University students' experiences of assessment adjustments: how can we move to inclusive assessment design?

Internal report for Deakin University

Joanna Tai. Mary Dracup & Merrin Mccracken

A collaboration between the Disability Resource Centre and the Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE), Deakin University

Summary

Deakin University, like all education providers, is bound by legislation to ensure that all students are offered equitable learning opportunities. This extends to the provision of assessment. The Disability Resource Centre has worked with students and staff for many years to ensure the effective implementation of adjustments such that students can have these opportunities. In recent years, there has been a realisation that moving to an *inclusive* education approach could help pre-empt many adjustments and benefit a broader range of students.

To investigate the possibilities for inclusive assessment design at Deakin, students registered with the DRC were invited to complete a short survey that asked them to share their positive and negative assessment experiences. 38 students with a range of conditions and studying a range of degrees responded to the invitation.

Students reported a range of positive and negative assessment experiences. Positive experiences stemmed from the willingness of both academic and disability support staff to accommodate their needs without question. Negative experiences were related to additional efforts required to secure adjustments, and a lack of flexibility in assessment. Adjustments relating to assessment were valued, especially extensions of time. Some students reported not knowing the possibilities for these adjustments when they first started at Deakin. Assessments discussed included exams, quizzes, assignments, group work, oral presentations and placements. While each assessment type had its downsides, students also reported features of each that allowed them to demonstrate their learning.

Aspects of suggested inclusive assessment design, directly drawn from survey respondents' data can be broken down into three areas: assessment sequencing within a unit of study, assessment choice, and assessment format. Feedback design was also seen as important to supportive inclusive assessment.

At all levels, we must continue to communicate clearly about how assessments can accommodate diverse student ability, and work proactively with students to ensure appropriate adjustments are in place where the assessment design cannot naturally accommodate diverse abilities.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1
Methods 2
About the survey respondents 3
Overview of student experiences 5
How do students perceive assessment adjustments? 6
Experiences of specific assessments 6
Feedback is important 9
Studying online and COVID-19 12
Students' perceptions of teacher responses 13
Support structures that influence inclusivity 14
Recommendations & implications 16
References 20
Appendix A – Survey questions 21

Tables

Table 1 Age of survey respondents 3
Table 2 Gender of survey respondents 3
Table 3 Degree level of survey respondents 3
Table 4 Degree major of survey respondents 3
Table 5 Conditions reported by survey respondents 4
Table 6 Types of adjustments reported by survey respondents 4
Table 7 Summary matrix of inclusive assessment design elements evidenced in the data 19

Introduction

Higher education providers in Australia are legally obliged to provide all students equivalent opportunities to achieve academic success (Disability Discrimination Act, 1992; Disability Standards for Education, 2005). The ways in which students are often assessed, such as essays, examinations, quizzes, group projects, oral presentations and placements are problematic for various students. While some students identify the need for, and request, special consideration, there are likely to be an additional cohort of students who have unidentified diverse needs, and/or students who do not wish to disclose their condition to the university (Grimes, Scevak, Southgate, & Buchanan, 2017). These students would also benefit from assessment designs that take into account diverse needs.

Currently, learners with diverse needs can work with the University's Disability Resource Centre and unit chairs to develop an 'access plan' that commonly includes adjustments to the format and/or timing of assessment tasks. This can require time-consuming and stressful negotiation, and as student populations increase (including increasing diversity), and without systemic strategies, the need for ad-hoc adjustments is likely to multiply. Continuing to operate in this way represents a significant investment of resources. Working within the confines of the system, which largely focuses on providing students with extra time to complete assessments, is unlikely to meet well the future needs of either learners or organisations, and there is likely to be continued and entrenched disadvantage for diverse student populations. Furthermore, students who choose not to contact the DRC will continue to be at a disadvantage. There is a need to reconsider assessment design in a way that allows all students to demonstrate their achievement. Rather than adjusting assessments as an 'integration' measure, superior assessment design that anticipates diversity of students would be a preferred way to provide equivalent opportunities for academic success for all students.

While there are many recommendations and resources for the improved design of assessment and feedback to take into account student diversity, there is little evidence regarding the success of assessment adjustments. Success or effectiveness may be thought of in a variety of ways, including student perceptions and experiences of assessment, and how they are able to use such adjustments to more fully demonstrate their achievement/learning in a particular area.

Feedback is also inextricably linked to assessment tasks, and a key factor in learning. At Deakin, a common adjustment option (72% in 2018) is the availability of an extension, which may impact on the utility of feedback, if the delay in submission leads to a delay in feedback such that the student can no longer act on the feedback in a subsequent task. Thus, an exploration of how diverse students experience feedback in relation to their assessment adjustments is also required.

This report forms part of a body of work at Deakin University, where we aim to understand the assessment and feedback experiences of diverse university students, as a first step in understanding what types of assessment adjustments and feedback modifications promote success and retention within higher education.

This report aims to share some assessment and feedback experiences of diverse students at Deakin University, to identify areas for improvement in assessment and feedback practices, and moreover, reinforce the assessment and feedback practices that already support diverse students.

Methods

In April 2020, all returning students at Deakin University who had registered with the Disability Resource Centre (i.e. not first year students) were invited by email to complete an online survey using the Qualtrics platform. The survey questions are contained in Appendix A. Students were also offered the opportunity to participate in an interview, or submit a file (Word document or recording) if they did not wish to complete the survey online. 35 complete online survey responses and 1 uploaded Word file was received. Two interviews were conducted.

Descriptive statistics were calculated in Excel. Responses to open-text questions were analysed by JT and MD. A framework was used to code reasons for adjustments, adjustment types, assessment types, positive and negative experiences, the role of technology, and how educators and the system impacted on these. Within each coding area, data was then synthesised and summarised by JT and MD, who then cross-checked the data summary for representativeness.

Research methods were approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (application number 2020-008).

About the survey respondents

Survey respondents' age distribution is reported in Table 1. There were proportionally fewer respondents in the 18-24 category (17, or 45% of all respondents) as compared to Deakin enrolment data for 2020, where 60% of students fall within the 18-24 age range. However, first year students were not invited to complete the survey and therefore this difference is not unexpected. Gender of survey respondents is reported in Table 2. There was an increased proportion of female survey respondents (27, 71%) as compared to Deakin enrolment data for 2020, where 57% of students are female. However, these proportions do reflect the demographics of the students registered with the DRC.

In terms of degree level (Table 3), the majority of survey respondents were undertaking a Bachelor level degree (28, 74%), which is an accurate representation of students registered with the DRC (in 2018, 79%). However, eight doctoral students (21%) responded to the survey, which is a higher proportion as compared to that of doctoral students overall registered with the DRC (in 2018, 3%). Students reported a wide variety of degree majors (Table 4), with representation of all faculties.

Table 1 Age of survey respondents

Age range	N	%
18 - 24	17	45%
25 - 34	12	32%
35 - 44	6	16%
45 - 54	2	5%
65 - 74	1	3%

Table 2 Gender of survey respondents

Gender	N	%
Female	27	71%
Male	8	21%
Non-binary	2	5%
Transman	1	3%

Table 3 Degree level of survey respondents

Degree level	N	%
Bachelor	28	74%
Master	1	3%
Graduate certificate	1	3%
Doctoral	8	21%

Table 4 Degree major of survey respondents

Degree major	N
Arts	2
Business	1
Education	4
Commerce	1
Criminology	3
Disability	1
Engineering	1
Environmental Science and Anthropology	1
Journalism	1
International Relations	1
International and Community Development	3
Language and culture studies	1
Law	2
Marketing	1
Medical imaging	1
Medicine	2
Nursing	3
Optometry	1
Photography	1
Psychology	5
Philosophy	1
Real estate	1
Science	1
Social sciences	1
Social Work	2
Visual Arts	1
Visual Communication Design	1

Students were able to describe their reason for assessment adjustments in their own words. While some respondents were specific in naming their condition (e.g. ADHD, depression), others used more general terms (chronic health condition), or chose not to disclose their condition. Many students reported more than one condition that led to assessment adjustments. Broad groups of conditions are reported in Table 5. Almost all students (34, 89%) reported that extension to a due date for assessments was part of their Access Plan (Table 6). Changed exam conditions were also commonly reported (23, 61%).

Table 5 Conditions reported by survey respondents

Condition reported	**N**	**%**
Mental health condition*	20	53%
Physical health condition	16	42%
Learning disability	9	24%
Life events	3	8%
Physical disability	3	8%
Unclear/not disclosed	2	5%

*Anxiety and depression made up the majority of this category

NB: respondents were able to describe as many conditions as they wished, so numbers do not add up to the number of survey respondents.

Table 6 Types of adjustments reported by survey respondents

Types of adjustments used	**N**	**%**
Extension on due date	34	89%
Changed exam conditions, e.g. extra writing time, breaks, room and location changes	23	61%
Different format of assessment, e.g. oral vs written, group vs individual	9	24%
Changed attendance requirements (e.g. for subject intensives, placements)	6	16%
Leniency on spelling/grammar	4	11%
Use of assistive technology	4	11%
Other – subtitles for videos in exams	1	3%
Other – individual consultation with teacher	1	3%
Other – access to rubrics and exemplars	1	3%

NB: respondents were able to choose multiple adjustment types, so numbers do not add up to the number of survey respondents.

Overview of student experiences

Most students were very grateful for adjustments because they enabled them to manage/cope with their conditions and time in a way that gave them an opportunity to perform effectively in their assessments. These were most commonly adjustments around exams, which are discussed in detail under 'Exams and quizzes' below.

Another large group of students found assignment extensions very helpful, for example:

> *As the assignment due date loomed I knew there was no way I would be able to have everything together in time. I contacted the teacher requesting an extension, and the two extra weekends they gave me alleviated all of that pressure and frustration - it allowed me the time to focus on my day-job and looking after myself during the weeks, and to save doing my uni work for the weekends when I had a little more energy to spare. (S15)*

The importance of the adjustments to many students' ability to succeed was clear, for example, one student said: 'I only wish I had gotten the DRC support from the beginning. I regretted not getting this kind of support back when I did VCE and when I first started studying as it would have improved my grades greatly.' (S6) Another said: 'I felt much more comfortable with these adjustments and it was a more pleasant experience, which made me feel more supported by the university' (S10). Several said they appreciated having the capacity to use the adjustments if they needed, though for the most part wanted to perform under the same conditions as their peers if they could.

Another positive theme was the willingness of many teachers and disability support staff to support their requests without question, leaving them free to focus on coping and completing their tasks. This is discussed further below under 'Teachers' responses'.

Many students took the opportunity to praise assessments that were inclusive and well designed, and did not require them to ask for adjustments. These are explored below under 'Inclusive assessments'.

In response to a question about assessments that had *not* supported their learning, students named a range of assessment types, including group work, oral presentations (live or recorded), discussion post assessments, intensive participation (for a geographically distant student) and lengthy placements. The types of assessments students disliked varied according to the types of conditions/disabilities they were managing and the types of barriers they faced with individual assessments. These are discussed below under headings for the various assessment types below.

Students also responded negatively where necessary adjustments were not made available, for example where a choice of time or day for an oral assessment was not offered, or where alternative formats were not allowed. However, in some cases it is not clear whether the problems arose for students because the adjustments they needed were not included in an access plan, or because the access plan had not been followed. Students were particularly troubled when they needed to justify their right to adjustments, as described under 'Teachers' responses' below.

How do students perceive assessment adjustments?

Temporal adjustments (e.g. extensions)

Extensions for assignments were very popular for allowing students the time they needed to cope with distractions and difficulties caused by their disabilities/conditions. These included fluctuating conditions that could not be predicted; hospitalisation; and feeling overwhelmed/fatigued due to their conditions, particularly when also coping with stresses of paid work, caring responsibilities or the death of a close relative. One student noted that an extension seemed to be the only adjustment on offer in response to their 'concerns', but in general, students indicated an extension helped meet their needs:

> *I have had to apply for assessment adjustments a number of times throughout my time at university. These adjustments are because I have been diagnosed with Short Term Memory Loss (Verbal) Dyspraxia and Auditory Processing Disorder. Due to this, I have required extensions for a number of assignments as I can become overwhelmed. (S14)*

Clashing assignment due dates across different units was a common cause of concern, prompting some to use their option for an extension: one student said 'all my four subjects share the same due date and it could be difficult for me to deal with' (S11). Another noted that extensions are 'always a double edged sword' (S8) because while they solved a short-term problem in one unit, the student might end up with a bottleneck of assignments due later on, in the same or other subjects.

One student noted that the length of extensions varied from unit to unit and faculties tended to have a pattern: 'With business, I find a bit more you might only get a week or two' (S36).

Other forms of assessment also required temporal adjustments: one student said the ability to choose the day or time to perform an oral presentation helped them to choose a time that worked best with their symptoms. Another said group assignments put pressure on them to complete tasks by a certain date, and while 'this is not necessarily a bad thing' (S12), it could also put pressure on other members of the group if their condition flared at the wrong time. For some students, a lack of flexibility around timing of assessments forced them away from a deep to a shallow learning approach.

Extra time or other arrangements for exams were also popular adjustments and are discussed below under 'Exams and quizzes'.

Non-temporal adjustments

Students had a range of other adjustments, including for leniency in grammar and spelling and subtitles for videos, having tutors read a draft of assignments to ensure they have interpreted instructions correctly, having a study support person to help interpret requirements, and leniency over conditions for making an oral presentation or studio 'pin-up' at certain times. These are discussed further below under headings for each of the assessment types for which they were given.

Experiences of specific assessments

Exams and quizzes

Most comments about exams related to the necessity of adjustments or difficulties associated with them. There were also (negative) comments about the nature of exams. Online quizzes attracted less criticism.

Many exam adjustment comments were about being able to sit the exam in a different venue such as a small room, due to anxiety or susceptibility to distraction. In most cases this worked well but in others the alternative venue itself contained distractions such as other students, or inappropriate furniture/equipment such as computers.

Other exam adjustment comments related to the importance of breaks and extra time to alleviate anxiety, 'reset [and] keep the voices and tears at bay' (S24), visit the toilet, or allow for reading difficulties, for example:

> *I also appreciate the longer exam time as it sometimes takes me a couple of goes of reading a question to understand what it wants and the extra time means I can complete the exam. In the past, before having the time extension I was unable to complete my exams. I have also appreciated being able to have breaks during my exam just to step out of the room to refresh and refocus and it not take away time from my exam. (S6)*

Other important adjustments included being allowed to use a computer instead of having to handwrite answers, being able to use a highlighter to highlight key points, being able to use hand warmers and be seated at the back of the room away from drafts, and having only one (afternoon) exam each day.

Some students commented that their exam adjustments gave them a sense that their anxiety had been removed and 'I am able to focus on the examination, which places me on a level footing with other students' (S5). However, others complained that their adjustments had not worked well, such as when alternative rooms were made available for taking exams but these contained distractions; or when an exam room was not close to a meeting point so the student arrived fatigued; or when exam supervisors did not understand a student's adjustments and they had to take exam time explaining them, causing additional stress; or when a student who was hard of hearing had required instructions to be repeated verbally, but the invigilator had imperfectly understood their needs and told them they were disrupting other students.

General comments about exams included that the lack of formative feedback meant that learning opportunities were missed; or that they relied on 'regurgitated theory' (S24) and for a student who could get confused and have memory lapses this was a disadvantage. Several complained that the need to handwrite or even use a keyboard for an extended period was physically very tiring, especially late in the day or when there were multiple exams in a day, for example:

> *I worked my arms/hands to a point where it was detrimental to me physically each time i had an exam to try snd get a good score. Same is for multiple exams in one day where i cannot recover in time for the second exam. (S35)*

One student said that regular online quizzes in contrast supported learning consistently throughout the trimester and helped prepare students for the exam. However, another student using a screen reader complained that online quizzes could be difficult to read and interpret:

> *online quizzes, do not allow for digital readers, require in-depth understanding of the question which can be hard to interpret for me and often include the reading of graphs or tables which i find extremely difficult and can not get help with when in a timed quiz setting. (S2)*

Assignments

Most comments around assignments related to extensions, and the importance of extra time to enable students to perform well, e.g: 'I only need it for assignments. It just gives me the opportunity to actually do my best' (S37). Aside from some design issues, students' comments indicated an acceptance of the assignment format as a means to promote and assess learning in a way that they could manage at their own pace, e.g:

> *This style of learning and study works for me as the online access removes the physical barriers/challenges, and also allows me to complete course material on the days and times when I have the capacity to do so. The written assessments again mean that I can work (somewhat) at my own pace, from my own home. (S15)*

In terms of assignment design issues, several students said they found smaller assignments less stressful than larger ones, e.g.:

> *I had a history unit last year (French revolutions) which had five smaller 500 word assignments and one larger assignment, having smaller ast's helped keep me engaged with the unit whilst not creating too much too much stress both mental and physical on any one of the assignments or their grades. (S8)*

Some found it particularly helpful when the assignments had a direct relationship with the weekly content, e.g.: 'assignments that followed course content week by week – you could complete a section relating to that weeks content immediately, which helped avoid confusion' (S24). Several mentioned the benefits in terms of the less stressful deadlines that were involved. One student found the provision of choice of topic and format made an assignment more engaging. Clear and coherent criteria and pointers to sources of information were also gratefully accepted. Several students commented on the benefit of having feedback on their assignment work that was sufficiently detailed and timely to help them improve their subsequent performance, which is covered in more detail under the 'Feedback is important' section below.

One student with an adjustment that she receive unit materials early so she could start work ahead of time on her assignments said this didn't work well as sometimes these were not yet available.

Group work

Most comments about group work were negative, and noted that in general, adjustments were not made for this form of assessments. Some complaints related to poor cooperation, including students not pulling their weight, or not keeping to timelines, or submitting poor quality work for which all group members had to accept a low mark, none of which an access plan was likely to improve. Related to this, some complained that group work tasks were inadequately supported, particularly online, e.g.: 'there's very little guidance about the formation and functioning of student groups, and beyond receiving the same mark, the groupwork isn't assessed' (S38).

Some comments were more clearly related to students' disabilities or conditions impacting on their ability to work well in a group. Some related to social anxiety, while one said their fluctuating medical condition meant that sometimes they held other group members up. Online group work could be harder to manage than face-to-face, as noted under 'Negative aspects of studying online' below

However, there were a handful of positive comments, which described instances when students collaborated well and achieved a good result. These recognised the importance of group work for

expanding individuals' perspective, enabling students to work together on large problems, and helping them build confidence in their abilities through collaboration.

Oral assessments

Several students said they found oral presentations difficult due to anxiety conditions, but they mentioned options or adjustments that made this form of assessment easier, including presenting at a time or day that worked better for them, presenting to the teacher before or after the class, recording a video version or presenting to their family.

> *Even though I have received special consideration in regards to my stutter it was still embarrassing to speak in front of my peers. I would have preferred to have instead recorded my presentations. (S16)*

For one student with anxiety even pre-recording video did not work as they were over stressed by the requirement to not refer to their notes. Another with hearing loss found PowerPoint presentation assessments problematic, both for individual assessment and peer feedback, and suggested a non-voice option would have suited them better.

Placements

Some students found long placements challenging when trying to manage their disability or condition. One mentioned a 500-hour requirement that they needed to fit in with their part-time employment while suffering fatigue related to their condition.

> *I was sexually assaulted earlier in my life and something had happened which had triggered this for me. I was incredibly depressed. … I was trying to complete my placement to the best of my ability while also being bullied by one of the nurses on the ward. I was so overwhelmed that I self harmed and had to go to hospital to get stitches. I was at a terribly low point. (S28)*

Feedback is important

Students overall indicated that they wanted to use feedback to help them improve their work, and that this was useful regardless of their performance, e.g.: 'Feedback on how to improve would be great (needed even when HD quality result is obtained)' (S21).

There were few comments on the preferred format of feedback. However, one student with anxiety did report that 'Feedback is best recieved online, either via the cloud or email, as it allows me to decide when I am ready to recieve the information, and I am able to be in a safe space when reading the feedback at my own pace' (S34).

Feedback can help to reduce the impact of some conditions

Feedback can help to allay some symptoms/conditions (anxiety), especially if at a formative stage, so that the student understands the goals/standards of achievement expected and can make changes. It improves confidence and an encouraging tone can motivate students to put in effort into their work, e.g.: 'Feedback that positively encourages is beneficial to diminishing anxiety' (S10); 'I often don't understand where I've gone wrong with an assignment and that makes me anxious because I can't make it better' (S31).

S31 reported that where they submitted an initial assignment for marking, received feedback, and then had another opportunity to resubmit for a specific allotted amount of marks, this helped them a lot and 'made the whole assessment piece a lot more enjoyable'.

Feedback provides motivation to keep on trying

Beyond allaying anxiety and stress, there was a positive motivating effect that could be realised from feedback, e.g.: 'she always signed off each feedback with "Well done" and it felt like enough praise to want to keep going (good or bad marks' (S16). However, this didn't always occur:

> *when doing online quizzes we're not allowed to know which questions we got wrong; that lack of feedback is a real problem for me because it makes me extremely unmotivated, as I don't know where to focus my attention on - getting told the topics I may need to focus on doesn't really help much. (S31)*

Feedback design to support learning

Feedback dialogues help with clarity

Students appreciated the possibility to discuss their work with an educator (S6, S25). It was noted that in some circumstances (e.g. exams) this was not possible, and also that a dialogue via email was not as easy as face-to-face (S37). Personalised, one-on-one type feedback was the most helpful for students as it directly helped them to identify areas for improvement. Specificity was also seen as a minimum requirement—this meant identifying which parts of the work were good, and which needed more detail (S33). A marked-up rubric by itself was seen as insufficient to be able to commence a meaningful conversation with a teacher about the work (S33); standards expected could also be communicated better (S11).

One student said that they had to go to additional effort through a dialogue to obtain feedback that was sufficiently detailed to be helpful, when they expected a level of specificity that was not present in the initial feedback:

> *The mark up on turnitin had some comments but they were not directive and were "incorrect" tagged above mistakes. I emailed the marker to ask where to improve and she responded with a lot - it is that exact point, that she was able to provide them in an email but not on the assignment that frustrated me. Getting poor feedback doesn't feel good, and it took a lot of extra 'effort' to email and ask, something I'm not sure everyone would've bothered to do. (S16).*

Feedback timing is important

Students found positive experiences where there was an opportunity to demonstrate improvement or modify work after an initial submission and feedback. Within these more immediate feedback opportunities, the opportunity to clarify the feedback message was also valued.

> *My first year nursing course had skill hurdle requirements. These assessments were helpful because I was able to demonstrate my hands on ability and then receive specific feedback right away and ask follow up questions if I didn't understand the feedback I received. This method of specific feedback and the opportunity to ask questions in a welcoming environment really helped my learning. (S26)*

When feedback didn't occur in a way that allowed for improvement, it was not perceived well: 'Feedback has been completely disappointing at the University level as they often (but not always) come either too late to adjust anything for the following assignment' (S8); 'I overthink things a lot if I

don't have things laid out for me, so not knowing what I was doing was very stressful. Getting the initial feedback helped' (S31).

Feedback needs to be specific

> *Specific and personalised feedback was perceived as useful for improvement (S4, S36), and where it was insufficiently specific, this made learning and improvement challenging, e.g.: Some units were better at explaining areas of improvement than others. This made improving writing techniques (lab reports) and acquiring the general knowledge sometimes difficult as feedback in some units was vague or non-specific. (S13)*

> *If a comment says that you need to improve in-text citations then the markup should show where in-text citations were missed. if there isn't anything shown on the mark up its very hard to know where you went wrong and how to improve it. (S20)*

Feedback could be tailored towards conditions, but it depends on individual preference

One student pointed out that specificity could also be tailored towards known conditions – e.g. if dyslexia is the condition, then feedback to improve spelling and grammar needs to be specific enough for the student to take action: 'i cannot know where my issues are unless they are pointed out directly I feel as though when they just tell me to fix spelling and grammar they are causing me or being lazy and not editing when it is quite the opposite' (S2).

However, another reported that feedback on aspects of their work relating to their condition were not so helpful, since they had been working hard with their healthcare team on those aspects, and would have preferred the feedback to focus on the salient parts of the task:

> *The feedback I received on this assessment included some comments about the speed and clarity of my spoken recording. This is helpful in general,, but personally I felt it was irrelevant and unhelpful and seemed not to take into account my hearing impairment, as vocal presentations are something I have worked hard on with my speech pathologist and audiologist and the feedback did not seem constructive. The other feedback was more focused on the content and style of my presentation and that was much more helpful, this feedback was from students who had completed the same assessment. (S30)*

Students recognise systemic limitations with regards to feedback

To an extent, students understood the limitations under which educators were operating, which impacted on the amount of feedback and time that could be spent discussing individual performance. However, this didn't diminish their expectations for quality feedback, e.g.:

> *do not give nearly as much feedback as is needed, and this is most likely because they have huge workloads and the casualisation of skilled workers who do marking not being paid enough to give thorough responses (S9).*

> *"I love one of my teachers because she always gives detailed thoughtful and insightful feedback. But she's told off by her supervisor (unit chair) that she doesn't need to spend that much time on feedback, which is fine if you got feedback throughout the trimester, but you often don't" (S33)*

Studying online and COVID-19

Positive aspects of studying online

In some cases, moving online for assessment was seen positively, as it helped with some aspects of assessment which were previously challenging, such as reducing the need for handwriting, e.g.: ’Being able to do my exams on a computer was helpful, as I have Parkinson's disease and my hands have an action tremor so writing with a pen was quite difficult to accomplish. This adjustment made it easier to complete the task in the allotted time frame. (S13).

Some students also spoke of the ability to undertake learning, and then complete and submit their written assignments according when they were able to, e.g.: ‘The written assessments again mean that I can work (somewhat) at my own pace, from my own home’ (S15).

One student reported that their ability to participate was previously hampered by the requirement to attend in person (which required significant travel that was exhausting):

‘we have the technology to do a face to face over face-time or other means of tech communications. When you have a physical disability that is life long and managing daily, traveling […] is not manageable let alone the cost’ (S18).

Negative aspects of studying online

However, other aspects of assessment remained problematic when online, or potentially even worsened. These included adding the stress of video recording to an oral presentation, and the difficulty of meeting deadlines. Group work was one area where students who already struggled due to their condition (usually anxiety related, but sometimes also fatigue/schedule related) found that the shift online was not beneficial. This was due to the need to interact with others with little perception of a relationship/connection, e.g.: ‘Group work in an online environment is impossible at the best of times, let alone when you're dealing with a disability and invisible trauma that you don't necessarily wish to disclose to the group’ (S1).

> *I have serve social anxiety so struggle a lot to interact in groups with my classmates. As I am a cloud student this only comes up during group presentations. I would change the group assessments to have another option for people who struggle like me. In the unit I am doing now we have to do a group activity then write about it and that's something I will struggle with but they have given he option of doing the activity with family members if you can't attend the seminar the group activity is happening in so I will do that. I think that's a good to have that option. (S19)*

Another student said that insufficient instructions on how to complete an assessment in an online unit caused significant problems: ‘I overthink things a lot if I don’t have things laid out for me, so not knowing what I was doing was very stressful’ (S31).

The accessibility of technology

Students reported difficulties within their assessments relating to the limitations of technology, as compared to in-person assessment situations. This included having to read online/on-screen, including as part of quizzes, as quoted above under ‘Exams and quizzes’. Other digital accessibility issues included non-OCR PDFs that could not be read by screen readers (with no provision of alternative accessible formats), and narrated PowerPoint presentation assessments where a student was hearing impaired.

Another student reported that the online oral format used meant that they had difficulties both seeing others' work and presenting their own, since they were hard of hearing (S30).

Students' perceptions of teacher responses

Many students described helpful ways in which many or even all of their teachers responded to their needs. These commonly included allowing extensions or adjustments without resistance and also more proactive methods, such as reaching out to explain content before class so a student would be able to participate in the class; sending personalised emails with clear, structured feedback; and sensitively supporting a student to gain peer feedback in a way that did not overwhelm them, for example:

> *I found this helpful and it made me feel that he understood my difficulty and actually wanted to help. He was making an effort basically. Now a big thing that he did for me was every now and then if there was a particular thing that he thought I had done well, he'd ask if it was okay for him to pin it up. This meant that I could get feedback and gain some confidence in my work and practise sharing it without the pressure of everyone knowing it was mine. I still felt nervous and a little anxious, but it was handleable. (S33)*

One compared Deakin's teachers' responses favourably against other universities:

> *With deakin I had immediate and responsive and comprehensive support always, despite living in an entirely different country in an entirely different time zone whilst studying, and working an extremely demanding job as an international diplomat which meant travelling to multliple countries with no internet access! (S1)*

Another noted the variability of teachers' approaches:

> *I had a unitchair email me at the start of the trimester to say that he was reaching out to every student with a DRC plan and he acknowledged that I had a plan and that i was welcome to reach out at any time to implement the plan or dicuss anything regarding further adjustments. I was a third year student when i got that email - i have had a DRC plan for the entire duration of my uni degree and no one had ever reached out like that before. I remember this expereince as often is it already marginalizing to have a chronic illness in its own right, but when you are using your DRC adjustments to get an extension you often have to state in the reason that you have a DRC and you have no idea if the unit chair or tute is even aware you have one - i don't what everyone to know, but it is so nice to not have to explain yourself (something you already do in so many aspects of your life when you live with a chronic illness). (S16)*

Students also described unhelpful teacher responses. These included lack of willingness to change an assessment design due to insufficient notice when they received a student access plan:

> *mostly the problem is about insufficient skill or unwillingness by the unit chair to make changes. They often have a strong personal commitment to the unit design and a belief that adjustments for me would undermine the integrity of the unit design (S38).*

Several students said it was especially difficult when they needed to justify extension requests despite having an access plan that allowed them. When students were suffering from mental illness this could be overwhelming, for example:

> *The coordinator emailed back saying that it was 'odd' that I was asking for more time and saying that if I submitted my work in a week, it 'might' be marked. I found this really upsetting, mostly because I was feeling quite fragile at the time. I ended up dropping out of the unit. I think that if I had been feeling better, I would have coped with this response from the coordinator just fine, but at the time it was fairly overwhelming. (S12)*

Support structures that influence inclusivity

Students tended to have polarised perspectives on the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) and bureaucratic systems with which they interacted at the university. Students had different perceptions of how the system worked, depending on their experience. Their responses frequently indicated the importance to them of having the option of adjustments available. For example:

> *When I started at Deakin I was really concerned that I wasn't going to be able to get the exam adjustments I had at my previous university and that I knew I needed to get through the exams well, which exacerbated my condition in general. The whole journey of getting my adjustments set up was really frightening initially and then once I went through the process it was really helpful and I felt really supported. When thinking of experiences that elicit a lot of emotion I chose this experience in particular because it was such a rollercoaster and I was so nervous about it that it nearly stopped me from moving to Deakin, because I wasn't sure what would happen if I couldn't get the adjustments I needed and was used to. (S31)*

One student complained that a lack of interaction between course development and disability support processes meant that non-inclusive unit design problems that could not be changed quickly once a student with an access plan enrolled could arise:

> *At that time all decisions about the unit design are fixed and can't be changed. … I have asked the Faculty to provide an educational designer to assist with the development of alternative assessment tasks, however, they wanted to keep the course development and disability support processes separate. (S38)*

This student also questioned whether needs of all students were taken into account adequately at higher levels of assessment planning: 'If the Faculty were serious about graduate attributes, then they would work with me and my support team to develop a long-term strategy to achieve them, and a reasonable approach to alternative assessments' (S38).

Several complained that the process of engaging with university bureaucracy with complaints or even just to gain the assessment adjustments they were entitled to was frustrating or overwhelming, with a heavy power imbalance, for example:

> *I received in one of my OSCE exam stations feedback a comment about how my adjustments (namely writing in reading time) led to me having an advantage over other students. I found this incredibly unhelpful, and I dislike the implication that adjustments which are supposed to help me be on the same level as other students are the reason why I did well on assessments, and not due to the work I*

put in. I did not lodge a formal complaint as I am scared of being singled out, as the adjustments would identify me. (S27)

On the other hand, support occasionally came from unexpected places in the system:

On my final assessment the examiner saw I was significantly struggling to type out the answers on my exam. She offered to type the rest of my exam for me while I gave her my answers verbally. I sincerely appreciated her consideration as I feel I wouldn't have been able to finish the exam without her help. (S13)

Several had praise for the DRC staff and their ability to both support them and streamline the process of organising the adjustments they needed, for example:

Being on the phone with my liaison, having such an understanding person who can represent me and my circumstances to anyone who needs to know, sometimes I'm a complete mess and just exhausted but she always understands what I'm saying. (S28)

There were also several with complaints, including that the DRC had refused to recognise their learning difficulties due to lack of an (expensive) professional assessment, that the DRC had failed to support them in formal complaints to the university, and that communication of access plans and adjustments with teachers or exam supervisors was either unreliable or flawed, for example:

I would like to point out that I think how allowances are communicated should change. I understand why they do it so that I am responsible for notifying teachers and tutors of my allowances and needed support. It ones the line for future communication. But I think that there should be some notice for the teacher before that happens. As I know I often forget to mention things, such as my allowance for spelling and punctuation errors and have lost marks because of it - and haven't noticed until it's too late. But more importantly, I have talked to people who share the same or a similar disability to me who are assumed of it and find it difficult to discuss (I for one some times end up having a bit of a cry when first discussing it with my teacher due to the memories and feelings that can pop up when discussing it). So it can take a bit of courage to talk to the teacher about it, and I think having them know that they need to set some time after class to talk to a student might be of some help. (S33)

Recommendations & implications

This report can only make recommendations based on the data captured through the survey, and does not take into account the broader literature. The inclusive assessment design elements summary matrix (Table 7) is presented to indicate what types of concerns might be addressed by certain assessment design features. **These suggestions have only been drawn from the survey data and do not take into account suggestions and recommendations from external guidelines and resources.** Furthermore, some design elements might act against other conditions, and so it is suggested that choice and careful consideration be afforded overall to account for the variation in student conditions that may require different assessment configurations to be inclusive.

The recommendations following could be considered both at a policy level, in terms of what Deakin requires in assessment, and also at an individual unit design level, where academics might adapt these suggestions within their own practice.

Supporting communication between students and teaching staff

Students' experiences with both individual academic staff, and the university system as a whole, suggest there could be improvements in the way that support for students with diverse abilities is both communicated about and enacted. There will still be students who need adjustments, even though inclusive assessment design might reduce the need for so many. The university, at all levels (i.e. within units, and across degrees), must make it clear that such support is available, in addition to communicating about how assessments take diverse abilities into account.

Some ways of supporting communication might include:

- Developing staff awareness around inclusive assessment principles and how to introduce them to students
- Developing staff awareness around how to approach communication with students with Access Plans or who require adjustments. This could include:
    - Templates for teaching staff to use to make initial & ongoing contact with students with Access Plans
    - Resources and training for teaching staff on working with students who have Access Plans
    - Promoting the role of the DRC in supporting teaching staff with advice and ideas
- Working together to understand and be explicit about how assessments can support a diverse range of students, including the suggestions for assessment and feedback which follow:

Possibilities for assessment design

Students described a number of ways in which assessments worked well for them without the need for adjustments. These were mostly in response to a request to describe an assessment that supported their learning, and included:

- having a number of smaller assessments instead of just large assignments (which could reduce anxiety, physical/mental stress and help with management of fluctuating conditions and caring responsibilities)
- having small assessments directly linked to course work (which helped with unpredictable conditions—steady progress helped build confidence despite organisation difficulties with a complex life and/or anxiety)
- having assessments with interactive or multiple-choice elements (which helped overcome physical barriers to writing or dyslexia)
- having practical assessments where a student could give oral answers and have feedback on

whether they had understood requirements before they wrote answers (which helped with dyslexia and dyscalculia)
- having hands-on skill demonstrations with formative feedback (which helped with a range of mental health conditions)
- enabling choice over topic and format, with clear criteria, structure, encouragement, scaffolding, support and dialogic/formative feedback provided (a combination that overcame many barriers). This may require consideration of equivalent formats
- using a timeslot sign-up sheet for oral presentations so students could choose the time that suited them best (to help manage anxiety)
- offering options to record a presentation or present to the lecturer privately (to reduce anxiety and embarrassment related to stuttering)
- studying and submitting assessments wholly online, enabling students to work at their own pace, at home (to help manage fatigue associated with chronic disease)
- being able to complete a group activity with family members if necessary, rather than strangers (overcoming social anxiety in combination with other mental and physical conditions)
- formative, dialogic feedback from teacher and peers on displayed student work (which helped with dyslexia)
- iterative assignment submissions with formative feedback between drafts (which helped with anxiety)
- early diagnostic assessments: 'They were an early indication of how I was going in the units and allowed for valuable and relevant feedback. It felt good to be able to display my knowledge and to feel as though I was on the right track' (S34) (this helped with a range of mental and physical disorders).

Possibilities for feedback design

Generally, what students reported to be helpful aligned with general 'good feedback practice', in that feedback should be timely, specific, and future-oriented. How this can be achieved at scale and for all students is still the outstanding question. It was noted that feedback itself would improve the inclusivity of assessment for learning, and thus formative feedback is featured strongly in the assessment design recommendations. To further support this, some feedback strategies that could enhance assessment design include the following:

- Include a feedback coversheet – so students can specify/alert the marker to matters on which they would particularly like feedback (this could be a menu list), the level of detail they would like on areas for improvement, and how they would prefer information to be provided. These parameters would need to be set within workload limits but may also reduce overall workload as feedback can be targeted
- Support students to identify and use additional sources of feedback information they may not have previously considered, e.g. language and learning advisors for students with dyslexia
- Provide opportunities to integrate 'performance relevant information' into final assessment submissions.

Implications

Further work drawing on a wider range of students' experiences, and exploring these experiences in greater depth, could assist the design of inclusive assessment. The survey data from 38 students has provided a useful, partial understanding of inclusive assessment from a student perspective. This draft report has outlined some potential ways of designing inclusive assessment. However, the suggestions have not been compared to the research literature to determine if there have been previous successes with any of these design elements, nor indeed have we considered what counts as 'success' in inclusive assessment: both from the perspective of the student, and according to the institution.

Work is underway to gain in-depth student perspectives through a NCSEHE grant on inclusive assessment, and to test the feasibility of some inclusive assessment design elements. We also invite anyone interested to continue the conversation around what might improve the inclusivity of assessments – please contact us. In these actions, we hope we are moving closer towards inclusive assessment design for all.

Table 7 Summary matrix of inclusive assessment design elements evidenced in the data

NB: these were evidenced by the survey data and do not take into account other potential design options. They may also help beyond the contexts indicated here	**Account for fluctuating condition**	**Reduce assessment related anxiety/stress**	**Reduce social anxiety**	**Reduce issues with information processing and/or output**
Assessment sequencing				
Smaller assessment tasks (rather than one large one)	x	x		
Assessments directly linked to course work	x	x		x
Assessment involving formative feedback		x		x
Assessment involving formative peer feedback		x		x
Assessment choice				
Choice of format	x	x	x	x
• Including choice of group members (possibly non-students)	x		x	
Choice to submit wholly online	x		x	
Choice of topic		x		
Assessment format				
Multiple choice				x
Practical assessments (with feedback and opportunity to re-do)		x		x
Oral assessments				x
• Signup for oral presentation timeslot			x	
• Recording for oral presentations	x		x	
• Possibility of private oral presentation			x	

References

Disability Discrimination Act. , (1992).

Disability Standards for Education. , (2005).

Grimes, S., Scevak, J., Southgate, E., & Buchanan, R. (2017). Non-disclosing students with disabilities or learning challenges: characteristics and size of a hidden population. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *44*, 425–441.

Appendix A – Survey questions

Some information about you

What is your university degree?

Level of study (undergraduate, master, doctoral, diploma)?

Major/concentration of study?

Your age?

Your gender?

Describe in your own words what has been the reason for you to apply for assessment adjustments. You can share as much information of your condition as you want to.

What types of assessment adjustments have you used? You may choose from the options below or include your own

- ❑ Extension on due date
- ❑ Different format of assessment – e.g. oral vs written, group vs individual
- ❑ Changed exam conditions – e.g. extra writing time, breaks, room and location changes, different exam paper
- ❑ Leniency on spelling/grammar
- ❑ Use of assistive technology
- ❑ Changed attendance requirements (e.g. for placements)
- ❑ Other (please list)

If at some point of your studies you have not used assessment adjustments, why is that?

Your experiences of assessment

Please share a detailed story/experience for the following prompts. You are welcome to share more than one if you wish.

1. Describe the assessment methods of a course/unit during which **assessment** supported your learning and studying. Why did this kind of assessment support your learning?

2. Describe the assessment methods of a course/unit during which **assessment** was not suitable for your needs and did not support your learning. Why were the assessment methods not suitable for you? How would you have changed the assessment methods to better suit your needs?

3. Share one key memory/experience about using **assessment adjustments** that is important or close to you, or one that elicits a lot of emotions. Why did you choose this experience?

Feedback can be considered as information to improve the quality of work, and also a process where a student interacts with others (e.g. a teacher, a fellow student, a computer) to develop an understanding of performance, and takes actions to improve performance.

4. Describe your experiences about **feedback** during your studying. What kind of feedback experiences have supported your own learning and studying? And what kind of feedback experiences have not supported your learning and studying?