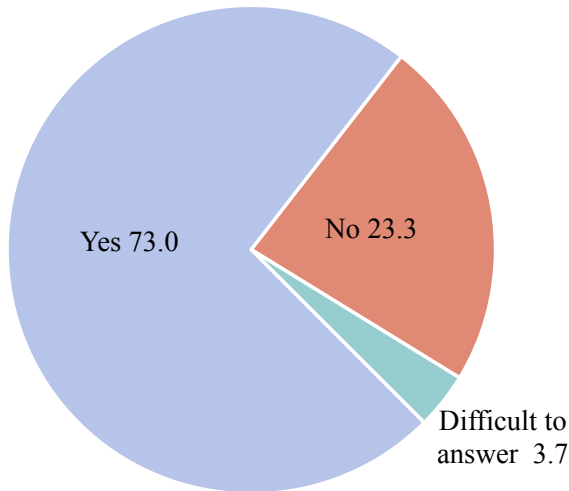


Fig. 10.4 Access to assessment tools and infrastructure for students with disabilities

Table 10.4 Students' opinions on the language of assessment

<i>Is the language of assessment clear to you and is it clear to students whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction?</i>				
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>To some extent</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Difficult to answer</i>
Overall number of students	129	60	21	5
Students with disabilities	16	7	3	0
Uzbek-speaking students	23	13	5	0
Kyrgyz-speaking students	4	2	3	0

Uzbek-speaking students (Table 10.4). Specifically, more Kyrgyz-speaking students seem to lack proficiency in the language of assessment, which could result in unequal learning outcomes if their program does not address their language needs.

Concerns regarding the recognition of student diversity were widespread in the three themes that emerged from lecturers' interviews. However, whether equity is brought to the policy implementation and whether the vulnerable students feel their full recognition is questionable. The theme "fellow support," for example, came up in discussions in eight out of ten interviews referring to both students with disability and those from minority languages as a redistribution approach. Although the policy does not institutionalize the volunteering of fellow students, they are systematically appointed to be responsible for their vulnerable fellow students with no recognition of their service.

There is a student in each group who becomes a close friend to the vulnerable student and helps him/her during the examination. (Lecturer 5)

When asked about the attitude and biases of lecturers toward minority groups and students with disabilities, more than half of students indicated the biased attitude of lecturers. Students with disabilities and Uzbek-speaking students were more positive toward their lecturers than the small number of Kyrgyz-speaking students (Fig. 10.5).

The lecturers did not echo this view. On the contrary, lecturers mentioned their support in the form of additional time, constant translation in the language of instruction, using alternative assessment tools,

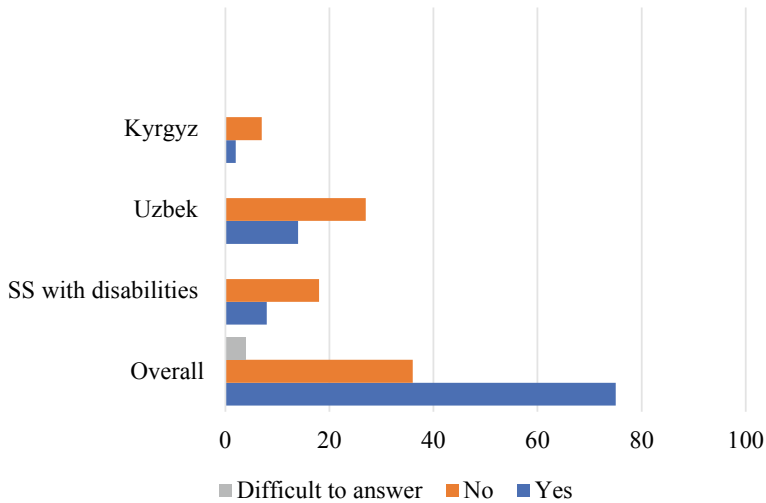


Fig. 10.5 Percentage distribution of biases and subjectivity of lecturers during assessment

arranging additional preparation lessons, or just adding up to their final score for the student's effort and active participation during lessons.

Regarding students' representation in developing assessment policies at their universities, the majority of those who responded to this question stated that their opinions and thoughts are not considered while designing the assessment strategies.

The issues faced by students who have complaints and wish to contribute to changing the assessment strategies emerged in interviews with lecturers who shared their experience in raising their voices in this regard and the platforms through which students can reach out to senior university management. The theme of bottom-up representation emerged. Lecturers indicated that the universities use established platforms of Youth Unions, Students Union Council, and Students Scientific Society for consulting students in decision-making regarding assessment. Lecturers reported these platforms to have annual plans and presidential election. They mentioned "that through these platforms or individually, students approach the class supervisor" (each class is assigned a curator in the first years of their BA degree program and he/she is responsible

for the group until they complete university who reaches out to the faculty dean, and they go to the university deputy head for curriculum and further in accordance with the hierarchy.

We discuss the quality and progress of students' knowledge and their assessment/marks. The council discusses all the issues with lecturers, and only the rectorate makes decisions on making changes in the system. In general, when concerns occur, the curator listens to the students and discusses the issue with the Head of the Department and the matter goes upward. (Lecturer 7)

The final section of the questionnaire covered reconciliation elements in higher education assessment. Lecturers or students did not specifically raise issues related to language reconciliation, the history of colonization and how it is reflected in the assessment policy. Only a few lecturers could reflect upon this issue and they highly felt nostalgic toward the Soviet assessment system that assured quality of education. One concern expressed regarding lesson-learning from history and decolonizing the assessment tools was constructed this way:

Religious people believe that it was better in the past, but we cannot go back to the 6th century. We are currently copying the Western system to replace the Soviet system, and we are left with nothing now. At the moment, we will progress the way it is dictated from above, I mean from Russia. In order to make growth happen, it's important to open an institution which will be responsible for designing education policy with a group of well-educated specialists and with good salaries. (Lecturer 10)

As a reconciling mechanism, students' trust in the assessment policy is very important; thus, the questionnaire asked about this issue (Fig. 10.6). Students' level of trust toward the assessment policy is generally positive. They believe that their learning outcomes are being assessed objectively and fairly.

For example, one out of ten of participants indicated that lecturers support students with disabilities by giving additional scores (4.7%), freeing them from submitting written assignments (1.3%), and allocating additional time during lessons (3.4%). However, lecturers acknowledged that most students with disabilities are against how the lecturers accommodate them. The students demand to be assessed as "normal" students.

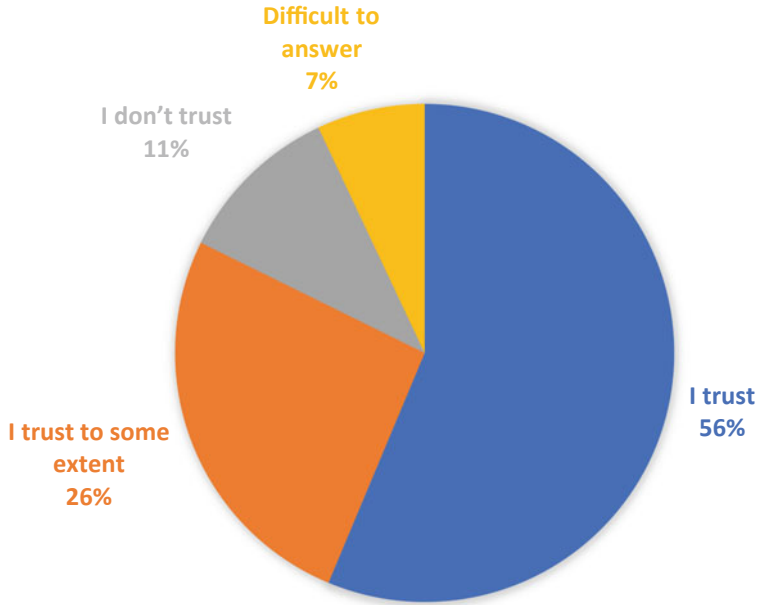


Fig. 10.6 Percentage distribution of students' trust in the assessment policy

Students with disabilities complain that our help is counterproductive for them. Our help results in getting marks that they do not deserve and that do not reflect their knowledge. (Lecturer 2)

These practices hinder students from active participation in the learning environment and do not meet the requirement of inclusive education and equity in assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

What emerges from the results reported here is that the participating students and lecturers understand the meaning of equity in assessment differently. Most students consider equity as giving equal opportunities for students regardless of their differences and limitations. They appreciate the support that their lecturers provide to them, but they do not even

think about the more important implications of equitable assessment, such as providing flexible and needs-based policy and implementation opportunities that will enable them to thrive irrespective of their limitations. The results also indicate that not all students have equal access to assessment tools and strategies, and some of them are not aware of how to use computers, although part of summative examination is fully computerized. Moreover, the fact that assessment content is entirely in a language that is not understandable by some students makes the learning process inequitable for them. However, although the traditional inclusive education accommodations are not stated in the assessment policy at higher education, lecturers and, at some points, university management accommodate them based on the number of linguistic minority students and those with disabilities. Lecturers felt morally obliged to use inclusion in assessment practices, and should the universities develop a policy to make the assessment process equitable, lecturers would greatly contribute to its implementation.

Lecturers' views suggest that the perspective of "policy-driven accommodations" for equitable assessment and a "lecturer -initiated approach" will ensure the recognition and representation of minority students and those with disability. Platforms already exist to hear the voices of students and lecturers regarding assessment and other higher education policies. However, since inclusive education is new to post-Soviet Tajikistan, the positive perspectives shared by students and lecturers indicate a crucial need to initiate equity-based assessment at higher education institutions.

Providing equitable education for vulnerable students is as important as the right to education and assessment is crucial in establishing and developing an equitable policy. It requires capacity building of lecturers in the area of inclusive education and their day-to-day collaboration with other university stakeholders. The current inclusive policies vastly deny the adaptation of assessment tools and methods to support students with disabilities, language minority students, and students from underprivileged backgrounds. The foremost step is to start sharing the vision of equitable inclusive assessment within the education sector at all levels and then collectively develop assessment methods and tools according to student diversity.

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