

The Case for Oral Assessment in Higher Education

Evidence, Innovation and Institutional Imperatives

A Research Report for University Decision-Makers
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1. Executive Summary

Higher education faces a crisis of assessment credibility. The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence, the persistence of contract cheating and the limitations of text-based detection tools have exposed fundamental weaknesses in conventional written assessment. This report examines the evidence base for oral assessment as a robust, pedagogically grounded and increasingly necessary component of institutional assessment strategy.

Drawing on systematic reviews, sector body guidance and empirical studies from across the disciplines, the report finds that oral assessment offers distinct advantages in three domains. First, it provides a verification mechanism that written assessment alone cannot deliver: the capacity to confirm that a student genuinely understands the work submitted in their name. Second, it promotes higher-order cognitive engagement by requiring students to explain, justify and defend ideas in real time. Third, it develops professional competencies that employers consistently identify as lacking in graduates, including oral communication, critical reasoning and the ability to think under pressure.

The report also addresses legitimate concerns around anxiety, examiner bias, equity and scalability. The evidence indicates that these challenges are real but manageable through structured design, clear rubrics, trained examiners and emerging technology-mediated approaches. A 2023 systematic review of structured viva formats found high validity, reliability and acceptability when oral assessment is properly designed (Sychanturi et al., 2023). The 2024 systematic review by Nallaya and colleagues concluded that the benefits of oral assessment are contingent on quality of design and implementation, not inherent to the format itself (Nallaya et al., 2024).

For Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Directors of Learning and Teaching, the central argument is straightforward: in an environment where authorship can no longer be reliably verified through written work alone, oral assessment is not a relic of the past but an essential, modern tool for safeguarding institutional standards and ensuring genuine student learning.

2. Introduction: The Assessment Landscape in Higher Education

Assessment sits at the heart of the academic enterprise. It determines degree classifications, shapes student learning behaviour and underpins the credibility of qualifications. Yet the assessment landscape in higher education is under unprecedented strain. Three converging pressures have created what many commentators describe as an assessment crisis: the maturation of generative AI tools capable of producing plausible academic text, the entrenched problem of contract cheating and the growing recognition that traditional written coursework may be insufficient as a sole measure of genuine understanding.

The scale of the challenge is significant. A 2018 meta-analysis published in *Frontiers in Education* analysed 71 samples from 65 studies and found that 3.52% of students self-reported engaging in commercial contract cheating, a figure that rose to 15.7% in samples collected from 2014 onward (Bretag et al., 2018). UK-focused research has suggested that 8–9% of degrees awarded in the United Kingdom may be compromised by contract cheating (Newton, 2023). These figures, which rely on self-report data and therefore likely understate the true prevalence, point to a systemic vulnerability in assessment systems that rely predominantly on unsupervised written submission.

The arrival of large language models has intensified these concerns dramatically. A widely reported 2024 experiment at the University of Reading found that AI-generated examination answers successfully evaded detection by academic markers in 32 of 33 cases (The Guardian, 2024). This finding, replicated in various forms across institutions worldwide, has made clear that text-based detection tools cannot keep pace with the capabilities of generative AI. The arms race between detection software and generation technology is one that detection is structurally disadvantaged to win.

Against this backdrop, oral assessment has re-entered institutional conversations with renewed urgency. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) explicitly includes oral assessment and presentation among recognised assessment modes, encompassing the viva voce examination as a legitimate and valuable component of institutional practice (QAA, 2023). Yet despite its long pedigree and its recognised strengths, oral assessment remains underused in most disciplines outside doctoral examination and clinical education.

This report presents the evidence case for oral assessment as a modern, scalable and pedagogically essential tool for higher education. It is addressed to university leaders and policymakers responsible for assessment strategy, quality assurance and institutional integrity. The argument is not that oral assessment should replace written assessment. Rather, it is that any assessment framework that excludes oral

verification is incomplete and increasingly indefensible in the current environment.

3. Historical Origins and Evolution of Oral Assessment

The oral examination is among the oldest forms of academic assessment in the Western tradition. Its roots lie in the medieval European university, where knowledge was demonstrated not through written submission but through public disputation, argument and oral defence before a panel of masters. Understanding this history is important because it reveals that oral assessment is not a supplementary add-on to the written tradition but rather the original form from which written examination later emerged.

3.1 Medieval Origins

The University of Bologna, commonly recognised as the oldest Western university and founded in 1088, established oral disputation as a core academic practice (Ferreira, 2023; Top Hat, 2020). At Bologna and subsequently at the Universities of Paris and Oxford, the demonstration of scholarly competence was fundamentally an oral activity. Candidates for degrees were required to defend their knowledge publicly before examiners, engaging in structured argument and responding to challenge in real time. The term *viva voce*, meaning “with the living voice,” captures the essential character of this tradition: assessment as a living, dialogic encounter rather than a static written product (Cambridge University, 2024).

The scholastic culture of these early universities was built around the *disputatio*, a formalised debate in which a candidate would propose and defend a thesis against objections from opponents. This was not simply an examination but a demonstration of intellectual capacity: the ability to reason under pressure, to marshal evidence in real time and to respond to unforeseen challenge. These are precisely the competencies that contemporary oral assessment seeks to evaluate and that written assessment alone cannot reliably test.

3.2 The Transition to Written Examination

The ascendancy of written examination in the 19th and 20th centuries was driven primarily by administrative convenience rather than pedagogical superiority. As universities expanded their intake, oral examination of every candidate became logistically impractical. Written examinations offered standardisation, scalability and the appearance of objectivity. Yet this transition came at a cost: the loss of the dialogic, adaptive and verification functions that oral assessment uniquely provides.

Throughout this period, oral examination survived in specific contexts. The doctoral *viva voce* remained a requirement at most European and Commonwealth universities, functioning as the final quality assurance mechanism for research degrees. In medical education, the clinical oral

examination persisted as an indispensable tool for assessing diagnostic reasoning. In legal education, mootings and oral advocacy retained their central position. These disciplines preserved oral assessment not out of tradition for its own sake but because the competencies they valued could not be credibly assessed through writing alone.

3.3 Contemporary Resurgence

Contemporary institutional guidance reflects the ongoing relevance of oral examination. Cambridge University's doctoral examination guidance describes the viva as serving multiple functions: to defend the thesis, to clarify ambiguities and, critically, to verify that the work is the candidate's own (Cambridge University, 2024). The Council on Higher Education in South Africa has similarly documented the evolution of the viva from general scholarly debate to a focused quality assurance and authorship verification mechanism (CHE, 2018). These functions have never been more relevant than they are today.

4. Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Oral Assessment

Oral assessment is not merely a practical tool; it is grounded in several complementary theoretical traditions that together provide a robust justification for its place in assessment design. Three frameworks are particularly relevant: Socratic pedagogy, constructive alignment and sociocultural learning theory.

4.1 Socratic Dialogue and the Evaluative Conversation

The Socratic method, rooted in the philosophical tradition of structured questioning to reveal knowledge and expose misconceptions, finds its most direct contemporary expression in oral assessment. The University of New South Wales explicitly describes oral assessment as an “evaluative conversation,” aligning it with Socratic questioning and dialogic pedagogy (UNSW, 2024). In a well-conducted oral assessment, the examiner does not simply test recall; they probe reasoning, challenge assumptions and guide the student into increasingly demanding territory. This adaptive, responsive quality is precisely what makes oral assessment a richer diagnostic tool than a static written examination.

The Socratic tradition also emphasises that knowledge is not merely possessed but demonstrated through the act of articulation and defence. A student who can write a coherent essay may or may not understand the ideas within it. A student who can explain those ideas verbally, defend them under questioning and acknowledge their limitations demonstrates a qualitatively different level of understanding. This distinction is the foundation of the integrity argument for oral assessment.

4.2 Constructive Alignment

Biggs’ (2003) theory of constructive alignment holds that assessment tasks must be aligned with intended learning outcomes and teaching activities. Where the intended outcome requires analysis, evaluation, explanation or professional communication, oral assessment provides a more direct and authentic alignment than written alternatives. Bloom’s taxonomy resources explicitly identify oral response and presentation as examples of active cognitive engagement at the higher levels of the taxonomy (University of Waterloo, 2024). When a learning outcome states that students should be able to “justify decisions” or “defend a position,” oral assessment is the natural alignment.

This framework has practical implications for assessment design. It suggests that oral assessment is most defensible when the learning outcome itself requires spoken justification, professional dialogue or real-time reasoning (UNSW, 2024; QAA, 2023). It does not need to be used for every assessment, but its absence from courses with communication-

dependent outcomes represents a misalignment that constructive alignment theory would identify as a design weakness.

4.3 Vygotsky and the Zone of Proximal Development

Oral assessment fits naturally within Vygotsky's sociocultural framework because the examiner's prompts and follow-up questions can scaffold the student's performance within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Unlike a written examination, which captures only what the student can produce independently, oral assessment reveals what students can do with guided interaction (UNSW, 2024; Nallaya et al., 2024). This makes it a more sensitive diagnostic instrument, capable of distinguishing between a student who lacks knowledge entirely and one who possesses emergent understanding that needs only a prompt to surface.

The 2024 systematic review by Nallaya and colleagues emphasises that scaffolding is a critical determinant of oral assessment quality, a finding that is directly consistent with this Vygotskian framing (Nallaya et al., 2024). When oral assessment is designed with appropriate scaffolding, including advance notification of question areas, structured rubrics and a supportive but rigorous examination environment, it functions not merely as an assessment but as a learning event.

5. The Pedagogical Case: Learning Outcomes and Cognitive Development

The pedagogical argument for oral assessment rests on a substantial body of evidence demonstrating its capacity to promote deeper learning, higher-order thinking and more durable understanding than written assessment alone.

5.1 Learning Gains and Depth of Understanding

The most comprehensive recent synthesis of evidence is the 2024 systematic review by Nallaya, Gentili, Weeks and Baldock, published in *Issues in Educational Research*. This review, which identified 17 eligible studies from an initial pool of 2,657 articles, reports that many studies found students performed better in oral assessments than written assessments, though outcomes depended heavily on design and implementation (Nallaya et al., 2024). A 2024 conference study reported that oral assessments “enhance comprehension” and “foster deeper understanding and authentic engagement” with subject material (ASCILITE, 2024).

These findings are consistent with the broader cognitive science literature on the testing effect and retrieval practice. Oral assessment requires students to retrieve and reconstruct knowledge in real time, without the scaffolding of notes or pre-written responses. This effortful retrieval process strengthens long-term retention and promotes the kind of flexible, transferable understanding that higher education aims to develop. A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Marketing Education* found that viva voce examinations enabled dialectic communication and provided students with “invaluable experience for career interviews,” suggesting learning benefits that extend well beyond content recall (Pearce & Lee, 2009).

5.2 Higher-Order Cognitive Engagement

Oral assessment is frequently framed as supporting higher-order cognitive work because students must explain, justify and defend ideas in real time. This aligns with the upper levels of Bloom’s taxonomy: analysis, evaluation and synthesis (ERIC, 2017; University of Waterloo, 2024). In a written examination, a student can rehearse and polish responses, potentially masking shallow understanding behind fluent prose. In an oral examination, the adaptive questioning process exposes the depth (or absence) of genuine understanding in ways that written formats cannot.

The critical distinction is between performance and competence. Written assessment measures a student’s ability to produce a written product that meets specified criteria. Oral assessment measures a student’s ability to demonstrate understanding dynamically and responsively. Both are valuable, but only the latter provides a reliable window into the

cognitive processes underlying the product. This is why clinical education has never abandoned oral examination: the ability to diagnose, reason and explain under questioning is the core competency, and no written proxy can substitute for it.

5.3 Metacognition and Self-Regulation

Although the dedicated literature on metacognition and oral assessment is still emerging, there is strong indirect evidence that oral assessment promotes metacognitive activity. When students are required to monitor their explanations, adjust responses to follow-up questions and articulate their reasoning process under guided questioning, they are engaging in precisely the kind of self-regulatory and metacognitive work that educational research identifies as critical to deep learning (UNSW, 2024; Nallaya et al., 2024). The 2024 systematic review notes that this evidence should be presented cautiously as an inference supported by qualitative and review-based findings, rather than a definitive quantitative conclusion. Nevertheless, the direction of the evidence is consistent and theoretically coherent.

6. Academic Integrity: Oral Assessment in the Age of AI and Contract Cheating

This section addresses what is arguably the most urgent contemporary argument for oral assessment: its role as a verification mechanism in an environment where the authorship and authenticity of written work can no longer be reliably established through conventional means.

6.1 The Scale of the Integrity Challenge

The data on academic misconduct in higher education are deeply concerning. The landmark 2018 meta-analysis by Bretag and colleagues, published in *Frontiers in Education*, analysed 71 samples from 65 studies across multiple countries and found that 3.52% of students self-reported engaging in commercial contract cheating. In samples collected from 2014 onward, this figure rose to 15.7%, suggesting the problem is growing rather than diminishing (Bretag et al., 2018). The authors emphasised that self-report data almost certainly understate the true prevalence, as students have strong incentives to conceal dishonest behaviour.

In the United Kingdom specifically, Newton (2023) has argued that 8–9% of degrees awarded may be “unsafe” due to contract cheating. This is a striking claim with significant implications for institutional credibility, employer confidence and the public value of higher education qualifications. If nearly one in ten graduates may have obtained their degree through dishonest means, the assessment systems that awarded those degrees require fundamental re-examination.

6.2 The Generative AI Disruption

The release of large language models from late 2022 onward has transformed the integrity landscape. A widely reported 2024 experiment at the University of Reading submitted AI-generated examination answers alongside genuine student submissions. Markers failed to identify the AI-generated answers in 32 of 33 cases (The Guardian, 2024). This finding illustrates a structural vulnerability: detection-based approaches to integrity are fundamentally reactive, and the detection tools consistently lag behind the generation capabilities they attempt to identify.

The implications for assessment design are profound. If written work cannot be reliably attributed to the student who submits it, then written assessment alone cannot serve as a credible measure of student understanding. This does not mean written assessment should be abandoned. It means that written assessment requires complementary verification through a modality that is inherently resistant to outsourcing. Oral assessment is precisely that modality. When a student is asked to explain, defend and elaborate on their submitted work in a live, adaptive conversation, the question shifts from “Who wrote this?” to “Does this

student understand it?” The latter question is both more important and more answerable.

6.3 Oral Assessment as Integrity Mechanism

The 2024 systematic review concludes that the capacity of oral assessment to reduce academic integrity breaches depends on whether it is “designed, scaffolded, and implemented well” (Nallaya et al., 2024). A separate 2024 study reported that oral assessments reduce academic dishonesty and increase assessment rigour, noting also that generative AI can be harnessed to generate individualised oral questions efficiently, thereby addressing scalability concerns (ASCILITE, 2024). Cambridge University’s viva guidance explicitly states that one purpose of the viva is to clarify collaboration and assure examiners that the work is the candidate’s own (Cambridge University, 2024).

The integrity argument for oral assessment does not rest on the claim that oral examination is cheat-proof. No assessment is. Rather, it rests on the proposition that oral assessment raises the cost and difficulty of dishonesty to a level that makes it impractical for the vast majority of cases. A student who has outsourced their essay can submit it without personal risk. The same student, when asked to explain the argument, defend the methodology and respond to probing follow-up questions about their own work, faces a qualitatively different challenge. This is why the QAA includes oral examination as a recognised integrity tool and why institutions that have piloted oral verification report positive outcomes in identifying students whose understanding does not match their submitted work.

6.4 From Detection to Design

A critical conceptual shift is needed in how institutions approach academic integrity. The dominant paradigm has been detection: catching students who cheat after the fact, primarily through text-matching software and, more recently, AI detection tools. This approach is reactive, adversarial and increasingly ineffective. Oral assessment enables a shift from detection to design: creating assessment conditions in which dishonesty is structurally discouraged rather than retrospectively identified.

When students know that they will be required to explain their work orally, the incentive structure changes. The knowledge that a viva will follow a written submission acts as a powerful deterrent against outsourcing, because the student must be prepared to demonstrate genuine understanding of the work they have submitted. This “integrity by design” approach is more sustainable, more equitable and more aligned with the educational mission of the university than post-submission detection. It also protects honest students, whose genuine work is devalued when peers obtain equivalent grades through dishonest means.

7. Graduate Employability and Real-World Competency

Employer surveys consistently identify oral communication, critical thinking and the ability to explain complex ideas under pressure as among the most valued graduate competencies. Yet conventional assessment regimes dominated by written coursework and examinations provide limited opportunity for students to develop and demonstrate these skills. Oral assessment directly addresses this gap.

7.1 Professional Communication Skills

The 2009 *Journal of Marketing Education* study by Pearce and Lee found that viva voce examinations provided students with “invaluable experience for career interviews,” noting that the skills developed through oral examination, including the ability to articulate reasoning, respond to challenge and communicate complex ideas clearly, are directly transferable to professional contexts (Pearce & Lee, 2009). QAA guidance frames oral assessment as an opportunity for students to demonstrate understanding in conversation, a formulation that maps directly onto the communication demands of graduate employment (QAA, 2023).

In professions where verbal competence is not merely desirable but essential, including law, medicine, teaching, consulting and management, the case for oral assessment as professional preparation is particularly compelling. A graduate who has never been required to defend their reasoning orally, respond to unexpected questioning or explain their decisions under pressure has been deprived of a formative experience that their career will demand. Oral assessment fills this gap in a way that written assessment cannot.

7.2 Critical Thinking Under Pressure

Written assessment allows students to plan, draft and revise their responses over extended periods. While this is valuable for developing certain skills, it does not test the ability to think on one’s feet: to respond to an unexpected question, to adjust an argument in light of a challenge or to acknowledge uncertainty with intellectual honesty. These are capabilities that employers consistently value and that oral assessment uniquely develops.

The adaptive nature of oral assessment, in which follow-up questions respond to the student’s actual answers rather than following a fixed script, creates a more authentic simulation of professional reasoning than any written format. In a board meeting, a client consultation or a clinical handover, professionals are not given time to draft and revise their responses. They must demonstrate competence in real time. Oral assessment provides a structured, low-stakes environment in which

students can develop this capacity before it is tested in high-stakes professional settings.

8. Student Experience: Anxiety, Equity and Inclusivity

Any honest case for oral assessment must address the legitimate concerns about its impact on student experience, particularly around anxiety, equity for diverse learners and accessibility. The evidence shows that these concerns are real but manageable and that they should inform the design of oral assessment rather than preclude its use.

8.1 Assessment Anxiety

Research on oral assessment anxiety is well-established and unambiguous in its central finding: oral assessment can provoke higher levels of anxiety than written alternatives, particularly for some student populations. A study on second-language oral assessment found that higher anxiety predicted lower performance on oral tests, with speaking to a native speaker identified as a major anxiety source (MinneTeSOL Journal, 2023). A separate study on accent-related anxiety found that concern about how non-native accents are perceived can itself function as a significant source of speaking anxiety (JPLL, 2022).

These findings are important and should not be dismissed. However, they do not constitute an argument against oral assessment per se. Rather, they constitute an argument for careful, evidence-informed design. QAA viva preparation resources and institutional guidance consistently identify preparation, clarity of expectations and supportive framing as effective mitigation strategies (Cambridge University, 2024; QAA, 2023). When students understand the purpose of the assessment, know what to expect and have had opportunities to practise, anxiety levels decrease substantially.

It is also worth noting that some level of productive challenge is an intended feature of assessment, not a flaw. Written examinations also produce anxiety. The goal is not to eliminate challenge entirely but to ensure that it is proportionate, fair and manageable. Structured oral assessment with clear rubrics, advance notification of topic areas and supportive examiners can achieve this.

8.2 Equity and Neurodivergent Learners

Equity considerations are particularly important for oral assessment design. A 2026 article on foreign-language speaking anxiety and mental health argues that spontaneous speaking examinations can compound anxiety barriers for students with mental health conditions, linking this to discriminatory effects on neurodivergent learners (Cambridge Core, 2026). Non-native accent concerns are documented as a source of speaking anxiety relevant to oral assessment fairness in internationalised higher education (JPLL, 2022).

These findings support a design-sensitive approach rather than avoidance of oral assessment altogether. Practical accommodations include: clear rubrics that assess content and reasoning rather than linguistic fluency; advance provision of question topics or areas; the option to respond in text as well as speech; extended time allowances; and trained examiners who are alert to the difference between communicative difficulty and conceptual weakness. Several institutions implementing oral assessment at scale have incorporated text-only response options and flexible pacing controls, demonstrating that inclusive design is achievable without compromising assessment rigour.

It is also important to recognise that written assessment is not inherently more equitable than oral assessment. Students with dyslexia, for example, may be disadvantaged by written examinations in ways that oral assessment could mitigate. The equity question is not whether oral or written is fairer but whether the overall assessment diet is sufficiently diverse to allow all students to demonstrate their capabilities through the modality best suited to their strengths.

8.3 Student Perception and Value Recognition

Where oral assessment has been implemented with appropriate communication and preparation, student perception tends to be positive. Evidence from pilot implementations at institutions including Lindenwood University in the United States shows a consistent pattern: initial scepticism gives way to endorsement once students understand the purpose and experience the process. Students report appreciating that questions are drawn from their own submitted work rather than being generic, which makes the process feel relevant and fair. Students also identify unprompted professional development benefits, recognising the ability to articulate and defend ideas orally as a transferable skill for employment contexts.

The critical variable in student experience is communication. When students understand that oral assessment is designed to help them demonstrate genuine understanding, rather than to catch them out, engagement is constructive. When this communication is absent, students may perceive the process as punitive or adversarial. This underlines the importance of structured onboarding and transparent communication as standard components of any oral assessment implementation.

9. Validity, Reliability and Examiner Bias

Psychometric concerns about the validity and reliability of oral assessment are long-standing and must be addressed directly. The evidence indicates that traditional, unstructured oral examinations are indeed vulnerable to the criticisms commonly levelled against them, including subjectivity, inconsistent questioning and “halo” effects. However, structured oral assessment formats show markedly stronger psychometric properties.

9.1 Structured Formats and Measurement Quality

A 2023 systematic review of structured viva and oral examination formats, published via PubMed Central, found that these approaches demonstrate high validity, reliability and acceptability as assessment tools in health professions education (Sychanturi et al., 2023). The key differentiator is structure: when oral assessment uses standardised rubrics, predetermined question frameworks and trained examiners, its psychometric properties approach and in some cases exceed those of written examinations.

The 2024 systematic review by Nallaya and colleagues reached a similar conclusion, finding that validity and reliability depend strongly on design, scaffolding and implementation rather than on the oral format alone (Nallaya et al., 2024). This is a critical insight for institutional policymakers: the question is not whether oral assessment is reliable, but whether it is designed to be reliable. The same, of course, is true of any assessment method.

9.2 Examiner Bias and Inter-Rater Reliability

Examiner bias is a legitimate concern in oral assessment. Traditional viva formats are often criticised for subjectivity, inconsistent questioning and the potential for examiners’ prior impressions of a candidate to influence their judgement (Sychanturi et al., 2023). A Swedish study of oral mathematical communication assessment found inter-rater reliability problems and argued that it is the assessment model, not the oral construct itself, that can undermine reliability (NOMAD, 2023). Research on rubric-based oral presentation assessment shows that reliability improves as the number of raters increases and that single-rater reliability may be only moderate to good depending on rubric quality (ERIC, 2024).

These findings point to clear design principles: use structured rubrics with explicit criteria; train examiners in their application; use multiple raters where feasible or implement moderation processes; and maintain a complete audit trail of questions asked and responses given. When these conditions are met, examiner bias can be managed to levels comparable with other assessment methods. The availability of recording technology further supports quality assurance by enabling retrospective review and moderation of assessment decisions.

9.3 Comparative Reliability

It is important to contextualise reliability concerns within the broader assessment landscape. Written examinations and coursework are not free from reliability challenges. Marker variability in essay assessment is well documented, and the reproducibility of coursework marks across different assessors is often lower than institutional quality processes assume. The relevant comparison is not between an idealised written assessment and a flawed oral one, but between well-designed oral assessment and well-designed written assessment. On this comparison, the evidence suggests that structured oral formats are competitive with, and in some psychometric dimensions superior to, their written counterparts (Sychanturi et al., 2023; Nallaya et al., 2024).

10. Technology-Mediated Oral Assessment: Emerging Innovations

One of the historical barriers to wider adoption of oral assessment has been scalability. Conducting individual oral examinations with academic staff is resource-intensive, particularly in large-cohort modules. Emerging technology-mediated approaches are beginning to address this constraint, opening the possibility of oral assessment at scale without proportionate increases in staff workload.

10.1 AI-Assisted Question Generation and Delivery

A 2024 physiology study reported that an AI-supported viva application produced no significant difference in marks compared with traditional viva examinations, and that students responded positively to the experience (American Physiological Society, 2024). A separate 2024 study reported that generative AI can be used to generate individualised oral questions efficiently, helping oral assessment scale to larger cohorts without loss of quality (ASCILITE, 2024). These findings are preliminary but they point toward a future in which technology handles the logistically demanding elements of oral assessment, including question generation, session delivery and initial analysis, while academic staff retain oversight of outcomes and final judgement.

This technology-mediated model has significant implications for scalability. If AI systems can generate contextualised questions drawn from each student's individual submission, conduct adaptive questioning sessions and produce structured reports for academic review, then the staff time required per student drops substantially. The academic role shifts from conducting every examination personally to reviewing outcomes, moderating borderline cases and exercising professional judgement where the technology flags uncertainty. This division of labour preserves faculty control while removing the logistical barrier that has historically limited oral assessment to small cohorts and doctoral programmes.

10.2 Video-Conference and Remote Oral Assessment

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of video-conference oral examinations. Cambridge University now provides explicit guidance for video-conference vivas, indicating that remote oral examination has moved from an emergency measure to a mainstream component of doctoral assessment practice (Cambridge University, 2024). This normalisation of remote oral assessment has significant implications for accessibility and reach, enabling institutions to conduct oral examinations with students regardless of geographical location and reducing the logistical barriers associated with in-person scheduling.

10.3 Scalability Considerations

The evidence base on full cost-effectiveness studies remains thin, and it would be accurate to characterise scalability as an active design problem rather than a settled advantage (Nallaya et al., 2024). The main scalability constraint identified in the literature is staff time and consistency of questioning, which AI-assisted question generation and software-mediated delivery are specifically designed to address (ASCILITE, 2024; American Physiological Society, 2024). Early implementations suggest that technology-mediated oral assessment can achieve session volumes that would be impractical with purely staff-delivered models, but rigorous cost-benefit analyses at institutional scale are still needed.

For institutions considering adoption, the practical implication is that technology-mediated oral assessment is viable now for targeted implementations such as pilot programmes, high-stakes modules and integrity verification, with the technology trajectory pointing toward broader scalability within the next three to five years.

11. Implications for Institutional Policy and Practice

The evidence reviewed in this report carries specific implications for institutional leaders responsible for assessment strategy, quality assurance and academic integrity. This section translates the research findings into actionable recommendations.

11.1 Assessment Strategy

Institutions should review their assessment frameworks to ensure that oral assessment is available as a recognised and supported assessment mode across all faculties, not confined to doctoral examination and clinical education. The QAA already recognises oral assessment as a legitimate component of institutional practice (QAA, 2023). What is needed now is for individual institutions to operationalise this recognition through policy, training and infrastructure investment.

This does not require a mandate that every module include oral assessment. Rather, it requires that the institutional assessment framework actively enables oral assessment where pedagogically appropriate, removes administrative barriers to its adoption and provides guidance and support for academic staff who wish to implement it. The default assumption should shift from “oral assessment is exceptional” to “oral assessment is an available and valued option.”

11.2 Academic Integrity Frameworks

Institutional integrity strategies that rely solely on text-based detection tools are increasingly vulnerable. The evidence reviewed in Section 6 demonstrates that generative AI can evade detection in the overwhelming majority of cases (The Guardian, 2024). Institutions should incorporate oral verification as a complementary integrity mechanism, particularly for high-stakes assessments and modules where the risk of outsourcing is elevated.

A risk-based approach is appropriate: not every piece of coursework requires oral verification, but institutions should have the capacity to deploy it where warranted. This includes both systematic use (such as a viva component attached to a dissertation) and responsive use (such as an oral follow-up where an academic has concerns about the authenticity of a submission). Both uses require policy frameworks, trained staff and appropriate technology infrastructure.

11.3 Staff Development and Training

The evidence on examiner bias and inter-rater reliability (Section 9) underlines the importance of training. Academic staff conducting oral assessments need support in three areas: the use of structured rubrics and assessment criteria; the management of their own potential biases;

and the creation of a supportive examination environment that reduces unnecessary anxiety while maintaining rigour. Institutional teaching and learning centres should incorporate oral assessment design and delivery into their professional development offerings.

11.4 Student Communication and Preparation

The evidence is clear that student experience of oral assessment is strongly influenced by the quality of communication they receive in advance. Structured onboarding that explains the purpose, methodology and benefits of oral assessment before deployment is a critical success factor (see Section 8.3). Institutions should develop standard communication materials and preparation resources for students, and ensure that the rationale for oral assessment is framed in terms of learning and development rather than surveillance or punishment.

11.5 Inclusive Design

Oral assessment design must account for the diverse needs of contemporary student populations. The evidence on anxiety and equity (Section 8) supports a set of practical design principles: clear rubrics that assess content and reasoning rather than linguistic performance; advance notification of question areas; alternative response modes including text-based options; extended time allowances where appropriate; and examiners trained to distinguish between communicative difficulty and conceptual weakness. These accommodations should be built into assessment design from the outset rather than retrofitted as adjustments for individual students.

12. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report leads to a clear and actionable conclusion. Oral assessment is not a relic of the medieval university preserved only through institutional inertia. It is a pedagogically grounded, psychometrically defensible and increasingly necessary component of assessment practice in contemporary higher education.

The convergence of three forces makes the case for oral assessment more compelling now than at any point in the past century. First, generative AI has fundamentally undermined the credibility of unsupervised written assessment as a sole measure of student understanding. Detection-based approaches are losing the arms race against generation technology, and institutions that rely on them exclusively are building their integrity frameworks on increasingly fragile foundations. Second, the persistent problem of contract cheating means that authorship verification cannot be taken for granted, even in the absence of AI. Third, the evidence base for oral assessment has matured substantially in recent years, with systematic reviews confirming that well-designed oral assessment delivers high validity, reliability and student acceptability.

The legitimate concerns about oral assessment, including anxiety, examiner bias, equity and scalability, are real but addressable. Structured formats, clear rubrics, trained examiners, inclusive design principles and emerging technology-mediated approaches together provide a pathway to oral assessment that is rigorous, fair and scalable. The 2023 systematic review of structured viva formats (Sychanturi et al., 2023) and the 2024 comprehensive review by Nallaya and colleagues both confirm that the quality of oral assessment is a function of its design, not an inherent property of the format.

For university leaders, the strategic implication is that assessment frameworks must diversify beyond their current reliance on written work. Oral assessment should be available, supported and actively encouraged as a component of the institutional assessment diet. In an environment where the question “Who wrote this?” can no longer be reliably answered through text alone, the question that matters most is “Does this student understand it?” Oral assessment is the most direct and credible way to answer that question at scale.

The institutions that act on this evidence now will be better positioned to maintain the credibility of their qualifications, protect the value of honest student work and prepare graduates for a professional world that demands the very skills that oral assessment develops. Those that do not risk finding their assessment systems increasingly disconnected from the reality of how knowledge is produced, verified and valued in the 21st century.

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