

# **Equal opportunity or unfair advantage? The use of test accommodations in high-stakes assessments**

Conference Abstract

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## Abstract

Standardised assessments pose challenges to some students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. These challenges stem from a variety of test features not related to the constructs being measured, including test format or administration procedures. In such cases, the differences in students' performance may be due to differing access to the assessment, which can obscure the knowledge of the test content and be a threat to the validity and fairness of the assessment. To address this, many countries introduced test accommodations (also known as access arrangements) to support the needs of students struggling with standard test procedures. The main aim of test accommodations is to allow students with specific needs (e.g., special education needs, disabilities, temporary injuries) to access the assessment and remove unnecessary barriers without changing its demands or reducing its validity.

While the above changes to assessment procedures intend to improve the fairness and validity of the assessments, empirical evidence behind the effectiveness of test accommodations is often lacking or inconclusive, with research based on experimental studies frequently suffering from methodological limitations (e.g., Duncan & Purcell, 2019) and results that cannot be easily extrapolated to the context of high-stakes assessments.

Moreover, the practice of providing test accommodations is not without controversy, with some critics suggesting that such accommodations may offer an unfair advantage, rather than simply level the playing field (e.g., Elliot & Marquart, 2004). Therefore, it is important to investigate the impact of changes to assessment, in particular in the form of test accommodations, on students' performance to inform stakeholders (students, teachers, etc.) and policymakers on the appropriateness of their use.

This research aimed to investigate whether granting test accommodations creates equity or confers an advantage using authentic assessment data. Using such data ensures that the students with test accommodations were actually in need of such accommodations and that the accommodations reflected their normal way of working. The data was provided by one international awarding body in the United Kingdom and included students in secondary education who requested accommodations in a high-stakes assessment in the academic year 2016/17. The research focus was on some of the most frequently used test accommodations: 25% extra time, word processor, supervised rest breaks, reading assistance and writing assistance.

To account for group differences that have the potential to affect students' performance, students with and without accommodations were matched on several characteristics, such as gender, prior attainment, type of school attended and income-related deprivation, using a propensity score matching procedure. This strategy provides a general framework to identify causal effects rather than measures of association. Once matched, the performance of students with and without accommodations was compared.

The results of this work revealed that students with test accommodations performed similarly to students without them: students received comparable grades in their assessments regardless of whether or not they had any of the test accommodations in place, suggesting that the accommodations supported the students in demonstrating their knowledge and skills and created equity between the groups.

In conclusion, this research found no evidence that test accommodations confer an unfair advantage to students with disabilities and learning difficulties. In fact, it suggested that the accommodations fulfil their role in creating a level playing field for disadvantaged students, which supports their use in high-stakes assessments.

## References

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