

What are the exam experiences of students with disabilities? Moving towards inclusive assessment design.

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Background

Exams and other high-stakes timed assessments can act as barriers to success for students in higher education. Australian law requires ‘adjustments’ for students with disabilities (SWD) to account for these less accessible or even exclusionary assessments. However, adjustments do not always meet student needs. Some students may also choose not to disclose their condition or situation, and thus adjustments do not necessarily lead to equitable academic outcomes. Designing assessment to proactively account for student diversity is therefore an important goal. Understanding how SWD experience assessment currently can help to inform inclusive assessment design.

Aims

To understand SWD experiences of high-stakes timed assessment practices.

Methods

SWD at two Australian universities were invited to share their experiences of timed assessment in telephone or Zoom interviews. Forty SWD were interviewed, including 21 from RRR and 25 from a low SES background. Students not selected for interview were invited to respond to a series of prompts in writing or via voice recording, resulting in 11 additional submissions. Thematic and narrative analysis of qualitative data was undertaken.

Findings

Access requirements spanned learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and mental and physical health conditions. Students reported exam experiences ranging from poor to well-supported in face-to-face and online environments. Staff proactivity around implementing adjustments was valued. Most students perceived that adjustments, typically involving extra time and breaks, were recognition of their personal circumstances and therefore helpful, if not critical, to an equitable assessment experience. However, adjustments were not always implemented consistently, and some students felt that commonly implemented adjustments did not necessarily meet their specific needs. At-home exams (due to COVID-19 restrictions), though less stressful for some, were difficult for others due to internet access, living situations and carer roles.

Discussion

The diverse cohort in this research had varying exam experiences. In developing equitable assessments, we must consider a range of possibilities to account for diverse student needs and how additional intersecting markers of disadvantage can have compounding impacts on students. In the post-COVID landscape, multiple options for assessment may be an appropriate means of assessing learning outcomes, and assessments may occur in a range of locations. Viewing inclusion as an ongoing process enacted by people contingent on good assessment design, rather than an administrative exercise, can also promote equitable assessment experiences. Further research could explore how university systems and policies can contribute to enabling inclusive assessment design, and how these findings might apply to other equity groups and diverse students overall.