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From Measuring to Achieving Educational Equivalence: Defining Equivalence Through Student Voices in Higher Education

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Abstract

Current approaches to assessing the equivalence of face-to-face and online learning within the higher education sector typically involve measuring student learning outcomes. But outcomes alone do not provide a complete picture. Higher education institutions need to consider students' perspectives if they want to achieve educational equivalence rather than simply measure it. To this end, 21 undergraduate students who had experienced both face-to-face and online study modes were interviewed. Consistently, their perceptions of equivalence focused on experiential factors rather than learning outcomes. Institutional measures represented only the tip of the iceberg: the students' comments pointed to what lay beneath. The results of this study are presented through a model dubbed the educational equivalence iceberg with five key layers: institutional measures, environmental factors, learning community factors, learning design factors, and educator factors. This research-informed model enables educators, institutions, and policymakers to move beyond measuring equivalence to systematically designing for it.

Keywords: educational equivalence, online learning, equity, belonging, learning design, educators

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been substantial, continued growth in the number of online course enrolments in the higher education sector (I. E. Allen & Seaman, 2010; Seaman et al., 2018). In Australia, the proportion of higher education students studying in an online or blended mode increased from 20% in 2001 to 39% in 2020 (Lodge et al., 2022). Despite fluctuations in overall higher education enrolments in more recent years, the proportion of domestic undergraduate students studying in these modes has increased from 30% in 2016 to 48% in 2024, remaining relatively stable since 2021 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many higher education institutions around the world to quickly transition from traditional face-to-face classes to online classes as part of social distancing measures designed to slow the spread of the disease (Martin, 2020; Abdrasheva et al., 2022). These restrictions compelled academics and universities to consider how the student experience was impacted by online delivery and how to ensure students received an equivalent learning experience despite the imposed restrictions (Martin, 2020). With nearly half of all domestic undergraduate students now studying online or in blended modes, it is critical to understand how equivalent learning experiences can be achieved for all students, regardless of their chosen study mode.

The requirements of national higher education regulators provide further impetus to develop a better understanding of the elements that contribute to equivalent learning experiences. Within Australia, for example, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), through the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (TEQSA,

2021) requires higher education institutions to provide students with "equivalent opportunities for successful transition into and progression through their course of study, irrespective of their educational background, entry pathway, mode or place of study" (s. 1.3). However, current approaches to understanding equivalence rely heavily on institutional measures such as academic performance and retention rates, with limited insight into student perspectives on what creates equivalent learning experiences.

This article therefore considers the question: What is educational equivalence from the perspective of students undertaking a higher education course in different study modes—face-to-face and online? Understanding equivalence from students' perspectives may reveal factors beyond traditional institutional measures that contribute to equivalent learning experiences, while also supporting the integrity of educational credentials and promoting fairness and accessibility in higher education.

Equality, Equity, and the Move to Equivalence

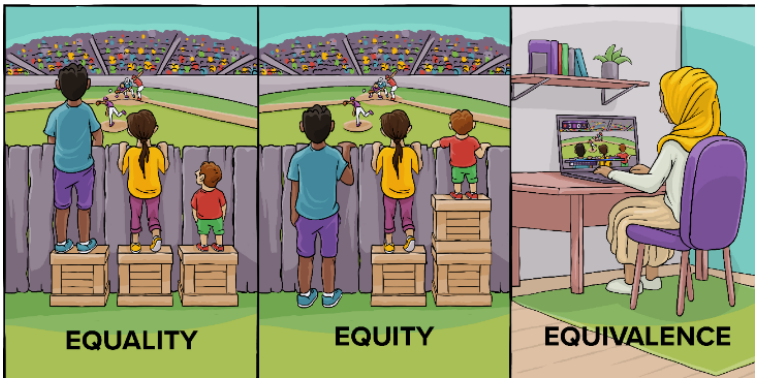
Current understandings of equivalence in higher education have been influenced by historical interpretations of related terms, such as equality and equity. *Equality* in education was the ideal that everyone should have access to the same learning opportunities and resources, irrespective of environmental factors. However, this interpretation of equality has been challenged because it does not account for the impact of underlying social and contextual factors (Evetts, 1970). The need to consider environmental factors in discussions about equality and education has given rise to the notion of equity. *Equity* in education is based on fairness and justice that takes individual circumstances into account, and is often achieved through deliberate, unequal provision of resources to address gross inequalities (Espinoza, 2007; Herrera, 2007).

Alongside debates about equality and equity, the term *equivalence* has appeared frequently in the educational research literature over the past 30 years (Clarke et al., 2016; Englund, 2005; Herrera, 2007; Platt et al., 2014; Richardson & Coates, 2014; Stevens et al., 2021). While the concept of equivalence appears frequently, it is rarely explicitly defined in an educational context. Simonson et al. (1999) provide one of the few definitions of equivalence in an educational context. Their equivalency theory posits that the more equivalent students' learning experiences are, the more equivalent their outcomes will be. Simonson et al. suggested that equivalent education is not achieved through identical learning experiences, but through the design of experiences that hold equal educational value for all students. Equivalency, in this sense, refers to achieving similar learning outcomes through activities and resources that are appropriately adapted to each learning environment. The emphasis is therefore on creating meaningful and contextually suitable learning experiences that offer all students, regardless of mode of study, a comparable opportunity to learn and succeed.

The evolution from equality to equity to equivalence is illustrated in Figure 1, an adaptation of Froehle's (2016) well-known meme, originally created to explain the difference between equality and equity. While the first two panels assume physical presence at the ballpark is necessary, the equivalence panel demonstrates that the goal of watching the game can be achieved through different methods with comparable value. Yet despite this conceptual understanding, current approaches to assessing educational equivalence have focused primarily on measuring institutional outcomes.

Figure 1

Visual Representations of Equality, Equity, and Equivalence



Note. Adapted from the Equality/Equity illustration by Interaction Institute for Social Change (artist: Angus Maguire; interactioninstitute.org; madewithangus.com), licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Equivalence panel is an original remix. Concept originates from Froehle (2016).

Research Design, Methodology, and Limitations

To address the deficiency in current understandings of equivalence, this study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to investigate educational equivalence through student perspectives. Specifically, this study sought to answer the question: What is educational equivalence from the perspective of students undertaking a higher education course in different study modes—face-to-face and online?

Twenty-one undergraduate students at an Australian university were interviewed about their experiences studying in different modes and their perceptions of educational equivalence. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 59; lived in seven different geographical regions; and included six males, 13 females, and two non-binary individuals. All participants had experienced both face-to-face and online study modes, partly due to COVID-19 restrictions. Recruitment involved a broad invitation to students from ethics-approved undergraduate programmes, aiming to achieve diversity across age, gender, location, and study-mode experience (initial purposive sampling). As analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was used to recruit additional participants whose experiences could elaborate on and challenge emerging categories of educational equivalence (Charmaz, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic created both limitations and opportunities for this research. Many students who had planned to study face-to-face were required to study online due to social distancing measures, meaning some experiences reflected emergency remote teaching rather than designed online learning. However, this also provided the opportunity to interview students who had experienced both modes with entirely different initial motivations about online study. Participants were domestic undergraduate students at a regional, multi-campus Australian university with significantly higher online and blended enrolments than typical institutions.

Semi-structured interviews focused on students' experiences and perceptions of equivalence in online and face-to-face learning. Participants were asked open-ended questions about each study mode and their preferences, challenges, and experiences. This approach allowed students to define equivalence in their own terms. Interviews were conducted either in person or via video conference, and all sessions were recorded for analysis. The transcripts were analysed in accordance with Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach (2014, pp. 111–113), involving three stages of analysis: initial, focused, and theoretical coding. This research was conducted with approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Central Queensland University (Approval Number: 22846).

This study employed constructivist grounded theory methodology, deliberately avoiding predetermined theoretical frameworks during analysis. While some emergent findings align with established educational concepts, they have not

previously been examined collectively through an equivalence lens or brought together into a comprehensive model for understanding educational equivalence.

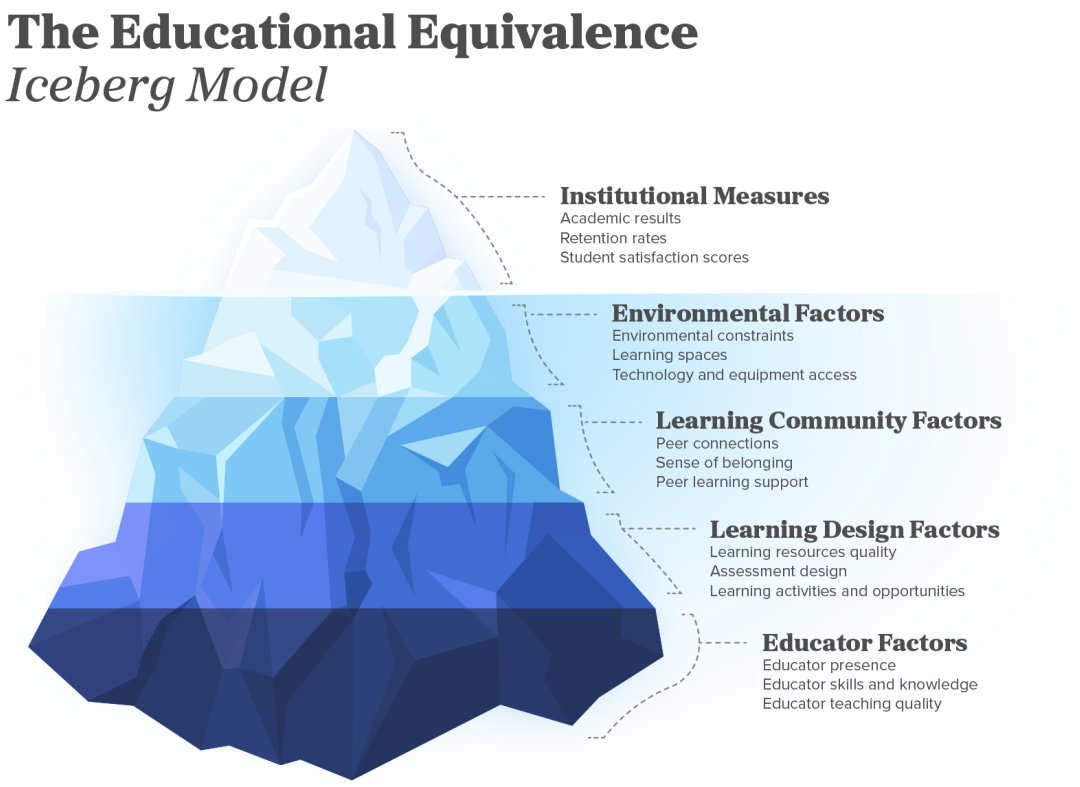
Results

In higher education, equivalence has traditionally been assessed through institutional measures such as academic performance, retention rates, and satisfaction scores, which this study terms *outcome equivalence*. Participants, however, rarely spoke in terms of outcome equivalence. What participants sought is what this study terms *experiential equivalence*: the sense that their learning experiences, regardless of study mode, are of a comparable quality, value and opportunity. These findings challenge institutions, researchers, and policymakers to reconceptualise what equivalence is.

Outcome equivalence represents only the visible tip of a metaphorical "iceberg" of factors that contribute to equivalent learning experiences. Participants consistently identified deeper factors that underscored the foundational role of the educator, learning design, learning community, and environmental factors in shaping their perceptions of equivalence. The educational equivalence iceberg model presents this layered understanding, with institutional measures above the waterline (outcome equivalence) and student-identified factors that contribute to experiential equivalence lying beneath the surface (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Educational Equivalence Iceberg Model



The Educational Equivalence Iceberg Model

At the top of the model are the institutional measures: academic results, retention rates, and satisfaction scores. Beneath these outcomes are the four layers of the model that determine equivalence from the perspective of students: environmental factors, learning community factors, learning design factors, and, at the foundation, educator factors. As discussed earlier, while research and policy in the higher education sector often focus on the topmost layer (Clarke et al., 2016; Englund, 2005; Herrera,

2007; Platt et al., 2014; Richardson & Coates, 2014; TEQSA, 2021), participants' perspectives revealed that the foundational role of educators is critical in shaping their sense of equivalence. Each of these factors are discussed in turn below.

Environmental Factors—The First Layer Below the Surface

Environmental factors are the first layer below the surface. These are the practical circumstances and conditions, such as work, family, health, location, learning spaces, technology access, and institutional constraints, that shape when, where, and how students can engage with higher education. These competing demands often necessitate flexibility in how and when students study, influencing both their initial study mode choices and their ongoing learning experiences. Participants in this study often navigated multiple environmental factors simultaneously. For study participant Nicole[1], a combination of work constraints, health considerations, and travel distance influenced her study mode choice:

> I was working in fast food, and the hours weren't really flexible, and also, I was sick a lot because my heart condition is triggered by standing. So, I'd be working, and then I'd be very sick for the rest of the day. So, I wasn't really up for travelling all the way out to uni.

For some students, these constraints are not always present from the outset. Environmental factors can also emerge or change during their studies, as described by Hannah:

> When I started studying, at the age of 19, it was all face-to-face … since becoming a mum, I've transitioned to online just because I have little kids, so I can't get to a campus at any time … I wouldn't be at uni if I couldn't study online right now.

Understanding these environmental factors is essential because they establish the context within which learning community factors, learning design factors, and educator factors must operate to achieve educational equivalence.

Learning Community Factors

While environmental factors provide the context, participants identified learning community factors, peer connection, sense of belonging, and peer learning support as essential elements of their learning experience. Participants valued being part of a learning community that provided a sense of belonging, enabled them to develop peer connections, and provided access to help from their peers. Jordan illustrated how peer connections supported access to help from peers:

> Her [student peer] and I chat a lot outside. We're still doing stuff together … I find that connection helps motivate both of us. We kind of help each other with things, and I find that super valuable.

The impact of being part of a learning community on student motivation was evident in Riley's experience:

> I do feel like it is good to engage with … the people around you. Because it helps you to keep your passion growing, because if you keep it to yourself, at some point, it just kind of quiets down.

Kim, who had initially found online study isolating, described the transformation that came with making peer connections:

> Anxious, very isolated, until I met the people. And then once I met people, during the residential school, we all formed a very strong bond, a very strong connection. Made friendships, you know, connected on social media and then post res school … we could contact each other because we had met, we'd made that relationship.

Participants identified that learning community factors provided more than academic benefits; they also offered social-emotional and practical benefits that supported students on their learning journey. Participants' experiences revealed that students seek equivalent opportunities to develop these connections and access help, regardless of their study mode.

Learning Design Factors

Learning design factors identified by participants included the quality of learning resources, the design of assessment tasks, and the learning activities and opportunities provided within a unit of study (a single subject within a degree programme). This often involves students making comparisons across different units, shifting the focus from study mode to unit-level equivalence. While still impacted by environmental factors in some respects, in this area, participants were more concerned with equivalence at a unit level. They directly compared the content, design, and delivery of one unit to another, often without

[1] All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information has been removed to maintain confidentiality.

reference to the mode of study. Participants recognised the importance of varied approaches to learning design. Patricia captured this when discussing effective learning experiences:

> I think as long as people are looking at having a really … textured way of teaching things where there's that variety … it's not just one way or another … there's all of these different ways of you getting the benefit of the knowledge … it's about being versatile and looking for different ways that people can learn the same kind of thing.

Participants also identified the quality of learning resources as central to their learning experience. Patricia reflected on the impact of quality learning resources:

> It was only that [educator]'s notes were so fantastic that I passed … his stuff was so clear … he was an amazing educator … all of his lectures were fantastic, his notes impeccable.

Assessment design was equally important to participants' sense of equivalence. Jordan described the benefits of having a scaffolded approach to assessment design:

> It's like, "here's a set task for this week to learn these skills" … you have to submit them and show them, get feedback … [educator] can see and go, "Yep, you're on the right track" … it holds you accountable where you have to produce something … essentially tricks you into progressing … other subjects where they're not broken down like that, it's just, "here's a big thing you have to do" … it just feels super daunting … just breaking it into smaller chunks is easier and having accountability where I have to show it, helps a lot.

Participants sought equivalence of these factors, which are directly influenced by educators, who are the foundation in this model.

Educator Factors

Educator factors, which consist of an educator's teaching quality, skills, knowledge, and, most crucially, their presence in the students' learning experience, were identified by participants as the most significant influence on experiential equivalence. Jordan highlighted the importance of educator presence and engagement:

> I think it is just being a participant in the learning … you can feel the passion, "I've done this before and I want to pass it on" … It shows that there's an interest in the thing you're teaching … being present and just acting like you care goes a long way.

Jessica reflected on the combination of qualities she valued in an educator:

> It's very much about the responsiveness of the lecturer, their knowledge on the content, and just their enthusiasm. If someone seems enthusiastic, you're more likely to want to learn it and be enthusiastic about it.

Participants consistently referenced educators when discussing peer connections, access to help, learning resources, and learning activities, highlighting their foundational role in shaping the overall learning experience. These educator factors influenced the quality of learning design, enabled community connections, and shaped how environmental challenges were addressed, forming the foundational layer from which experiential equivalence is achieved.

Discussion

Current approaches to equivalence often focus on measuring outcomes, treating them as the measure of equivalence. However, outcomes are merely symptoms. Outcome measures reflect the health of underlying factors. This theoretical model builds on earlier conceptualisations of educational equivalence (Englund, 2005; Simonson et al., 1999) by incorporating student perspectives. In doing so, it enables educators, institutions, and policymakers, informed by research, to move beyond measuring equivalence to systematically designing for it.

Having established both outcome equivalence and experiential equivalence, what has been missing is a clear definition that integrates both. Without a shared definition, educational equivalence remains ambiguous, open to interpretation in ways that may not capture its full complexity. This study therefore proposes the following definition of educational equivalence:

> In higher education, educational equivalence ensures that all students, regardless of their pathway, context, or mode of delivery, have access to learning experiences and outcomes of comparable quality, value, and opportunity.

Educational equivalence, therefore, encompasses all the layers shown in the model: institutional measures, environmental factors, learning community factors, learning design factors, and educator factors. This revised view of educational equivalence encourages all stakeholders to make meaningful contributions to student success, whether through evidence-based teaching practices, informed policy development, or research that addresses underlying factors rather than symptoms. Educators, institutions, and policymakers can draw on established bodies of research across each layer of the model to inform purposeful, evidence-focused decision-making.

At the environmental factor level, well-established research on study mode choice, the digital divide, and students' perceptions of online versus face-to-face learning has already documented how constraints, technology access, and modal preferences shape higher education participation and experience (Bailey et al., 2015; Platt et al., 2014; Russo & Emtage, 2024; Martin, 2020). The learning community factors layer aligns with decades of research on academic and social integration, sense of belonging, peer support, and learning communities in higher education (K.-A. Allen et al., 2021; Goguen et al., 2010; Larsen & James, 2022; Pedler et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2025). Similarly, learning design factors, including the quality of learning resources, assessment and feedback design, learning activities and opportunities, and the learning environment, are well supported in existing literature (Couzens & Cattoni, 2023; Garrad & Nolan, 2023; Mcalpine, 2004). The model's foundation is educator factors, backed by research on teacher presence, teaching quality, and educator expertise (Garrison et al., 1999; Hénard, 2010; Stone & Springer, 2019; van Dijk et al., 2020).

Research in these areas often remains siloed, focusing on specific modes, factors, or stages of a student's journey. The educational equivalence iceberg model unites these, providing educators, institutions, and policymakers with a structure to leverage this research to shift from measuring equivalence to intentionally designing for it. But where can meaningful change begin? We argue that the answer lies in investing in educators. Educators underpin the entire model, forming the foundational layer from which experiential equivalence is achieved, influencing the overall learning experience of students. Educators impact the quality of learning design, enable community connections, and shape how environmental challenges are addressed. With educators' influence flowing through all layers of the model, it is essential to recruit, support, and value educators who have not only strong subject matter knowledge but also quality teaching skills and a strong educator presence. Therefore, investing in educators has the potential to drive the most progress towards educational equivalence. This investment could take the form of strong recruitment and reward, professional development for educators across all layers of the model, the development of institutional policies that enable rather than constrain educators, and consideration of the impact on educators when making institutional decisions. While this study identifies where meaningful change can begin, how that change is contextualised and enacted will look different for educators, institutions, and policymakers, and represents a rich opportunity for future research and practice.

Ultimately, this matters because educational equivalence exists to ensure all students have the best opportunity to thrive. Rather than conducting autopsies on failed equivalence after poor outcomes emerge, this model enables institutions to create environments where equivalence is built into the foundation of the learning experience. When students, regardless of their pathway, context, or mode of delivery, have access to learning experiences of comparable quality, value, and opportunity, we move beyond regulatory compliance to educational excellence.

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