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Improving assessment equity using Interactive Oral Assessments

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Abstract

Equity in assessment has been a major issue plaguing the higher education sector for a long time and although efforts have been made to implement a variety of assessments to address this issue, the assessment design tends to ignore the increasingly diverse student population. This article assesses the equity of Interactive Oral Assessments (IOAs) based on the principles of the McCES framework: match, comprehensible, challenge, elicit, and scaffold. Accordingly, the process of designing and administering IOAs is compared with each of the five principles and shows that the assessment environment for students from equity backgrounds is significantly improved. To do this, the data collected from teaching staff and students from a two-year mixed methods research project at a regional university in Australia is used to evaluate the claim. The findings demonstrate that IOAs offer an opportunity to assess students' learning and clarify their ability to achieve learning outcomes which aligns with the McCES framework; therefore, it is argued that IOAs are an equitable assessment approach. The implications of the findings for academics, students, and educational institutions are significant. For academics, they can be confident that their assessment approach is equitable. For non-traditional students, the chances of succeeding in assessments and improvement in learning are enhanced. For educational institutions, a direct impact on reducing the gap between the performance of mainstream students and non-traditional students in relation to retention, attrition, and successful completions is expected.

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Introduction

Assessments drive student learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2005) and yet assessments in higher education (HE) are plagued with several challenges, such as academic integrity (Bretag et al., 2019) and the inability to develop students' employability skills (KPMG, 2020). However, equity in outcomes is a far bigger issue, as reflected by the lower levels of success of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Tai et al., 2022) despite the increase in enrolments resulting from the Australian government's 'widening participation' agenda (Bradley et al., 2008).

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the existing equity issues in HE (O'Shea et al., 2021). O'Shea et al. (2021) claim that about 50% of students in the HE sector can be classified as belonging to one or more of the equity groups: low socio-economic status (SES) students, First Nations students, students with disabilities, students from a non-English speaking background, students from remote and regional areas, and women in non-traditional areas. Despite the high number of students from equity backgrounds, their success rates are relatively low. For example, only 16.8% of undergraduates in Australia belonged to the low SES equity group in 2019 (Koshy, 2020). As per the data from the Australian Government's Department of Education and Training in 2017, the national attrition rate for First Nations students was 29%, compared to 16% for mainstream students (O'Shea et al., 2021). Thus, to improve outcomes for students from equity groups and reduce the gap in outcomes between traditional and non-traditional students, it is necessary to improve opportunities for diverse student cohorts to succeed in HE (Dinmore & Stokes, 2015; Gill, 2021; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). To achieve this goal, it is crucial to focus on assessments as studies show that many students tend to focus their learning priorities in response to the requirements of assessment tasks due to time pressures (Harris et al., 2018).

The assessment context

The major critique of assessments from an equity point of view results from their Euro-centric origins and the influence of the American education system, which ignores any alternative ways of acquiring knowledge (Milligan et al., 2021). The higher education sector is being criticised as the enabler of inequity where the assessments are characterised by an uncritical adherence to traditional approaches (Stowell, 2004) that continues to drive the sector (Milligan et al., 2021).

In the past, assessments were used to select a small number of students for elite education, and these assessments often created success or failure identities that were linked to economic and social advantage (Torrance, 2017). However, in recent decades, the focus and purpose of assessment have shifted, largely due to the demands of the knowledge economy. With the rise of a globalised, information-based economy, there is a growing need for a highly skilled workforce. This means that most of the population needs to be qualified to the highest level possible, and assessments are now seen as a means to support this goal (Torrance, 2017).

The HE assessment environment in Australia highlights some drivers and inhibiting factors for designing equitable assessments. The major drivers are the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA) requirements for accreditation under the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF), which includes a section on Diversity and Equity. This section (Part A, Section 2.2) requires higher education institutions (HEIs) to accommodate student

diversity and offer equivalent opportunities for success (TEQSA, 2017). Another driver is the Australian government's commitment to the 'widening participation' agenda, which involves increasing the number of graduates aged 25–40 to 40% of the population (Bradley et al., 2008). These drivers are underpinned by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 4, which aims to "[E]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (United Nations, n.d.).

The major inhibitors, on the other hand, are that the content and assessment practices tend to favour the traditional student population (Tai et al., 2021), standardised policies and procedures that govern assessments (Harris & Dargusch, 2020), and the redefinition of equality away from the disadvantage of certain community groups has shifted focus from the institution to an individual (Apple, 1989, as cited in Gipps, 1995). Therefore, the lack of success or poor performance of non-traditional student cohorts in assessments is attributed to their perceived shortcomings in terms of diligence, dedication, or capability (McKay & Devlin, 2016, as cited in Harris & Dargusch, 2020). Other factors, such as the reduction in government funding, a high level of casualisation of the teaching workforce, and the changing characteristics of the student cohort have adversely impacted assessment quality (Anderson et al., 2002, as cited in Goos et al., 2011).

Equity and equality

This paper adopts the definition of equity in assessment used by Gipps (1995) as the "practice and interpretation of results [that] are fair and just for all groups" (p. 273) as it resonates with the aims and purpose of this paper.

The focus on equity is particularly important to reduce the gap between the success rates of traditional and non-traditional students, considering the percentage of non-traditional students in higher education is only expected to increase (Goode et al., 2021; McCall et al., 2020). It is essential to investigate how the success rates of students from equity groups can be enhanced (Devlin & McKay, 2012, as cited in McCall et al., 2020; Gill, 2021).

Over the years, there has been confusion between equity and equality and these terms have been used interchangeably in the literature, probably owing to the confusion around "fairness and sameness" (Stowell, 2004, p. 497). It is therefore essential to differentiate between the two to clearly focus on equity. Tierney (2013, as cited in Harris & Dargusch, 2020) clarifies this difference where, to ensure fairness, equality requires using identical tasks and criteria for all learners, whereas equity entails making adjustments to accommodate each student's unique requirements. Stowell (2004) further clarifies that unfairness can result from treating unequal individuals equally and treating equal individuals unequally, and that "[I]mpartial processes do not guarantee just outcomes" (p. 497). Thus equity, not equality, is required to improve outcomes for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

In response to the growing diversity of students in higher education, inclusive pedagogies have been suggested as an effective approach (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Inclusive assessment has been defined as the development and implementation of effective assessment methods and practices that allow all students to showcase their knowledge, skills, and abilities to apply them in

practice (Hockings, 2010, as cited in Tai et al., 2021). It is expected to help students from equity groups; however, the evidence as per Tai et al. (2021) is inconclusive.

Mpofu and Ortiz (2009) explain that equity in assessment is based on technical and socio-moral perspectives where the technical perspective is about the "comparability of assessment procedures" and the socio-moral perspective is aimed at the "fairness in opportunity to learn and demonstrate abilities" (p. 42). They claim that technical equity is important but not sufficient in ensuring equitable outcomes. The focus of this paper is therefore on the socio-moral aspect of equity in assessment.

Interactive Oral Assessment

An Interactive Oral Assessment (IOA) is a relatively new assessment approach that gained popularity because of the sudden shift to online assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic when the opportunity for more creative approaches to assessment arose. This assessment approach is underpinned by the 'Framework for Authentic Assessment Design' (Sotiriadou et al., 2020), which includes six characteristics and three key objectives. The six characteristics are scaffolding and support, scenario-based, aligned to the program, course learning outcomes, accessible and equitable, and professionally focused. Sotiriadou et al. (2020) claim that once these six characteristics are embedded, three key objectives of enhanced student engagement, employability skills, and academic integrity can be achieved.

An IOA is a genuine and unscripted conversation between an academic/s and a student/s framed around an authentic workplace scenario (Sotiriadou et al., 2020) and aligns with the assessment culture values of dialogue or interaction with the learner (Birenbaum, 2014). Various studies on this assessment approach validate the claims of enhanced engagement and outcomes, academic integrity, and employability skills (Krautloher, 2021; Krautloher et al. 2021; Samuelson et al., 2022; Shaeri et al., 2021). However, little has been written about how equitable this assessment approach is.

Equitable Assessment Framework

This paper adopts the "McCES, Sounds like Success" equity framework (Siegel et al., 2008, p. 43). Although other frameworks were considered, this framework most suited the purpose of the paper.

A literature review of the equitable assessment framework in higher education resulted in three key approaches: Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Tai et al., 2021), Culturally Responsive Assessment (CRA) (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017), and VALUE – Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (AAC&U, 2023). Each framework was considered to assess its suitability for this paper, as explained below.

The focus of UDL driven assessment is to allow students choices in showcasing their abilities to meet the requirements of the assessment task (Rose, 2000). Although an IOA could be offered as one of the options for students to complete their assessment task within the UDL framework, this framework could not be applied to IOAs as it is verbally conducted and does not allow for any other choices of showcasing knowledge and abilities. Tai et al. (2021) acknowledge that while the UDL framework is helpful for addressing the needs of students with learning and sensory

disabilities, it may not sufficiently cater to the diverse range of the broader student population, potentially resulting in the marginalisation of some.

Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) explain the four key features of a CRA as being contextualised to student population to be assessed and reflective of student voice, it should include clearly defined learning outcomes that are easy for students to understand, the assessment methods should allow students to showcase their knowledge in multiple ways in the context of their cultural backgrounds, and it should improve student learning. Although an IOA includes clearly defined learning outcomes and helps improve student learning, some of the other aspects could not be accommodated for this study. For example, the assessments were designed to reflect students' future professions rather than their backgrounds and students could only showcase their knowledge verbally. Also, an IOA accommodates every type of student, including those with diverse cultural backgrounds.

The focus of the VALUE framework is on rubrics to assess student achievement against learning outcomes to ensure consistency and comparability across institutions and is aimed at undergraduate study (AAC&U, 2023). The IOAs can be implemented at all levels of study, not just the undergraduate level and the development of rubrics is subsidiary to the design of an IOA.

After careful consideration, it was decided that none of these frameworks could be directly applied in the current situation as the focus of this paper is on one type of assessment that is verbally conducted.

Further research resulted in the Equitable Framework for Classroom Assessment – EFCA (Lee & Orgill, 2021), which has been applied in high school settings. It is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural underpinnings and includes five principles. Further investigation showed that this framework is based on, or rather a renamed version of another one called the "McCES, Sounds like Success" framework (Siegel et al., 2008, p. 43). Both frameworks include the same five principles and aim to redesign assessments for English language learners in secondary science classrooms (Siegel et al., 2008).

The McCES framework was adopted to assess whether IOAs qualify as an equitable assessment approach as it appears to be the foundation framework on which the EFCA framework is based. The framework focuses on the design of assessments rather than the outcomes, which suits the focus of this paper. The five principles of the McCES framework are: M – Match learning and instructional goals, c – be linguistically and culturally comprehensible, C – Challenge students to think of difficult ideas, E – Elicit student understanding, and S – Scaffold the use of language and support learning (Siegel et al., 2008).

Research question

RQ: Is an Interactive Oral Assessment equitable as per the McCES framework?

Method

A mixed methods research project was established at a regional Australian university to assess the effectiveness of IOAs over two years. The design of the IOAs was done as part of a community of practice (CoP) with an educational design lead and an external mentor.

The research question is addressed through a literature review on equitable assessments and by reviewing the design of IOAs through the lens of the McCES framework. The data collected from students and teaching staff as part of the mixed methods research project will be used to validate each principle of the framework. Finally, the process of administering IOAs in a range of subjects will be compared to the McCES framework to examine whether it qualifies as an equitable assessment approach.

In total, 14 academics participated in this trial, with 25 teaching subjects, with some subjects having run IOAs multiple times over the two years. The subjects participating in this trial were from diverse disciplines, including Languages, Health and Nutrition, Criminal Justice, Marketing and Management, Veterinary Science, and Engineering. Similarly, the cohort sizes varied widely from as little as three in the Biblical Hebrew subject to 110 in one of the Criminal Justice subjects.

An ethics approval (H21255) was sought to collect the feedback from academic staff and students and included the student survey tool to be administered at the end of every semester after grade release. Participation in the research project was voluntary for teaching staff and students. The student survey included Likert scale type questions and open-ended questions. The survey was administered three (3) times from 2021 and 2022, with a total of 1136 students surveyed and 172 responses received, equating to a response rate of just over 15%. The open-ended responses were thematically analysed by two researchers and then compared to identify themes. The numeric responses to the Likert style questions were analysed to gauge student responses.

The experiences of the teaching staff were captured via auto-ethnographic accounts and through focus groups from 2021 to 2022 teaching semesters. Four focus groups were conducted by an academic not involved in this research project to ensure unbiased discussions. Two focus groups per topic were conducted to capture academics' feedback on the IOAs and the value of participating in a community of practice to design the assessments. The aim was to allow academics to participate in at least one focus group discussion. The anonymised transcripts of these focus groups were thematically analysed by two researchers separately and then compared to identify the themes from each. The quantitative responses from the student survey are used, where relevant, and the qualitative feedback from academics and students were anonymised and used in the analysis section below.

The sampling approach was convenience (Alvi, 2016) or opportunity sampling, as the participants were the academics participating in the community of practice to learn and administer IOAs in their subjects and the students were from the subjects that had IOAs embedded in them. Under these circumstances, other sampling techniques would not have worked.

Findings

The findings are presented using open-ended comments from academics and students as they relate to each principle of the McCES framework. Quantitative responses also have been used, as appropriate. These findings are presented in Table 1, followed by a detailed discussion of their implications against each principle of the framework.

Table 1

Evaluation of Interactive Oral Assessments against the McCES Equitable Assessment Framework principles

McCES framework principles	Brief explanation of the IOA design process *Responses (teacher, student) and statistics*
Match learning and instructional goals	Assessments are scaffolded to and from an IOA, which allows content and delivery to be refined. **Teaching staff** responses: *"T[t]rain my brain to think more about the assessment rather than focus too much on the content."* *"T[t]o talk about interactive oral it had to be bigger than that, it had to be more broadly about assessment and how assessment is scaffolding, and how it all fits together."* *"It helped my teaching in that I had the opportunity to reflect on what had been previously done."* *"For me my teaching was hugely improved it just really clarified for me in my teaching the order I needed to teach content in the kinds of skills, I needed to incorporate into the process of learning for the students."* *"It helped my teaching."* *"Improved the order of the content."* *"Completely changed the subject and how I taught it."* **Teaching staff** comments in relation to the time taken to design IOAs: *"…the time commitment we had to give to the group (to design and learn how to implements IOAs), I think I got back more than the time."* *"But it was such a time efficient way to do something new and to not have to make all the mistakes, learn straight up from other people's experience."* *"...one (issue) would have been that confidence or self belief that I could get it right (implementing a new assessment approach), on my own."* *"I'm the queen of great ideas, but if you leave me to do them on my own, I'm not great at meeting my own deadlines or my own expectations, I need external deadlines."*
Be linguistically and culturally **comprehensible**	Not assessed for language proficiency. Framework for authentic assessment design principle – Accessible and equitable. The survey included specific questions to assess the value of the support resources as shown below: The value of the exemplar/sample recording in helping to address students' concerns – 65% of students responded positively and 17% responded negatively. The response to the question of whether the learning/practice activities helped students to effectively prepare for their IOAs – 61% of students responded in the affirmative and 22% responded negatively.
Challenge students to think of difficult ideas	Students must think on their feet to address issues or challenges raised during the discussion. **Student** – "*How to think on your feet, without knowing what questions are going to be asked*." **Student** – "*The interactive oral was a great tool to ensure I really understood the content. As an online student I found this activity to be really successful in developing my professional skills, as it required me to respond quickly. I found this*

McCES framework principles	Brief explanation of the IOA design process *Responses (teacher, student) and statistics*
	assessment encouraged me to expand my knowledge in a deeper sense. As a student I found it extremely beneficial." **Student** – "*The IO is an assessment that requires you to think on your feet and truly understand the information and learning material. It reflects real life professional situations. Whilst, before the IO took place I was stressed, upon reflecting I would like to see these in more of my subjects*." **Student** – "*Overall, it was a stretching experience, but possibly one that was good to do as a contrast to written assessments.*" **Student** – "*Made you think on your feet, making it a more applicable skill set towards real life situations*." **Teaching staff** – "*Fulfilling experience to watch your students grow as professionals.*"
Elicit student understanding	Through unscripted interaction between assessor(s) and student(s) using conversational prompts. **Student** – "*The only thing to me that I gained is the importance of asking the assessor question and drawing out what is required from the task, especially when it comes to cretin (certain) high weighting sections of a task*." **Student** – "*The more casual environment was beneficial for allowing back and forth discussion of development and therefore better justify experiences*." Student – "*Ability to think outside the square and be able to present to a live audience.*" **Student** – "*The IO was a great tool in assessing the student's ability to articulate the subject matter. As a student it was good to be put under immediate pressure rather than just writing an essay where you have the time to review before submission*." **Student** – "*Learning how to succinctly defend a viewpoint.*" **Teaching staff** – "*The greatest benefit for me from this process was spending 10 minutes in conversation with each student. The opportunity to engage in person with each student gave me excellent insight into their learning journeys and what I can do to support them better*." **Teaching staff** – "*Enjoyable to mark, authentic, refreshing and really managed to get to the core of student understanding*."
Scaffold the use of language and **support learning**	Support is provided to prepare students for IOAs. For example, exemplar/sample recording, marking activity, and practice activities. Students were asked whether they were stressed about their IOAs, to which 22% of students responded yes, and 61% responded no. Students were asked if their lecturers were able to address their concerns – 8% of students said yes, 2% said no, and 13% of students responded that they did not approach their lecturer. The value of the exemplar/sample recording in helping to address students' concerns – 65% of students responded positively and 17% responded negatively. The response to the question of whether the learning/practice activities helped students to effectively prepare for their IOAs – 61% of students responded in the affirmative and 22% responded negatively. Based on their experience of the first IOA, students were asked to consider whether they would be happy to participate in another one, to which 72% of students responded positively and only 10% responded negatively.

McCES framework principles	Brief explanation of the IOA design process *Responses (teacher, student) and statistics*
	In response to the question of whether students would be happy to help their peers who were stressed about their IOAs – 73% of students responded positively and only 9% responded negatively.

The comments and feedback from the teaching staff and students (Table 1) are discussed for each principle of the McCES framework in the following sections.

Principle 1: M – Match

The first principle is to match the learning goals and the language of instruction which has been explained by Siegel et al. (2008) as the knowledge and skills as well as the language and terminology taught in the class should be the same as the ones being assessed through the assessment tasks. The process of designing IOAs was accompanied by the complete redesign of the assessment regime in all 25 subjects involved in this study. The assessments were constructively aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2011) with the aim of scaffolding (Sotiriadou et al., 2020) to and from an IOA and to help students build their knowledge and skills in preparation for their IOA without being stressed or overwhelmed (Sotiriadou & Hill, 2015). These goals were also showcased through a sample or exemplar recording where these expectations were clearly showcased to students (Sotiriadou et al., 2020).

According to the academics' feedback, as shown in Table 1, the redesign process helped them to look at their subject content differently to match the learning goals, and some academics reflected that it allowed them to reconsider their delivery, the order of the content, and how it was taught to help students achieve the learning goals.

The academics also commented on the time they invested in designing and learning how to implement the IOA for the first time, which involved an hour-long weekly CoP meeting from before the start of the teaching session to the end. However, as can be seen from the comments in Table 1, the academics believed that it was a worthwhile investment to ensure the successful implementation of a new assessment approach in their first attempt. The learning through the CoP, along with other academics, helped to improve their skills and confidence vastly, compared to if they had done it on their own. Some even questioned whether they would have persevered with it on their own, as seen from the comments in Table 1.

Principle 2: c – be comprehensible

The second principle is to be comprehensible for English learners, both linguistically and culturally has been explained by Siegel et al. (2008) as the assessment task should be readable and not create additional reading for students. Teachers should also consider sociocultural influences on students' thinking when designing assessment tasks to reduce bias.

To be linguistically comprehensible, the task description was simplified along with the rubric in the subject outlines. Academics explained the new assessment approach, its purpose, and benefits to students at the start of the study session. They clarified to students that the assessment aimed to measure their learning and ability to apply their knowledge rather than their

language skills. Similarly, rubrics were simplified with clear objectives for each performance level. Exemplar/sample video recordings (as was also suggested by Sotiriadou et al., 2020) were developed where the academics played the role of a student and common errors were incorporated and showcased to ensure that students understood that they were not (usually) assessed for their English language skills. As a practice activity, students were asked to mark their academic's performance against the rubric for the assessment task. It helped them to engage deeply with the rubric and improve their assessment and feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018) and aligns with the findings of Logan et al. (2017) that students engage deeply with the rubric to prepare for their IOAs.

The student feedback in Table 1 confirms the value of the exemplar/sample recording and practice activities to help them prepare for their IOAs. There were no comments that indicated additional readings were required for students to understand the assessment task.

In the current study, however, there was limited application of culturally comprehensible content due to the nature of the subjects implementing IOAs. Only one subject that focused on First Nations content applied the culturally comprehensible approach. The academic chose to embed an IOA in this subject to reduce the written assessments, which is deemed to be more culturally appropriate. The assessment aimed to capture students' reflections on their learning in the subject in line with the goals of reflexive assessment items and allowed them to draw the richness of their learning (Colvin & Gaffey, 2023). Further application of culturally comprehensible content would be considered in some of the future subjects implementing IOAs.

Principle 3: C – Challenge

The third principle is to challenge students to think about difficult ideas to make assessments "cognitively challenging" and offer students the opportunity to reflect and evaluate their own work to start building connections (Siegel et al., 2008).

IOAs offer an opportunity to extend student learning beyond other written materials or assessments (Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Logan et al. (2017) explain this as how questions/prompts are contextualised to the scenario, and based on students' previous work and other responses, making it unique to each student.

Many participating academics chose to replace the written reflection task in their subjects with an IOA. During the IOA discussion (both reflective and other types), students were asked to address challenging situations or variations to the scenario they might have already analysed. In those situations, students were expected to 'think on their feet' and apply their knowledge to address these challenges. This expectation is also clearly reflected in the rubric/marking criteria for the assessment task.

Students expressed much satisfaction with verbal assessment compared to a written one, as seen from the comments in Table 1. Despite the unknown, the questions/prompts stretched their ability to apply their knowledge to unfamiliar situations (i.e., other scenarios beyond their assessment), which was appreciated by the students as they saw it as preparing them for real-world situations and challenges, thus aligning with the formation of their pre-professional identity (Hill et al., 2022). Academics were also satisfied, as seen from the comment in Table 1, as they

could gauge their students' knowledge and understanding and clarify as required, which they cannot achieve when marking other types of written assessments (Akimov & Malin, 2020).

Principle 4: E – Elicit

The fourth principle is to elicit student understanding by providing students with opportunities to express their knowledge and learning in the context of their backgrounds (Siegel et al., 2008). The challenge with the traditional types of oral assessment is that they follow a question-answer format (Logan et al., 2020) and there is no possibility to probe students' understanding of the concepts or ability to apply them to other scenarios. Traditional oral assessments cause much stress to students (Akimov & Malin, 2020); however, an IOA assessment allows for discussion to take place between an assessor and a student by using conversational prompts to gauge students' understanding of the topic content and key concepts (Logan et al., 2020), like what Wiggins (1989) calls a 'hint'. This also allows each student's interaction to be unique based on their background and responses. The support offered to academics to learn to administer the IOAs through the CoP included helping them to consider how to "'probe' students' reasoning…without prompting them for particular points" (Sutherland et al., 2019, p.3). This is a key differentiating factor between a traditional oral assessment or viva voce and an IOA. As can be seen from students' comments in Table 1, they preferred the opportunity of dialogue with the assessor to clarify their understanding of the questions and improve the quality of their responses. Similarly, the academics' comments in Table 1 highlight the value of getting to know each student, getting insight into their learning, and identifying the best way to support their learning further.

Principle 5: S – Scaffold

The fifth principle is to scaffold the use of language and support student learning to allow students to complete tasks that would initially be challenging (Siegel et al., 2008).

As part of the scaffolding process, assessments were designed to help prepare students for their IOAs and take their learning from the IOA into subsequent assessments, subjects or work scenarios. Both the academics and students were supported throughout the process to prepare for their IOAs. Academics were supported (Logan et al., 2017) from the beginning to the end of the session to develop their skills in designing and administering the IOAs, planning learning activities, developing conversational prompts to initiate and steer discussion, developing instructions for students, designing rubrics, embedding rubrics, and marking directly in the grade centre within the learning management system to enhance the efficiency of marking, thereby reducing the overall time commitment.

Support resources for students included exemplar/sample recording, practice activities, including the one where they marked the exemplar/sample recording against the rubric, as well as a workshop offered by the Academic Skills team to help prepare students for their IOA on aspects not related to the subject content, rather focused on helping students to manage their nerves, plan and prepare, and pace themselves during the IOA. Students' responses to the practice activities and resources show very positive feedback, as seen in Table 1. Similarly, their feedback on the stress-related questions and supporting resources reflect its value in preparing students for their IOAs and keeping their stress at manageable levels, as can be seen from the quantitative analysis of the responses to those questions. These findings align with the recommendations of

Knight et al. (2013) and Sotiriadou et al. (2020) in relation to the value of support resources in managing students' anxiety levels when implementing newer assessment approaches.

Discussion

This paper aimed to assess whether IOAs were equitable as per the McCES framework. Accordingly, the analysis of the IOA design process was compared to each principle of the framework and the feedback collected from students and teaching staff has been used to evaluate whether IOA meets the equity requirements.

Student feedback captured in the above section reflects low levels of stress considering a new style of assessment, indicating a positive assessment environment for a wide variety of students. This could be attributed to the level of detail and clarity of the task description included in the subject outlines. Although students had some concerns about IOAs, the survey results showed that not many approached their lecturer for assistance or guidance. However, those who did, found the support given by the lecturers helpful in addressing their initial concerns. The use of supporting resources (Sotiriadou et al., 2020), such as the exemplar or sample recording, as well as practice activities and the Academic Skills team's workshop went a long way in addressing students' concerns to the point that a high number of students indicated that they were prepared to undertake another IOA and assist their peers in addressing their concerns about it. The students' feedback to the survey also helps allay the general concerns experienced by casual academics who feel pressured to dilute the content and assessments for positive student feedback adversely impacting quality and equity initiatives (Goos et al., 2011, p. 96).

Students' open-ended comments about the value of this assessment experience show their satisfaction with an alternative to written assessment, the ability to ask questions of the academics to clarify what was expected and respond appropriately, enhanced engagement with the subject, and improvements in various skills, from communications, time management, to critical thinking and problem-solving. This aligns with Logan et al.'s (2017) observation that IOAs offer the opportunity to help develop and assess students' communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Students also tend to show the beginning of the formation of their pre-professional identity (Hill et al., 2022).

Similarly, the feedback from the focus groups and reflections of the academic staff demonstrate satisfaction with the interaction with students which helped to convince them of their students' knowledge and skills and their readiness to join the professions – this aligns with what Wiggins (1989) mentions as "asking further questions, by seeking explanation" (p. 708). The academics were also satisfied with the improvement in academic integrity and the impact on teaching and learning strategies. They also indicated that their feedback was better 'heard' by students than the feedback given for written assessments. The general concerns around the initial time invested in the design process, marking time, and moderation issues were addressed satisfactorily through the support offered by the educational designer and the external mentor. Interestingly, the various academics' experiences were similar, irrespective of their type of subject or cohort size. The academics also commented on the efficiency of marking compared to other written assessments owing to the simplicity of the rubric and the ability to mark directly into the grade centre within the learning management system.

The overall analysis shows that IOAs not only offer an alternative to traditional written assessments but also tend to work better than other types of oral assessments because of the scaffolding and support offered to students (Logan et al., 2017). It was observed that each student's IOA was unique based on their experiences and responses and thus it did not marginalise any student cohorts. As such, IOAs help to create an appropriate assessment environment for all students to succeed. According to the feedback from the academics, only the students who were not engaged with their studies did not do well in the subject and assessment. Therefore, it is argued that IOAs are an equitable assessment approach as per the McCES equity framework and can help mitigate the challenges of traditional assessments for students from equity groups.

Limitations

As demonstrated above, there is clear evidence that IOAs do meet the requirements of each McCES framework principle. The areas that have been lacking are clearly an outcome of the gaps in the design of the research project and owing to the types of subjects participating in the project. It is acknowledged that the objective of assessing equity requirements was not the primary focus of the research project when it was established. Future research projects should focus on equity and include a wider variety of subjects. Similarly, responses of students with disabilities and neurodivergent students, such as those with anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) need to be investigated.

The major inhibitors to equity in education, apart from assessment practices, as acknowledged before, include the subject content, standardised policies and procedures that govern assessments, and the redefinition of equality. However, the focus of this paper has only been on IOAs and none of these factors. Similarly, the usual constraints faced by academics when implementing new assessment approaches include workload, time commitment, academic quality assurance, and scalability for large cohorts. Although time commitment for academics is briefly addressed, none of the other factors has been addressed as it is outside the scope of this paper. Future research should address these aspects to help encourage the uptake of this assessment approach.

It is also acknowledged that the analysis presented in this paper is based on a relatively small sample of subjects, a low number of student survey responses, and a sample of academics who belonged to one institution and thus potentially at risk of homogeneity in thinking. Therefore, the findings may not be conclusive but hopefully make a case for further investigation. Further research at other universities with a larger pool of students and a variety of subjects would help bridge the gap in the current research.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Academics look for new assessment approaches to improve outcomes for their students. This research shows that an IOA can enhance equity in the assessment process for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Thus, by implementing IOAs, academics can be confident that it will assist students from a range of backgrounds to better showcase their learning and contribute to their success. Considering the challenges associated with academic integrity in the evolving context of artificial intelligence-powered generative tools, it would be helpful to implement oral

assessments to assess student learning as IOAs offer a superior approach over traditional oral assessments. Students would benefit from the opportunity to showcase their knowledge verbally and in a professional setting, thereby helping them to develop real-world skills and the confidence to join their professions. This approach would suit more than just students from non-traditional backgrounds. The larger implication for the educational institutions implementing this approach would be better compliance with the principles and practice of equity essential for accreditation and a positive impact on reducing the gap between traditional and non-traditional students in relation to retention, attrition, and success. The literature review for this paper highlighted the absence of equitable assessment frameworks in the higher education context.

Conflict of Interest

The author discloses that she has no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The author discloses that she has not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at her respective university. The author has produced this manuscript without artificial intelligence support.

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