

Paul Holland (1994) suggests that assessments can be seen as either measurements or contests. In the measurement view the test is seen as measuring some important attribute of an individual. In the contest view the test is seen as something that produces winners and losers. The main concern from the measurement point of view is to obtain a valid and reliable assessment of the individual; from the contest point of view the paramount concern is that the competition be conducted fairly. Most people would probably agree that the main goal of an assessment of higher education outcomes would be a valid measure of what students in a school or department know and can do at the end of a course of study. But all such assessments are also contests (either explicitly or implicitly) between students within an institution, between students in different institutions, between the faculty members who teach the students, between departments in different institutions, between institutions, and even (and perhaps especially) between national educational systems. Much of the political difficulty (at the individual, institutional, and national level) associated with establishing outcomes assessments has to do with the conflicting perspectives on fairness and validity that different constituents bring to the table: almost everyone wants the assessment or the assessment system to be fair and valid, but almost no one wants to lose either. The talk will suggest that we need to be very clear about the purpose of such assessments and that we need to recognize the inevitable contest-like nature of any such assessments. The talk will then explore those design options that are likely to maximize fairness broadly considered.