CAULLT Grant Final Report, Part 2 (for publication

Supporting leadership in inclusive assessment policy and practice

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Project summary

This project examined ways that higher education assessment policies and practices create opportunities for inclusive assessment. It drew on Hockings (2010), who defined inclusive assessment as 'the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do" (p. 34). Whilst equity and inclusion for students with disabilities was the initial goal of inclusive assessment, it is suggested that inclusion must now account for the many forms of diversity represented in higher education students, including considering learners via culturally informed means (e.g., Lambert et al., 2023). For example, Tai et al. (2023a) argued that assessment for inclusion should consider the needs of "any learner, no matter what their characteristics or background" (p. 485), including, but not limited to, socio-economic status, cultural background, and gender. Given the diverse historical and current understandings of and approaches to inclusive assessment, this project sought to understand how Australian and New Zealand leaders and educators working in the higher education space conceptualised inclusive assessment. Using phenomenography (Marton, 1986), the research team identified five qualitatively different conceptions of inclusive assessment that underpinned teacher practice and leaders' understanding of policy.

The project also explored the consequences, both intended and unintended, of current Australian and New Zealand assessment policy on inclusion via leader and educator descriptions of practice. While universities offer individualised accommodations for students with disabilities to comply with anti-discrimination legislation, research suggests that university policies around grounds for other adjustments vary greatly (e.g., Moore & Greenland, 2017). Concerns are raised about reliance on the current individual accommodation-based system as it requires students to disclose and prove circumstances (Crawford et al., 2022; Grimes et al. 2019). While all universities were reported as having accommodations available for students on disability support plans, a minority also provided students flexibility via other arrangements (e.g., Indigenous cultural leave entitlements). Pockets of innovation, in relation to both policy and practice, were shared, which can provide others within the sector with ideas that they may be able to adapt to meet the needs in their own contexts.

To enable staff and students at all levels of universities to understand and support changes towards inclusive assessment, the project used this study's findings and the wider literature to design an Open Educational Resource entitled Leading Inclusive Assessment. As supportive leadership is required to shift the assessment status quo (Kneale & Collings, 2018; Tai et al., 2021), the resource drew on understandings of distributed leadership to show how people at all levels of the university can work together to promote change towards more inclusive assessment designs, drawing on theory, research findings, and practical examples. Published under Creative Commons, it is designed to be customised for a range of uses including post-graduate coursework, professional development programs (e.g., workshops, seminars, micro-credentials), and personal self-development. Findings were also presented at a recorded CAULLT Webinar (November 15, 2024) and via this report. A short Policy Brief was also developed, along with a Framework that leaders and educators can use to generate ideas about possible ways to improve inclusion in assessment.

Methodology

This multi-method project collected data in three phases to address the project research questions:

- What are CAULLT educational leaders' and educators' conceptions of inclusive assessment?
- What policies do university leaders and educators identify as facilitating and undermining inclusive assessment practices?
- How do university educators describe enacting inclusive assessment within their own units?

Phase 1: After ethical clearance for the project was obtained, the CAULLT Secretariat sent an online survey link to all CAULLT nominees; an invitation to participate was also published in a later CAULLT newsletter. The survey, designed for university leaders, was created to gather broad information about inclusive assessment leadership within the sector and as a mechanism to recruit interview participants. Demographic data were collected, along with responses to prompts about inclusive assessment policy and practice at their institution. Participants responded to prompts using a 10-point sliding scale from strongly disagree (1), to strongly agree (10). In open-ended questions, participants were also invited to provide their personal conceptions and institutional definitions of inclusive assessment and examples of inclusive assessment policies and initiatives within their university. At the end of the survey, an invitation was given to participate in an interview, or to nominate another educational leader (e.g., Head of Course, Head of School/Faculty), to discuss educational policy and its relationship with inclusive assessment at their university. Descriptive statistics were calculated for closed questions, while thematic analyses were conducted on data gathered through open-ended questions (Braun et al., 2018).

Of the 26 valid survey responses, 22 were completed by participants with more than 16 years working in their respective university. The remaining four participants had some experience (3–5 years n=3; 6–10 years n=1). There were more variations relating to how long participating leaders had been in a leadership role (0–2 years, n=2; 3–5 years, n=6; 6–10 years, n=10; 11–15 years, n=4; 16+ years, n=4), with 6–10 years being the most frequent response. Leadership roles reported were diverse and included academic developers (n=2), directors (n=11); heads of school/department (n=4), pro vice chancellors (n=5), and other academic roles (n=4). Hence, the sample included leaders with differing roles and levels of responsibility for the design and implementation of assessment policy within their institutions. Sixteen Australian or New Zealand universities were named as the participant's home institution, with an additional three anonymous responses returned. These included a diverse range of institutions, including members of the Group of Eight, Australian Technology Network, Innovative Research Universities, and Regional Universities Network.

Phases 2 and 3: During Phase 2, leaders who had indicated in their survey response that they were willing to be interviewed were contacted, with 14 taking part in individual online interviews. These participants were from 12 different Australian and New Zealand universities. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were focused around exploring three aspects of assessment: (i) the participant's conceptions of inclusive assessment; (ii) policies within their university designed to support inclusive assessment and how those worked in practice; and (iii) examples of assessment which they considered to be inclusive within their university. Through these discussions, an overarching aim was to explore the real-world affordances and constraints of described approaches, including intended and unintended consequences of policies and initiatives.

At the end of Phase 2 interviews, all leaders were invited to nominate one or more educators whose assessments were considered inclusive within their university. Through this strategy, twelve educators at eight universities were recruited and interviewed, with an additional two recruited through researcher networks to maximise sample diversity in relation to geography and disciplines. Different discipline areas were represented, including accounting, anthropology, data science, digital media, engineering, English literary studies, Indigenous studies, marketing, mathematics, sociology, teacher education, psychology, and work integrated learning. Teaching contexts were also highly diverse; while the majority taught into undergraduate programs, several worked additionally or exclusively with postgraduate coursework students. Participants also reported teaching into programs which had diverse class sizes, including large classes (i.e., more than 400 in a class).

Interviews with educators went for approximately one hour. Questions first centred around practice, getting interviewees to discuss concrete examples of assessment approaches they adopted which they believed helped support diverse learners. They were then asked to explain their own understanding of inclusive assessment and discuss how policy, procedures, and initiatives at their university supported or complicated their efforts to create inclusive assessments.

Data from Phases 2 and 3 were analysed in two ways; phenomenographically and thematically. Data about participant conceptions were analysed using phenomenography (Marton, 1986). Marton's (1986) analytical procedures were followed, involving two main steps: creating categories of description and ordering the outcome space. Categories of description were created to show the variation between conceptions and then the outcome space was established to demonstrate the hierarchical relationships between these categories of description. Within phenomenography, it is acknowledged that people often hold multiple conceptions simultaneously (Marton, 1986). Hence, the goal is to map variation rather than attempt to classify an individual participant to a particular conception.

To create categories of description, two researchers initially read all transcripts in their entirety before identifying passages relating to participant conceptions of inclusive assessment and its enactment. While these passages became the focus of analysis, whole transcripts were regularly returned to as part of the iterative process. Throughout the analytical process, data were systematically and iteratively compared and contrasted with other participant data. No pre-existing categories were utilised, with key words and phrases from the data used to describe draft categories. Similar understandings were grouped together into categories of description, each of which represented a qualitatively different conception. Borderline cases were examined and criteria for categories were made explicit via multiple independent and joint interrogations of the data.

Academic literature and insights from participants themselves (e.g., participants emphasising aspects were more inclusive than others) were drawn upon to organise categories of description into an outcome space from least to most sophisticated and inclusive conception. The categories of description and outcome space were reviewed by the entire research team and found to be descriptive and representative of the data sets.

Aligning to the second key research question, additional thematic analyses were also undertaken. These were focused on the characteristics of inclusive assessment and current challenges to inclusive assessment implementation. The approach aligned with what Braun et al. (2018) categorise as a codebook approach to thematic analysis. These analyses primarily act as a "domain summary" (Braun et al., 2018, p. 486), mapping some of the main ideas in relation the question. To conduct these thematic analyses, data relating to key questions were first identified as transcripts were read in full. Much of the relevant data were found in participant responses to prompts aligned with the research question, but, at times, these were found in responses to other interview prompts. Next, initial codes were developed to identify major ideas relating to each key question. These were then consolidated into larger themes via an iterative and collaborative process involving all authors.

To address the third research question, authentic examples of practice were also compiled. The example shared via this report highlights the complex considerations and decision-making educators went through when designing assessment with inclusion in mind and was one of many we could have selected to illustrate educator thinking about inclusion within assessment. This example was member-checked, with minor changes made after participant feedback about the description of their practice. The Open Educational Resource, created as part of this project, provides further examples of inclusive practice shared via this research.

Project findings

Phase 1: Survey Results

The survey participants identified inclusive assessment design as benefiting all students "regardless of background or ability." In a qualitative question asking which students were in mind when respondents thought of inclusive assessment task and policy design, participants acknowledged the diversity of students and highlighted the complexity of assessment for all. While statements like 'all students' were recorded most frequently, participants also identified those routinely named as equity groups, with acknowledgement that students were often members of multiple equity groups [e.g., students with disabilities, low-SES students, regional/rural/remote students, Indigenous students

including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (AU) and Māori (NZ), Pasifika students (NZ), students who spoke English as an additional language or dialect]. Students were described as experiencing university differently due to their own unique circumstances, including, but not limited to: managing work pressures, caring for children and other family members, being from non-academic backgrounds, studying part-time, living regionally or remotely, being international and/or mature-aged students, and/or being impacted upon by diverse forms of trauma and unexpected life challenges. Some respondents made distinctions between students who self-identify as needing extra support, those who are encouraged to access support given their eligibility for targeted government support programs and funding, and those who may not traditionally or always identify as needing additional support given their 'shifting circumstances'. Some mentioned Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) as providing 'broad access to learning activities' for the diverse range of students described. Participants also mentioned considering: technology/resource availability (hardware, software and connection), transparency of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, language and cultural considerations, and fairness.

In terms of institutional policies and intentions around inclusion, there was strong participant agreement that their university's assessment policy was well aligned with institutional values around inclusion and that there was support at universities to move towards more inclusive assessment (7.85 and 7.6 respectively out of a 10-point scale, with 10 being strongly agree, and 1 being strongly disagree). While still positive, there was less agreement about alignment between policy ideas and practice [policy alignment with institutional values (6.27) and the inclusion of diverse students (6.69)], suggesting that university procedures may be where immediate work is most needed. Policy was identified as moderately aligning with participants' personal beliefs about inclusion (6.77). Support was given to the notion that inclusive assessment helps promote academic integrity (7.92). Participants indicated that concerns about GenAI are currently dominating conversations about assessment at their institutions (7.81), but there was only moderate agreement that these AI concerns were being used to prompt assessments to be redesigned in more inclusive ways (5.04).

Participants disagreed with only three statements: that inclusive design benefits some students over others (3.19), that accommodations create an unfair advantage for some students (2.92), and that inclusive assessment is a risk to academic security (3.96). Disagreement with these statements suggests that participants considered inclusive assessment design and accommodations to be fair. While findings suggested support of inclusive assessment, participants only showed weak agreement that sufficient training opportunities and resources were available around creating and implementing inclusive assessment practices (6.15), highlighting an important area for action.

When identifying challenges to inclusive assessment, many participants identified teaching staff expertise (n=20). Other noted roadblocks related to staff workload in creating and administering inclusive assessment (n=16) and associated financial costs (n=10, e.g., impacts on casual teaching budgets), along with concerns around how inclusive assessment works within academic discipline traditions (n=13). Concerns were also identified about perceived threats to academic standards (n= 10); however, only one participant selected academic integrity compliance. Three participants also identified accreditation requirements as being a challenge to inclusive assessment design.

Examples participants provided of inclusive assessment designs enacted to minimise student disadvantage included the following features:

- Co-design with students
- Provision of student choice around how they are assessed (negotiated with teaching staff or a range of choices given so students can draw on their strengths)
- Adoption of E-portfolios – allows a diverse range of assessment tasks to be included (e.g., written essays, oral presentations, practical projects)
- Use of authentic assessment (e.g., reflection on professional practice, professionally contextualised tasks)

- Provision of flexible deadlines for assessment tasks (e.g., 'recommended' assessment due date, student provided with a range of possible due dates to select from, student-nominated assessment deadlines)
- Use of feedback and feedforward throughout the unit
- Adoption of open educational resources and textbooks to minimise student financial costs.

Universities were also adopting the following approaches to training staff about inclusive assessment design:

- Making available an inclusive digital design micro credential
- Creating an authentic assessment plan for the whole university
- Generating questions to provoke design thinking: What counts? This is what we need to see – how can you show me?
- Adopting different design approaches (e.g., multimodal learning) using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2024)
- Designing assessment policy around inclusive principles and foregrounding transparency for students (e.g., including a student perspective, then a statement of the principle and then an explanation, see Table 1).

Policy statement design example	
Student perspective	I can see myself in the assessment and it makes sense to me / [Statement translated into Indigenous language]
Statement of principle	Assessment and associated processes are inclusive, accessible, compassionate, and personalised
Explanation	Students see themselves in the assessment, have the tools to complete the task, feel able to do their best, and reach their potential. Feedback on tasks is developmental, actionable, and empowering/mana-enhancing

Table 1 - *Example of policy statement design*

Phase 2 and 3 – Qualitative interview results

All leaders and educators interviewed within the study discussed commitment to making assessment more inclusive, including the importance of providing equitable supports and assessment methods for increasingly diverse student cohorts. Interviewed staff often gave reasons for wanting to be inclusive, including their:

- *Consideration of students* – Staff member had deeply engaged with students and, through this, had come to better understand accessibility concerns
- *Personal experience* – Staff member had lived experience as an equity group member or had equity group member/s within their immediate family
- *Engagement with colleagues* – Staff member had engaged with colleagues (within or outside of their institution) who inspired or worked with them to encourage inclusive practice

The importance of using assessment that enables all learners to demonstrate their learning came through all interviews. However, simultaneously, there was agreement that creating and implementing inclusive assessments was sometimes difficult given diverse and differently interpreted university policies and practices, with one participant noting "exciting" was often "code for terrifying" (leader). There were many challenges noted, including the starting point of determining potential barriers within an assessment task. For example, one leader identified that "sometimes students don't even question what you're asking them to do." This leader argued the key question for assessment design should be "is any student disadvantaged in a greater way than others? If it is not a level playing field for all students, then that assignment is not inclusive." This statement was mirrored in the larger data set, with

participants noting that a major goal was to make sure that no student was disadvantaged via assessment design and implementation.

To create more inclusive assessment, there was also a stated need to question historical or standard approaches to assessment. For example, one leader explained that "I think it [inclusive assessment] is not well understood. I think, in fact, many academics project their own privilege by not questioning their assessment, and not even really thinking about the impact it might have on different ranges of students." Several participants also noted that a key challenge was often around specifying learning outcomes as these regularly became wrapped up in, and therefore inseparable from, the existing task, hindering change efforts. Concerns around generative AI and academic integrity within assessment, institutional changes (e.g., mergers, restructures), and Covid-related assessment disruptions were also noted as prompting the review of many tasks and creating opportunity for change. Gen AI was particularly viewed as a catalyst that could increase the inclusivity of assessment practices and perhaps motivate educators to change more than they would under an inclusion-specific agenda.

While all participants were committed to increasing inclusivity within assessment, there were conceptual differences between their ideas about what inclusive assessment was and how it might be enacted. Five categories of description were used to describe this variation, arranged hierarchically in order of complexity, moving from the least sophisticated conception to the most sophisticated and inclusive conception. Given both contexts and curricula impact on assessment approaches, individual participant data often spanned multiple categories, acknowledging that participant conceptions frequently incorporated ideas across categories as they discussed inclusive assessment within different contexts during the interview. Figure 1 provides an overview of these five categories.
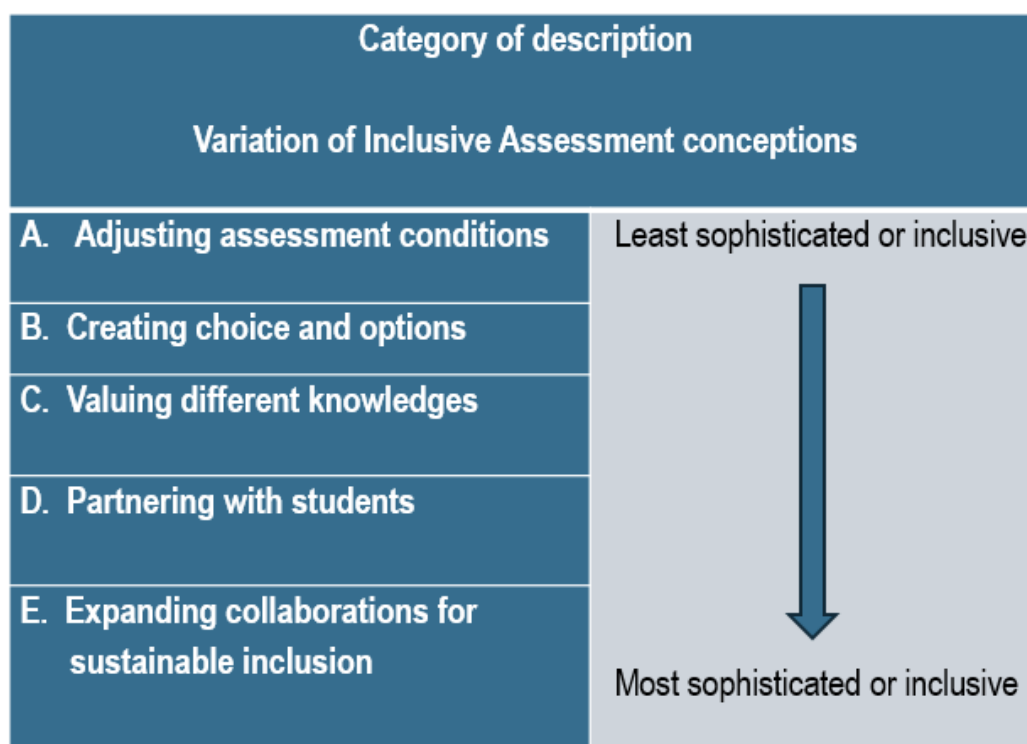

Category of description

Variation of Inclusive Assessment conceptions

A. Adjusting assessment conditions	Least sophisticated or inclusive
B. Creating choice and options	
C. Valuing different knowledges	
D. Partnering with students	
E. Expanding collaborations for sustainable inclusion	Most sophisticated or inclusive

Figure 1- Conceptions of inclusive assessment

These five categories are briefly explained below using examples from the data.

Category A- Adjusting assessment conditions

Within this category, leaders and educators striving to be inclusive saw themselves as primarily working within current higher education systems based on assessment accommodations, with inclusion being about adjusting assessment conditions via existing processes (e.g., accessibility/disability support plans, Indigenous student support plans). For example, one leader explained, "We do allow

[for] reasonable adjustments for students. So, I think there are strategies in place that allow us to be inclusive."

This approach aligned with an assessment of learning focus. Inclusion within this category reflected current assessment policy frameworks, providing accommodations to meet an individual's need. These accommodations allowed the student to "access that learning experience" and be assessed against the learning outcomes. Common accommodations such as additional time, support (e.g., scribing), or assistive technology were seen as including the students, with a focus on epistemological understandings of what knowledge was assessed (i.e., set course content). This approach also necessitated student disclosure of circumstances, often also requiring documentation (e.g., medical certificates, psychological reports, police report). As one leader explained, "From my understanding of how it plays out in practice, it is very much students who have some documented medical reason for requiring alternative assessments," foregrounding the need for reasons for inclusion to be 'medical' and 'documented'. While this approach was seen as providing some assessment flexibility and leading to some level of inclusion, as multiple authors have noted (e.g., Burke, 2022; Nieminen, 2023), systems built around adjustments and accommodations are grounded in ableist assumptions and privilege 'traditional' students, which can lead to 'othering' of students who do not meet these expectations. Participants also frequently raised concerns about access (Who is eligible?) and equity (Who can follow necessary processes to access accommodations? Are accommodations appropriate?), making it the least sophisticated category in the outcome space.

Category B - Creating choice and options

In Category B, Creating choice and options, inclusive assessment was conceptualised as a process of assessment, where although the focus was on assessing learning outcomes, students had choice in relation to some aspects of the task and its conditions. In a similar way to Category A, the method of assessment was the focus, but with an emphasis on using design to eliminate barriers wherever possible by creating multiple ways for learners to demonstrate learning against the course pre-determined learning outcomes or providing flexible assessment conditions, thereby "removing the need to have alternative assessments" (leader).

Central to this conception was growing awareness of individual student strengths. For example, one educator described inclusive assessment as being about "Finding ways where everybody can find success [through tasks which] consider different ways of processing information and different ways of presenting or communicating information." A leader explained that inclusive assessment should be "Assessment that recognises that students are individuals and that it's not one size fits all - that it's tailored to give opportunities to demonstrate learning in different ways," foregrounding the need for flexibility around how learning is evidenced. However, within this category, what was to be assessed remained pre-determined.

Category C - Valuing different knowledges

Within Category C, valuing different knowledges, learning and assessment were connected in more holistic, integrated ways of enacting teaching, learning, and assessment. Unlike in lower categories, assessment was described as an integrated part of an inclusive curriculum and approach in higher education which included different ways of sharing materials with students and using diverse teaching approaches. Inclusive assessment was part of an inclusive curriculum designed to allow students to 'see' themselves in the learning, with Indigenous and Western understandings receiving equitable status. For example, one educator explained that "We consider having the Aboriginal content included in an element of the assessment as the gold standard, so it loses impact if it's not included in the assessment in one way or another…we try and find a way to include it in assessment that is meaningful." Hence, within this category, inclusion broadened to incorporate additional knowledges and ways of working to allow diverse students and their worldviews to be acknowledged and represented within learning and assessment.

Category D - Partnering with students

Category D introduced authentic partnership with students and continued the work of Category C where students gain greater agency in assessment. For example, one educator explained "if I had to think of being inclusive, I think it's an assessment that is as much as possible in the hand of the student rather than in the hand of the lecturer, or of the teaching team. You want the student to be driving, you want to let the student drive."

Within Category D, the explicit incorporation of student voice allowed students to drive their own assessment experiences, thereby integrating their diverse knowledges and ways of working into their learning. Participants saw inclusive assessment as taking place with students, foregrounding more dialogic ways of working and explicitly acknowledging the multiple and diverse cultures, needs, and experiences of these learners. It identified the importance of no 'one right answer' or no 'one right way' to approach and assess student learning. This suggests that inclusive assessment may facilitate differing responses to assessments. Design requires careful consideration of the rubrics used to assess learning to ensure students are not tempted to 'join the dots' in the hope of being able to maximize their grades but not their learning. The focus on assessment includes earlier conceptualisations (e.g., Category B) that explore how to create ways for learners to demonstrate their knowledge and their learning against the course pre-determined learning outcomes, but by Category D this also includes learners being able to demonstrate their knowledge and their learning against their own pre-determined goals. For example, one educator explained that "My assignment is basically telling the students you are the ones who are learning. You are the learner. You are the ones responsible for your journey… an inclusive assessment is really an assessment that lets the student choose or control as much as possible," foregrounding the active student role in inclusive assessments. Working in this way often occurred via tasks which allowed students to curate and/or reflect upon their own experiences and work (e.g., portfolios, reflective tasks, negotiated assessment products).

Category E – Expanding collaborations for sustainable inclusion

In this final category, the conception of inclusive assessment becomes a catalyst to benefit both the students' own and others' (community) needs. Here, the purpose of inclusive assessment shifts from creating situations where students can equally access assessment to ones where assessment is used to help students become more inclusive, both as knowledge workers and practitioners within their disciplines and as citizens within the wider community.

Within this category, inclusive assessment had a student-centred focus, foregrounding relational and community-based aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment. As one leader noted, it enables students to directly engage in ways where "students are connecting with community and thinking about the diverse needs of community." In this final conception, there is an understanding that assessment is not merely for exploring a student's epistemological knowledge, or discipline knowledge, but also about who they are 'becoming' within that profession. In other words, the ontological nature and function of assessment is understood more fully via "inclusive environments that enable our students to have a deeper understanding of different perspective and different world views and different ontologies" (leader). An educator further explained the longer terms goals of inclusive assessment, saying, "We have a real-world learning vision which drives the design of our learning across the curriculum and one of the key components of that vision is inclusive, creative environments. Empower strong, and supportive, and healthy communities." Hence, the goal for such work is supporting students to become inclusive themselves as they become a professional within their discipline area or field.

Thematic findings

Additional thematic analysis also highlighted possible characteristics of inclusive design, particular challenges noted in relation to inclusive assessment, and opportunities for how leaders can best support inclusive practice.

Characteristics of inclusive assessment

Common themes were noted across interviews which provide a starting point for considering possible characteristics that inclusive tasks may share. According to participants, inclusive tasks:

- *Are accessible* – Design and presentation of tasks take accessibility into consideration (ability of all students to access assessment venue and engage with materials, considering physical and digital architecture, etc.)
- *Encourage students to demonstrate inclusive ways of thinking and working* – Inclusive tasks allow students to show via reflection or action what inclusive futures might look like within their discipline or profession
- *Focus on student strengths-* Inclusive tasks allow students to demonstrate learning via strengths
- *Articulate learning outcomes* – Inclusive tasks have clearly articulated learning outcomes that can be potentially achieved in a variety of ways
- *Give opportunities to demonstrate diverse knowledges and ways of showing learning -*Tasks value and give opportunities to demonstrate both Indigenous and Western knowledges and ways of working
- *Provide flexibility*
  - Mode – Students choose between modes of presentation
  - Timing - Students have flexibility around assessment timing (e.g., choosing presentation date, deadline, checkpoint dates)
  - Topic - Students can choose personally and/or culturally relevant foci for their learning within their discipline area
- *Use inclusive language and scenarios-* Inclusive tasks use culturally and socially inclusive language and task scenarios

While these themes are not intended to be used as a check list, they are useful as a set of relevant design features to consider during task design and review.

Challenges to inclusive assessment

Within the data, numerous challenges were identified. Awareness of these is important for those hoping to make changes as, real or perceived, these may be roadblocks to innovation. Themes relating to identified challenges fell into two broad groups: External and institutional requirements and Staff attitudes and capacity:

External and institutional requirements

- *Higher education accountability*– Mechanisms around quality assurance/ degree accreditation seen as limiting (or are perceived as limiting) assessment flexibility
- *Gaps in policy-procedure alignment* – Policy and current procedures/processes seen as poorly aligned, creating difficulties (e.g., policy may be interpreted broadly, but assessment approval procedures are restrictive)
- *Blocking of innovation-* Initiatives to promote inclusion are blocked or made difficult by academic leadership or administrative processes (e.g., tasks not given approval)
- *Lack of university prioritisation and oversight around inclusion* – Inclusiveness of assessment tasks seen as just one of many, many stated goals; minimal 'checking' for inclusion can see it deprioritised compared to other agendas (e.g., academic integrity, Gen AI concerns)

Staff attitudes and capacity

- *Fairness concerns* – Flexibility in inclusive assessment potentially undermined by some staff and students' thinking that equal treatment is the best way to make things 'fair' and that task equivalence is difficult/impossible

- *Lack of creativity* – Concerns that some teaching staff are unable to conceptualise novel alternatives to traditional tasks
- *Resistance to change* – Perceptions that some staff and students are resistant to doing assessment differently
- *Focus on the assessment task instead of the learning outcomes* – Perceptions that some staff are unable to clearly articulate learning outcomes and/or visualise alternative but equivalent ways students could demonstrate these outcomes
- *Staff workload concerns* – Staff concerns about inclusive assessment creating additional workload
- *Student behaviour concerns* – Staff concerns that students may abuse inclusive assessment approaches (e.g., selecting 'easier' options, acting in academically dishonest ways if exam conditions are removed)
- *Prejudice against non-traditional students* – Concern around some people's beliefs about the personal characteristics necessary to be part of specific professions (e.g., whether particular disabilities or identities are incompatible with necessary professional ways of working, negating the need for assessment to be inclusive of such individuals)

The Framework developed as part of this project may be a helpful tool and starting point for those working through these challenges within their own institutions.

Leading inclusive assessment

Within the data, leaders and educators noted the need for further change to occur to better facilitate inclusive practice. Suggestions included:

- *Being vocal* – Pushing others in leadership and practice to keep inclusion as a priority within an environment with many competing agendas
- *Encouraging innovation in inclusive assessment* – Creating an environment where academic risk-taking is accepted (e.g., educators knowing that their leaders will support innovations/innovators. One university used an 'innovation flag,' added to a new innovative assessment task, allowing more flexible interpretation of initial student course evaluations.)
- *Taking advantage of disruption and change* – Identifying that change (e.g., introduction of Gen AI, university restructures/mergers) and disruption (e.g., Covid 19 pandemic) are also opportunities to reexamine institutional norms and processes
- *Providing professional learning opportunities around inclusive assessment* – Having programs/pathways to help upskill stakeholders (e.g., staff conferences, PD workshops, microcredentials, mentoring/working with learning designers, new staff orientation programs)

These approaches were seen as helping grow and develop inclusive assessment practice within universities.

Examples of inclusive practice

Within the project, what became clear was that assessment tasks cannot be classified into a dichotomy of 'inclusive' versus 'exclusive'. Instead, tasks sit on a continuum of more and less inclusive approaches, with no 'one size fits all' possible given the diversity of student needs and discipline requirements. Within the Open Educational Resource (OER), multiple examples are provided of different ways people in differing discipline areas and educational contexts constructed tasks with inclusion in mind. In this report, we provide one case as an example of the kinds of design choices which may support higher level conceptions of inclusive assessment. It was one of many examples we could have chosen from the data set. Interested readers are encouraged to access the OER, which contains further examples.

The case discussed here shares the assessments reported in a 1st year Engineering course, whose students were primarily school leavers, but who came from diverse backgrounds. The subject was delivered face to face to between 150 and 180 students, with a further approximately 200 participating via online mode.

During the interview with two members of the teaching team, it became clear that they had thought very deeply about inclusion. The course assessment tasks were designed to help engineering students develop empathy with clients and understand how to consider clients' culture and Country in their engineering solutions to problems. As one educator noted "we're helping students develop their skills in empathising, in cultural awareness, in self-reflection, self-awareness," showing commitment to goals that were potentially transformational for students and which they integrated with traditional engineering curriculum content. There was also a very strong commitment to helping students develop the skills needed to work inclusively with peers within teams.

Assessments built to student participation in a team project based on scenarios drawn from the "Engineers without Borders" program. Scenarios changed annually, but always involved a context where students were working with an Indigenous community in Australia or abroad to solve a community need. Aboriginal engineers were prominent within the teaching team and regularly provided students with feedback about their emerging reflections on culture (forum) and engineering design ideas (team project). The team noted the importance of engaging with and understanding community, noting that within the project students "really need to put themselves in the shoes of the client in the shoes of the community of who they're working with to empathise with the community, to come up with appropriate engineering solutions" explaining that "If it doesn't fit culturally, it's not going to be a successful solution."

Within the engineering subject, there was a diverse range of tasks (forum posts, individual report, team report, team presentation, e-portfolio), catering for students' different preferred ways of working. However, the teaching team noted that within this structure, there was also flexibility for the team to make changes to a particular task on a case-by-case basis, noting "There are some students who may not have an access plan, but you can identify those with brilliant and unique ways of thinking. They may present their ideas differently from the standard format, so we can negotiate and find workarounds."

The first assessment task (forum posts) was designed to help students engage with big course ideas around the intersection of engineering and culture. Every year, the teaching team initially focused on getting students to better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. One lecturer noted "in the Cultural Forum, we start from talk about your culture, how that manifests, and then we go on to [talking] as an engineer, how will you, what interface will you have with Aboriginal Australia in your future work?"

The second assessment built on students' reflections about culture, with students writing an individual report. The report focused on the role of the engineer working inclusively within their team and with diverse clients. It allowed students to consider how human-centred design approaches, and the Engineers Australia Code of ethics could help them develop solutions that were appropriate for the community, preparing them to do the "Engineers without Borders" team project.

Within the team project, students were actively supported to work together to solve a real-world problem for a community. To support inclusive group work, students completed personality testing and were taught how to identify and draw on peer strengths. Peer assessment was used twice (in the middle of the project and at the end), with data used to moderate grades, but also to provide constructive feedback about student engagement in the team. The teaching team noted that this scaffolding allowed students to "get that feedback on their teamwork skills from the people that they're working with, and the comments are so supportive and constructive. And it really does help the teams to, you know, work inclusively together." As a further part of the feedback process, students presented

preliminary designs to the class and received feedback from peers and Aboriginal teaching team members about suitability, which they could then use to improve their designs. These teaching staff were also involved in the feedback process when final reports and presentations were delivered.

The students' final task was an e-portfolio which allowed them to reflect on their learning from the project and the course. This included learning journal questions that they responded to around working inclusively in their team.

This case shows some of the different dimensions of thinking around inclusivity in assessment. Here, the teaching team deeply considered what was being assessed (e.g., understandings of culture, working respectfully with people from other cultures, embedding cultural considerations into engineering solutions) and how it was being assessed (e.g., different types of assessment across the term, flexibility for individuals).

Discussion

This project explored a broad range of questions around inclusive assessment, examining leader and educator conceptions of inclusive assessment, factors facilitating and undermining inclusive practices, and examples of potentially inclusive practice. Conceptions of inclusive assessment were found to be varied. These ranged from views more aligned with current systems based on educational adjustments and accommodations (Category A), to those where inclusive tasks encouraged and challenged students to become more inclusive personally and professionally (Category E). When considering these findings, it is important to remember that while these categories were hierarchically ordered by complexity, those lower in the taxonomy remain a part of the phenomenon of inclusive assessment. This means these ideas act as genuine stepping stones to more inclusive practices or may be how an inclusive educator needs to operate within a particular educational context due to external constraints (e.g., inability to immediately change a task due to accreditation processes). The higher categories provide ideas about how more inclusive assessment conceptions can challenge the status-quo of assessment and are something to potentially aspire towards. Hence, educators are encouraged to consider how these categories work for them, and whether some categories may push their own thinking and open new possibilities in relation to inclusive assessment. Thematic analyses around possible characteristics of inclusive tasks also provide ideas around ways tasks could be redesigned or adjusted to promote inclusion.

The additional thematic analyses also identified broader opportunities and challenges in relation to inclusive assessment. Leaders noted the many possibilities for improved inclusion which could come from remaining vocal about the importance of inclusion, supporting staff innovation, seizing on times of broader disruption and change, and providing opportunities for staff professional learning and development. However, many challenges were simultaneously noted around external and institutional requirements and staff attitudes and capabilities. These findings are not unexpected, with many authors noting the challenges around enacting assessment which is responsive to student needs (e.g., Harris & Dargusch, 2020; Tai et al., 2023c, 2024). Leaders are encouraged to work with staff to collaboratively problem-solve around these and other institutionally relevant concerns.

We believe it is useful to consider this study's broader findings in relation to the concept of sustainable assessment, first coined by Boud (2000). Sustainable assessment considers how the learning embedded within assessment will continue and be able to be applied outside of the classroom. Boud and Soler (2016) more recently revisited the concept, considering the following questions as guiding the development of sustainable assessment:

- What particular features of the assignment and accompanying activity prompt consideration beyond the immediate task?
- In what ways does engagement in the activity foster self-regulation?
- How does the activity help learners meet challenges they will find in practice settings?

- How is engagement in the current activity likely to improve the capacity of students to make effective judgements about their work in subsequent ones?
- Are the educational benefits of the task likely to persist once the particular knowledge deployed in it can no longer be recalled?
- Does the activity enable students to appreciate, articulate and apply standards and criteria for good work in this area?
- Does the activity enable students to demonstrate those course-level learning outcomes that relate to preparation for learning post-graduation? (p. 410).

Boud and Soler (2016) concluded by summarising that, for sustainable assessment to occur, "every act of assessment needs in some identifiable way to build students' capacity to manage and judge their own learning and thus equip themselves for the more challenging learning environments they will confront post-graduation" (p. 410).

These ideas are well aligned with conceptions of inclusive assessment described within the categories outlined earlier in this document. Even in the initial category, students are expected to be active within the assessment process. They must self-identify needs and advocate for support, a potentially important skill to develop for their future. However, it is acknowledged that this does create additional (and potentially uncomfortable) work for such students, explaining why many choose not to seek the accommodations they are entitled to receive (Clark et al., 2018; Grimes et al., 2019). Connections to sustainable assessment become stronger in latter categories, with students being given substantially more agency within assessment. When students are allowed to be active in the construction of their own assessment experiences, the goals of sustainable assessment are far more likely to be achieved.

While all five conceptions of assessment required or facilitated levels of student agency, particularly within the final category, there was focus on how tasks help students become more inclusive in their thinking and actions at university and within the wider community. We argue that the final category Expanding collaborations for sustainable futures extends the mission of sustainable assessment, embedding a commitment to improved social justice as an assessment outcome. While creating inclusive discipline experts and practitioners may initially seem to sit outside of stated course learning outcomes, we argue that in many institutions, this aligns well with broader graduate attributes and university principles; these are just seldom assessed.

Designing tasks which give students agency and encourage inclusive professional behaviour would be a strong step towards increasing wider social inclusion in the future. Assessment can be personally transformative, whether that is via professional reflection, on Country or practical experiences, or engagement with stimulus that shifts thinking. If inclusive futures are a goal of higher education, the role assessment plays requires further consideration. How is assessment providing students with opportunities to better understand different perspectives and ways of working, through curriculum and engagement with their fellow students and the wider community? While we recognise the importance of keeping assessment aligned with learning objectives and graduate attributes, these representations of what is valued and measured may also merit further scrutiny. Who has had a say into what these are? Have people with diverse perspectives been involved (e.g., students from a range of backgrounds, community elders, industry experts)?

This work has many implications for leadership within the sector. First, there is the importance of prioritising inclusion, both in policy and practice, including work to align procedures to policy and to ensure adequate resourcing. While all participants noted that there was plenty of in-principle support for inclusive assessment, including references within high level policies, they did not describe it as prioritised with resources in the same way as other assessment issues (e.g., academic integrity, Artificial Intelligence threats). Participants argued that those doing extra work to help improve inclusivity needed this to be recognised in workload and via staff incentives or awards. Some staff also talked about, at times, working slightly outside of policy (e.g., granting accommodations/extension requests

without all paperwork being completed), highlighting the need for policy to include some space for staff professional judgement around how to best meet student need in equitable ways.

Second, it is important that leaders promote innovation. Participants acknowledged that any assessment change included an element of risk (e.g., student dissatisfaction, unforeseen risks to academic integrity, staff difficulties enacting new tasks, concerns/rejection by accrediting bodies). Policy needs to actively promote innovation and provide safeguards for innovators to encourage them to try new things. Leaders should also actively seek input and feedback from diverse stakeholders through mechanisms like students-as-partners programs (e.g., Dargusch et al., 2022) when making changes to assessment policy and practice.

Finally, across disciplines, teachings contexts, and institutions, staff noted the importance of flexibility in assessment templates and approval processes. Multiple leaders and educators noted that inclusive design could be undermined when it did not match templates (e.g., templates which required only one assessment response mode to be selected, disallowing choice of mode). By adding options like "or equivalent" or "other" boxes, or allowing multiple response formats to be ticked, staff had more freedom when designing assessments, creating possibilities for student choice or use of novel assessment forms.

Individuals and institutions working towards more inclusive assessment practices are encouraged to use the framework developed as part of this project to guide their own reflections and actions. Everyone within university systems has a role to play in moving towards more inclusive futures. Students can help staff understand barriers they or their peers face, teaching staff can design assessment with inclusion in mind, and educational leaders can work to create policy frameworks and resourcing which facilitate and reward inclusive practice. The power of inclusive assessment practices and policies cannot be underestimated, enabling staff and students to maximise their local and global success and contributions to their communities.

Project deliverables

This project created a range of resources to help university leaders and educators reshape policy and enact more inclusive approaches to assessment. These included:

- A CAULLT-promoted webinar on November 15, 2024. This was recorded so will provide a lasting artefact people can access to hear about key results.
- An Open Educational Resource
- A Framework which can be used to guide decision-making around inclusive assessment policy and practice
- A Policy Brief

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