

SMALL GRANTS RESEARCH PROGRAM REPORT

Time for a rethink: Assessment policy to enable equity

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

At a glance

Background

Access to time is an important equity consideration within assessment. Students from equity backgrounds consistently face complex, often unavoidable circumstances (such as paid work, caring responsibilities, or the impacts of trauma) that significantly constrain their available time during assessment compared to their more advantaged peers. However, assessment policies and tasks are often designed around the assumption that all students have equal time to prepare and complete tasks. This project aimed to improve our understanding of the problems around time and assessment from the perspectives of students from equity backgrounds by examining how Australian universities currently construct and consider student “timescapes” within assessment contexts, and by identifying potentially high-equity assessment policy and practices.

What we did

The project involved four phases. First, we analysed 92 student interviews to identify time-related factors that negatively impacted on students’ assessment completion and success. Second, we searched the websites of 42 Australian universities for policy documents, guidelines, and web-based information relating to assessment and time (for example, extensions and other accommodations related to time). We identified the types of circumstances that merit additional time and time-related accommodations, as well as underlying assumptions about students and their rights to assessment equity. Third, we conducted focus group discussions with 27 staff from four universities we identified as having potentially high-equity practices. Lastly, we held a National Roundtable to discuss the findings of the study, share good practices, and gain feedback on a model and framework of questions to support university leaders and educators to consider policy and practice around time and assessment.

What we found

Analysis identified the salience of time within assessment policies. Significant variation existed between institutions around which student circumstances were described as meriting extra time, how students requiring additional time were constructed within policy, and how accessible policy was to students. Additionally, there are tensions around how equity-based changes to time-related policies might interact with existing university timelines and systems and impact upon staff and student workload and relationships.

What we recommend

Universities need to fundamentally re-evaluate how assessment policies are framed, moving away from individualised notions of “time management” towards a recognition of systemic time inequities. There is a need to audit and streamline policies and processes related to assessment adjustments, ensuring students find them easily accessible, comprehensible, and consistently applied. Relying solely on reactive measures like extensions is insufficient to address underlying time inequities. We need to move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” assessment model and embrace innovative designs that are inherently more equitable. Sharing effective examples of inclusive assessment design and practice is a key first step.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

AI or GenAI	Artificial intelligence/Generative artificial intelligence
AHPRA	Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency
CQUniversity	Central Queensland University
DDLTL	Deputy Dean Learning and Teaching
Go8	Group of Eight (Australian research-intensive universities)
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual, and other sexually or gender diverse
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RQ	Research question
RRR	Rural, regional, and remote
SES	Socio-economic status

1. Executive summary

Increasing diversity within higher education and narrowing achievement gaps is vital work, and progress has been made towards increasing student participation across equity groups (including First Nations Australians; students from rural, regional, and remote areas (RRR); students of low socio-economic status (SES); and students with disability) in higher education (Tai et al., 2022). However, equity goals around attraction, retention, and success for students from these groups are yet to be achieved. Assessment serves gatekeeping functions within higher education; grades can impact on academic progression and students' perceptions of their capability for university study (Harris & Dargusch, 2020; Nieminen, 2023).

To perform well on assessment, students need to have the resources available to be successful. One often overlooked and inequitably distributed resource is time. Research suggests that students from equity backgrounds often experience complex circumstances that are outside of their control, and which impact upon their time (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Crawford, et al., 2022; Harris & Dargusch, 2020). Time flexibility and/or access to additional time during assessment can, therefore, become important for these students' success.

Hence, higher education policy and practices around time and assessment need to be scrutinised to understand how they may support or undermine the abilities of students from equity backgrounds in accessing the time they need. Previous work highlighted the strong discourse around time management in higher education policy (Burke et al., 2017). This discourse placed responsibility for time upon the student, ignoring student circumstances and positioning students as in full control of their use of time. Research also identified variation across universities in what circumstances merit extra time according to policy (for example, Moore & Greenland, 2017). However, work had yet to be done to examine policies across the entire Australian higher education sector or to investigate how universities create more equitable policies and practices around time and assessment.

This research project therefore had three aims: 1) to understand the problems around time and assessment from the perspectives of students from equity backgrounds; 2) to examine how Australian higher education policy and practice currently construct and consider student "timescapes" within assessment contexts; and 3) to identify potentially high-equity assessment policy and practices at Australian universities.

The project design included four phases. Phase 1 involved re-analysis of interviews gathered in a previous research project, conducted over 2015–2017 and funded by the Higher Education and Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), in which project investigators Joanne Dargusch and Lois Harris were involved. The re-analysis explored the assessment experiences of students from equity backgrounds ($n = 92$), to identify time-related factors that negatively impacted on students' assessment completion and success. In Phase 2, searches were conducted of Australian universities' websites ($n = 42$) for policy documents, guidelines, and web-based information relating to assessment and time (for example, assessment extensions and access to assessment accommodations related to time). Multiple analysis methods were employed ($n = 4$) to identify the types of circumstances that merit additional time and time-related accommodations. Work was also

undertaken to surface assumptions about students, their timescapes, and their rights to assessment equity within these documents. In Phase 3, team members used the policy analyses to identify universities ($n = 4$) with potentially high-equity practices to be involved in focus group discussions about the design and implementation of their policies ($n = 27$). In Phase 4, a National Roundtable event was held to discuss the findings of the study, share potentially high-equity practices in relation to time/timing and equity students, and gain feedback on a draft model and framework of questions designed to support higher education leaders and educators to consider policy and practice around time and assessment (see [Section 7](#)).

Findings from Phase 1 highlighted that students from equity backgrounds often made strategic decisions around time during assessment. For example, time impacted on student choices around how they engaged with the course content and accessed assessment supports (for example, lecturer-provided resources or help from academic support staff), at times reporting choices that would not support learning or assessment well. Students' decisions about meeting assessment deadlines and completing their assignments were influenced by a range of complex factors, both within the university and in their personal lives outside of it.

The analyses of Phase 2 highlighted that while there are a wide range of circumstances relating to time and assessment named in policies across the sector, greater and more consistent consideration is needed around circumstances that impact students from equity backgrounds. These included paid and unpaid work, trauma, victimisation, disasters, and mental health concerns. Cultural considerations should also be embedded in these policies, with a need to make sure First Nations students can see their cultural concerns represented. Geographic dispersal of students must also be taken into consideration, making sure that those experiencing hardship in their own local areas can see their circumstances within policy.

Further policy analysis highlighted that “time” was the second largest concept in university assessment policies and guidelines (after the concept of “assessment”) and interrelated extensively with the concept of assessment. As universities consider how to develop more equitable policies, acknowledging the significance and impact of time should be a starting point for discussions.

The use of heatmapping highlighted how crucial it is to make policies accessible. This analysis indicated that students often had to navigate complex systems to find the policies and processes needed to access extra time. Additionally, they would need a high level of policy literacy to understand and engage with policy discourses. When designing policy documents, universities should be mindful of the difficulties students might face in accessing the information they need, especially as this is likely to occur when they are feeling overwhelmed or under stress.

Finally, a close analysis of four policies, drawing on Bacchi's (2009) work, interrogated the problems and solutions that were represented in a sample of policy documents. This analysis examined how the “problem” of students/equity and assessment/time was represented, revealing assumptions about student time and institutional time. The findings indicate that, since students often face complex circumstances regarding time, it is essential to treat requests for extra time as an expected part of the assessment process. Consideration should also be given to how modality, institutional conceptions of time (for

example, time as fixed and predictable), document detail and length, and the complexity of information about decision-making and the processes required to obtain extra time may impact students' ability to access that time.

Phase 3 examined a range of potentially high-equity practices found in policy and discussing these with leaders and practitioners in four universities via focus groups and interviews. The findings suggest that the introduction of innovative and potentially high-equity practices in response to challenges identified within each institution presents both opportunities and obstacles. When changes are implemented, the complex institutional system of processes, structures, and people that enact assessment innovations in response to policy must be taken into consideration. The findings highlighted the need for consultation and shared vision across all levels of the university as innovations were planned—including integration of diverse student perspectives. Likewise, attention to the capabilities of human and technological systems was necessary to make sure consistent and coordinated implementation could take place.

The project findings highlight the following key messages:

1. Assessment policy and practice need to be examined for assumptions that favour linear time and position students in ways that are inequitable.
2. Significant tensions exist between the intentions of policy and the systems and processes that enact that policy. This can hinder equitable assessment practice.
3. Development of equitable assessment practices in relation to time requires talk within and across complex systems.
4. Consideration of equitable assessment practices should be a catalyst for change within and across institutions.

This project contributes towards the identification and dismantling of inequity within higher education policies and practices. The discussion section of the report includes a model and framework of questions designed to assist institutions to consider their current policy and practice in relation to assessment and time and spark discussion around how they could include more equitable practices that suit their local needs and context. A further output of the project is a shortened version of the framework for use as a professional development tool (see [Appendix H](#)).

2. Recommendations

Four recommendations are presented here and developed further in the Discussion section (see [Section 7](#)). Recommendations 1–3 refer to how policy can be re-shaped to be more equitable. Recommendation 4 refers to the importance of enacting change within institutions and across the sector in relation to assessment and time.

Recommendation 1: Recognise assumptions

Universities need to recognise and challenge hidden assumptions about time in assessment. Two main assumptions surfaced through our analysis:

1. Students have equal access to time and experience it in similar ways.
2. Students can independently locate relevant assessment policy relating to time and apply it to their circumstances.

Challenging these assumptions means the onus is on institutions to recognise that students from equity backgrounds with complex lives do not fit within conventional, structured university notions of time. Transitioning to more equitable and inclusive assessment policies is dependent upon institutions being more responsive to difficulties students experience, rather than seeing students as responsible for removing barriers to their own learning—including interpreting documents that require high levels of policy literacy and navigating and accessing extra time via often complex systems. It will be necessary to take a whole-of-institution approach to identify the assumptions in assessment policy, including the voices of students, educators, accessibility staff, discipline leaders, and leaders with responsibility for writing assessment policy.

Recommendation 2: Raise awareness of tensions

Universities must consider the tensions that exist between the intentions of policies and the mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder inclusive assessment practice in relation to time. These tensions centre around how university values regarding diversity are made visible within assessment policies and systems, whose voices shape policy, who makes decisions about time and assessment, and how assessment integrity and equity can be simultaneously considered in assessment design. Addressing these tensions requires acknowledgement of conflicts between institutional “clock-time” (fixed deadlines, opening hours) and students’ “life-time” (complex and often unpredictable), and the role educators play in translating policy for students and mediating tensions. It must also involve identifying the competing priorities (for example, maintaining university standards, upholding university values, academic integrity, and industry expectations) that impact upon policy formation and implementation. Being aware of these tensions is the first step toward resolving them constructively, and this will involve open conversations between leadership, discipline leaders, and educators. Diverse students should be invited to contribute to this work. This should lead to action within institutions to conceptualise equitable assessment design and implementation and share and support innovative practice strategies.

Recommendation 3: Talk within and across complex systems

Universities should identify how university staff can enact assessment across complex systems in ways that promote equity. Consideration must also be given to the challenges that come about because of changes/factors external and internal to the institution, and how equitable practices can be introduced to respond to problems that arise. Prioritising equity as a foundational principle in assessment policy and practice, while recognising the complexities of innovative practices, will enable leaders and educators to identify the types of trade-offs that are necessary to work towards more equitable assessment time for students. In addition, constant review and changes within systems and processes are necessary to respond both to the needs of the university and of the changing student cohort.

Recommendation 4: Generating action and innovation

The higher education community must continue to have robust discussions about what student circumstances should merit extra time, and how extra time can be allocated consistently across institutions to ensure equity and academic success. Collaboration could occur in different contexts—ranging from individual teaching teams that can meet to discuss possible changes to assessment design to cross-institutional meetings of university leaders who can work together to share good practice and work to create a more consistent policy landscape across institutions. The processes of collective learning, exploration, and experimentation are crucial for addressing the problems that arise in the management of institutional policies and the will to accommodate individual needs. These types of collaboration should lead to practice changes that better support students in a range of institutional contexts.

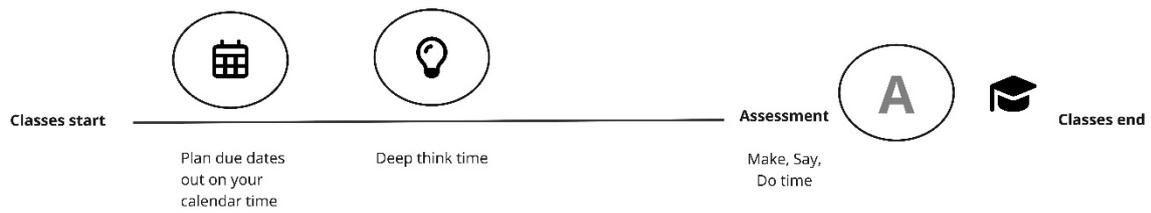
3. Introduction

Australia has been actively working towards increasing diversity within higher education and narrowing achievement gaps. This has included work from the early 2000s (for example, Bradley report; Bradley et al., 2008) to more recent policy statements about participation, access, and equity from the Federal Department of Education (for example, Commonwealth of Australia, 2024). Diversity includes students from equity groups such as those with disability, First Nations Australians, and students from regional and remote areas or with low socio-economic status—with intersections of demographic, social, and cultural characteristics and experiences such as those who are First-in-Family at university (Tai et al., 2022). Despite the reports and policy intentions, goals associated with the attraction, retention, and academic success of equity student groups are yet to be achieved (Jackson et al., 2023). This suggests that many obstacles remain for students from equity backgrounds, and it is important to actively work towards identifying and dismantling inequity within higher education policies and practices.

Assessment serves gatekeeping functions within higher education. Assessment is understood in this study to be the formative and summative practices that enable students to demonstrate their learning. Assessment results impact not only students' abilities to progress within degree programs, but also their perceptions of their capability for university study (Harris & Dargusch, 2020; Nieminen, 2023; Vanderburg et al., 2023). Assessment performance also affects retention, with Li and Carroll (2020) finding that “students who perform less well academically tend to be more likely to withdraw” (p. 23). Given the consequences for students (and universities and wider community), it is important that students are able to submit assessment responses that reflect their highest capabilities.

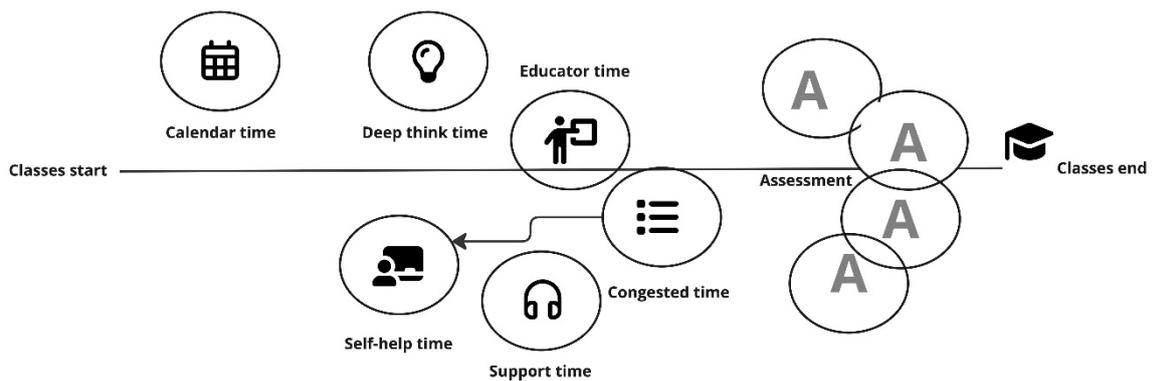
Nieminen (2023) has noted that “Assessment has struggled to deal with the increasing diversity of students in higher education” (p. 614). Questions are raised about the equity of current mechanisms within higher education, such as accommodations to adjust assessment in consideration of circumstances (Tai et al., 2022, 2023a, b, c) and extensions (Moore & Greenland, 2017). One reason for this struggle may be that assessment is often conceptualised as an endpoint within a linear learning process (see Figure 1). Classes begin, assessment tasks are explained, students are expected to manage their time and complete the assessment task by the due date when it will be graded and contribute to an overall qualification.

Figure 1: Higher education – linear time



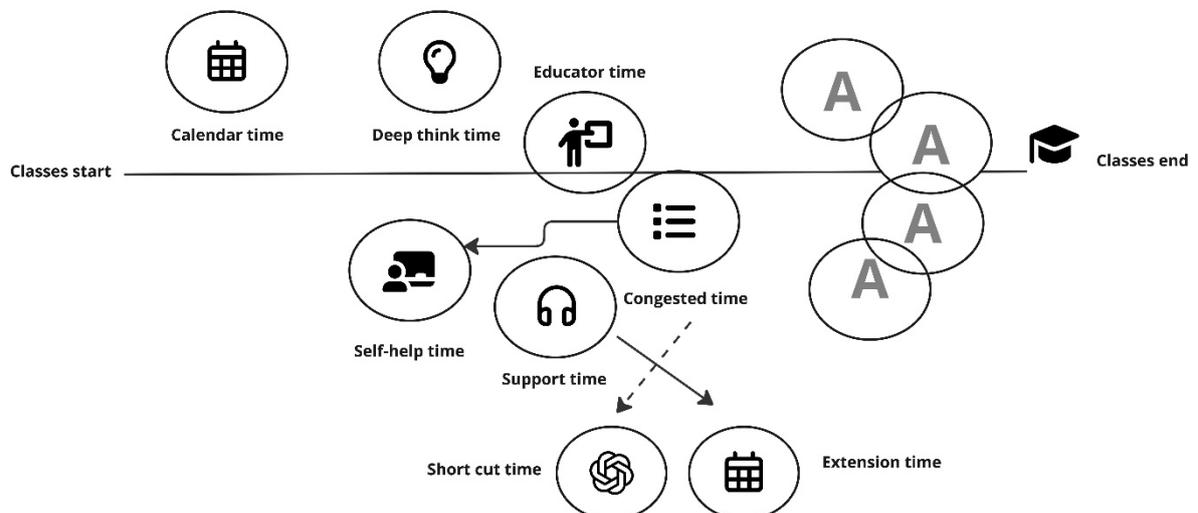
To perform well on assessment, students need to have the resources available to be successful. One often overlooked and inequitably distributed resource is time (Burke et al., 2017). Students need to manage multiple assessment tasks at once and can experience congestion at certain times in the learning cycle (see Figure 2). Within higher education literature and policy, there is a strong discourse around time management, placing responsibilities for time upon the student (Burke et al., 2017). Students are expected to reach out for help and support, which requires additional time and access to the knowledge of what, where, and who might provide support.

Figure 2: Distribution of time



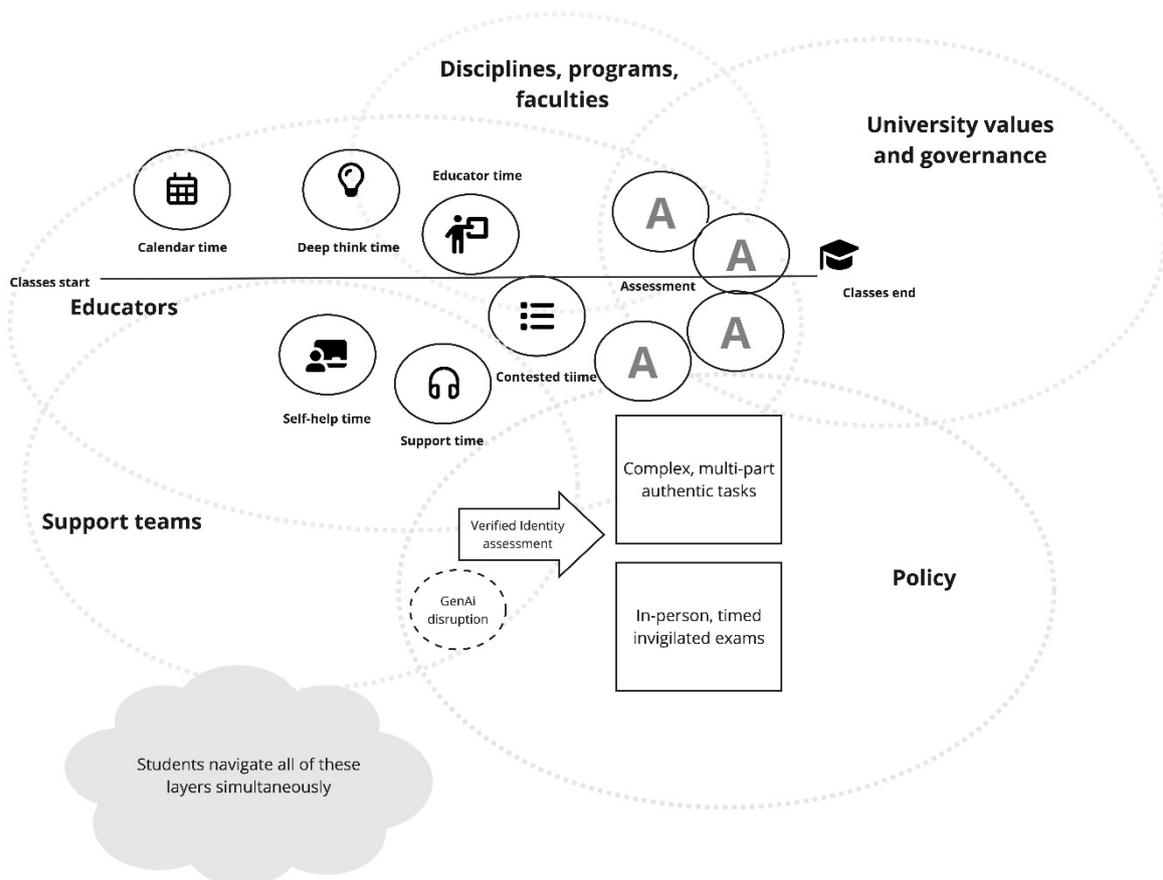
A frequent recommendation for students experiencing assessment time pressures is provision of additional time through extensions (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Accessing assessment time



As universities grapple with challenges such as reduced funding—including policy shifts around fee-paying international student numbers—and the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in teaching, learning, and assessment, it is clear that assessment is not linear but part of a complex system. There are policy departments, levels of decision-making, and institution-wide systems that interconnect and shape what counts as assessment, how it will present, and the conditions around it. Students who seek consideration of their circumstances in relation to assessment tasks through support and/or flexibility are faced with the need to negotiate the people, departments, and the conditions prescribed by the system. The complexity of the interconnections and their inherent paradoxes and tensions can be opaque and difficult to navigate for the student seeking support. Yet for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, engaging with the relationships between problems and complex systems is seen as opening possibilities for collaboration, learning, and innovation (Head, 2019). Following this argument, we map the complexity of time across institutional systems and personal circumstances that a student from an equity background has to navigate (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Navigating multiple layers of time



We drew on Burke and Manathunga’s (2020, p. 663) use of the term “timescapes” as a metaphor that allows an “understanding of time as entwined with space, conceptually drawn and constituted experientially”, to consider time in assessment and equity. Bennett and Burke (2018) argued that within universities “unequal power relations often flow in deep, insidious ways and this is inextricably shaped by different timescapes and contested

discourses of time” (p. 914). Examining timescapes enables “an understanding of how we move through life across complex ‘maps’ of time, which inform what we do and how we decide to do it” (Burke et al., 2017, p. 7). Timescapes include biological and “clock” time but simultaneously consider their intersection with diverse settings (for example, university, work, personal/family life) and circumstances.

Bennett and Burke (2018) identified that students who conform to traditional university timescapes (for example, meeting assessment deadlines or requesting exam time allowances) are constructed as having the ability and commitment required for higher education; those who experience disrupted, circular, or extended timescapes are labelled as “at-risk”. Other researchers (for example, Nieminen, 2023) have also noted the impact of expectations around time, with Crawford (2021) finding “entrenched attitudes and expectations that favour and privilege some students (for example, younger students with time and who study on-campus) over others (for example, older students who juggle numerous commitments, and study online and part-time) continue to prevail” (p. 4).

Arguments have been made that higher education policy needs to consider the many circumstances students experience that are outside of their control. For example, Bennett and Burke (2018) argued that this perception “marginalises cultural traditions of other ways of relating to time, such as supporting family, having a strong work ethic, of needing to work, of requiring ongoing healthcare and support” (p. 917). Time is one of the most frequently proposed accommodations for students—for example, students might receive extensions or additional exam time (Tai et al., 2022)—showing a mismatch between university timescapes and students’ complex lives and needs. Moreover, time adjustments such as extensions or additional time for exams can contribute to the marginalisation of students by positioning them “as ‘different’, ‘special’, and ‘lesser than other students’” (Nieminen, 2022, p. 2). These concerns signal the need to examine how aspects of temporality are constructed within assessment policies in order to surface inequity, particularly given underlying assumptions about diversity and ableism found in other jurisdictions’ policies (for example, Finland, Nieminen, 2021).

A substantial body of literature documents the unique time pressures that many students from equity backgrounds face when studying at university and which can impact on timely completion of assessment (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Burke, 2022; Cochrane et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2022; Greenland & Moore, 2022; Harris & Dargusch, 2020; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Whitburn & Thomas, 2022). For example, additional time might be required for:

- Indigenous students to meet cultural responsibilities (Barnes et al., 2019; Wilks et al., 2020)
- carers to meet others’ personal and medical needs (Munro et al., 2023)
- low SES students and mature-age students’ paid work (Moore & Greenland, 2017)
- students with disabilities to manage health, well-being, and learning (Nieminen, 2023; Tai et al., 2022, 2023a)
- migrant, refugee, and non-English-speaking background students to understand system requirements and study in their non-native language (Mestan, 2016).

Li and Carroll (2020) found that while students from equity backgrounds have strong dispositions for study, complex factors played into their decisions to consider leaving university (for example, financial, social, and workload for Indigenous students; financial and health for First-in-Family and low SES students). Such students occupy complex,

overwhelming timescapes that systematically differ from the normative timescapes considered when assessment policy is developed. Other emerging concerns include homelessness and students experiencing domestic violence (Crawford & Emery, 2021), which also disproportionately intersect with class, race, language background, and/or gender.

Policy analysis can help dismantle assumptions about class, race, gender, language background, and ability, and their intersection with assessment demands. It is a direct step towards establishing more equitable support for students in assessment. While there has been some analysis of assessment policy in other jurisdictions (for example, Nieminen, 2021) and calls for increased assessment flexibility within Australia (for example, Nelson et al., 2017), there is yet to be a comprehensive review of Australian higher education assessment policy to examine how equity students and their needs are constructed and considered. There is emerging evidence of inequity. For example, Moore and Greenland (2017) found inconsistency in how Australian Open Universities considered work and work-related reasons when granting assessment extensions, suggesting the need for a systematic examination of how time and circumstances are considered within policy across the sector.

Our project provides a step in this direction, examining how Australian higher education policy and practice currently construct and consider student timescapes within assessment contexts. Central to the design of this project was Head's work (2019) acknowledging policy as interactions within complex systems, in contrast to policy as a purely rationalist and technical activity (for example, Althaus et al., 2022). Informed by the existing literature, the research team drew on pre-existing student interview data as well as current assessment policies across the Australian higher education sector. The final phase of the project involved focus group discussions and interviews with university stakeholders to better understand how time-related assessment policies have emerged and are being implemented in practice. The design of the project reflected the research team's interpretivist stance; we sought to understand the way that concepts of time in assessment policy interact with the experiences of students and teachers. This was realised through a social constructivist approach that involved iterative analysis within the team, with feedback from critical friends (in the form of our reference group) and a National Roundtable involving educators from Australian universities. From these ontological and epistemological positions, we identified the importance of a multi-methods approach to understand policy in action. This included a range of complementary perspectives that enabled student and teacher experiences of assessment policy interactions to be presented—from empirical methods (Leximancer) and interpretivist methods (interviews) to post-structuralist methods (Bacchi analysis).

From this work, we proposed a model based on complexity theory (see [Section 7.1](#)), which represented the interactive, emergent, and multi-feedback loops that surfaced in the data and analysis. Acknowledging that complexity theory is a "loose collection of scholarly work that takes up important questions about systems and how systems change, develop, learn and evolve" (Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Walby, 2007; Wheatley, 2006, as cited in Cochrane Smith et al., 2014, p. 5), its emphasis on "wholes, relationships, open systems, and environments" rather than "parts" of a system was of interest in this research (Byrne, 1998; Davis & Sumara, 2006, in Cochrane Smith et al., 2014, p. 5). It was most useful as a synthesising theory to identify the "network of elements that interact and combine" (Cairney, 2013, p. 5) in assessment policy and its enactment. We also acknowledged that further studies were needed to evaluate its use as an explanatory theory and that identified

challenges to its use included that it is considered “amoral and value free, not attending to power inequalities” (Cochrane Smith et al., 2014, pp. 16-17). In our study, we chose to draw on Bacchi’s “what is the problem represented to be” (WPRB) framework (2009) and post-humanist concepts of time to address these concerns.

This report begins with the research questions (RQs), background, and methods of the project. The findings are structured around the key analysis methods (interview analysis, content analysis, Leximancer analysis, accessibility analysis, Bacchi analysis, focus group/interview analysis). The discussion section brings together these analyses to make four key recommendations about inclusive assessment policy and practice in relation to time. (See Sections [7.2](#), [7.3](#), [7.4](#), and [7.5](#))

The research questions guiding the research are as follows:

- RQ1: What time-related factors are identified in literature and re-analysed student interview data as negatively impacting upon equity students’ assessment completion and success?
- RQ2: In assessment policies, what types of circumstances merit additional time and time-related accommodations so equity students can demonstrate capability?
- RQ3: What assumptions about students, timescapes, and rights to assessment equity are evident in higher education assessment policies and processes?
- RQ4: How do universities that currently offer more flexibility and considerations of time within their policies manage this within their systems?

4. Background

This literature review responds to RQ1: What time-related factors are identified in literature as negatively impacting upon equity students' assessment completion and success? In the Introduction, the impact of diverse students' timescapes on their university study and assessment was explored, highlighting the need to consider these within assessment policy, policy implementation, and assessment design. Literature searches used the key words "time", "assessment", "higher education/university", and "assessment accommodations/adjustments". Gathered sources explored evidence about how time affects diverse students during assessment and how higher education policy and practice currently negotiate tensions around time and assessment. This section reviews research around how university assessment policies shape who has access to time within assessment and under what conditions. It then examines research about the implementation of such policy. Finally, it considers the role of assessment design in supporting students with the time needed to demonstrate learning.

Within literature, university policies are acknowledged as strong drivers of assessment practice and often stipulate how time is allocated (for example, rules about types and number of assessments, assessment extensions, possible accommodations). These policies attempt to bring together university values with stakeholder considerations (for example, industry/government expectations) to create systems that provide equitable considerations around time in assessment across an institution. However, many challenges exist.

4.1 Assumptions operating within university policy

Equity scholarships and non-traditional pathways are mechanisms used to attract diverse students to enrol in Australian universities, with mission statements and marketing materials commonly stating that equity students are valued within institutions. Nonetheless, evidence exists that the sector still grapples with how to define equity within assessment and how this may differ from traditional notions of equality based on standardisation. Regarding assessment practice, Harris and Dargusch (2020, p. 97) stated that "the notion that identical treatment is 'fair' runs deep" and many higher education institutions treat their students as mostly homogeneous (Ajjawi et al., 2023; McArthur, 2022). Tai et al. (2023b, p. 403) noted that "assessment that treats all students the same is by definition inequitable, because it ignores differences in students' past and present circumstances". These conditions can even lead students to question the "fairness" of receiving extra time; for example, one chronically ill student reported a "nagging suspicion that accommodations [such as extra time] somehow undermine the quality of education, like you're getting something for nothing" (Jung, 2002, p. 189, [comment added]). However, data from the United States and United Kingdom suggested that "even with accommodations, disadvantaged students performed slightly worse than their 'comparable' but typically developed peers" (Vidal Rodeiro & Macinska, 2022, p. 474). Khasawneh and Khasawneh (2023) found that while assessment results for students from culturally diverse backgrounds improved when additional time and language support was given to them, this worked to level "the playing field", allowing students to prove their cognitive abilities and skills—that is, facilitating *equity* rather than giving unfair advantage. When time restrictions were removed from tests, students commented on their

improved confidence and reduced stress (Case & Gunstone, 2003). At present, the evidence base does not suggest that equity students receive unfair advantage from receiving extra time.

There are also currently fundamental assumptions about time within higher education that may undermine work towards improved equity. Students who do not show an ability to manage time “are often deemed ‘disorganised’ or ‘uncommitted’, and as requiring correction therapies as if the problem is simply about getting the skill or right attitude to manage time effectively (or not)” (Bennett & Burke, 2018, p. 914). Common “solutions” include university-sponsored courses and resources around time management skills (Burke, 2022; French, 2019; Greenland & Moore, 2022). There is evidence that students allocate more time to assessment than other aspects of study in a course, particularly when tasks are worth a high percentage of their final grade (Bunn et al., 2019; Case & Gunstone, 2003). The downside is that students often prioritise assessments over the learning process (Bunn et al., 2019), with students making strategic decisions around how they use their time (Harris et al., 2018). For example, multiple simultaneous assessment deadlines can cause students to strategically underperform on a particular piece or even choose non-submission if previous assessments had already ensured a passing level in the unit (Harris et al., 2018). O’Shea and Delahunty (2022) argued that students “should not be penalised for the impact that external pressures place on their time, well-being or capacity to achieve” (p. 174). These scholars’ findings highlight the need for higher education to move away from assessment policies and practices that set time up as a student problem to be solved through bettering their time management.

Furthermore, if appropriate time is not provided, assessment results are unlikely to validly demonstrate learning. Students may require a longer period of time to demonstrate the learning through the assessment due to personal circumstances. For example, refugee, migrant, or Indigenous students with English as an additional language or dialect may need additional time to translate learning materials and compose responses in English. Students ideally require assessments to be held at a time when they can access them (for example, have exams scheduled that do not clash with key carer responsibilities or medical needs). When time is not considered, it can lead to the exclusion of students unable to submit the assessment or participate in the exam. Dawson (2022) argued that such assessment exclusion is as great a concern to assessment validity as cheating. Ajjawi et al. (2023) cautioned that requirements for students to adhere to strict time constraints are not always as crucial as the final product, and that assessment should not exclude students who would otherwise be able to prove their competency against learning outcomes.

There are also varied notions within the sector about which student circumstances should be entitled to extra time within policy. While students with disabilities are protected under anti-discrimination laws and are legally entitled to accommodations (Disability Discrimination Act 1992), those with other considerations may or may not see their circumstances named in policy. For example, carers, most of whom are female, are seldom recognised as an equity group within higher education (Munro et al., 2023), even though these complex roles may lead to students requiring extra time. Students who must undertake paid work to support themselves and/or their families receive varied consideration, with only some universities acknowledging work as legitimate grounds for extensions (Moore & Greenland, 2017). There are also those who argue that accommodations give a “false sense of inclusion” (Nieminen,

2022, p. 64) as individual accommodations can create the perception that the student is the problem, rather than the assessment practice (Tai et al., 2023b).

4.2 University processes around time

Even when policy is constructed in ways that attempt to be equitable around time, university structures and processes can make needed flexibility difficult. For example, Greenland and Moore (2022) found that over-assessment, rigid assessment deadlines, and inflexible semester or term-based timeframes were common reasons why students reported dropping out of open access online courses. While online learning options market themselves to students as flexible, Moore and Greenland (2017) found that assessment policies and deadlines for open courses often aligned with those used for traditional delivery modes to on-campus students, noting the high attrition rates from Open Universities Australia courses. Diverse higher education students have indicated that they view specific due dates and times as disadvantageous if they have health issues or work or family commitments that could be unpredictable (Tai et al., 2023b). Despite the common practice of university-wide, semester-based scheduling of assessments, “there is no fundamental reason why assessment completion must be confined to the 10–12 week conventional university term” (Harris & Dargusch, 2020, p. 105) other than for ease of administration and concentration of staff workload. However, beliefs remain that students should fit in with the system rather than the system adapting to support the individual (Mallman & Lee, 2016). Harris and Dargusch (2020) note the need for universities to do simple mapping of assessment tasks within programs to ensure multiple deadlines are not concentrated into short timeframes and submission times do not encourage unhealthy practices such as staying up all night to complete a task.

Changing assessment tasks to make them more inclusive can also be difficult due to systems and processes in place. For example, Winstone and Boud (2022) found that decisions regarding assessment design often needed to be made far in advance of teaching a unit and need to fit into course timeframes set by higher education systems rather than the assessors themselves. This indicates a need for higher education institutions to enable more flexibility within course and assessment approval processes.

For policy to have an impact, staff and students need to access and understand it. Multiple studies have highlighted that many equity students, particularly those with disabilities, are unaware that they qualify for accommodations or are unsure if they are eligible (for example, Bunn et al., 2019; Claiborne et al., 2011). Those with “invisible” conditions or challenges (for example, learning and/or mental health difficulties) are particularly likely to question their eligibility (Clark et al., 2018). Corcoran et al. (2022) found that “students who ‘don’t know what they don’t know’ are likely to self-exclude rather than investigate how universities should be providing reasonable adjustments for students” (p. 82), which likely contributes to the higher assessment failure and attrition rates for these groups (Fuller et al., 2004; Jury et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2018; Newman & Madaus, 2015).

Time-based adjustments and accommodations usually rely on student disclosure of disability or circumstances, with documentation normally required. The process of applying is a burden when students are often already time-poor (Tai et al., 2023a), with money often required to obtain sufficient medical documentation (for example, medical certificates or

other medical or psychological reports). For students with disabilities, even if they have disclosed their needs to the university, rights to privacy mean that this information is not automatically shared with other staff, such as lecturers and tutors. As a result, students must frequently disclose information and advocate for themselves (Tai et al. 2023b). These structural barriers are documented as deterring students from disclosing circumstances when at university (Grimes et al., 2019; Newman & Madaus, 2015) and “by not disclosing, they may have achieved a sense of autonomy but also they forfeit any supports or services to which they are entitled” (Yerbury et al., 2022, p. 534).

There is evidence that many students choose not to disclose difficulties due to concerns about the stigma involved. Mallman and Lee (2016, p. 685) argue that “students are more likely to see their challenges as personal inadequacies”, with other studies also reaching this conclusion (for example, Clark et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2018). Tai et al. (2023b) point out that even when accommodations are provided to students, being treated differently can cause feelings of shame. There is evidence that many students with disabilities choose not to apply for accommodations (Clark et al., 2018; Corcoran et al., 2022; Grimes et al., 2019; Newman & Madaus, 2015; Nieminen, 2022; Tai et al., 2021), with “hidden” disabilities (for example cognitive and mental disabilities) being associated with higher levels of stigma and shame (Clark et al., 2018). Mature aged students can also be set up as “outsiders” within the dominant traditional school-leaver model of university culture (Mallman & Lee, 2016; Moore & Greenland, 2017). This can extend to students feeling as if they are taking too much time from teaching staff by asking for their assistance (Mitchell et al., 2023).

The options available to students seeking time adjustments are also varied. When combined with a lack of information provided to teaching staff about a student’s relevant circumstances, the result can be differing levels of support and acceptance of learning adjustments (Krattli et al., 2022; Tai et al., 2023b, 2023c). Power imbalances between students and staff exist, which can make it difficult for students to self-advocate (Nieminen, 2022; Yerbury et al., 2022). Claiborne et al. (2011) argued that higher education staff must recognise and respond to difficulties experienced by students rather than seeing students themselves as responsible for removing barriers to their learning. To meet the needs of diverse students, Nieminen (2024, p. 846) suggested that “the menu of assessment accommodations should be expanded and diversified beyond the ‘traditional’ set of extra time and separate testing rooms.” Demystifying and destigmatising assessment accommodations is fundamental to anti-ableist work.

4.3 Assessment design

While much of the literature about time and assessment focused on accommodations and adjustments (for example, assessment extensions and extra time during exams) where the fundamental task remained unchanged, there is also a push towards assessment design that considers students’ challenges around time from the onset, given evidence of inherent challenges within particular forms of design and delivery (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Jain, 2022; Nieminen, 2022, 2024; O’Neill, 2017; Tai et al., 2023b). For example, there is growing evidence that exams are particularly problematic for students from some equity backgrounds (Nieminen, 2022, 2024; Tai et al., 2023c; Torrance, 2017), with this mode of assessment receiving high numbers of requests for accommodations and adjustments (Tai, 2023c). Timed examinations privilege students without concerns of interruption by poor health

conditions, work or family commitments, and who can work quickly, concentrate immediately, and maintain focus throughout the exam time (Tai et al., 2023a). Even potential adjustments to traditional styles of exams, such as remotely proctoring exams, may be a bolt-on solution that is ineffective for some students (Dawson, 2022). Another example is using eye-tracking software, as it may not recognise a range of neurodivergent eye movements (Tai et al., 2023a) or detect the eyes of students wearing spectacles. Students with darker skin tones may even be invisible (Dawson, 2022; Logan, 2020).

The incorporation of universal design principles (CAST, 2024) into assessment is seen as one way to improve inclusivity regardless of student population makeup (Black, Weinberg & Brodwin, 2015; Dickinson, 2018; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Stampoltzis et al., 2015). Such designs often consider timing. For example, some students found completing assessment tasks progressively across a unit, rather than as one large task at the end, enabled them to manage their time more effectively (Tai et al., 2023b). Flexibility and choice in how students might demonstrate learning outcomes are also key design factors, with O'Neill (2017) noting that "it should not be a surprise that where students are encouraged to play to their strengths that they might do so and gain higher grades" (p. 233). Harris et al. (2025) found lecturers have a range of ways that allow them to design assessments with time flexibility in mind including allowing students to engage in online exams at their own preferred start time, letting students choose between topics tied to different deadlines, calculating students' grades based on only some assessment tasks (allowing students to choose to skip tasks where timelines did not suit), and setting their own deadlines within a range of possibilities.

4.4 Conclusion

This literature review highlights the opportunities and challenges currently present within higher education when trying to develop more equitable approaches to time and assessment. There is still a need to work towards more shared values by helping stakeholders understand the difference between equity and equality, and by shifting away from time management discourses that ignore students' circumstances and assume that students have complete control over their time. Policies around accommodations and adjustments across the sector unevenly consider the unique time concerns of equity groups. It is often unclear to students what they qualify for—with many not seeking help due to concerns about stigma and difficulties following existing documentation processes. Research highlights that exams are particularly problematic for many equity students, with Universal Design for Learning frequently suggested as a set of guidelines that may help educators build time-related flexibility into assessment design. While it is heartening to see concerns being debated, the literature highlights the substantial gaps in what is known about how policy currently represents time and assessment across the sector and what emerging practices may support students to validly demonstrate learning via assessment. Rethinking how time in assessment policy positions students is a key consideration of this study, acknowledging the complex systems of higher education policy and practice.

5. Methods

5.1 Ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee (0000024699) and the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee (8814). Student interview data gathered in a previous project was originally approved by CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee (0000021666, approved 2019). Re-use for the current study was approved under 0000024699.

5.2 Phases of the project

The project design reflects the understanding that complex connections and interrelationships are best investigated through an intensive program of empirical research (Head, 2019). To this end, three phases of data-gathering and analysis were carried out in response to the four research questions. The project aimed to identify the complex policies and conditions associated with assessment and time in the experiences of equity students in Australian higher education. A fourth phase of the project was designed as part of a collaborative process of gathering feedback data from the project reference group and other university assessment and equity stakeholders at a National Roundtable event for the purpose of refining recommendations for policy innovation and change.

5.2.1 Phase 1: Understanding the problem

The first phase of the project was designed to understand the problem from the students' perspectives and drew on existing interview data from Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded projects completed by CQUniversity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with first year students enrolled in several different discipline areas at CQUniversity (Nursing, Business and Law, Education, and Engineering). Participants were recruited via email sent to all students enrolled in core first year units in bachelor degrees in these disciplines, with students from equity groups selected for participation. The focus was on finding time-related statements and concepts in interviews ($n = 92$) that investigated the assessment experiences of first-year students belonging to one or more equity groups: First Nations Australians; students from regional, rural, or remote areas; students with a disability; and/or students from low SES backgrounds. Analyses of the data were guided by Miles et al.'s (2014) approach to coding and the use of NVivo with more than 20 codes identified. Tallies were made of the number of participants who made statements relating to time as well as the number of individual mentions of time. Coding suggested categories based on participants' accounts of their level of flexibility and/or power to change their circumstances. Further analysis identified three main themes:

- accessing necessary assessment content
- decision-making to meet assessment deadlines
- timing assessment completion.

5.2.2 Phase 2: Analysing policy

The second phase of the project involved the sourcing and analyses of university policy documents. RQs 2 and 3 guided the analyses, examining (i) the types of circumstances that merit additional time and time-related accommodations so equity students can demonstrate capability (RQ2) and (ii) the assumptions about students, timescapes, and students' rights to assessment equity (RQ3). The website of all Australian universities ($n = 42$ at time of data collection) were systemically searched for policy documents, guidelines, and web-based information relating to assessment extensions and access to assessment accommodations, including those related to time.

The content analyses of the policies in relation to student circumstances drew on the three themes generated in the Phase 1 analyses (see [Section 5.2.1](#)), using a priori categories relating to circumstances that may merit flexibility within policies and additional categories created inductively as the policies were examined. Through initial coding, five overarching categories (medical, personal context, work, trauma, commitments) were identified, with each featuring sub-categories (see [Section 6](#)). Once the iterative coding process was finished and the schema were finalised, two research assistants independently coded all policy documents to the categories and sub-categories. Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) was used to calculate agreement between the two sets of coding, with high levels of interrater reliability and agreement found, confirming content analysis reliability (Mayring, 2015) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Qualitative content analysis interrater reliability statistics

Category	Interrater reliability agreement
Medical	$\kappa = 0.84836272$
Personal context	$\kappa = 0.92699489$
Work	$\kappa = 0.82231406$
Trauma	$\kappa = 0.87925117$
Commitments	$\kappa = 0.91165249$

The policy analyses of Phase 2 of the project also addressed RQ3 and its focus on the assumptions in policies about students, timescapes, and students' rights to assessment equity. The policy investigations comprised a text mining analysis of key policy concepts using Leximancer and accessibility and Bacchi's (2009) analyses of "what the problem is represented to be".

Leximancer (Leximancer, n.d.) is a web-based, text mining program designed to analyse the content of large volumes of textual data in terms of key concepts and the relationships between the concepts manifested in co-location and meaning associations. The interrelationships between concepts can be displayed graphically in ways that highlight the level of co-occurrence and provide a descriptive basis for interpretation and claims about why and to what end the text producers constructed these particular meanings. In this project, 70 policy documents were investigated using Leximancer. The program identified concepts with similar meanings and mapped their relationships to other concepts. The concept of "time" was evident in words such as "time", "current", "due", "during", and "date". In the analyses, these concepts were investigated for their co-occurrence and co-location with concepts aligned with assessment. The results showed the construction of particular

meanings about the interrelationship between time and assessment in the university policy documents (see [Appendix A](#)).

The interrogation of policy texts also included reading for the accessibility of policy documents from a student's perspective. To analyse the assessment policies for their accessibility, four criteria of accessibility (see Figure 5) were developed in response to an orienting scenario:

When I require this service, I am not at my best. This information needs to be accessible for me when I am in a health or personal crisis, or if I am advocating for my accessibility rights as a person with a disability. Sometimes the event or experience that prompts the need for assessment consideration will be a combination of events.

Four criteria of "find it, read it, use it, trust it" were established with indicators using student and person first language (Woolridge, 2023).

Figure 5: Four student-reader criteria for accessibility of higher education assessment

<p>Find it</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I can easily find the assessment policy/procedures on the university website.2. I can easily share the information with a support person to access (who may not be enrolled). <p>Read it</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">3. The title makes sense to me.4. The document has accessible fonts and layout that can be used with text to speech and OCR (optical character recognition) screen readers.5. I can read the text easily (readability score). <p>Use it</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">6. I can recognise my circumstances/situation.7. The document helps me pay attention to key information to take action.8. I can activate the process simply (without adding additional burdens or circular processes).9. I can find a person to talk to if I am not sure what to do. <p>Trust it</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">10. The title makes me feel valued.11. I can recognise myself, my identity is valued, and my entitlement is clear.12. I can evaluate the consequences for me of applying.13. I trust the policy's currency and reasonability (rationale clear, up to date).14. I trust the process as how the decision gets made is transparent.15. I have agency in the process (for example, can withdraw request, know how to appeal or advocate).
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All policies were coded using one of three scores: (0) for not evident, (1) for slightly evident, and (2) for very evident. Coding began with group coding and calibration of 10% of the policies and was then completed by a research team member who was a recent graduate with lived experience of studying with disability and extensive experience in inclusion and

policy analysis. Extensive notes for each score supported reliability. The four student reader accessibility criteria were designed to augment analyses and claims about readability and design.

The final part of the extensive content analyses involved the Bacchi (2009) framework guiding interrogation of the policy documents in terms of “what is the problem represented to be (WPRB)?”. The position is taken that policy documents are representations of solutions to problems which means that analyses can investigate the problems: How they are shaped and represented. Six questions guide the analyses (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2):

1. What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this ‘problem’ representation?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

Four assessment policies were selected for close reading and analysis using the Bacchi WPRB questions. Researchers analysed each of the four policies focusing on representations of students/equity, and assessment/time. For each analysis question, the researchers drew together textual evidence based on key topics, repetition of ideas, the modality of language and emphases and elaborations evident in subheadings. A summary table was created that synthesised the analyses and enabled a comparison of policy responses and the ways that the policies represented problems and potentially high-equity practices and solutions

5.2.3 Phase 3: Identifying good practice

The third phase of the data collection and analyses focused on RQ4 and its question about how universities that currently offer more flexibility and considerations of time within their policies manage this within their systems. This phase considered accounts of practice. Universities were identified from the Phase 2 policy content analyses for their flexible and unique processes in relation to time/timing including high accessibility scores (accessibility analysis) and high number of listed circumstances. In addition, universities with particularly inclusive mechanisms and/or practices (referred to as potentially high-equity practices) were identified. While it was originally anticipated that two universities would participate, the breadth of potentially high-equity practices identified led to additional universities being invited to participate in focus groups discussions or interviews, depending on staff availability. Four universities consented, nominating two groups:

- i) key assessment policy and practice decision-makers and leaders (for example, Vice Presidents Learning/ Teaching/ Deputy Vice Chancellors (Academic), Deputy Deans Learning, Teaching and Learning/ Accessibility staff)
- ii) educators implementing these policies in their courses.

In total, nine focus group discussions or interviews were conducted (see Table 2).

Table 2: Focus group/interviews conducted

Institution (labelled)	Focus group/interview	Attendance
University E	Leaders Educators	<i>n</i> = 4 (focus group) <i>n</i> = 6 (focus group)
University F	Leaders Educators	<i>n</i> = 4 (focus group); <i>n</i> = 1 (interview) <i>n</i> = 4 (focus group)
University G	Leaders	<i>n</i> = 4 (focus group)
University H	Leaders Educators	<i>n</i> = 1 (interview) <i>n</i> = 2 (focus group); <i>n</i> = 1 (interview)

Note. Please see [Appendix G](#) for a sample of focus group/interview questions.

With permission from participants, the focus groups discussions and interviews were recorded and live transcribed in Microsoft Teams. All transcriptions were checked for accuracy against the recordings. Coding of the transcription data was undertaken drawing on codes developed in the analyses of Phases 1 and 2. Second cycle coding methods were employed to construct six themes: university values, university policy, processes/structures/systems, individual programs, teaching staff, and students. These are presented in the following section on findings.

5.2.4 Phase 4: Dissemination and feedback on the model and framework of questions

Phase 4 of the project was designed as a final collaborative opportunity with key stakeholders to gain feedback data on the outcomes of the project, principally the conceptualisation of the relationship between higher education assessment, time, and equity and the recommendations for future innovation and change. To this end, this phase comprised a National Roundtable event to discuss the empirical evidence of common assessment practices in relation to time/timing and equity students and the possibilities for institutional and sector-wide change. A key aim was to gather feedback on the framework of questions developed as part of this project from peers across the sector. The framework was further refined based on this feedback.

6. Findings

This section is arranged according to the phases of the project: Phase 1, drawn from the student interview analyses, which responds to RQ 1; Phase 2, drawn from multiple policy analyses and responds to RQs 2 and 3; Phase 3, drawn from focus group analyses; and Phase 4, drawn from the National Roundtable feedback, which responds to RQ 4. Each subsection presents key findings that are synthesised in the Discussion section of the report.

6.1 Student voice – impacts of time on assessment

The interview analyses indicated that priority was given by students to time and its impact on their engagement with course content necessary for completion of assessment; their interactions with assessment deadlines and choices about access to supports were based on time available; completion of assessment was negotiated around complexity from within and outside the university.

6.1.1 Accessing necessary assessment content

Students reported being dependent on information made available to them about assessment time and timing. Accurate and organised unit-based resources focused on time assisted them to “arrange” their time around assessment and due dates: “I could access Moodle and still see where I needed to be up to with my assessments” (Angela). Clear expectations around student time and its relationship to assessment and levels of performance were identified as necessary:

perhaps maybe right back at the beginning of the course they may need to say, ‘If you put 12 and-a-half hours in, you will pass this subject.’ If you actually want to get any better than a pass, you’re probably looking more at 20 hours. (Yana)

Moreover, extra time was identified as crucial for first-year students to navigate and understand the processes, software, and assessment genres that they were unfamiliar with:

I think I understood what I was meant to do, but I think having a little bit more time [to] sort of get used to how everything works ... would have probably been beneficial. (Angela)

6.1.2 Decision-making to meet assessment deadlines

Data indicated that students made decisions about what they would and would not access to meet assessment deadlines. This included planning for assistance and feedback through the Academic Learning Centre. As one student said, “to be able to get all of your assessments looked at by the Academic Learning Centre they’ve got to be at least four days prior to due date” (Annabelle). While this assistance was recognised as valuable, some students could not “make” time to submit drafts early for feedback.

The importance of not “using” staff time was a key message, with participants not wanting to “bother the lecturer” (Chris) or create extra work for them by repeating earlier questions on the unit forum and “waste of a lecturer’s time” (Liam). The question of how much support from lecturers is needed in relation to assessment deadlines similarly pointed to the responsibility of the student themselves: “We are ... mature age students at university, and they shouldn’t have to do that [send out email reminders about assessment deadlines]” (Chris).

Students indicated that they lacked time to complete assessments, with a particular issue being assessments due at the same time. This could be overcome if lecturers gave choice around time, for example staggered deadlines for different topics due at different times. This option not only matched students’ interests but also offered an opportunity to manage their time more effectively and avoid a bottleneck of assessments due for several subjects/units at once: “I chose the first one because I could easily finish it early instead of having to wait ... because I had, like, exams and other assignments. I just got it out of the way” (Rayna). Conversely, this posed a problem for students who chose topic options that were due earlier as they missed out on the targeted learning about formatting and genre, which occurred later in this first-year course: “I ... don’t feel like everyone was given equal opportunity, in terms of getting that information from the tutorials that they could use in their essays” (Hope).

The data included only few mentions of extensions, possibly because this was not specifically asked about in the original interviews. However, the data showed that students were aware of the availability of extensions where needed (Erika). However, the consequences of extra time were considered: “I felt that if I get an extension and if I complete an extension day, I could miss assignment 2, assignment 3 so I thought ... better to complete assignment 1 as per everyone else” (Sanjiv).

6.1.3 Timing assessment completion

Completing assessments was described as a time-bound activity, with students choosing to prioritise time to certain parts of their assessment to maximise grades: “I’m running out of time, I really want to focus on this part ... that’s worth a lot of marks” (Bianca), or, alternatively, making choices about allocating time according to what “I need to do and what is extra” (Sally). Complexity existed in group projects where students negotiated time with other people. This worked well where there was a shared idea of time and how to spend it: “We had four days to research and then we were all going to be getting up and presenting on the last day no matter what, we all really kept that team energy going for the entire time” (Larry). For others, however, interpretations of time and timing were not shared: “I suppose they [team members] didn’t have to work on the assignment, that was their own prerogative ... [but] you couldn’t get any work out of them” (Tim).

A key theme was the impact of complex lives on the amount of time these students had available to complete assessment tasks. Time commitments outside of study included:

- Family caring commitments: “I’ve got kids to look after and all that kind of thing, so my study time is a little bit more limited” (Emily).
- Living remote: “[campus] is ... just over an hour away ... it’s not viable for me to travel for an hour there and back for each day when I’ve got a toddler in day care” (Gabbie).

- Paid work: “I've got massive maintenance jobs on my helicopters and I'm getting them done now ... during the break periods. So, I'll also do more of my ... work life in between assessment pieces too” (Theo).

6.2 Policy analysis – circumstances meriting extra time

Examination of university policies highlighted the variation in student characteristics and circumstances that can be used as grounds for extension (see Table 3).

Table 3: Tally of reasonable grounds for extensions

Category	Sub-category	Number of universities that include these categories as reasonable grounds (<i>n</i> = 42)	Percentage of policies including this reason
Medical	Short-term illness	42	100%
	Long-term illness	41	98%
	Injury	34	81%
	Mental health	23	55%
	Childbirth	9	21%
Personal context	Personal disruptions	40	95%
	Religious/cultural commitments	38	90%
Work	Traditional paid work	34	80%
	Emergency services work	37	88%
	Caring responsibilities/unpaid work	32	76%
Trauma	Bereavement	37	88%
	Victimisation	27	64%
	Disasters	21	50%
	Trauma and hardship	31	73%
Commitments	University-related reasons	14	33%
	Elite athlete/performer obligations	35	83%
	Weddings	7	17%
	Legal processes	31	74%

Within the medical category, all universities were found to accept medical grounds as a reason for extensions, with short-term illness universally accepted across all policies. Longer-term illness was named as a legitimate reason in all but one policy (that is, 98%), with injury also appearing in the majority (81%). However, mental health concerns were listed in far fewer policies (23 policies, 55%). Given the stigma still attached to mental health, students may not see mental health issues as counting under existing short and long-term illness clauses. This silence has potential implications for equity given evidence that groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities, and people identifying as LGBTIQ+ report higher levels of mental health concerns than the population

average (Australian Government, 2024a). It was unexpected that only nine policies (21%) explicitly named pregnancy and childbirth, given its impacts upon women.

Within the next category (personal context), it was found that most policies did include some consideration of students' lives outside of university. The first sub-category, personal disruptions, included family issues (for example, relationship breakdowns, disruption to domestic relationships), technology issues, transport issues, and other broad references to personal disruption (for example, "combination of moderate problems"). Forty policies (95%) referred to at least some form of personal disruption. Most policies (38 policies, 90%) also had some provision for religious and/or cultural commitments. These considerations are particularly important for equity as it is vital that culturally and linguistically diverse students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are supported to simultaneously study and maintain culture within Western calendars, which seldom recognise their cultural days and events of significance.

The next category (work) examined the extent to which policy had provision for the impacts of paid and unpaid work. Emergency services work (for example, military deployment, emergency services, state emergency services volunteers) was most widely recognised in policy (37 policies, 88%). Paid work was named in 34 policies (80%), but often with clauses suggesting extensions could only be granted when unexpected work circumstances arose. While this is a higher percentage than reported in Moore and Greenland's (2017) analysis of Australian Open Universities' policies, more universal acknowledgement of the place of work in a student's life is important given the rising costs of living, which are making work a necessity for students who do not come from financially privileged backgrounds. Unpaid work relating to the care of children, family members, and close friends was considered in only 32 policies (76%). This finding highlights that work relating to caring remains silenced in many policies, an equity concern given that these roles fall disproportionately to women and mature-aged students.

The next category (trauma) included sub-categories relating to bereavement, victimisation, disasters, and hardship. Bereavement was recognised in 37 policies (88%). Victimisation included circumstances where the student had been the victim of, or witness to, a crime or had experienced violence or domestic abuse (27 policies, 64%). Trauma and hardship were acknowledged in 31 policies (73%). While these circumstances can potentially impact anyone, those from equity groups are statistically more likely to experience many of these circumstances (for example, domestic violence, Australian Government, 2024b), making them important considerations for student equity. Likewise, disasters (for example, natural disasters, pandemics) were named in only 21 policies (50%). While students co-located with their university's main campus may get automatic consideration when a disaster strikes (for example, flooding causes closure of main campus), those experiencing disasters in other geographic areas while studying also need to be able to receive equitable consideration.

The final category (commitments) included circumstances relating to study, events, and other obligations. Fourteen policies (33%) had some provision for extra time when university-related scheduling led to assessment problems (for example, having three exams within a 24-hour period, attending a graduation, participating in an internship, study abroad commitments). Many universities considered elite athletic or performance commitments to be grounds for extension (35 policies, 83%). Weddings were seldom considered (7 policies, 17%), while participation in legal processes (for example, jury duty, court, visa delays) were grounds at 31 universities (74%).

This analysis shows that although progress is being made—such as broader consideration of work circumstances for equity students compared to earlier studies (Moore & Greenland, 2017)—equity gaps remain. Greater consideration is needed in some policies in relation to both paid and unpaid work, alongside allowances for trauma, victimisation, disasters, and mental health concerns. There is also a need to ensure that cultural considerations are embedded into these policies, to make sure First Nations students can see their cultural concerns represented. Geographic dispersal of students must also be taken into consideration, making sure that those experiencing hardship in their local areas can see their circumstances within policy.

6.3 Key concepts around time in policy and their interrelationships

The findings from the Leximancer analyses provide a description of the key concepts and their interrelationship in 70 documents from Australian universities. These concepts and their configurations construct meanings which the analyses have made visible in the following findings (also see Figure 7 in [Appendix A](#)):

- “Time” has been shown to be the second largest concept in university assessment policies and guidelines, after the concept of “assessment”. *Time* interrelates extensively with the concept of *assessment* and other assessment-related concepts such as *award*, *document*, and *policy*. Time is a significant consideration in all critical elements of assessment, including the completion of assessment tasks, the development of assessment policies, and the preparation of documentation such as supporting materials for extension requests.
- The top 30 words that co-locate with the concept of time—assessment, student, students, course, circumstances, time, examination, date, consideration, task, unit, relevant, academic, learning, requirements, application, study, due, days, grade, period, tasks, required, document, final, mark, request, award, including, work—are mostly administrative, which suggests that time is a consideration in the administering of assessment and therefore external to the individual student.
- In relation to *time*, there are concepts that reveal information about the student’s responsibility to ensure assessment deadlines are met and the extension application is compliant with university guidance. For example, the exploration of other concepts in relation to *time* in documents from the website of one university shows co-location of concepts such as *tasks*, *extension*, *responsibility*, and *penalty*. These concepts co-locating with *time* can be understood as the imposition of responsibilities onto the student to properly follow guidelines for special circumstances, with penalties for non-compliance.

- The analysis of documents from all eight universities within the Group of Eight (Go8) shows a prevalence of time-related concepts such as *period*, *consideration*, *relevant*, *date*, *application*, *approved*, and *days*, underscoring the need for students to be responsible for adhering to university guidelines. The semantic maps also feature terms such as *University*, *Academic Board*, and *application* (capitalised as they appear in the documents), which refer to the specific university and its academic board as well as application procedures.

An unexpected concept emerged in the analysis of one Go8 university as a time-based reason for an assignment extension: *wedding*. The word “wedding” was not found in the analysed documents of any of the other universities in this sub-sample of policies, meaning it must be prominent in that particular university’s consideration of students’ special circumstances when applying for an assessment extension.

6.4 Policy accessibility

The accessibility scores for each university’s policy documents were determined by four criteria (see [Appendix F](#) for scoring summary). For a person seeking information about how to access additional time from an assessment policy, they needed to be readily able to:

- find it
- read it
- use it
- trust it.

The total scores for each criterion across the 42 universities indicated that the “use it” criterion referring to circumstances and processes helping students to take action was the most highly scored (86%), with the readability criterion next (75%). However, these actions are only possible if students can find the policy (66%) and trust the policy (47%), and both of these criteria were scored lower across the sector.

With scores being awarded a total of 15 criteria statements and the highest score being (2), the highest overall accessibility score possible was 30. While no university scored highly across all four criteria, indicating that there is still room for improvement for all, there were seven universities that had moderately high scores across all four criteria, with total scores above 25. There were six universities with total scores below 15 indicating accessibility problems, and two universities with scores below 10 indicating that their policies were highly inaccessible.

Some policies that were rated as highly useful (criterion three) and trustworthy (criterion four) were not highly accessible as scores indicated they were hard to find (criterion one) and hard to read (criterion two). Clearly more work remains to be done.

The analysis showed that universities were not consistent with their use of terminology, which could lead to additional confusion for the reader. For example, the same kinds of provisions were sometimes called an assignment extension, special consideration/provisions, or disability support plan/individual action/disability action plan. These phrases were seen to have similar meanings across universities, with slight variations

in terminology when all three terms are used within the one institution. Not all universities use all three terms. Most often the terms were used in these ways:

- **Assignment extension:** is the granting of additional time to complete an assignment.
- **Special consideration/provisions:** covers all manner of unexpected events on the day of an exam or when an assignment is due. This can lead to deferred exams, alternative assessment arrangements, an extension on the assignment. This is a varied response across universities.
- **Disability support plan/individual action/disability action plan:** typically a hierarchical document, which often leads to an assignment extension or special consideration/provisions. As disability support is legislated, the details of the subordinate processes (assignment extension, special consideration) are also often filled with requirements and disability jargon that speak to obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and Disability Standards for Education 2005.

Many of the policies used the language and processes that reflect assessment accommodations from the Disability Standards legislation (Disability Discrimination Act, 1992; Disability Standards for Education, 2005) even when the student experience was not a medical issue. For instance, students were often required to provide medical reports as documentation, even for issues that were not medical in nature. This creates a burden of additional time and expense for students. The medical/legal framing also positions students as people who are “broken”, with accommodations requiring students to identify themselves with labels that have stigma attached (Grimes et al., 2019). This medical model of disability does not recognise the social and political structures that place additional burdens on students.

Overall, students would need a high level of policy literacy to understand the processes and policies or even to locate the policy, which is often buried deep in university bureaucracy. Few students would have this level of familiarity with policy discourses, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed or require assistance with their studies.

Finding policy documents was made more difficult by some websites and policies displaying deactivated links. Given the cyclic nature of university review processes, it is possible that web development cycles were not synchronised with policy review cycles. In addition, website pages were not always named the same as the related policy. Some websites had a chat bot that could respond instantly to queries. However, to activate the chat bot, students were generally required to provide a lot of personal and/or sensitive information. Some students may prefer the anonymity of a chat bot, but for others this may prove problematic.

6.5 What is the problem represented to be? A close analysis of four policies

The following four policies represent typical yet differing ways that the problem of needing additional time for assessment is considered (see Appendices B–E for full analyses).

6.5.1 An institution with a traditional looking policy and low-equity potential

In University A, students requesting extensions are positioned in the policy as interrupting the important work of the administration team. The problem of extensions can be managed (processed) at arms-length from teaching and learning, and the faculty office can determine what issues of equity and transparency are and how they can be addressed or resolved. Consistency is the unproblematic aim, and equity is mistakenly conflated with equality or sameness and not seen as a right but a favour that may be granted. Time is represented as predictable and plannable, and students must meet the schedules as set out by the institution. Students who seek assessment considerations may feel uncertain whether they would be supported, leading to additional stress and disadvantage under the current policy. See [Appendix B](#) for further exploration of this policy.

6.5.2 A Go8 university with a traditional looking policy with high-equity potential

In University B, timely completion of assessment is of reciprocal value to the learner and institution. The problem of assessment disruptions for high-priority equity groups is not seen as exceptional or unexpected but part of life, and significant decision-making can be done at the Subject/Unit Coordinator level. Students are positioned in the policy as partners in learning and in upholding the values and standards of the institution; that is, they do their part to maintain good faith with the university. The terms of this relationship are underpinned by a strong legal discourse—such as, “Subject to the provisions of this sub-clause, a student who attempts an examination is presumed to be fit to do so”—and a very long policy document with multiple sections and sub-clauses. The range of circumstances that can be considered is broad, and there is an assumption that students are sufficiently empowered to represent themselves if they do so in a “timely” way. Assessment is for learning and the fair evaluation of student work in relation to the standards. Individual academic staff are decisionmakers who are expected to act “reasonably” in negotiations for extensions of time. What’s only very thinly disguised—by the equitable guiding principles, reasonable considerations, and the neutrality of the legal discourse—is the enormous power difference between the two parties in the contract. Students who do not (or cannot) behave in ways that comply with this expectation would find it difficult to advocate for themselves. The legal discourse could be so intimidating and confusing that students may not initiate the process to access support. See [Appendix C](#) for further exploration of this policy.

6.5.3 A technology university with an innovative looking policy with potentially highly accessible language

In University C, a first read of the policy positions the institution as supportive and caring, using language such as, “We understand that events can occur that may mean you will miss key dates ... It’s important not to get overwhelmed ... We’re here to support you”. Students from equity groups are those with “unfortunate circumstances” that are “genuine” who need additional time decided by “your teacher ... with you”. What is not clear is the criteria the teacher uses to make the decision. While it is expected that students will have disruptions to their studies, including non-medical events, a medical doctor or someone with AHPRA registration is required to confirm all disruptions by completing a medical certificate. This is an extended application of the medical model of disability. Regardless of the circumstances, the timelines are the same and the amount of time provided is the same, reflective of an equality—rather than equity—discourse. Timelines represented are complex, requiring students to know the week of their course. The starting dates for multiple courses are listed on the website, with students identified by their “intake” number. For example, intake 7 commences studies in March. The high modality by using “must” and “no later” indicates that power is held by the University; for example, “must be submitted using the appropriate online form by no later than 5pm of the third working day after the originally scheduled due date or exam date.” The caring language may appear supportive, but the relationship is a paternalistic one, with several inequitable assumptions underpinning the operation of the policy. See [Appendix D](#) for further exploration of this policy.

6.5.4 A regional university with a long, dense, text-based document and high-equity potential

In University D, students requesting different assessment time is an expected occurrence as part of the dual policy of being equitable to students and maintaining the University’s academic standards to meet federally legislated requirements. The policy acknowledges that students come from a range of backgrounds and life experiences. Assessment equity is represented as being achieved through clarity of processes. Students are positioned in the policy as having the right to fully participate. Students are expected to engage in civic actions like requesting reasonable adjustments or engaging in conscientious objection. At the same time, students’ rights must serve the higher purpose of “maintaining University academic standards”. The repeated inclusion of this particular phrase at the end of many of the sub-clauses indicates that the university retains the overall power to make decisions to meet the requirements of the regulators and maintain academic standing in the community. Students and educators would need to spend considerable time working out processes. Time is represented mostly as being something that can be reasonably negotiated in the first place between teachers who plan, and students who advocate for their needs. This requires a level of relational interaction that is a challenge for teachers and students in a distributed campus/student population and increases the requirement for students to have or develop skills in advocacy. Teacher workload is increased. Support for students is managed through specificity about the processes, which includes multiple provisions to negotiate the timing of assessment. This approach may inadvertently undermine equity; while the intention is to promote transparency through numerous specific regulations, the sheer volume of rules and guidelines can ultimately obscure clarity. See [Appendix E](#) for further exploration of this policy.

6.6 Focus group findings

The focus group findings are presented here as themes drawn from the data. While they are presented here as separate themes, they are over-lapping and interdependent.

6.6.1 Values around inclusion

Participants across the four universities identified institutional values that underpinned their policy decision-making and practice in relation to diverse students and time. Stated values were derived from and are responsive to the university context. They were similarly focused on each university's positioning of students as well as institutional and staff roles and responsibilities in meeting student needs:

- University E: Both leader and practitioner participants identified the importance of trust in students and their needs and awareness of students' complex lives, the provision of support for students around assessment and time, with student aspirations at the centre.
- University F: Participants acknowledged the "social responsibility of the university in empowering students" (Participant UniF_L_A).
- University G: A deliberate move towards more supportive policies in relation to time and diverse students came with institutional "aspirational goals around increasing enrolments of equity students from equity backgrounds" (Participant UniG_L_B).
- University H: "Values of collegiality, integrity, collaboration, working together" (Participant UniH_L_A) were foregrounded as underpinning assessment policy design and enactment.

While these stated values were focused on support for students through considerations around time, the link between values and policy and its enactment was represented differently across and between universities. Common to these descriptions was the push and pull of values and the experiences of staff and students in relation to assessment and time. For example, University E leaders assumed that their values were held across the institution and shared by staff, with workload considerations less important than the shared institutional goal/value of supporting students. In contrast, University F's social responsibility towards students was juxtaposed with the need to balance fairness and equity while considering students, staff, and systems in time-related assessment decisions or considerations that were recognised as vital in a time of policy change. University G made changes to processes in response to increases in applications for special consideration (over many years) and increased workload of educators in addressing those extension approvals. Policy design and decisions at University H were made as part of "a culture of consultation, socialisation, and allowing people to have a voice" (Participant UniH_L_A). Wide-ranging consultation with staff (for example, teachers, leaders, accessibility staff) and students, and recognition of the legitimacy of a broad range of views in relation to time and assessment, enabled the institution to arrive at a supportive and equitable policy that was deemed acceptable to all involved. University G reported a similar approach of involving a range of students in conversations with different levels of the university hierarchy, through different structures and mechanisms. The values of the institution influenced a range of projects that ultimately "seed those discussions [about equity] more broadly ... it's something that may

come from either practice or top-down from policy. There's sort of cross-pollination" (Participant UniG_L_A).

Sitting alongside the focus on student support in university values and culture was a common concern with the perceived tension between inherent/industry/job requirements and assessment policy that allowed flexibility in time in relation to assessment. This included:

- uncertainty around the role of the university in preparing graduates to adhere to industry-specific/perceptions of job-related time requirements (University E)
- whether flexible time allowed during a student's studies may influence their ability to demonstrate skills within timeframes (University F)
- institutional values around improving timing of assessment to support students' diverse needs
- the focus on producing industry-ready graduates.

Some teaching staff questioned aspects of equitable and supportive assessment design and opposed attempts to make additional time available to students (University H). See Table 4 for data relevant to this theme.

Table 4: Values – sample data

Theme	Quote
Values and inherent/job requirements	<p>Tension</p> <p>“They're expected to know what they need to know. We are very allowing of extra time in assessments, but as sonographers and every lecturer in sonography is a sonographer, we know that they're going to need to be faster as sonographers ... like they're going to need to know it on the spot.” (Participant UniE_P_C)</p> <p>“Is it really if we've been supported throughout making reasonable adjustments to time and then we expect at the end that they are then able to handle that [full time work], is that really equitable ... it's not our job to ensure that we graduate teachers who are able to go into the workforce full time ... that teacher may be an amazing teacher, but has the capacity to work .8 or .6, and will do a wonderful job at that. Yet our systems, our policies, our accreditation, you know, our external accreditation body expects that they are able to function in the full-time capacity and we have no flexibility around that.” (Participant UniE_P_F).</p> <p>Uncertainty</p> <p>“But the other aspect is, what does industry want of our graduates, or what do the employers want of our graduates? Do they care that we give them extensions? Or in industry, are your employers saying, yep, not a problem with us because we can deal with that flexibility when they come out and graduate.” (Participant UniE_P_E)</p>

6.6.2 Policy

6.6.2.1 Purpose

Assessment policy has a dual purpose in each of the universities:

- 1) An authoritative purpose in identifying what is accessible, inclusive, and equitable in assessment practices in relation to time, influenced by shared institutional values and knowledge about their student cohorts: “we have written it with a mind’s eye thinking about our different students and their different needs” (Participant UniH_L_A).
- 2) A regulatory purpose in informing the ways in which this purpose is transformed into action through systems and people: “the policy is there to support ... coordinators and us [Deputy Deans Learning and Teaching] in our decision making. But you know it allows the students that easy process for assignment extensions” (Participant UniE_L_B).

6.6.2.2 Design – language, structure, detail

The language, length, and level of detail in policy documents influences how accessible information about assessment, and the application for and of time, is to staff and students. As can be seen in Table 5, there is a clear tension between making things visible to assessment policy users, with too much detail presenting as a constraint (overwhelming, difficult to find information), and ensuring sufficient information is made available and not lost when the size of a document (and therefore the detail) is reduced.

Table 5: Two contrasting policies

Institution	University E	University F
Description of policy documents (compiled by research team)	<p>One relevant document:</p> <p>Assessment policy and procedure (Higher Education Coursework): 31 pages (including details of alternative tasks, extensions after due dates, range of reasonable adjustments, wide range of acceptable reasons for adjustments for exceptional circumstances).</p> <p>Features:</p> <p>Adjustments to assessment in response to conscientious objection (to use of animals for scientific purposes).</p> <p>Separate section and detail on extensions of time for assessment. Extensions up to 4 weeks.</p>	<p>Two relevant documents:</p> <p>Assessment Procedure – Adjustments (including Special Consideration): 5 pages, clearly set out, succinct.</p> <p>Reasons and documentation: 6 pages, clearly set out (including category, circumstance, required supporting documentation.)</p> <p>Features:</p> <p>Provides examples and “case-by-case basis” option for things that do not fit the supplied examples.</p> <p>Range of levels of adjustment options clearly set out.</p> <p>Language is supportive: “They [subject coordinator] are here to help you and understand that this is a challenging time for us all [having</p>

Institution	University E	University F
		difficulties with studies/unable to submit on time].”
Challenges and affordances	<p>“I think a lot of ... these sorts of scenarios are captured well in the ... policy, but the price you pay is, it's become a really, really big document that even ... academics find it hard to sort of decipher in certain places. I think it covers a lot of ground in terms of you know what scenarios, what can be done and ... but it's too lengthy. I think that's ... maybe not complex, but it's too lengthy and obviously by being lengthy it is complex. [DDLT making a decision using] the policy is not a trivial task. Sometimes it takes a while, just maybe four things that you need to sort of compare when making a decision. There it is difficult.” (Participant UniE_L_C)</p>	<p>“There has been a conscious effort ... around the importance of not having policies that are pages and pages and pages long and, where possible, not having shopping lists type pieces in policy. But I said you've got to be careful ... there is a balancing act of that, because if you make it too vague, it leaves it very much up to interpretation, and people then don't know what to do, and in many instances, people are referring to a policy for some direction.” (Participant UniF_L_C)</p>

Three additional considerations that influenced language, length, and detail were evident:

- Differentiating for intended audience: “Depends on the policy. So, if we're writing a validation and moderation policy, that's fairly staff-centric. If we've got something like a student misconduct policy, then that's going to be more student-centric. So, it's not a one-size-fits-all.” (Participant UniF_L_D)
- Ensuring policies are detailed yet adaptable to meet individual student needs: “And didn't have so much in them that we were so heavily constrained by the policy that we couldn't actually do what was in the best interest of a student.” (Participant UniF_L_E)
- Balancing the complexities of the organisation: [University G] “is a complicated organisation, teaches everything from single person dentistry classes to maths classes with 3000 students, so it has to work across everything ... It is a struggle. And finding the sweet spot between centralising and localising is ... always an issue.” (Participant UniG_L_A)

6.6.3 Processes, structures, and systems

6.6.3.1 Processes for policy change

While policy provides guidance and authoritative information around assessment and time, participants indicated that university processes, structures, and systems determine how that policy plays out in practice and how time is distributed or made available to students. For many participants, there was tension between the intentions of policy, the mandatory processes to support implementation, and the structures and systems that either facilitated or hindered inclusive assessment practices in relation to time. Universities routinely review policies and procedures; this process is cyclic, scheduled, and completed through a committee procedure. Participants from all universities involved in this study reported that changes to assessment policies in relation to time and access to time had been implemented or were planned to be implemented in the near future. In some instances, this involved change that had occurred incrementally over time or in response to:

“It’s certainly a lot of feedback from student advocacy, who deal a lot closer with students than what we do in situations, and the feedback from advocacy is that you know that the policy was difficult for students to interpret.” (Participant UniE_L_B)

“Probably more reacting to circumstances, so ... coming back from COVID, rise of integrity cases, rise of cost-of-living pressures, increased numbers of students registering with disability mental health, students registering mental health issues growing in our high schools and with us, and last ... lately AI. ... We’ve been kind of changing policy every semester just to react to where our students are as much as who they are.” (Participant UniG_L_A)

- evidence of the need for major change drawn from various sources (for example, student advocacy staff or an appeals committee indicating that students had trouble accessing information or flagging the need for simplification, convenience, and compassion in applications for time)
- institutional data that indicate underperformance by particular groups; current rising cost-of-living pressures (a key concern for equity students who often work full-time and care for other family members and were disproportionately influenced by the costs/impost of getting medical certificates to apply for further time)
- staff-related issues, such as academic time and workload associated with supporting students to access time, the need to reduce costs in relation to workload, and the need for increased consistency of decision-making (see [Section 6.6.4.1](#))
- centralised decision-making across the university, including assessment extension approvals
- issues impacting assessment design and practice (for example, concerns about GenAI and assessment, rising numbers of integrity cases, the possibilities for more flexibility around assessment design and timing that were recognised during the COVID-19 pandemic).

6.6.3.2 Consultation processes

“COVID actually made it easy for us to implement because that ... kind of gave the whole sector a reason to think differently ... because we couldn't get a student to go and get a medical certificate or to go to the counselling services or to do all of that. So, we said, let's just take that off, understand that the world is a terrible place at the moment and that we want to be able to be a little more liberal.” (Participant UniF_L_E)

Two contrasting approaches to institutional consultation on assessment policy (generally) and in relation to time were identified in the leader focus group and interview data. The first involves broad consultation across the university, with potential challenges including the need for a longer lead-in time to policy change to accommodate the range of voices (University H). Broad consultation was also a feature of work being completed by University G, where the student voice was considered essential in developing their growing focus on equity and inclusion. Different mechanisms for hearing student voice or getting feedback included students as partners initiatives, student representative councils, student representative groups (undergraduate, postgraduate) that included disability and welfare officers, equity student groups, and committees that include student representatives. In addition, heads of schools, communities of academics, and faculty representatives were included in discussions about assessment design. Students as partners played a role in innovation that preceded policy through internal grants designed to develop more innovative practices. While these types of projects were not necessarily (or solely) focused on issues around time and assessment, involving students in this way prioritised their perspectives and voice, with one leader indicating this “might proceed it through practice and chang(e) ... the way people do things” (Participant UniG_L_A).

“And then once you see examples that work, that may be part of the institutional way that we think about what that... how that might translate into policy or even procedure, and it's important. I think the... the bottom-up practice and innovation, because different faculties will be dealing with local, other things that come outside of institutional policy, for example, like faculty procedure or accreditation requirements or other things. So that might be a part of the... an ongoing narrative that it's not just occurring... policy in isolation. There's stuff preceding it.” (Participant UniG_L_A)

One university (University E) took a less widely consultative approach to changing its assessment policy. Changes would generally happen in response to feedback and data from relevant groups which resulted in a draft document completed collaboratively by the Deputy Deans Learning and Teaching (DDLTL). A potential challenge of this approach was that the draft document was produced after DDLTL discussion, but prior to student consultation. The student representatives therefore provided feedback on a draft document rather than being involved in a dialogue aimed at developing ideas.

6.6.3.3 Processes and systems for policy enactment around time

Data from focus groups and interviews show that there are varying levels of flexibility in how policy related to time is applied and interpreted within institutions and between participating institutions. This was largely attributed to the different processes and systems within universities that determine who has responsibility for, and influence over, access to time for students.

Inflexibility of systems within participating universities was seen as a common and multi-dimensional problem and included:

- structural inflexibility that affects learning and assessment time due to:
 - a) a term-based system of arbitrary due dates that restricts how time is made available and experienced by students
 - b) processes for marking/grading within term-based structures that influence how time is distributed to academic staff and how this structure influences the distribution of time to students
- complex, centrally controlled systems that are sometimes not time effective
- inflexible, time-limited processes requiring documentation that affect equity students (for example, submission of a doctor's certificate)
- systems that do not interact, precluding oversight or coordination of information that can inform decision-making, or creating workloads.

Educators must work within systems that make accessing time problematic for students. This reveals itself as a tension for both educators and students:

I'm trying to adhere to policy ... yet we have many geographical isolated students who, being able to find a JP [Justice of the Peace] to be able to sign off on a stat dec [statutory declaration], or a Commissioner of Decs [Declarations] is pretty difficult, and it's not something that they can get and have happen within the timeframes that they need to. (Participant UniE_P_F)

Existing, inflexible systems can prevent change towards more equitable practices:

If you have a student access plan, you're meant to be able to use that to get automatic seven-day extensions. But ... our student system doesn't talk to our learning management system ... so if a student applies for an extension they do it through this system, which is not connected to their access plans, they have to attach that and then this is decided at a school level, say ... and then that doesn't get through to the course coordinator, it's sent through an email ... the schools end up managing these massive spreadsheets. (Participant UniH_L_A)

6.6.4 Educator decision-making

6.6.4.1 Decision-making models

The data showed evidence of various different models of decision-making (such as, educator decision-making and centralised decision-making). At University E, key decision-making around time, the circumstances for time, and how policy related to time is enacted largely sits with educators, including school-based leaders who have responsibility for academic leadership in teaching and learning (for example, Associate Deans Academic). Such decision-making can involve others, including the accessibility team and subject or unit coordinators (at two of the participating institutions, coordinators had approval responsibilities over shorter, one-off extensions and special considerations [University E, University H]).

School-based leaders involved in decision-making reported "some subjectivity" around decisions that are "on the borderline" in terms of extended time, with consideration applied differently depending on the student's explanation of "the difficulties they're facing" by

leadership staff within the relevant school (Participant UniE_L_C). These types of discretionary powers were available to school-based leaders across a number of universities (universities E, F, and H) and were written into policy. Decisions manifested as compassionate responses to students' circumstances:

If they've completed three of the four assessments, the first three of the assessments actually hit all the subject learning outcomes etcetera, we know that something bad happened they haven't initiated, but we have the ability to do that to assist the student. (Participant UniF_L_D)

Despite the clear intention that policy is implemented as written, a key challenge in all institutions was the inconsistent application of decision-making regarding time across faculties, schools, and institutions (expressed by both practitioners and leaders). Practitioners described a lack of standardisation and "correct" interpretation of the policy, with "inequities from unit coordinator to unit coordinator, which is not fair to students" (Participant UniE_P_B), and school-based differences: "Unfortunately not all schools have that flexibility and so you might have students who are taking a subject from a more strict school and then an elective from one of my subjects, and it can get confusing" (Participant UniF_P_A). This could include the ways in which coordinators foreground extension mechanisms in their subjects or units (for example, simple extension policy of five days at University G), with the possibility that individual staff who disagree with this approach "will not disclose it or encourage it".

In some instances, concerns over inconsistency led to the implementation of automated or centralised processes, which altered who was involved in decision-making. This had occurred, was planned to occur, or had been part of institutional discussions at some level at all of the participating universities (universities F and G; future plans for universities E and H). The planned introduction (in 2025) of an automated three-day extension at University F removes subject/unit coordinators from any decision-making around assessment and extra time. All decisions about extra time (three-day extensions, special consideration, design of learning access plans, and seven-day auto extensions for learning access plan holders) will be made by automated systems or staff other than the subject/unit coordinator. According to leaders, this change was primarily intended to alleviate growing staff workloads, as numbers of students applying for applications increased exponentially since the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also designed to reduce the impost on students in applying for extensions under previous rules (which required applications with documentation three days prior to assessment due date), but also to improve consistent application of decision-making: "Different academics probably assess things differently, so having a centralised response also gives that consistency; and predictability" (Participant UniF_L_B).

However, some educators were concerned that centralising decision-making in this way would remove "relational" aspects of the process and potentially lead to students abusing the system:

I'd much prefer to assess my own students' extensions based on the fact that they are mitigating circumstances, so what might be, two days or three days, I might give them a little bit more or a little bit less. I also would want to see if they're making progress in the assessment or they're just wanting a couple of days because whatever else is going on. (Participant UniF_P_C)

The need for consistency also drove similar decision-making at University G, where special consideration decisions and academic adjustments (which are circumscribed) have been centralised. In this instance, subject/unit coordinators could make the choice to override semi-automated decision-making in their individual units. Leaders, however, indicate that “it used to be quite common, it’s much less common now for people to say that theirs was different” (Participant UniG_L_A), with change towards this mechanism detected over time.

6.6.4.2 Mediation of information about time and policy by educators

“No, I don’t think they [students] do [access policy], but they get the information from our staff now.” (Participant UniE_L_A)

In all participating universities, policy is enacted through interactions between staff (both leaders and teaching staff) and students. Policy information is mediated by teaching staff at most universities, with strong indications that students do not engage with policies for information about time. Staff expressed that, “I’d be astonished if many students are reading them” (Participant UniF_P_C) and “feedback is that students don’t read the policies, they rely on... the shortened versions” (Participant UniG_L_A), indicating that students access the information through other channels.

Focus group data showed varied understandings about students’ choice and agency in interpreting assessment policy to apply for and access extra time:

- students may not see themselves as deserving of extra time, and therefore deploy agency by not applying for additional time
- students may take advantage of extra time in ways that were unfair and inequitable (for example, applying for three-day extensions without documentation for reasons that do not fit within acceptable circumstances outlined in policy [discussed above in Section 6.6.4.1])
- students’ use of available mechanisms to deploy extra time strategically should be considered legitimate.

This led to differences in how educators mediated policy information. Strategies for interpreting and reproducing policy understandings about time and the availability of time for students included:

- subject/unit learning guides housed on learning management sites (in each subject or unit—produced using a template)
- uniform university-wide subject/unit outline includes links to various internet pages containing plain English versions of the policies and links to full policy documents
- information and activities aimed at first-year students, such as training about their rights and the types of extensions and accommodations that are available
- inclusion of links to policy, videos from equity and accessibility teams, pinned forum posts that talk about the policies and how to use them, uploaded screenshots of the extension part of the policy on subject/unit learning management systems for the unit and adding this to emails to students
- providing information about time as related to assessment at orientation and during tutorials and workshops

- video resources—previous students talking about time-related and other experiences in the unit
- “push notifications” via the learning management system to follow up on students who have not completed assessments by the due date to find out whether there are extenuating circumstances that would meet the policy for an extension
- sending out reminders about assessment due dates in weekly messages to students.

The emphasis on the central role educators play in mediating policy and processes around time and how to access extra time was common at all universities. Inconsistent understanding of policy and its application was seen as a challenge to this process. In addition, the casualisation of the higher education teaching workforce was seen as a threat to implementation of policy around time as casual educators “are not privy to all of the staff meetings that we have ... accessing our policies has been at times problematic for sessional staff” (Participant UniE_L_A). The responsibility for knowing the policy sits with the academic but it depends on them “having the time to engage with it in a meaningful way and we know like all people like in different contexts, they’re going to apply a policy differently based on maybe what they understand of the student” (Participant UniF_L_D). Making a judgement, therefore, is a complex process that relies on the educator’s knowledge of the policy and the student. This was seen as a key challenge, with the need for academic staff to be mentored and supported to engage with ideas around equity and inclusion and how this is realised through application of assessment policy (University G).

7. Discussion

This project has considered how, when transparency through policy is seen as unproblematic, timely completion of assessment puts responsibility on the student without acknowledging how their assessment completion can be undermined by many circumstances outside of their control (Burke et al., 2017). With research suggesting that equity students are more likely to withdraw from study due to such complexities (Li & Carroll, 2017), it is important to make transparent and address any biases and barriers within policy that may disproportionately affect these student groups. In this project, we adopted Bearman and Ajjawi's (2018, p. 7) metaphor of transparency as "seeing through" previously obscure assessment processes and Gonsalves and Lin's (2024) understanding that transparency is not a "static attribute", but a "dynamic interplay of multiple factors" (p. 3).

This study provides an approach for critically examining assessment policy in higher education, aiming to clarify any underlying discourses and assumptions within these policies that influence how diverse student populations are represented and may experience time during assessments. As outlined in [Section 5.2](#), we employed a range of methods to look at policy through different lenses. In combination, these multiple ways into the policy have enabled the research to unearth a range of inequities (see [Section 6](#)). These analyses have also allowed insights into particular aspects of policy.

This discussion section brings together the results from all analyses performed in Phases 1–3 of the study. It is intended that the model and framework of questions could be used by institutions to guide the examinations of their own assessment policies and practices and inform adoption of more equitable assessment practices in relation to time.

7.1 Assessment time within complex systems

Complexity theory was used to synthesise findings from the study, with this theory used to frame an understanding of how systems learn, evolve, and change. Complexity theory is a good fit for understanding assessment policy in higher education as university systems do not run to rule as suggested in organisational charts or formal policy, but more like biological ecosystems that constantly adapt with nonlinear and unpredictable responses to environmental change (Eppel, 2009). Similarly, students interact within many complex family, group, and work systems beyond university, with university assessment creating feedback loops into their lives and these other systems (Balloo et al., 2024). Complexity theory has been used previously to understand issues of equity (Jackson et al., 2022), student experiences of assessment (Balloo et al., 2024; Haggis, 2011), and policy change in higher education (Eppel, 2009). This report brings these system elements together.

There is no one definition or theory of complexity, however a set of principles across several fields have been developed since the 1950s (Cochrane-Smith et al., 2014). The first is around the notion that the whole is greater than the parts, so patterns of interactions cannot be predicted by understanding how parts of the system work together (Mason, 2008). Another defining feature of complex systems is that time is not conceptualised as linear, where change causes further change in the next layer of the system in predictable, repeatable ways. Change in one part of the system is theorised as causing ripples of

emergent change in all layers at once, and the same action will have different consequences in the next instance as the system itself has already changed. Most often, change is occurring in several local adaptations from the bottom up, so the system is constantly organising and re-organising (Mason, 2008). Coherent patterns emerge from the dynamic ways that many parts and agents interact together.

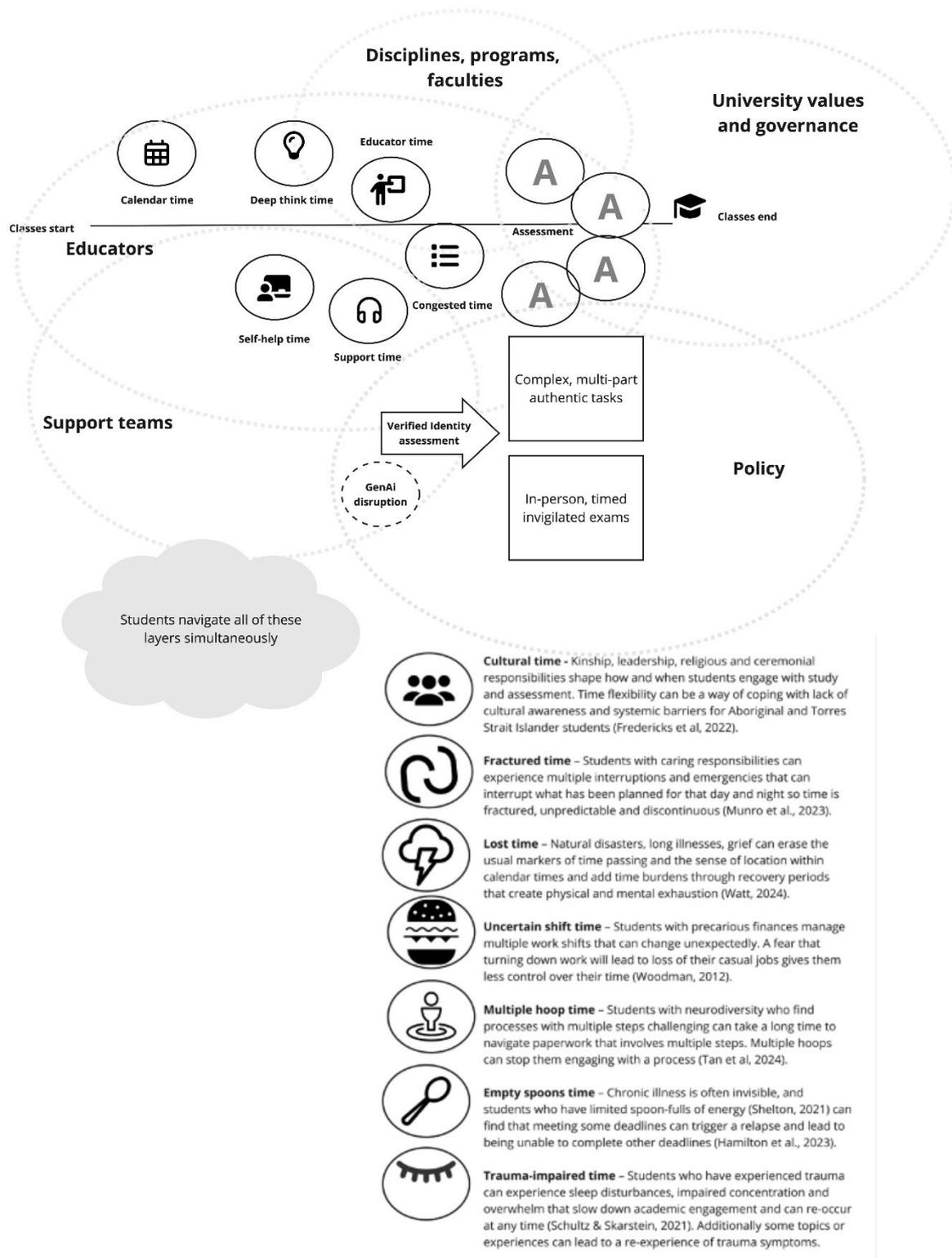
Trying to definitively model how assessment, time, and equity interact in universities is not possible as a model is necessarily simpler than the thing modelled (Osberg et al., 2008). However, an approximation of these relationships is modelled in Figure 6, which demonstrates the complexity of timescapes across institutional systems and personal circumstances that an equity student has to navigate. The model's overlapping layers highlight the challenges students experience, which also impact on the availability of time.

To accompany this model, we have developed a framework of questions to try to “keep a sense of these different levels and systems in relationship to one another” (Haggis, 2011, p. 192). As definitive causal pathways cannot be identified in complex systems, the “best chance of success lies in hitting the problem from as many angles, levels and perspectives as possible” (Mason, 2008, p. 45). It is for this reason that the report includes prompt questions that institutions can use to identify existing practices and the range of systems and people who enact assessment practices. Examples of potentially high-equity practices and their benefits are presented, along with the trade-offs that may be necessary to implement these in complex university contexts. For higher education actors seeking to bring out more equitable outcomes for students through assessment time, thinking with complexity theory can encourage particular types of actions:

1. **Recognise assumptions:** The literature review, focus groups, and policy analysis about the concepts of time identify some hidden assumptions that have powerful consequences for students whose lives have complex dynamics and are not governed by linear experiences of time. Linear, causal concepts of time that are often so strongly embedded within assessment practices are not helpful in understanding the emergent interactions in complex systems as “time is not a static variable unaffected by systems, but rather an operator in the system itself” (Osberg et al., 2008, p. 225). Time operates through the processes in the system, with interactions across layers of the system acting as a series of feedback loops (Cochrane-Smith et al., 2014). Prompts for bringing some taken-for-granted assumptions in higher education assessment policy to the surface so they can be critically evaluated are outlined in Recommendation 1.
2. **Raise awareness of tensions:** As assessment clock-time and student life-time may not correspond, there are many tensions that can add pressures to students, especially those from equity groups. Complexity framing recognises the necessity of looking across multiple levels and systems simultaneously, keeping in mind the experiences of students, educators, administrators, and policy makers (Haggis, 2011). The literature review highlighted many ways that student life-time is in tension with assessment clock-time. The focus groups and policy analysis illustrated how others within the university experience can manage these tensions via small local actions or inventive policy approaches. Prompts for exploring these tensions in productive ways across multiple levels of higher education policy are outlined in Recommendation 2.

3. **Talk within and across complex systems:** In a complex system, small changes in one part can affect many layers. Actors can perturb the system, through “rich, exponentially generated connectivity among constituent elements ... [with] the diversity of those constituent elements, and the rate of information flow—and feedback—[circulating] through the system across time” (Mason, 2008, p, 39). As Ueland, Hinds, and Floyd (2021, p. 126) noted, “small efforts may have large impacts, or large efforts may have little or no impact creating a situation where cause and effect are rarely easy to isolate”. Kitto and Gibson (2024) give twelve examples of different levels of interventions ranging from smaller quantitative interventions to more structural and paradigmatic ones. The focus groups and policy analysis highlighted various potential high-equity practices from many higher education institutions that can generate new ideas across the sector. Prompts for exploring such practices in higher education assessment policy are outlined in Recommendation 3.

Figure 6: Assessment time in complex systems



7.2 Recommendation 1: Recognise assumptions

The first project recommendation is based on the need to recognise and challenge assumptions about students that are implicitly informed by linear and causal notions of time. It is clear that assessment policy and practice need to be examined for assumptions that privilege linear time. Researchers elsewhere (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Burke et al., 2017) have posited that diverse students have very different access to time, foregrounding this as an equity issue. Despite this, this project has found that current assessment policy documents often position students as having equal access to time and of experiencing it in similar ways. The following assumptions about students and time have been identified in the policy analyses and focus group discussions and provide advice for both policy makers and educators.

Assumption 1: Students have equal access to time and experience time in similar ways

Students are responsible for “finding” time to fit within university assessment requirements, or work within the structures, systems, and processes available to access extra time. Consistent with other research that found responsibility for time lies with the student (Bennett & Burke, 2018), time-related concepts used in many policy documents analysed in this study position students as responsible for adherence to university guidelines around time, with common “solutions” including resources to help students develop time-management skills (Burke, 2022; French, 2019; Greenland & Moore, 2022). In contrast, interview and focus group data indicated that not all students have the time resources to be successful in assessment, with some existing mechanisms for extra time (for example, extensions that need documentation, allowable circumstances that are exclusionary of equity students’ realities, applications that must be submitted before due dates) unable to respond to equity students’ complex circumstances and timescapes. This finding aligns with previous research (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Burke, et al., 2017) and provides further evidence that limited access to time (as a resource) disproportionately affects students from equity backgrounds, especially in their ability to conform to traditional university timescapes.

This points to the importance of questioning deficit discourses and assumptions about student advantage through adjustments that were prominent in a range of policies analysed in this study (see [Section 5.2.2](#) and [Section 6](#)). Particular attention should be given to the role of higher education staff in responding to student difficulties rather than seeing students as responsible for removing barriers to their own learning. Indeed, in policies where interruptions were anticipated or seen as part of students’ lives, there was greater scope to negotiate support that was responsive to students’ circumstances with a wide variety of circumstances acknowledged as impacting a student’s ability to complete assessment. In this framing, support for completing assessment—such as variation to time conditions—is seen as a right and a shared responsibility negotiated between students and teaching staff. Negotiations can lead to students getting the kind of support they need, rather than support they do not need.

Moreover, as institutions seek to transition to more equitable and inclusive assessment policies, it is essential for all educators to understand the diverse needs of students, beyond—but including—those with equity markers that have been recognised for some time in universities (for example, students with disabilities).

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- Who are the students from equity backgrounds enrolled in your institution?
- Which equity backgrounds are represented within your student community?
- How are the complex circumstances of students from equity backgrounds likely to affect how they experience time and assessment?
- What is the assessment pass rate? Does it vary by equity group?
- What is the assessment extension rate? Does it vary by equity group?
- What forms of inequity might students be navigating within your institution?
- How does your university's assessment policy determine who has access to time flexibility within assessment?
 - What assumptions does this policy make about students from equity backgrounds and their relationship with, and access to, time (for example, their right to extra time, responsible for their own time, ability to access time)?
 - How does this policy support diverse students to access extra time to complete assessments?
- How would students experiencing complex circumstances in relation to time answer these questions:
 - What can I, and can't I, control in terms of time and assessment in my course?
 - How does the university recognise me and support me to access additional time?

Assumption 2: Students can independently locate relevant policy and apply it to their circumstances

For students from equity backgrounds to get the additional time they need, assessment information needs to be accessible. Heat-mapping analysis of policy documents identified that accessibility to information exists in multiple layers. Where documents are difficult to find (for example, due to inconsistent naming conventions, not easy to download or search for, or links not being current or direct), difficult to read (for example, jargon-rich or formal language, extremely lengthy and detailed, and difficult to navigate), difficult to use (for example, no clear processes or not drawing the student to key information), or difficult to trust (for example, the student cannot recognise themselves or use the information to evaluate risks or there is a lack of transparency), then students are unable to easily access the necessary time to suit their circumstances. (See [Section 6.6.2](#) for further information).

It is important for institutions to consider how policy documents name and describe the circumstances considered as grounds for extra time. A wide-ranging set of descriptions and inclusionary and exclusionary practices were identified in this study. Content analysis conducted on assessment policies showed variation in the specific circumstances named in policy. While medical reasons were recognised in all policies, specific concerns including mental health, pregnancy, and childbirth, which students may not classify as illness, were not named in many policies. Likewise, there were high levels of variation between policies around the extent to which circumstances that may disproportionately affect students from equity backgrounds were recognised, particularly around work, caring responsibilities, and cultural commitments. This variation surfaces a broader equity issue within higher education: given the wide variation in policy, an individual student's ability to access additional time due to their circumstances appears to be highly contingent on which institution they attend. There is a clear need for cross-sector dialogue to improve consistency.

Furthermore, even when policy attempts to be inclusive of a range of circumstances, strong evidence exists in other research that equity students are unaware that they qualify for accommodations or are unsure if they are eligible (for example, Bunn et al., 2019; Claiborne, et al., 2011). The disjuncture between what students use and know and what policy documents make available (identified in the data gathered in this study), would contribute to equity students' uncertainty.

Participants in our study (see [Section 6.6](#)) identified the need for high levels of policy literacy, and that this can be difficult for students, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed or requiring assistance with their studies. While some institutions are introducing, or have introduced, AI support (for example, bots) to assist students to find the information they need, a common "fix" reported in the focus group and interview data was educator mediation of assessment information (for example, providing links to policy documents, simple versions of policy, and forum posts) within subjects/units of learning. In interviews, students reported having to depend on information that educators made available about assessment time and timing. The casualisation of the higher education teaching workforce is further complicating institutional efforts to present consistent information to students. Short-term, front-line teaching staff whose role is to interact with students around university curriculum and assessment may be unfamiliar with policy and its nuances (see Section 6.6).

Promising strategies for improving policy transparency and accessibility drawn from the data included:

- producing policy documents for intended audiences (for example, plain English explanation for students)
- having more than one document, with documents clearly named and targeted (for example, "Circumstances for Assessment Extensions")
- ensuring consistent information about extensions is provided in all units of work across all programs through the use of templates.

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- Where does your university currently locate its assessment policy?
 - Would the policy be easily found using the search engine on the university website?
 - Are passwords required to access the policy or supporting materials?
- How do factors like the language, structure, and level of detail of your institution's assessment policy potentially enable or hinder students and staff to effectively access information about assessment and time?
- If a student were to read the assessment policy, how would they answer these questions:
 - Do I have a right to extra time, and can I recognise my needs and circumstances in this policy?
 - Do I understand clearly where and how to apply for additional time to complete assessments?

7.3 Recommendation 2: Raise awareness of tensions

Within universities, time and assessment are enacted via procedures and processes involving staff, students, and technology. Tensions exist between the intentions of the policy and mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder inclusive assessment practices in relation to time and determine whether students from equity backgrounds access the time they need. The following tensions and action/reflection questions are presented as prompts for discussion.

Tension: How are university values around diversity visible within assessment policies and systems?

The enactment of university values is strongly influenced and often interrupted by the need to work through systems that are time dependent. A broad range of university values were identified in the data (see [Section 5.2.3](#)). These include views of students (for example, trust, needs, complex lives, support, and aspirations) and views of the university (for example, social responsibility, empowerment, increasing diversity, collegiality, integrity, and collaboration). In practice, an expectation of trust in students and acknowledgement of their complex lives sits at odds with the requirement that students are required to provide evidence that they need extra time (for example, a doctor's certificate) and the associated cost and time imposts of doing this within a set timeframe. Similarly, while several universities involved in the study are using or working towards short auto-extensions, various complexities in systems were preventing this from happening easily (for example, where manual spreadsheets were required because systems did not support the transfer of data to teaching staff), or increasing workloads for educators (through the compounding nature of extensions that leave staff with little time to meet system requirements such as marking and recording of grades). Despite growing voices in the literature that point to the external pressures that are brought to bear on the "time, well-being or capacity to achieve" of diverse students (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2022, p. 174), penalties are commonly applied where institutional time frames for assessment due dates and extension applications cannot be met.

Inflexible time designed into systems includes arbitrary assessment due dates and timelines for marking and reporting, structures that the literature found were disadvantageous to diverse higher education students with unpredictable demands on their time outside of the university (Tai et al., 2023b). As can be seen in Figure 6 (above), students with complex timescapes must "manage" layers of university assessment time—such as, multiple subjects/units, disciplines, systems, and people—simultaneously. In response to these situations, interview data highlighted that students make strategic choices about how to engage with systems and use their time (Harris et al., 2018). In attempting to meet institutional deadlines, students must make decisions that influence how they learn and complete assessments. In keeping with previous research that found that students often prioritise assessments over the learning process (Bunn, et al., 2019) and make decisions around how they use their time (Harris et al., 2018), the data in this study indicate that students make choices about how to allocate their limited time resources when completing assessment tasks. This includes making decisions about which assessment-related content and resources to access, using extensions strategically to ensure that they meet

assessment timelines for all of their units in a program of study, and choosing which parts of an assignment to concentrate on to get the best result for the time expended. The need to make choices about how to engage with assessment and allocate scarce time is exacerbated where assessment schedules are constructed without regard for students' obligations to complete multiple pieces of assessment within short timeframes. Participants in this study identified varying appetites and abilities to innovate within the system. Key to this was coming to an agreement on which trade-offs were acceptable.

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- What university values and aspirations are expressed for assessment and inclusion?
 - What key words and symbols communicate these university values within assessment policy?
- How closely are these values aligned with the policy and the way it is enacted in the university?
- If a student were to reflect on the university's values, how might they answer these questions:
 - Do I recognise my life (and time) circumstances in the university values in ways that allow me to imagine my success?
 - Do I see these values reflected in assessment policy?

Tension: Whose voices shape policy?

The notion of voice is central to how time features in assessment policy and its enactment in practice, including who is consulted in policy design, who has responsibility for negotiating or mediating assessment time, and who has decision-making responsibilities. All institutions involved in the focus groups and interviews include a student representative on committees that have responsibility for approving assessment policy, but the point at which students enter the discussion is varied. For some institutions, this occurs at the committee meeting level, when a student representative is present and feedback is sought on a draft policy document from stakeholders on the committee before adjustment or approval.

Data in this study indicate that a stronger voice for students from equity backgrounds is necessary so that policy properly reflects their complex circumstances and the possibilities for more responsive mechanisms around time (see [Section 5.1.2](#) for further discussion). Focus group participants who reported that consultation began before an assessment policy was written and focused on wide-ranging stakeholder experiences and needs (including various student groups), described such processes as consultative and collegial, leading to supportive and equitable policy that was “acceptable” to all involved. Approaches included extensive workshops and focus groups conducted to identify key concepts and account for stakeholder needs before a policy is drafted and presented to a committee for feedback and approval. In at least one participating university, this included consultation with multiple student and staff groups. Such processes also allow universities to address typical concerns identified in the literature, including addressing assumptions that identical treatment is fair, avoiding student homogeneity in policy, and working through concerns with fairness and advantage (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Harris & Dargusch, 2020; Jung, 2002; McArthur, 2022). While approaches that involve consultation may require further time, as one participant indicated, wide consultation can short-cut lengthy committee discussions as different perspectives have already been sought and concerns addressed. When involving students in consultation

processes, it is also important to make sure they are compensated for time spent preparing for and taking part in meetings.

Consideration should also be given to the clear tension between assessment support and inherent, or industry- and job-related, requirements that surfaced in the focus group data. Both leaders and educators described juggling accreditation and discipline requirements with more flexible approaches to time and timing in assessment design. The data indicate that expectations around time and the importance of this in preparing industry-ready graduates needs to be more clearly defined given the changing nature of work and job-related time requirements. This should include an exploration of whether time-based restrictions relate to course learning outcomes or if they are present for other reasons (for example, tradition or academic integrity considerations). When exploring alternatives, educators must consider how flexibility and choice can be embedded into design to allow diverse students to “play to their strengths” (O’Neill, 2017, p. 233) while demonstrating unit learning outcomes drawing on industry ways of working. When working under time restrictions is an important learning outcome, it is necessary to signpost this as a learning outcome so reasons for limited time flexibility are clear.

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- How have assessment policy documents been developed and whose perspectives do they reflect?
- In what ways might discipline-based educators in your university think differently about the appropriateness of flexibility around time?
- To what extent are students involved in the development of assessment policy?
 - Which students are included?
 - Do these students represent the diversity within the student body?
- At what stage in the process of policy development and change are stakeholders involved, and what different methods of engaging with stakeholders are employed?
- If a student were to reflect on assessment policy in your university, how might they answer these questions:
 - Is it clear that the voices of diverse students like me have been represented/have informed the writing of this policy?
 - Do I see an opportunity in my university to contribute to conversations about policy where I can represent my needs?

Tension: Who makes decisions about time and assessment?

All leaders involved in this research described a changing assessment policy and practice landscape since the COVID-19 pandemic, with increasing numbers of extension requests and opportunities to reconsider assessment design in relation to time. Tensions occurred around institutional movements towards auto-extension systems (often centralised) that do not rely on educator decision-making. While the purpose of the move included the reduction of educator workloads (as a result of increased extension requests) and inconsistent decision-making regarding extension approvals (two targets acknowledged in leader and educator focus groups), concerns surfaced regarding the removal of the educator from the decision-making process. Educators in the focus groups from two universities who have implemented a more centralised system saw this as making it harder for them to attend to students’ needs and see the impact of assessment design decisions. Centralisation of

decision-making (external to the school or faculty) was viewed as a trade-off in order to solve problems that applied across the university, but may not apply to all schools.

Data indicate the importance of consultation with educators about their role in assessment design and time, particularly in relation to decision-making. Also of importance are the negotiations that occur at the school or faculty level with a range of actors (for example, accessibility team, unit coordinators, and students). Educators saw the role of school-based leadership in decision-making as essential, and especially important where flexibility needs to be applied to borderline decisions. Establishing how students view and use these more centralised and automated systems is an important area for future research.

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- Who is involved in making decisions about assessment extensions and accommodations (for example, lecturers, centralised team of staff, or automated computer systems)?
- What are the strengths and limitations of current human and technology-based systems? Consider factors including timeliness of decision, staff workload, staff-student relationships, consistency of decision-making, etc.
- If a student were to reflect on assessment design in your university, how might they answer these questions:
 - What is working well about how decisions are made about extensions?
 - What aspects of the current system do you find frustrating, confusing, or unfair?

Tension: How can assessment integrity and equity be simultaneously considered in assessment design?

Participants at all universities reported tensions between assessment design considerations and recent concerns with assessment security and integrity due to disruptions caused by GenAI. Approaches to ensuring assessment integrity have included re-designing assessment tasks to be more authentic and process focused. Conversely, some are returning to more in-person timed tasks with less flexibility. Such decisions sit at odds with the move towards implementation of Universal Design for Learning principles, which encourage more flexible forms of assessment, often in relation to timing (Black, Weinberg & Brodwin, 2015; CAST, 2024; Dickinson, 2018; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Stampoltzis et al., 2015).

While the need for assessment integrity cannot be denied, consideration must be given to the relevance of time in the age of AI, and how tasks can be designed to be more authentic and context-bound, without increasing time restrictions or requirements. Introducing more flexibility or choice in how students might meet learning outcomes, including reconsidering how assessment tasks can be completed progressively around flexible timelines, can enable students to manage their time more effectively (Tai et al., 2023b).

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- What changes are occurring to assessment design and practice in response to concerns about assessment integrity (particularly threats around GenAI use) at your university?
- How can recent disruptions including the COVID-19 pandemic and GenAI be harnessed to encourage more equitable assessment design?

- If a student were to reflect on assessment design in your university, how might they answer these questions:
 - Are the assessments in my current courses designed so that I'm not disadvantaged due to a lack of time?
 - Are the types of assessment tasks that prioritise academic integrity in response to GenAI (for example, invigilated exams or complex, multi-part assignments that may have multiple due dates) easy for me to access and complete?
 - Do I feel that current assessment design is more or less equitable for me, particularly in relation to assessment timing?

7.4 Recommendation 3: Talk within and across complex systems

The model developed through the project highlights the many people and systems involved in assessment implementation, highlighting the need for talk within and across complex systems when making changes to assessment policy that provide students with more flexibility around time. Complex systems thrive through feedback loops that work across layers of the system, and when new stimulus prompts adaptive changes. Through the project, numerous examples were identified that show attempts to generate ideas across university systems through dialogue—where evaluation of student needs and consideration of trade-offs have led to innovation.

The data analyses of this project (see [Section 6](#)) identified potentially high-equity practices. The data suggest that many high-equity practices have been implemented in response to contextual factors in different institutions, as university staff implement assessment practices across complex systems in ways that advance equity. These include the following examples, drawn from policy analyses, of how institutions adaptively responded to challenges in their communities, often considering assumptions and tensions discussed previously. Such challenges might come about as a result of changes or factors external and internal to the institution and are therefore often both institution-specific and shared across the sector. While many of these practices were used by multiple institutions, single examples are provided here for brevity:

- Online tools were used to save time searching for information and to access information more easily: students can check eligibility before starting the process; chat bot support 24/7; feedback option on the website regarding the usefulness of information.
- Explanation of consequences provided when applying for extension, withdrawal, and appeal; encouraging student agency.
- Assessment design that builds in negotiation of assessment tasks and dates.
- Enhanced information about assessment and time: glossary of terms; students can monitor the progress of the application; visual/infographic of the extension process.

Table 6 is framed around problems that were identified at institutions that then instigated potentially high-equity practices through innovations in their policy-writing, processes, and systems. Data analysed in Phase 3 of the project revealed that there are both benefits and challenges associated with the implementation of many of these innovations. The data

indicate clearly that trade-offs are necessary to introduce innovative, high-equity practices to support students from equity backgrounds.

Potentially high-equity practices

The following practice ideas are drawn from analyses of literature, current university policy, and focus group data and represent a wide range of approaches that are attempting to create better equity around assessment and time. They are offered here to start a dialogue about how universities and educators have adopted inclusive practices, with consideration of both the affordances and challenges in implementation.

Table 6: Examples of potentially high-equity practices intended to improve equity around time and assessment

Practice	Description	Affordances	Challenges
Include students early in policy-making	Before writing policy documents, a wide range of stakeholders, including students from equity backgrounds, take part in workshops that inform the writing of assessment policy.	<p>Student and stakeholder voices inform policy prior to policy design.</p> <p>Greater recognition of the lived experience of students and inclusion of complex and diverse circumstances.</p> <p>Stronger acceptance of policy because negotiation and agreement occurred prior to committee approval.</p>	<p>Workload and time to conduct workshop.</p> <p>Aligning consultation process with the institutional policy review schedule.</p> <p>Bringing together a broad range of stakeholder voices and managing conflicting priorities.</p>
Recognise a wide range of equity considerations	Policy documents name many specific reasons for extension eligibility, with a focus on circumstances common to students from equity backgrounds (for example, cultural commitments, work, chronic medical issues, technology issues, childbirth, trauma [including victims of crime], and carer responsibilities).	<p>Named reasons are inclusive of range of students and circumstances so they can see themselves as qualifying for extra time and feel that their life outside of university is acknowledged.</p> <p>Additional broader categories (for example, cultural commitments) also included to account for valid, but unspecified, circumstances.</p> <p>Technology can assist with navigation (for example, online tools to check eligibility and use of AI to answer questions).</p>	<p>Detailed and lengthy documents can require mediation work (for example, staff explaining the policy or assisting students to find the part they need).</p> <p>Difficulty achieving the balance between being specific (so students can see themselves as meriting extra time), but still broad enough to cover emerging or unforeseen needs.</p> <p>Risk that narrowly specifying circumstances might marginalise students whose circumstances are legitimate but not named.</p> <p>Describing concerns appropriately (for example, not using descriptor that are too ambiguous or using different terms from those familiar to the student).</p>

Practice	Description	Affordances	Challenges
Offer automatic extensions	<p>Give short automatic extensions without documentation (for example, additional 2–7 days).</p> <p>One-off discretionary examination deferral.</p>	<p>Saves students time and cost when providing documentation.</p> <p>Saves staff time when approving extension applications.</p> <p>Students can use this strategically to separate out assessment tasks that are due at the same time.</p>	<p>Practitioner concerns that students will automatically work towards the later deadline and around losing line of sight.</p> <p>Technology systems may not align (for example, extension granted in one system but not showing in another)</p> <p>Uptake can mean insufficient staff time for marking and student time to receive feedback and prepare for the next task.</p>
Assessment tasks with in-built student choice around time	<p>Assessment design allows for student choice (for example, choice between topics, each of which has a different deadline or choice to nominate a deadline within a particular date range).</p>	<p>Assessment design allows students to map their own term and plan for contingencies and assessment due date clashes.</p> <p>Encourages students to be strategic about their use of time.</p> <p>Students get some flexibility without negotiation or disclosing circumstance.</p>	<p>Potential difficulty in meeting university marking deadlines if most students choose the last possible deadline; workload associated with assigning multiple batches of assessments to markers.</p> <p>Potential for many students to select latest possible deadline and then still have difficulties when unexpected circumstances arise.</p>
Online exams with flexibility around start time	<p>Exam available during a 24-hour window, allowing students to choose their own suitable start time.</p>	<p>Allows students to work at a time of day where they can achieve the best focus.</p> <p>Allows students to plan around work and carer responsibilities.</p>	<p>Potential challenges to academic integrity; if all students complete an identical exam, students who take it early within the 24-hour window could share content with those starting later.</p>

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking about complex systems in institutions include:

- What stakeholders and influences external to the university affect institutional thinking about time and assessment?
- How do systems within the university determine how extra time for assessment is applied for and granted? To what extent do these systems consider the needs of all stakeholders?
- How do university systems (including those used for data collection and storage as well as extension requests via learning management systems) facilitate staff to enable students' access to extra time?
- University structures for teaching and learning are usually time-bound (for example, term dates and due dates for marking). How do these structures affect the availability of extra time for students?
- If a student were to reflect on the process for applying for extra time, how might they answer these questions:
 - How much time does it take to apply for and be granted extra time?
 - How many times do I have to make my circumstances visible to others?
 - Are there any risks involved in accessing extra time?

7.5 Recommendation 4: Generating action and innovation

The project highlights the power of approaching the conditions inherent in university assessment systems and their connections with students' circumstances as complex, with tensions and paradoxes both for governance and the students themselves. Feedback loops with stakeholders as well as inductive and iterative cycles of analysis provided detailed insights into the representations of assessment and its intersection with students and time. The argument is that such intensive investigations and findings provide awareness that forms the foundation for new knowledge and learning. Crucially this knowledge foundation needs to pave the way for action and innovations in policy and practice. In the case of this project, this means the possibility for change in the design and administering of assessment, especially in response to the challenging circumstances of equity students. The examples of innovative policy provisions made visible during the project can be replicated or adapted to localised institutional contexts. In addition, practitioners can find spaces of possibility within their own responses that address students' needs while remaining aligned to the policy mandates.

In addition, this project has highlighted the value of collaboration and some of the potentially high-equity assessment practices of some universities, allowing these to be a catalyst for change. By sharing these practices and providing opportunities for discussion during the National Roundtable, knowledge was disseminated and simultaneously refined as the first step towards action. The project's National Roundtable brought together academics from four universities. Participants were able to learn from the project, but also share their own institutions' innovative approaches, including examples of how Gen AI is being employed to help improve student experiences of extension and accommodation systems, ways student voice is incorporated into policy, mechanisms to easily give students extensions, and novel

approaches to design. This sharing led to deep learning, with one participant observing that “deficit seeps into the way that we structure time.”

This new knowledge was also seen as a platform for action. For example, one group reported that the draft model and framework of questions from the project, shared at the Roundtable, might “help start conversations and collaboration between units that might not ordinarily work together” within their university. The project team also benefited from the rich discussions at the National Roundtable, using participant feedback to revise the model and framework to better capture the complexity of students’ experiences of time within assessment and the contextualising university policies and systems.

Based on the success of the National Roundtable, a recommendation is that the higher education community continue to have robust discussions about what student circumstances should merit extra time, and how extra time can be allocated consistently across institutions to ensure equity and academic success. Collaboration should occur at all levels: from individual teaching teams who can meet to discuss possible changes to assessment design, to cross-institutional meetings of university leaders who can work together to share good practice and work to create a more consistent policy landscape across institutions. The processes of collective learning, exploration, and experimentation are crucial for addressing the problems that arise in the management of institutional policies and the will to accommodate individual needs (for example, Head, 2019).

Action/reflection questions to generate active and innovation in institutions include:

- What collaborative processes could be introduced to drive change in assessment policy related to time in your institution? What existing mechanisms in the institution could be used to inform this change and how could they be used differently (for example, gathering extensive data about students from equity backgrounds to inform review processes or adopting a consultative approach before writing or changing the assessment policy)?
- How can your university work with internal and external stakeholders to secure and communicate alignment between inclusive values and the needs of students and industry (for example, accreditation requirements)? Who should be consulted about such a modification?
- How can your institution ensure that a range of voices are heard when re-designing policy to be more equitable? How might actors who are sometimes marginalised in policy conversations and system-level decisions (for example, permanent and casual teaching staff) be involved in creating the assessment policies that affect their daily work with students?
- Which systems and processes related to assessment and time at your university could be improved to reduce the demands on students and staff?
- How can your institution develop or adapt potentially high-equity practices in ways that meet your staff and students’ needs and drive change at the institutional level? If a student were to redesign your assessment policy, what might it look like? What would the major changes be and why would students be driving such changes?

8. Conclusion

This research project examined how Australian higher education policies currently construct and consider student timescapes in assessment. It was evident that some universities have more flexible policies and practices related to assessment and time. The analysis identified how time and equitable outcomes are managed within university systems. Publishing the results of this project, our hope is that it allows Australian universities to learn and improve together.

The first phase of the project investigated the perspectives of students from equity backgrounds about time in assessment. The second phase involved the analysis of assessment policies from all Australian universities, providing insights into when additional time is justified and revealing underlying beliefs about students and their relationship to time. These findings allowed us to identify potentially equitable practices. During the third phase of the project, we identified the complex contexts, systems, and processes that inform and sometimes hinder inclusive assessment practices in Australian higher education institutions.

Findings highlight that students experience assessment across and within multiple layers of university and personal time and space. Rather than seeing students as responsible for “finding” time to fit within university assessment requirements, universities can take responsibility for critically analysing their policies in action. Instead of asking students to work within complex and difficult to navigate systems and processes that might not clearly include them, universities are encouraged to develop more inclusive approaches that support diverse student populations while maintaining academic standards.

The process of making assessment more inclusive of students’ diverse timescapes is not easy. We draw on the words of one of the focus group participants, an educator, who indicated that it “takes a serious amount of effort to think through how the temporal load affects different people differently and how ... an institution could take that on as a serious problem” (Participant UniH_P_A). This report presents a step to support universities to undertake the serious effort needed to address issues of time and assessment for students from equity backgrounds. The discussion section of this report has been structured around a research-informed model and framework of questions to guide institutions to consider their own policies and practices. Informed by complexity theory, the model illustrates the multiple layers that influence the experiences of students from equity backgrounds with time and assessment and how students are required to manage and negotiate these layers. The framework is underpinned by four main recommendations for institutions to move towards more equitable time and assessment practices. Questions provided within each recommendation can assist institutions to reflexively examine institutional practices, with a focus on student experiences with assessment and time. The discussion section also includes potentially high-equity practice examples, together with consideration of both the benefits and challenges of implementing such practices.

The fourth recommendation raises the need for action and innovation in assessment policy involving a reflexive approach to designing more equitable assessment practices. Our discussions with leaders and educators, and participants who attended the National Roundtable (an output of this project) indicated that there are complexities for educators and leaders responsible for policy in addressing the problem of how to make assessment and

time more equitable. What we discovered was that sharing resources and models allowed us to imagine more equitable policy and assessment practices regarding time across the sector.

Our work also identified many areas for future research. First, while our policy analyses identified a range of potential barriers for students to access, interpret, and use mechanisms designed to help them receive additional time during assessment, more data needs to be collected from students directly to inform the optimal design and translation of such policies. For example, it remains unknown whether students from equity backgrounds prefer to try to match their circumstances to detailed statements (for example, “Sorry business/Sad news: the loss of an immediate or extended family or community member and/or disruption to kinship system”) or if they are able to effectively see themselves in broader and more flexible descriptions (for example, “a combination of moderate problems”). Their perspectives would help guide recommendations around policy writing, as prescriptive statements risk silencing salient but emerging circumstances, while broad statements may lead students to question if their situations are included. There are also questions to address about how students think relevant assessment policies should be structured, where these should be located, and how they are best named. Studies should also more closely examine work that educators and systems (for example, chatbots) do to mediate and interpret policy for students. What approaches do students find helpful that could be scaled up across institutions?

The study has identified a range of practices that leaders and educators suggested had the potential to improve equity around time during assessment. However, an evaluation of these practices, and gathering data about students using these practices, was outside the scope of the study and was thus a limitation. We acknowledge that it is important to examine how students and staff experience these practices to better understand how they work within the complex systems identified within this project. It is also important to examine outcomes. Has implementing these practices led to any improvement in accessing extra time for assessments and better assessment results for students from equity backgrounds?

Further limitations of the study included that we were unable to widely sample staff within each participating university. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed via university leaders. Participation numbers were influenced by the time of year the study was conducted (Christmas/January is the time many Australian academic staff take leave). In addition, policy analyses were conducted on those assessment policy documents that were publicly available on university websites. We acknowledge that further information about assessment policy, processes, and procedures might be available to students but was not accessible from outside the university. For this reason, the policy documents themselves may not have been all the information made available to students about equity, assessment, and time. However, data gathered from current educators and leaders within our participating universities provided insights into other forms of information made available to students.

Finally, our model has highlighted the complexity within and across the complex systems involved in university assessment. Hence, it is important to better understand how potentially high-equity practices may be best contextualised within institutions. Our work suggests there is a need for genuine engagement with all stakeholders to adapt practices to context and to gain the support needed for consistent implementation. While our National Roundtable event was a useful way of beginning cross-institutional dialogue, there is a need for further work that examines how to best share ideas and collaborate across the sector while still respecting the unique needs of institutions and their student bodies.

As institutions continue to evaluate and assess their policies and processes regarding assessment and time, it is essential that the perspectives of students from equity backgrounds are prioritised and actively included in decision-making processes. When done well, flexibility around time can make a significant difference to student success, as one leader reminded us via a story shared about a mature-aged student on an accessibility plan:

she's finally graduated, good news story here. It was quite difficult to get her to hand in her last assignment, and ... because she's a perfectionist ... but we eventually got her to (submit), and she finished her degree. And then she wrote this email:

“Now I cannot thank you enough. I've been crying happily (and am) incredibly relieved here since reading your e-mail, that was the one saying you've done it. You've graduated. I'll concentrate on healing now (because she has been quite ill) ... thank you so much. Mum and Dad will be so proud too. So, thanks for that as well.”

(Participant UniE_L_B)

Although it is important to consider staff workload and wellbeing when making decisions on assessment policy, it is also crucial to provide students with more flexibility to accommodate complex health and personal needs. We hope institutions will use the framework of questions shared in this report to continue to refine policies, systems, and assessment design in ways that best serve equity.

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Appendix B: Policy of a traditional institution

Traditional institution – Time as fixed and assessment equity limited		
Context	The institution is a small university. This policy is written as a formal and traditional policy with a layout that could be similar across several policies. The policy begins with a section indicating action officers and key definition of terms, has numbered sections, and concludes with information about cycles of review.	
Problem representation	The problem of assessment time is represented as a limited resource and managing time is a weighty administrative responsibility. Students who request additional time for assessment are a disruption to the smooth articulation of the overall system. Coordination of compliance and decisions about adaptations occurs centrally through a central Faculty Office (capitals in original).	
	Commentary	Evidence
	Students are positioned in the policy as enrollees who are required to meet conditions. Students who are not able to meet conditions may present their “excuse” to have it considered.	“An assessment task is a learning activity which students are required to submit for grading as part of the total marks obtained for a unit.” “Extenuating circumstances are those beyond a person’s control that provide excuse for an outcome. In the context of this [policy] the decision-maker reviewing the circumstances will determine if they are considered extenuating.”
	Students from equity groups are narrowly construed to include those with medical conditions, injury, disability, or chronic medical conditions. This narrow range of eligible students and the phrasing reflect a medical model where the problem resides within the student rather than circumstances, and health care provider documentation is needed for requests to complete assessment at alternative times. Equity is conflated with equality or sameness and not seen as a right but a favour that may be granted. Equity is represented as “extra” and a therapeutic, individualised issue rather than a structural issue.	“Students experiencing a short-term or unexpected medical condition or injury...need to inform the Faculty Office as soon as practicable. The Faculty Office will determine what special provisions, if any, will be provided...Students who have a disability or chronic medical condition...may apply to the Equity Officer for assessment adjustments as per the Disability Policy. Such applications must be made in a timely manner before the assessment deadline and must be supported by appropriate documentations from a relevant healthcare professional.” “Issues of equity and transparency will be considered so as not to disadvantage students who have met the set deadlines.”
	Time is represented as predictable and plannable, and students must meet the schedules as set out by the institution. There is an assumption that students engage with their study and institution during office hours, and that “work” is occurring in hour increments.	“Students must attend and/or complete the in-person assessment as per the instructions and format outlined in the Unit Information.” “Working hours on a working day are normally Monday to Thursday 8:30 am-5 pm; Friday 8 am – 12 pm.”
Assumptions and silences	Assessment time is considered separate to the learning goals and intended assessment design like equitable opportunities to demonstrate learning. Assessment fulfils requirements within workloads. The problem of extensions can be managed (processed) at arms-length from teaching and learning, and the faculty office can determine what issues of equity and transparency are and how they can be addressed or resolved. Consistency is the unproblematic aim. Assumptions include that students are studying full-time or prioritising their studies and have unencumbered, regulated lives. Students who can meet the deadlines are positioned as preferable students.	“When setting and assessment task careful consideration should be given to the time required to complete the task in relation to the learning outcomes and the overall volume of learning for the unit...the impact on staff and student workload.” “The Faculty Office will receive and process requests for extensions to ensure consistency of outcomes, taking into account the appropriateness of the situation for the lecturer and the student.” The high modality and frequent use of “must” sets up an authoritative tenor and relationship with students.
Potential effects	Many students who may need support (for example, carers and those experiencing financial stress) would not see themselves in this policy and would also be put off from asking someone because of the legal tone. The students are unlikely to be accessing the full range of assessment extension they are entitled to, either in the learning process or after submission. The burden of proof is on the student, and it is up to someone in authority to decide if the student is deemed to be deserving of an extension or special provision.	
Emergence, dissemination, disruption	This is a traditional representation of assessment as serving credentialling purposes prevalent before the introduction of predominantly online learning platforms and inquiry processes. The university is at risk as contemporary understandings of equity and access as a right has not informed this policy. Policy writing could be checked with those it is designed to inform and could be revoked from a student perspective.	
Commentary	Time is structured by the institution, which requires students to fit into expectations. Under the current policy, students requesting assessment considerations may feel uncertain if they would be supported, leading to additional stress and disadvantage. As this is a small university, there is greater likelihood that interpretation and enactment of the policy may be more responsive to Faculty-level considerations.	

Appendix C: Policy of a large Go8 institution

Large Go8 institution – Time as what is reasonable for shared responsibility	
Context	The institution is a large metropolitan university. The policy is part of a comprehensive (long) and very formal coursework policy document and there is significant cross-referencing between sections. The scope of the assessment policy is clearly signposted in the table of contents. The policy begins with a “statement of intent” and assessment purpose and principles. Sub-sections are numbered as part of a continuous system of numbering in the whole document and conventional letters and numbers signal additional layers of information. Roles and responsibilities, as well as special considerations, are outlined.
Problem representation	The problem of assessment time is represented to be one of learning and quality assurance. Timely completion is of reciprocal value to the learner and institution. The problem of assessment disruptions for high-priority equity groups is not seen as exceptional or unexpected but as part of life, and significant decision-making can be done at the unit coordinator level.
	Commentary
	Students are positioned in the policy as partners in learning and in upholding the values and standards of the institution; that is, they do their part to maintain the decorum of the relationship between educators and the educated. The terms of this relationship are underpinned by a strong legal discourse.
	Students from equity groups are defined broadly as “students with disability and carers” and there is a link to online information that is clear, including an acknowledgement of the university’s responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. The problem of assessment disruptions for high-priority equity groups is not seen as exceptional or unexpected but as part of life. Time does not feature in this discussion, which prioritises equitable opportunity in design and standards. The pressure of other study work commitments is an acceptable reason for an extension where other universities specifically exclude it.
	Evidence
	“All requests for special consideration must be genuine and made in good faith. (a) Attempts to use special consideration as a means of gaining an unfair advantage in an assessment must be rejected. (b) Making a request for special consideration that is not genuine or in good faith may lead to disciplinary action against a student.” “81(7) Subject to the provisions of this subclause, a student who attempts an examination is presumed to be fit to do so.”
	“Principle 3 Assessment practices must be inclusive, valid and fair. (2) The purpose of reasonable adjustments is to assist students to satisfy the learning outcomes of their units of study and meet the inherent requirements of their course.” “81A(2) The special considerations unit may permit a student to submit an assignment task up to five calendar days after the due date with no penalty on the grounds of illness, injury, misadventure, pressure of study commitments, pressure of work commitments, special arrangements (as defined in clause 85 below) or illness, injury or misadventure of a person for whom the student is a carer.”
	“81(1) A unit of study co-ordinator, who is satisfied that it is appropriate to do so, may permit a student to submit a non-examination task other than a task to which section 81A applies up to five calendar days after the due date with no penalty.” “Note: Any faculty resolution or local provision forbidding the granting of simple extensions is inconsistent with this policy.”
Assumptions and silences	Students are entering into a contract with a prestigious and powerful organisation, the smooth running of which relies on both parties acting “in good faith”. The policy makes it clear that there are firm boundaries on the agency of students to negotiate their position. There is an assumption that students are sufficiently empowered to represent themselves. Further, the way they will do so must be timely.
Potential effects	“A student does not have a right to a merits review by the Student Appeals Body under [University C]’s (Student Academic Appeals) Rule and cannot appeal against an academic decision on the ground that the student believes that the academic decision was made in a manner that was inconsistent with the assessment principles set out in this part.” “84(4) Students wishing to apply for reasonable adjustments must submit their Academic Plan request to Inclusion and Disability Services ... as soon as possible after becoming aware of any further needs for adjustments”
Emergence, dissemination, disruption	The combination of a traditional, legalistic policy document that is clear but ultimately binding coupled with principles that are made real in the policy detail and accessible in online documents will have the intended effect of assuring quality and order. Students who do not (or cannot) behave in ways that comply with this expectation will find it very difficult to advocate for themselves. The legal discourse will be intimidating and confusing enough to limit appeals.
Commentary	Assessment is for learning and the fair evaluation of students’ work in relation to the standards. What’s only very thinly disguised by the equitable guiding principles, reasonable considerations, and neutrality of the legal discourse, is the enormous power difference between the two parties in the contract.
	Time is represented as a resource to ensure quality and equity. Students who seek assessment consideration—if they can read and understand the policy (the online resources are a considerable mediator) and they meet the standard of negotiating “in good faith”—are likely to be accommodated. Additionally, there is an expectation on teaching staff to be empowered and uphold the principles and policy details.

Appendix D: Policy of a large technology institution

Large technology institution – Special considerations and extensions									
Context	The institution is a multi-campus university and TAFE. The main campus is metropolitan. The assessment policy incorporates all courses (TAFE and university) and campuses.								
Problem representation	Assessment time is measured in weeks and follows a linear structure. While students may be entitled to extra support to finish their studies, certain rules apply.								
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Commentary</th> <th>Evidence</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> <p>A first read of the policy positions the institution as supportive and caring, using language like “we”. However, the process of accessing additional assessment time is for students to comply with specific calendars and business hours.</p> <p>Students need to know ahead of time what type of extension or special consideration they need to ensure they apply for the right option.</p> </td> <td> <p>“All applications for special consideration must be submitted using the appropriate online form by no later than 5pm of the third working day after the originally scheduled due date or exam date.”</p> <p>“We offer special consideration and assistance to help you continue your progress should unfortunate circumstance occur. It exists to enable you to maintain academic progress in the event of extremely difficult circumstances.”</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>Students from equity groups are those with “unfortunate circumstances” that are “genuine”. The first few eligibility criteria are health conditions verified by a medical practitioner. Equity is assumed through personalisation, decided by “your teacher ... with you”. What is not clear is the criteria the teacher uses to make the decision. Regardless of the circumstances, the timelines are the same and the amount of time provided is the same, reflective of an equality rather than an equity discourse.</p> </td> <td> <p>“We offer special consideration and assistance to help you continue your progress should unfortunate circumstance occur. It exists to enable you to maintain academic progress in the event of extremely difficult circumstances ... ‘special’ really does mean special — it’s only given where genuine need is proven.”</p> <p>“Extension of time for submission of assessable work (for applications made in advance for an extension of up to 7 days).”</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>Time is represented as university weeks, not calendar dates, so students must know what week of the semester they are in, which is based on their cohort intake (of which there are several throughout the year) and students are identified by their “intake”. For example, “intake 7” commences studies in March, unlike “intake 6” in February. Semester blocks vary depending on the intake.</p> </td> <td> <p>“no later than 5pm of the third working day after the originally scheduled due date or exam date ... 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<p>Students from equity groups are those with “unfortunate circumstances” that are “genuine”. The first few eligibility criteria are health conditions verified by a medical practitioner. Equity is assumed through personalisation, decided by “your teacher ... with you”. What is not clear is the criteria the teacher uses to make the decision. Regardless of the circumstances, the timelines are the same and the amount of time provided is the same, reflective of an equality rather than an equity discourse.</p>	<p>“We offer special consideration and assistance to help you continue your progress should unfortunate circumstance occur. It exists to enable you to maintain academic progress in the event of extremely difficult circumstances ... ‘special’ really does mean special — it’s only given where genuine need is proven.”</p> <p>“Extension of time for submission of assessable work (for applications made in advance for an extension of up to 7 days).”</p>								
<p>Time is represented as university weeks, not calendar dates, so students must know what week of the semester they are in, which is based on their cohort intake (of which there are several throughout the year) and students are identified by their “intake”. For example, “intake 7” commences studies in March, unlike “intake 6” in February. Semester blocks vary depending on the intake.</p>	<p>“no later than 5pm of the third working day after the originally scheduled due date or exam date ... ELICOS students must submit an application to defer their final assessment no later than 5pm of the second working day after the originally scheduled due date.”</p>								
<p>There is an assumption that students will know in advance if they will have difficulty adhering to the assessment schedule. The use of language like “special really means special” assumes students are “gaming” the system to get an advantage.</p> <p>Teachers are positioned as both supportive and helpful but also as assessors of requests. Silences include the criteria for making the decision for an extension and details within the process. Teachers are put in positions of judging on moral grounds, and students can be portrayed as overwhelmed or needy.</p>	<p>“‘special’ really does mean special — it’s only given where genuine need is proven.”</p> <p>“Special consideration is granted only in exceptional circumstances, and you must provide documentary evidence to support your claim.”</p> <p>“We understand that events can occur that may mean you will miss key dates ... It’s important not to get overwhelmed... We’re here to support you ... we offer special consideration and assistance to help you ... only given where genuine need is proven ... your teacher will assess your request and let you know the outcome.”</p>								
Potential effects	Students accept the medicalisation of social circumstances that disrupt completion of assessment, teachers are made responsible for how time is managed by the institution, the intake system is confusing, and the institutional requirements and demands are passive. Confusion about the process is blamed on the student, caring language lacks precision (and therefore clarity and direction) about the process, expectations and outcome are not binding. Commodification of time, control over temporality with little regard to the activities that make up one’s life as these do not fall neatly in sequential chains of actions but are non-linear interdependencies. Institutional bureaucracy controls the lives of students.								
Emergence, dissemination, disruption	While it is expected that students will have disruptions—including non-medical events—to their studies, a medical doctor is still required to verify this disruption by completing a medical certificate. This is an extended application of the medical model of disability. There is a disjuncture between website and actual policy, as there is no link on the public webpage that mentions the policy to the actual policy. This process requires policy literacy, which enables the institution to remain silent and unseen. Time is the problem and then used as the solution, with no acknowledgement of the often complex chain of actions that led to the request. The eligibility criteria give some circumstances higher value, for example, elite athlete (high value) versus technical issues (low value).								
Commentary	The policy constructs academic success as a linear progression where students move through scheduled assessment milestones. When students miss key dates, the policy attributes this to circumstances that meet specific eligibility criteria. However, the policy simultaneously recognises that students’ lives are complex with nonlinear interdependencies. The need for additional time is framed primarily as a medical issue requiring verification from healthcare professionals with AHPRA registration. Time is presented as a measurable resource—counted in weeks and due dates—with the institutional solution being the provision of additional time through extensions. The policy establishes temporal parameters that specify how much additional time students can receive, applying fixed boundaries to situations that are inherently complex and dynamic. There is limited recognition that students’ circumstances continue to evolve beyond the missed assessment date. Students are required to submit extensive documentation in which they codify their circumstances to the institution, which then determines eligibility. While the policy emphasises student care and support, the assessment extension processes reflect a medical discourse that positions students within a framework of patient and pathology, with institutional time compliance remaining a central priority.								

Appendix E: Policy of a large regional institution

Large regional institution – Assessment equity as a right, but time flexibility reasonable		
Context	The institution is a regional, multi-campus university that has traditionally served high-priority equity groups. The assessment policy is a formal policy that begins with the policy purpose and leaves definitions and regulatory information until the end of the policy. It is a lengthy policy with the assessment design section having over 80 sub-clauses and the section outlining the conditions for adjustments having over 180 sub-clauses.	
Problem representation	The problem of students requesting different assessment time is represented to be an expected occurrence, that is a dual problem of being equitable to students and maintaining the university's academic standards to meet federally legislated requirements. Assessment equity is represented as being achieved through clarity of processes.	
	Commentary	Evidence
	Students are positioned in the policy as having rights to fully participate. Students are expected to engage in civic actions like requesting reasonable adjustments or engaging in conscientious objection. Students' rights are represented as serving the higher purpose of "maintaining University academic standards". The repeated inclusion of this phrase at the end of many of the sub-clauses indicates that the university retains the overall power to make decisions to meet the requirements of the regulators and maintain academic standing in the community.	"Assessment must be designed and implemented to enable all students an equal opportunity to access and fully participate in learning and assessment, regardless of student's background, in a way that maintains the University's academic standards, including course accreditation requirements". "Adjustments to assessment to support students with a disability, those impacted by exceptional circumstances, or students who make a conscientious objection to using animals must be implemented in a way that is equitable and maintains the University's academic standards." "Assessment must aim to enable students to achieve the academic standards expected by the University and its community including employers and the professions."
	Equity is represented as one of the two core values that underpins the policy. Students are acknowledged as coming from a range of backgrounds and life experiences. A wide range of circumstances are recognised including disability, health, hardship, compassionate circumstances, and unavoidable civic and sport commitments. Social anxiety or work are not considered.	"The following circumstances are not acceptable reasons for adjusting assessment including circumstances that students could be expected to meet in the normal course of their study, work, family or social life (normal risk)."
Time is represented in multiple ways, not often in clock-time, but rather in days or weeks. Time is mostly seen as predictable and under a student's control. Time is an assessment resource that can be negotiated directly with the teachers within the guidelines. There are opportunities to re-attempt an assessment task without penalty. Time is also recognised as associated with conditions of distance. Attendance (learning time) is not equated with assessment.	"Circumstances that are reasonably within the student's ability to control" "Extensions may be granted for up to four weeks after the original due date, if the student provides acceptable reasons for requesting the extensions and the required supporting information". "Students with a residential address more than 150 km from an exam centre must nominate a new centre". "Marks must not be awarded for student attendance only".	
Assumptions and silences	Requests for adjustments to assessment time is accepted and anticipated for many reasons, both to comply with standards and assist students to complete courses. The repeated phrase "reasonable"—reasonable planned time and reasonable adjustments—indicates an expectation that there will be negotiated interactions between students and the university where a mutual accommodation may be reached.	"Students must have made a reasonable attempt to complete the assessment task initially to be eligible for an opportunity to re-attempt the assessment task". "Students are given reasonable time to submit an assessment task, taking into consideration availability of materials and reference texts and practical or technical difficulties likely to be/that may be encountered".
Potential effects	Support for students is managed through specificity about the processes, which includes multiple provisions to negotiate the timing of assessments. This may have a paradoxical impact on equity as in seeking to make the processes clear through multiple specific regulations, the clarity is obscured by so many rules and guidelines. Students and teaching academics would need to spend considerable time working out processes.	
Emergence, dissemination, disruption	The focus on equal opportunity to participate reflects a focus on responding to disability legislation as the source of ideas. The policy seems to come out of previous experiences with requests from student, and this is an attempt to regulate or coordinate the many requests that are prompted by a large, multi-campus population. Awareness of university reputation and regulation is an uneasy undercurrent. Online proactive peer support, AI, and other ways of overcoming distance may enable simpler and sector-leading policy approaches.	
Commentary	Time is represented mostly as being something that can be reasonably negotiated in the first place between teachers who plan and students who advocate for their needs. This requires a level of relational interaction that is a challenge for teachers and students distributed across multiple campuses and increases the requirement for students to have or develop skills in advocacy. Teacher workload is increased.	

Appendix F: De-identified scores for four student-reader criteria for accessibility

Uni ID	1. Find it	2. Read it	3. Use it	4. Trust it
1	0	3	5	3
2	2	5	10	6
3	1	3	3	7
4	4	5	9	7
5	2	6	9	9
6	3	5	5	7
7	4	5	5	9
8	4	6	8	8
9	3	3	8	8
10	3	4	5	3
11	2	4	7	8
12	0	3	10	6
13	3	3	6	5
14	4	4	7	2
15	3	6	10	7
16	3	4	6	5
17	4	6	9	6
18	0	3	5	8
19	1	6	2	7
20	4	5	10	9
21	3	6	6	5
22	2	5	9	2
23	4	4	6	7
24	4	5	7	7
25	1	4	6	4
26	3	4	6	2
27	4	6	8	4
28	4	6	10	8
29	4	5	7	7
30	3	3	6	6
31	0	4	0	0
32	4	6	10	7
33	2	5	8	7
34	4	4	9	9
35	1	1	5	6
36	4	4	8	2
37	0	4	3	0
38	4	6	9	4
39	1	3	4	6
40	2	6	10	4
41	4	6	5	6
42	3	3	8	5
Totals	111	189	289	238

Appendix G: Example focus group questions

Focus group/ interview participant group	Categories of questions	Example questions and prompts
Leaders	Policy design – process	What is an example of your current policy working well to support equity students at your university? What influenced this design?
	Policy design – examples Institution-specific question	During our review of higher education policy, we were particularly interested in how your current policy [details provided for each university]. Why and how did this particular aspect of the policy come about? How do you see this being practiced across different schools/discipline areas?
	Policy design – implementation	What have been the effects of implementing this type of inclusive and flexible policy, including unforeseen events?
	Policy – practice implementation	What discretion do teaching staff have to interpret and apply policy guidelines?
Practitioners	Policy design	What are the problems you see students having at your university in relation to time and assessment? Do you think these challenges affect students equally at your university?
	Assessment design and practices	When you were designing assessment for your unit/s (or reviewing the assessment if you inherited the unit), did considerations of students' time influence your design decisions?
	Policy design – examples ** Institution-specific question	During our review of higher education policy, we were particularly interested in how your current policy [details provided for each university]. Have you seen this particular aspect of the policy implemented? How do you interpret this in practice? How do others interpret this? Is it working?
	Policy – practice implementation	Is there anything else in your university's assessment policy that helps you support diverse students in relation to time in your course/s? Are there times when implementation of the policy is a challenge for you?

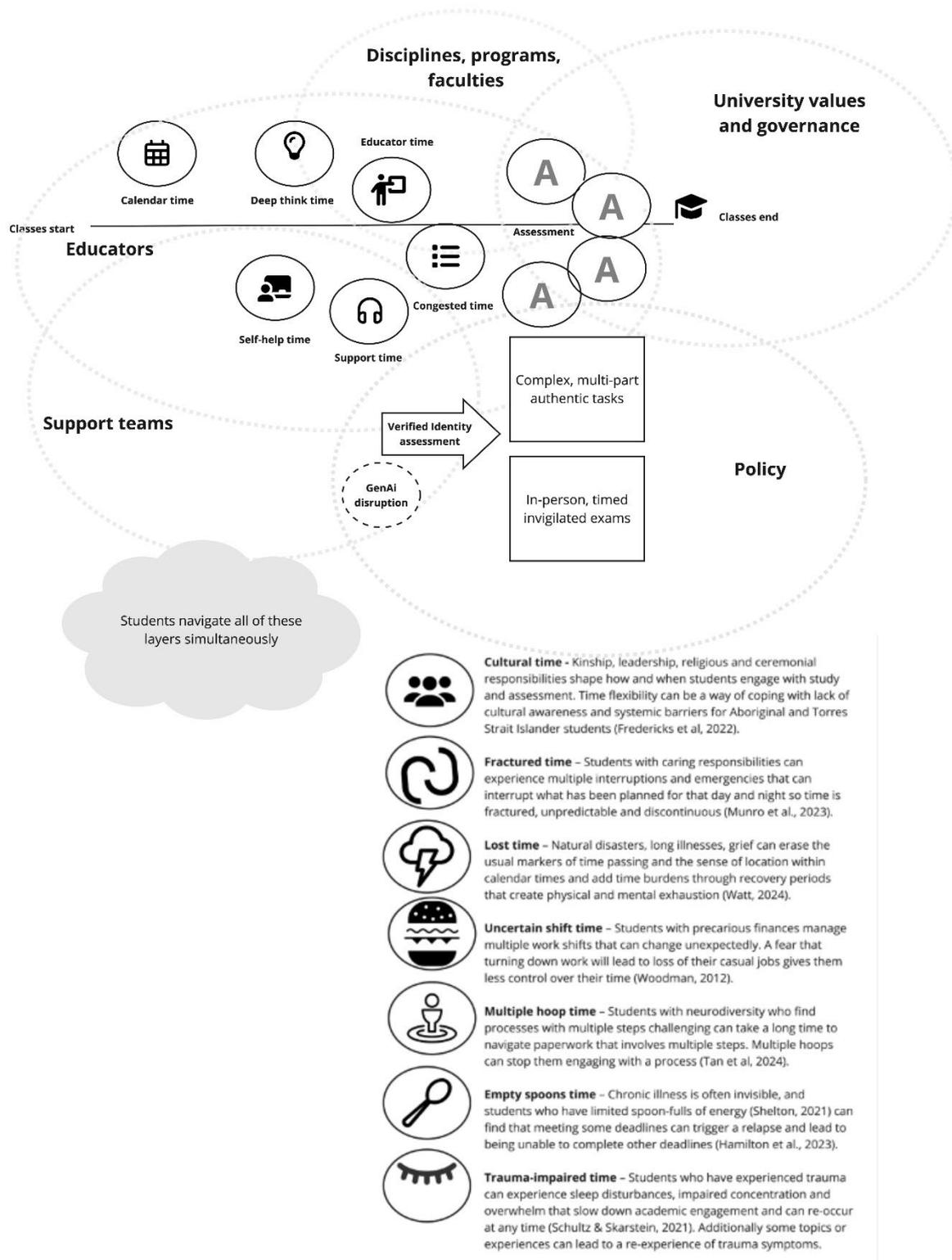
Appendix H: Professional development resource

Framework of questions to support higher education leaders and educators to consider policy and practice around time and assessment

To perform well on assessment, students need to have the resources available to be successful. One often overlooked and inequitably distributed resource is time. Research suggests that students from equity backgrounds often experience complex circumstances that are outside of their control, and which impact upon their time (Bennett & Burke, 2018; Crawford, et al., 2022; Harris & Dargusch, 2020). Time flexibility and/or access to additional time during assessment can, therefore, become important for the success of these students.

Drawing on project data, Figure 1 shows a model that depicts some of the complicated relationships between students, university staff, university systems, assessment policy, and the wider context that impact on how students can access time during assessment. The model demonstrates the complexity of “timescapes” across institutional systems and personal circumstances that a student from equity backgrounds navigates. The model’s overlapping layers highlight the challenges students experience and which impact on the availability of time.

Figure 1: Student experiences of time in assessment



Framework of questions

To help university staff identify their own institutional challenges around time and assessment and devise context appropriate solutions, the following framework of questions has been designed to help prompt deep thinking and action. The framework is organised around four types of actions that are necessary to bring about more equitable outcomes for students through assessment time:

1. recognise assumptions
2. raise awareness of tensions
3. talk within and across complex systems
4. generate action and innovation.

1. Recognise assumptions

Assumption: Students have equal access to time and experience time in similar ways

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- Who are the students from equity backgrounds enrolled in your institution?
- Which equity backgrounds are represented within your student community?
- How are the complex circumstances of students from equity backgrounds likely to affect how they experience time and assessment?
- What is the assessment pass rate? Does it vary by equity group?
- What is the assessment extension rate? Does it vary by equity group?
- What forms of inequity might students be navigating within your institution?
- How does your university's assessment policy determine who has access to time flexibility within assessment?
- What assumptions does this policy make about students from equity backgrounds and their relationship with and access to time (for example, their right to extra time, responsible for their own time, and ability to access time)?
- How does this policy support diverse students to access additional time to complete assessments?
- How would students experiencing complex circumstances related to time answer these questions:
 - What can I and can't I control in terms of time and assessment in my course?
 - How does the university recognise me and support me to access additional time?

Assumption: Students can independently locate relevant policy and apply it to their circumstances

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- Where does your university currently locate its policy relating to assessment?
- Would the policy be easily found using the search engine on the university website?
- Are passwords required to access the policy or supporting materials?
- How do factors like the language, structure, and level of detail of your institution's assessment policy potentially enable or hinder students and staff to effectively access information about assessment and time?

- If a student were to read the assessment policy, how would they answer these questions:
 - Do I have a right to extra time, and can I recognise my needs and circumstances in this policy?
 - Do I understand clearly where and how to apply for additional time to complete assessments?

2. Raise awareness of tensions to prompt action

Tension: How are university values around diversity visible within assessment policies and systems?

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- What university values and aspirations are expressed for assessment and inclusion?
 - What key words and symbols communicate these university values within assessment policy?
- How closely are these values aligned with the policy and the way it is enacted in the university?
- If a student were to reflect on the university's values, how might they answer these questions:
 - Do I recognise my life (and time) circumstances in the university values in ways that allow me to imagine my success?
 - Do I see these values reflected in assessment policy?

Tension: Whose voices shape policy?

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- How have assessment policy documents been developed and whose perspectives do they reflect?
- In what ways might discipline-based educators in your university think differently about the appropriateness of flexibility around time?
- To what extent are students involved in the development of assessment policy?
 - Which students are included?
 - Do these students represent the diversity within the student body?
- At what stage in the process of policy development and change are stakeholders involved, and what different methods of engaging with stakeholders are employed?
- If a student were to reflect on assessment policy in your university, how might they answer these questions:
 - Is it clear that the voice of diverse students like me have been represented/have informed the writing of this policy?
 - Do I see an opportunity in my university to contribute to conversations about policy where I can represent my needs?

Tension: Who makes decisions about time and assessment?

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- Who is involved in making decisions about assessment extensions and accommodations (for example, lecturers, centralised team of staff, or automated computer systems)?

- What are the strengths and limitations of current human and technology-based systems? Consider factors including timeliness of decision, staff workload, staff-student relationships, consistency of decision-making, etc.
- If you were a student, what would you say is working well about how decisions are made about extensions? What aspects of the current system might students find frustrating, confusing, or unfair?

Tension: How can assessment integrity and equity be simultaneously considered in assessment design

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking in institutions include:

- What changes are occurring to assessment design and practice in response to concerns about assessment integrity (particularly threats around GenAI use) at your university?
- How can recent disruptions (for example, the COVID-19 pandemic and GenAI) be harnessed to encourage more equitable assessment design?
- If a student were to reflect on assessment design in your university, how might they answer these questions:
 - Are the assessments in my current courses designed so that I'm not disadvantaged due to a lack of time?
 - Are the types of assessment tasks that prioritise academic integrity in response to GenAI (for example, invigilated exams or complex, multi-part assignments that may have multiple due dates) easy for me to access and complete?
 - Do I feel that current assessment design is more or less equitable for me, particularly in relation to assessment timing?

3. Talk within and across complex systems

Action/reflection questions to prompt thinking about complex systems in institutions include:

- What stakeholders and influences external to the university affect institutional thinking about time and assessment?
- How do systems within the university determine how extra time for assessment is applied for and granted? To what extent do these systems consider the needs of all stakeholders?
- How do university systems (including those used for data collection and storage as well as extension requests via learning management systems) facilitate staff to enable students' access to extra time?
- University structures for teaching and learning are usually time-bound (for example, term dates and due dates for marking). How do these structures affect the availability of extra time for students?
- If a student were to reflect on the process for applying for extra time, how might they answer these questions:
 - How much time does it take to apply for and be granted extra time?
 - How many times do I have to make my circumstances visible to others?
 - Are there any risks involved in accessing extra time?

4. Generating action and innovation

Action/reflection questions to generate active and innovation in institutions include:

- What collaborative processes could be introduced to drive change in assessment policy related to time in your institution? What existing mechanisms in the institution could be used to inform this change and how could they be used differently (for example, gathering extensive data about students from equity backgrounds to inform review processes or adopting a consultative approach before writing or changing the assessment policy).
- How can your university work with internal and external stakeholders to secure and communicate alignment between inclusive values and the needs of students and industry (for example, accreditation requirements)? Who should be consulted about such a modification?
- How can your institution ensure that a range of voices are heard when re-designing policy to be more equitable? How might actors who are sometimes marginalised in policy conversations and system-level decisions (for example, permanent and casual teaching staff) be involved in creating the assessment policies that affect their daily work with students?
- Which systems and processes related to assessment and time at your university could be improved to reduce the demands on students and staff?
- How can your institution develop or adapt potentially high-equity practices in ways that meet your staff and students' needs, and drive change at the institutional level?
- If a student were to redesign your assessment policy, what might it look like? What might the most major changes be and why would students be driving such changes?

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