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# The performative turn in the assessment of student learning: a rights perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Active learning and group-based processes in higher education are central to student engagement strategies. Forms of assessment regarded as evidencing student engagement, including attendance, class participation grading and group-based projects, have become commonplace in the university curriculum on an international basis. Whilst the literature has focused on evaluating such forms of assessment in terms of learning gain, analysis of their impact from a student rights perspective has been largely overlooked. This paper will analyse student perspectives of three forms of assessment entailing the measurement of observable student attitudes and behaviour: attendance, class participation and group work grading. The evidence from a survey of undergraduates based in a Hong Kong university suggests that the majority of students are concerned about whether such practices are appropriate and fair, potentially undermining their freedom of choice to learn as adults.

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## Introduction

Over the last 20 years radical changes have taken place in the way in which students are assessed in higher education (HE). The shift towards more continuous assessment is widely regarded as ‘relatively uncontentious’ (Richardson 2015, 10) since it is connected with active, student-centred learning (Coates and McCormick 2014). The diversification of assessment tools incorporates a stronger focus on group and peer learning processes seen as providing more ‘valid’ or ‘authentic’ forms of assessment relevant to employment (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). For this reason the literature on university assessment is focused principally on the learning benefits students derive from diversifying and operationalizing assessment tools. The legitimacy of new forms of assessment is often accompanied by claims that they embrace the principle of assessment *for* learning. This implies students receiving feedback to enable them to improve as learners.

However, many of these newer methods of assessment are notable for their emphasis on ‘student performativity’ defined as the measurement of observable student behaviour and attitudes which are audited in a public as opposed to private learning space (Macfarlane 2015, 338). Notably these include attendance requirements, class contribution grading and the assessment of peer learning groups. The concept of performativity

emerges out of the audit culture (Power 1994, 1997). Performative pressures are closely connected with the public professions, notably teaching and medicine, and increased demands for accountability via the auditing, monitoring and evaluation of workplace activities. The effects include, *inter alia*, a distortion in patterns of behaviour, the decline in the importance of non-audited elements, the punishment of non-compliance and a more a general loss of trust (Power 1997; O'Neill 2002; Murray 2012). Whilst performativity has been interpreted largely in relation to the professions, notably teachers and academics (e.g. Lucas 2006), many of the effects of performativity may now also be observed in the treatment of students at university, for example, in forms of assessment, such as class contribution grading, which rely on observing patterns of student behaviour and attitudes as a basis for awarding grades.

## The rise of student engagement

The growing emphasis on student performativity needs to be understood in the context of the rise of the student engagement movement. In the 1980s and 1990s universities developed internal student feedback systems in response to increasing demands for quality assurance data. Whilst such systems were, at first, resisted they have subsequently become institutionalized. The National Survey of Student Engagement in the US was introduced in 2000 and versions of it have subsequently been adopted in most developed HE systems including Australia, Canada, Korea, China, Japan, New Zealand, Mexico, Ireland, South Africa and the UK (Coates and McCormick 2014). This has been driven by the challenges associated with mass HE systems especially high levels of non-completion. Student engagement initiatives have evolved, in large part, to improve student completion and success rates at university. Many HE institutions now have engagement initiatives in place such as The Student Success Program (SSP) at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia. This is designed to identify and support those students deemed to be 'at risk of disengaging from their learning and their institution' (Nelson et al. 2012, 83).

Student engagement implies a learning environment where participants, drawn from diverse backgrounds, are actively engaged in a participatory culture and experience an adequately resourced and interactive approach to teaching (Newswander and Borrego 2009). Hence, student engagement has a behavioural dimension that demands in-class participation symbolized by the expression 'passivity is the enemy of (student) growth' (Coates and McCormick 2014, 1). Secondly, the theory of student engagement has an emotional element in the way that students are expected to relate to others and to their learning environment and, thirdly, a cognitive dimension representing how students should construct their own understanding and learn how to learn more effectively (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004).

The assumptions that inform student engagement are that anything that gets students more involved in active forms of learning and community participation at university is a good thing. It makes the process of learning more communal and, furthermore, is underpinned by the pragmatic argument that if students are engaged as learners they are more likely to complete their studies, obtain better degree results, and gain life skills suitable for the employment market (e.g. Astin 1993; Allen 1999; Kuh et al. 2008). Hence, student engagement theory and university initiatives see performativity in a positive light as

contributing to learning and improving completion rates. At the heart of student engagement is the idea that students should be rewarded on the basis of ‘the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities’ (McCormick and Kinzie 2014, 14). However, this expectation stands in stark contrast with Sadler’s argument that offering students credits and penalties for engagement constitutes an academic ‘non-achievement’ and is a ‘contamination of the object to be graded’ (Sadler 2009, 813).

As a result of the growing emphasis on student engagement, university attendance requirements are now commonplace justified by arguments that they shape appropriate attitudes for the workplace (Macfarlane 2013). Class contribution grading has conventionally been used most extensively in a North American context (Bean and Peterson 1998) but has recently become more firmly established in other systems, such as the UK (Ni Raghallaigh and Cunliffe 2013). The literature on assessment lends considerable support to the use of active and participative assessment tools. Group or peer learning is associated with a range of benefits including promoting co-operation rather than competition, engendering mutual respect, helping to improve understanding of cultural differences, and equipping students with the skills they need for employment and lifelong learners (Boud 2001). Whilst some research shows that many students do not like group work assessment (Flint and Johnson 2011) the assessment literature tends to focus on the learning benefits which derive from collaborative working rather than student disquiet over issues of fairness, particularly in deriving group grades. Whilst this issue is well known and recommendations for deriving fairer individual grades within group projects exist (e.g. Conway et al. 1993) there is little evidence that such approaches are used extensively in practice.

Class participation is also considered to benefit students in a wide range of ways including creating an active learning environment, improved motivation, developing skills as critical thinkers, improving communication skills, working with others in groups and being better able to contribute to a democratic society (Bean and Peterson 1998; Rocca 2010). Grading class participation is often justified as ‘sending positive signals’ to students who adjust their behaviour accordingly and prepare better (Bean and Peterson 1998, 33). Where researchers define class participation this tends to be by reference to what is observable and therefore easier to measure. In online learning this takes place via discussion forums. Learner engagement in online courses is defined as ‘posting regularly to the forum, at least two or three times per week’ (Vai and Sosulski 2011, 136). Both the number of posts and the time intervals between each one are used as assessment criteria recommended to count for between 15% and 30% of an overall course assessment grade (Vai and Sosulski 2011). Rocca’s (2010, 188) definition of face-to-face class contribution comprises ‘asking questions, raising one’s hand, and making comments’. Hence, definitions stress visually auditable elements whilst excluding other less easily observable indicators such as active listening or note-taking. Very few assessment rubrics incorporate criteria that is not directly observable through visible student action in class (i.e. aural or physical).

## Rationale and method

There is evidence that the measurement of observable student behaviours and attitudes is a growing element of modern HE. However, most research studies focus on the learning

'gain' or benefits which students derive from these forms of student engagement (e.g. Bean and Peterson 1998) rather than on their implications from a student rights perspective. This may be understood by reference to a conceptual distinction between rights *to*, *within* and *through* HE (McCowan 2013). There is much emphasis on the right *to* a HE in terms of access opportunities and *through* HE in terms of acquisition of employability skills. By contrast, student rights *within* HE tend to receive comparatively little attention. Student perspectives critical of active and participatory approaches to learning, for example, typically emerge as a footnote or by-product of work focused on the effectiveness of the learning process rather than a threat to student rights *within* HE. Students can perceive the grading of groupwork as unfair (Volet and Ang 1998). Moreover, few studies have specifically sought to investigate student attitudes towards forms of assessment that measure student behaviour and attitudes, such as class contribution grades, as a collective concept or sought to establish how common such approaches are within the undergraduate curriculum. Thus, this study is designed to fulfil both of these objectives. In the process, it builds on the author's previous policy-based and conceptual work in the area of student academic freedom and performativity (Macfarlane 2013, 2015).

A questionnaire was designed which asked second and third year undergraduate students at a university in Hong Kong to respond to statements about the extent to which performative forms of assessment are used and to provide open comments on their attitudes towards their use. A questionnaire was chosen as a means of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in order to meet the dual objectives of the investigation. The quantitative data were collected to establish the prevalence of three forms of assessment associated with student performativity: compulsory attendance, class contribution grading and groupwork grading. The qualitative data were gathered via open-ended comments to gain an exploratory understanding of student perspectives towards these forms of assessment. The quantitative element of the questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative element, which asked respondents to complete open comment sections, followed from questions about the extent to which attendance, class contribution and group work are used for monitoring and assessment purposes. All respondents provided qualitative comments as a precondition of receiving an incentive award for participating in the study. Further analysis of the data was undertaken using the word search function to identify commonly occurring adjectives and phrases related in comments about these forms of assessment.

The questionnaire was targeted at all second and third year undergraduates of the University, the total population of which at the time was 6607. Responses were returned by 299 students representing a sample of 4.5%. The small sample provides an exploratory insight across a range of disciplines into the prevalence of, and student attitudes towards, a number of forms of assessment. The size of the sample means that broader conclusions cannot be drawn about the extent to which such requirements prevail across HE.

The sample collected was slightly over-representative of female undergraduates comprising 64.2% of respondents compared with 52.7% of the actual population. Correspondingly, 35.8% of respondents were male whereas the population was 47.3%. Almost three quarters of students were aged between 17 and 21 (73.7%) with the remaining quarter all aged between 22 and 30 (26.3%). The University does not collect information with respect to the age profile of incoming undergraduates and so the extent to which the responses collected were representative of the population could not be verified in this respect.

Participants were drawn from all undergraduate subject areas consisting of business and economics (18.8%), education (15.7%), humanities (12.6%), social sciences (9.9%), engineering and architecture (10.2%), medicine (8.9%), Arts (8.2%), Science (7.1%), Law (0.7%) and students studying for a double major (7.8%). Business and economics accounted for the largest number of responses from a single subject area (18.8%) accurately reflecting the extent to which this subject accounts for the total undergraduate student population (18.1%). The sample collected for social science (9.9%) was also only slightly below the population percentage for this subject area (11%). However, overall, the sample tended to somewhat under-represent some of the STEM (i.e. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects, such as engineering and medicine where responses collected (10.2% and 8.9%) were lower than the population as a whole (13.5% and 14.7% respectively).

91% of the sample was from Hong Kong with others hailing from Europe (4.8%), Mainland China (2.4%), Australasia (1.0%) and North America (0.8%). This reflects the population of undergraduate students as a whole the overwhelming proportion of which (92.3%) are drawn from the local Hong Kong community, 94% of which are ethnic Chinese. Whilst students from mainland China make up the majority of the postgraduate population of the institution, a pattern reflected across other universities in Hong Kong, undergraduates tend to largely be from Hong Kong.

### Assessment and performativity

The evidence indicates that forms of monitoring and assessment associated with student performativity are now commonplace within a number of undergraduate subjects at this university. Most students within these subjects experience the use of attendance registers at least to some extent with just 4.4% indicating that they never do. One fifth of respondents indicated that attendance registers are always used whilst a further two fifths confirmed that they are often used. Female students (61.7%) were slightly more likely to experience attendance registers than male students (55.2%) either often or always.<sup>1</sup> This may be partly explained by disciplinary differences which show that students taking degrees in teacher training and education science (86.9) are the most likely to encounter the use of an attendance register followed by business and economics (59.2%). Engineering and architecture, where the proportion of male students is conventionally higher, were the least likely (33.3%) to experience attendance registers.<sup>2</sup>

Students were also asked about the role of in-class assessments, such as tests and oral presentations. These are in widespread use with over 70% of students reporting that they normally undergo such assessments. They are used extensively in most subject areas, particularly education (82.6%) and social sciences (79.3%), although slightly less so in the medical and health-related sciences where just under 60% of students commented on their use as taking place often or always. Online discussion boards also play an important role in both engaging and monitoring student contributions in a virtual teaching environment. There are quite stark differences in the uptake of this tool for assessment purposes though across subject areas with students in education (91.3%), for example, reporting much higher levels of usage than counterparts in engineering (30%) or medicine (24.3%) (Figure 1).

	Never	Rarely	Often	Always
Attendance registers are taken at class	4.4	36.2	39.2	20.1
In-class assessments, such as tests and oral presentations, are used	1.4	21.8	50.6	20.8
Online discussion boards are used for assessment	12.3	41.6	29.0	17.1

**Figure 1.** Attendance and attendance proxies (n. 299).

The results indicate that class contribution grades are part of the mainstream experience of the students who responded to the questionnaire. More than 56% indicated that they have been awarded an individual grade on the basis of their contribution in class whilst just 5% had never encountered this form of assessment. Almost 80% of students are normally expected to contribute to class discussion. Disciplinary differences though are quite striking and the use of class contribution grading is much more common in the humanities and social science areas (e.g. 82.8% in social sciences) than in science and engineering (e.g. 29.7% in medicine).

Responses also indicated that the grading of group tasks or assignments is overwhelmingly part of the regular experience of these university students with just over 2% never encountering this form of assessment. Whilst group assessment is experienced by around two thirds of students in medicine (64.5%) it is ubiquitous for students in business and economics (94.5%) and the social sciences (93.1%). The differences in the extent to which class contribution grading and group assessment are used across the disciplines may reflect the use of signature pedagogies such as case studies in business and management studies intended for class discussion or oral presentations based on group analysis (Figure 2).

The questionnaire elicited qualitative comments from all students in respect to their experiences. Comments<sup>3</sup> in the free section of the questionnaire focused mainly on three areas: attendance, class participation, and, to a lesser extent, group work following on from responses indicating how often respondents experienced these forms of assessment. In analyzing the comments a division emerged between *learning-based* and *rights-based* arguments made by students. The former category refers to arguments based on whether particular assessment tools are effective as a means of developing

	Never	Rarely	Often	Always
Students are awarded an individual grade on the basis of their contribution in class	5.1	38.2	42.0	14.7
Students are expected to contribute to class discussion	3.1	17.7	50.2	29.0
There is assessment grading of group tasks or assignments	2.4	13.3	46.8	37.5

**Figure 2.** Participative assessment (n. 299).



student learning. The latter refers to arguments pertaining to whether such forms of assessment are seen as fair or just from a student rights perspective. In respect to these qualitative comments there were no notable divisions between students on the basis of gender although students in education and the social sciences, who are more often subject to class participation grading, gave more negative feedback about this practice.

## Theme 1: attendance

The respondents were overwhelmingly critical of the use of attendance registers. Only a small minority of students who commented in writing supported the idea of compulsory class attendance. These respondents argued that it is a student's responsibility to attend and a signifier of respect for the teacher and fellow students.

Attending class shows respect to peers and the lecturers (Education)

Being punctual is very important to show respect for the professor (Medicine)

Many of the criticisms of attendance registers were rights-based, inasmuch that they reflected concerns that such a requirement was unjust in some way. This was represented largely by the argument that students are adults or mature learners and should be entitled to choose how best to use their time and take the consequences of such choices accordingly. Some respondents made unflattering parallels between school and university cultures in terms of the latter granting no greater degree of personal autonomy than the former contradicting their expectations. A number of comments asserted that attendance should be a matter of student choice rather than something they are compelled to do by registers or the threat of punishments.

I think students should have the right to choose if and when to attend class at university because university students are mature enough to choose (Medicine)

University students are mature enough to judge whether to attend class. So they should have the right to choose. (Education)

Most university students are adults and they know what they will gain or lose if they attend the class (Arts)

Other objections were grounded on learning-based arguments. These students contended that attendance requirements do not necessarily produce learning benefits or foster student responsibility and that there are other ways to learn besides attending classes. Respondents identified poor teaching as the main reason why they did not attend class and some of these comments identified the teacher as responsible for making their classes stimulating rather than relying on attendance registers to compel attendance. In-class assessments, such as tests and oral presentations, were sometimes associated with teachers using attendance proxies to ensure the physical or virtual presence of students (e.g. quizzes, tests, group work, compulsory on-line postings and hand-outs only available in-class).

University students are mature enough to choose the way they learn that suits them best. (Education)

Why is attendance important when students can catch up by reading and learn themselves? That's why I think taking attendance is really not important (Business and economics)



Skipping lessons is a common phenomenon. But professors should reflect whether its the responsibility of students or is it that the lecture is too boring? (Social sciences)

Quality of teaching should be the factor which affects students to attend class, instead of assessments and attendance taking (Business and economics)

In engineering, attendance is almost never taken, and many lecturers resort to other measures to ensure students attend class, such as giving out solutions to problems only during lectures and refusing to provide them on-line (Engineering)

## Theme 2: class participation grading

Whilst the assessment literature offers justifications for the use of class contribution grading only a minority of respondents felt this practice is beneficial by developing their professional or work-related skills. The vast majority of responses identified negative implications of grading class contributions. Learning-based criticisms were focused on the inappropriateness of this form of assessment for students who are shy, quiet or prefer other learning styles; and the way such grading practice overlooks other forms of participation.

I think that participation in class (e.g. answering questions in class) should not be one of the assessment factors as some students are not that talkative. They may express their opinions in words much better rather than speaking. (Arts)

There was also the rights-based perception that class contribution grades are unfair and impressionistic. Concerns were expressed about a lack of transparency regarding how grades are derived and the limited opportunities available for all students to meet such criteria given time restrictions and the fact that some students are shy.

Participation grades are impression marking and depends on the professor's impression without objective criteria (Social sciences)

Sometimes students are encouraged to speak up in class and professors grade them on what they. However, there is bias from professors towards some students so some students easily get a good grade (Business and economics)

I think the assessment structure (principle) should be more clear [sic], especially for grading in-class discussion (Education)

Students participation in class is not a fair means of assessment because not everyone gets a chance to contribute and time is limited, and some students may be shy (Business and economics)

A further concern was that contribution grades might constrain free discussion as students are 'forced' to contribute. Examples given included the use of online discussion boards where comments are required rather than voluntary. The word 'force' or 'forced' was used 35 times in all comments, almost always in a negative context.

The overwhelming majority of respondents were Chinese students from Hong Kong and a few chose to highlight cultural barriers to participative forms of assessment.

I strongly doubt that in an Asian culture group discussion and in-class participation is welcome and useful (Science)

I feel that XXX [i.e. the University] lacks an interactive learning environment. Perhaps a lot of the locals are scared to participate in class (Business and economics)

Whilst respect for teachers and peers was cited by some students as a reason for justifying attendance registers, respect was understood from an alternative perspective in relation to class contribution grading. Here, a concern was widely expressed that such a practice tends to overlook a student's preference to learn passively.

teachers should also respect students who prefer to stay quiet (Business and economics)

some students do not prefer voicing out their opinions in class but are still committed to the subject (Arts)

some students may not love speaking but that does mean they do not know the answer (Science)

I think that participation in class (e.g. answering questions in class) should not be one of the assessment factors as some students are not that talkative. They may express their opinions in words much better rather than speaking (Arts)

I think debating in tutorials should be optional because there are students who feel nervous to say something in front of other people, and it will make them embarrassed to say anything by force (Arts)

Aside from concerns about the appropriateness of class contribution grading on the basis of student preferences, respondents further highlighted the more general criticism that speaking in class should be a matter of free expression without pressure, fear or grading attached.

I think use of moodle should not be used as a contribution mark. The statements should not be assessed. Students should have the freedom to express what they think whether they are right or wrong (Education)

I think students should be free to express their opinion in the class but the content of speech should not be marked or graded (Education)

I think that the in-class participation like in-class group discussion should be encouraged but they should not be assessed as this will give students pressure in speaking and expressing their own opinion freely (Double degree)

Finally, there was a keen awareness among students that forms of assessment relying on the observation of their behaviour and attitudes can result in inauthentic patterns of engagement. Examples, such as speaking in class to get the attention of the teacher or posting an online comment to a discussion forum to satisfy a grading requirement, are designed to meet the assessment criteria without engaging deeply or meaningfully in the learning process, the opposite effect of the one intended by those that advocate the adoption of such assessment tools. Student comments revealed an understanding of the difference between attendance at class and genuine engagement in learning.

On-line discussion forums are good in facilitating knowledge exchange, but using the number of posts/responses as an indication of participation is not preferable. One should be assessed on quality of work instead of the quantity. (Double degree)

Students may attend class just because of wanting to have attendance taken but not really learning (Arts)

Students should not be forced to speak up because people make meaningless points just for grades and slow down the class schedule (Business and economics)

'Counting the number of times a student posts' should not be used for assessment (Business and economics)

I do think that class participation should not be graded because students should have the right to speak or not. Grading class participation forces students to speak, without thinking thoroughly. Adversely, it may affect the progress in class. Some students may speak too much. (Double degree)

Whilst class contribution grading was recognized as distorting patterns of student behaviour in these ways the invisibility of other forms of non-audited engagement were also acknowledged.

There is no grading assessment on attitude or incentive to learn other than participation in class. Participation should not be the sole mediator on attitude (Social sciences)

I don't think remaining silent necessarily means not paying attention in class. There are many students who listen to the lecturer all the time but do not say anything. It is not fair to them to claim they didn't participate in class. (Business and economics)

These comments are illustrative of a concern about the superficiality of assessment practice in focusing on easily observable and recordable forms of participation.

### Theme 3: group work

Students were highly critical of grading processes that fail to recognize unequal levels of contribution within groups. The recognition of individual contributions appears to be rare even though students expressed the belief that this would be fairer than awarding a single group grade.

Ten comments alone referred critically to the effect of 'free-riders'. It was, perhaps, surprising that students were familiar with this specialist term especially as it was not employed as part of the questionnaire. One student, who did not specifically employ the term 'free-rider', nonetheless provided a definition of this phenomenon:

Some members do not contribute anything but get the same grade as others (Science)

One or two comments did acknowledge that group work can be helpful for problem-solving but all comments contained qualifications with respect to concerns about the fairness of awarding a group assessment grade without regard to individual levels of contribution. Just one respondent referred to a learning-based criticism of group work on the basis of different learning styles.

I think the assessment method should allow for different learning style of students. Some prefer studying alone while some prefer learning in groups. (Law)

Other remarks were focused largely on the ill-effects of 'free-riders' and perceptions of unfairness in group assessment and included the following:

Students should always be graded individually and it is so unfair when they meet irresponsible students as group mates. It is not that the students fail to communicate, but they bear an unreasonable burden to work on a group project alone (Double degree)

I think student should be judged individually because there are many free-riders (Business and economics)

Group assignments have too many random variables that may affect the fairness of assessment (Social sciences)

Students across all subject groupings were most critical about group work grading with many referring to personal experiences where they felt that their grades had suffered as a result of assessment practice that had failed to control for free-riding.

## Performativity and responsibilisation

The findings indicate that forms of assessment involving the measurement of student behaviour and attitudes are quite commonplace in the undergraduate student experience. Students experience the effects of performativity via a heightened emphasis on attendance registers and attendance proxies and a demonstrable preference for collaborative learning in assessment regimes. Arguably, this heightens the emphasis on certain student behaviours such as vocal loquacity and presenteeism. Non-compliance with these requirements can result in lower grades for attendance and class contribution.

The audit of these visible elements of student engagement may be contrasted with non-audited or less visible aspects of learning such as active listening and effective note-taking in class or individual contributions in group work projects. Where class contribution grading is deployed there is a risk that behaviour among students can be distorted resulting in inauthentic patterns to satisfy assessment demands. Many respondents resent attendance registers and do not regard such a requirement as fair from a rights perspective even though research evidence might indicate that attendance is positively related to achievement from a learning perspective. The findings from this small-scale study connect with other recent research which has found that negative feelings associated with assessment such as being monitored (or watched and controlled) are among the most commonly expressed by university students (Brown and Wang 2013).

Students showed awareness of differential learning benefits according to personality types and preferences in learning styles. To some extent this finding acts as a salutary reminder of the classic literature in this area which indicates that more introverted students are capable of doing well by using their own individual study methods whereas more extroverted students perform better in seminars where oral participation is used (Entwistle and Entwistle 1970; Furnham 1992; Furnham and Medhurst 1995). The use of forms of assessment which emphasize vocal loquacity, such as class contribution or oral presentations, provides more challenges for the shy or quiet individual now increasingly defined as a deviant in the university learning environment and society at large (Scott 2006; Reda 2009).

The deficit model of the 'Chinese learner' tends to emphasize, *inter alia*, their reliance on rote learning, passivity and 'quietness' or presumed unwillingness to participate in class (Clark and Gieve 2006). This deficit model implies that Chinese students are less likely to participate willingly in assessments that seek to measure their behaviour and attitudes in class. However, research has shown that Chinese students have no predilection towards passivity or reproductive styles of learning (Kember and Gow 1991). This stereotype results from learning and teaching approaches rather than student predilections. In Hong Kong active approaches to learning have been used in the university sector for at least the last 15 years (Sivan et al. 2000). Hence, it would seem even more unlikely that

the attitudes of this small sample is necessarily unusual in comparison with a group of students from a Western context. Further research, though, is needed to make any safe cultural comparisons.

The findings of this study may further be understood in considering the extent to which the technology of ‘responsibilisation’ operates to legitimise the performative turn in the assessment of university students. Originally conceived as a characteristic of neo-liberal government to control individuals and reduce welfare commitments, responsibilisation involves convincing citizens to understand social risks, such as unemployment, which will arise unless they regard such problems as within their own self-control (Rose 1990). The concept of responsibilisation has also been used in reference to the criminal justice system and the idea that responsibility for crime prevention should be shared or devolved from the government to individuals and community groups thereby reducing the role of the state (Garland 1996). In the context of university teaching justifications for attendance rules, for example, are often related to the need for students to take more responsibility for their own learning including the importance of attendance as developing a work-related aptitude (Macfarlane 2013). Thus, such rules can be seen as an attempt to devolve responsibility for teaching and learning from the university and the teacher to the individual student. Some of the free comments illustrated student ventriloquism of this agenda:

I think attending class is the responsibility of a student. If they choose not to attend I think its disrespectful (Engineering)

We should educate students how to be disciplined and pay respect to their lecturers (Business and economics)

Being punctual is very important to show respect for the professor (Humanities)

However, using the word count function to identify key vocabulary it is clear that overall students are more supportive of a libertarian view of university learning rather than the responsibilisation agenda (see Figure 3). Students mainly tended to use words such as ‘responsible’ or ‘irresponsibility’ to refer to their own duty, as they call it, to attend classes. Occasionally the word was also used to refer to the ‘responsibility’ of professors to teach in an interesting style. The word ‘respect(fullness)’ was most commonly applied in relation to the rationale for why students should attend lectures and was often used both in demonstrating this virtue to peers as well as professors. Other terms indicative of student’s accepting and verbalizing the responsibilisation agenda included

Responsibilisation		Libertarianism	
Responsible/Responsibility	30	Choose/Choice	80
Irresponsible/Irresponsibility			
Respect(fullness)	15	Freedom	49
Disrespect(fullness)			
co-operation (3), discipline or self-discipline (3) and time management (3)	9	Rights	22
Motivation	5	Express/	17
/Self-motivation		Expression	

Figure 3. The language of responsibilisation and libertarianism.

self-motivation (5), co-operation (3), discipline or self-discipline (3) and time management (3). Despite the influence of the language of responsabilisation, an alternative, more libertarian lexicon represented by words such as choose/choice (80), freedom (49) and rights (22) was more commonly expressed. These words were used in the context of comments critical of attendance rules, class contribution grades and group grading. Students placed an emphasis on what they regarded as their freedom of choice in engaging with learning at university.

## Conclusion

The student engagement literature has hitherto largely overlooked student perspectives with respect to issues of fairness and rights in regard to their learning experience. Instead, student satisfaction questionnaires, such as the UK's National Student Survey, tend to collect data on attitudes to assessment which are confined to understanding of criteria, the timeliness of feedback, the clarity and detail of comments and fairness in the narrower context of marking practice. Moreover, 'student voice' is often buried beneath an overriding emphasis on quantitative data (Grebennikov and Shah 2013). Performative expectations have profoundly changed what it means to be a university student. Assessment practices increasingly evaluate social and behavioural skills in a public learning space rather than individual intellectual understanding in a largely private one. Despite the purported benefits for student learning this performative turn is a cause for concern in undermining their freedom to make choices as learners and rewards game playing behaviours. Currently university learning, teaching and assessment policies focus on the rights students acquire *through* the curriculum via learning gain and employability. This research indicates that there is a need to rebalance policy and practice by strengthening the emphasis on rights *within* the curriculum, such as fairness in group assessment, respecting 'passive' as well as 'active' learning preferences, sanctioning reticence in class discussion, and recognizing that attendance is a learning choice made by adults.

## Notes

1. Subsequently the combined percentage of respondents indicating 'often' or always' will be reported unless otherwise indicated
2. Analysis based on subject areas with at least 30 respondents.
3. Subsequent reporting of student comments will identify their subject area in an abbreviated form.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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