

Bond University  
Research Repository



## Assessment cultures in higher education: reducing barriers and enabling change

Simper, Natalie; Mårtensson, Katarina ; Berry, Amanda ; Maynard, Nicoleta

*Published in:*  
Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/02602938.2021.1983770](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1983770)

*Licence:*  
CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

*Recommended citation(APA):*  
Simper, N., Mårtensson, K., Berry, A., & Maynard, N. (2022). Assessment cultures in higher education: reducing barriers and enabling change. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(7), 1016–1029.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1983770>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.

## Assessment Cultures in Higher Education: Reducing barriers and enabling change

\*Natalie Simper<sup>1</sup>, Katarina Mårtensson<sup>2</sup>, Amanda Berry<sup>1</sup>, Nicoleta Maynard<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Monash University, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Lund University, Sweden

\*Corresponding author: [nsimper@bond.edu.au](mailto:nsimper@bond.edu.au)

A series of worldwide projects concerning assessment, student outcomes, and quality in higher education has revealed the need for a change in how higher education institutions assess student outcomes; however, many academics remain unconvinced. The success of assessment change arguably depends on the assessment culture within the institution. This qualitative investigation of assessment cultures draws on the perspectives of 35 academics from Australia, Canada and Sweden. Data were analysed through a socio-cultural lens, with results supporting assessment cultures related to institutional structures and collegial relationships. The results also suggest the existence of assessment microcultures embedded in disciplines. This study provides concurrent validity to previous studies of assessment cultures, evidenced from institutional leadership perspectives, through the analysis of academic practitioner's viewpoints. Synthesis of findings observed that a combination of agency for change and policy levers effectively stimulated change. Included are suggestions to address the perceived barriers of entrenched disciplinary practices, institutional systems, and logistical constraints. There is limited empirical research on the impact of assessment culture on assessment practices; this study addresses this shortcoming and provides a new aspect to add to the literature on assessment cultures in higher education.

### Introduction

The higher education sector faces continued pressure to raise and measure academic quality and performance (Ewell, 2012). A series of worldwide projects around student outcomes and quality assurance processes underlined the need for change (González & Wagenaar, 2003; Harris, 2009; Barrie et al., 2011, Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). A typical response to the recommendations has been for government agencies to provide frameworks and impose institutional accountability measures (Salto, 2018). Recommendations focused on assessment of employability skills (Gallagher, 2010), and concerns were raised around disenfranchising discipline communities, and issues of inconsistency of standards in the assessment of student learning (Barrie et al., 2011). In some sectors, these measures include reporting of student learning outcomes, yet assessment conducted for accountability purposes has been known to undermine meaningful learning (Boud et al., 2010; Rhodes & Finley, 2013).

Addressing recommendations and issues often requires academic upskill and change leadership (Armstrong, 2016), but change management in higher education has historically been met with resistance (Kezar, 2011). Especially when academics are unconvinced about institutional aspirations for meeting recommendations (Baas et al., 2016), and "relevant professional capability and capacity is required to change assessment practice, which in the field of higher education is in short supply" (Coates, 2015, p. 408). Research suggests that the success of assessment change initiatives depend on the assessment culture within the institution (Magruder et al., 1997; Gorran Farkas, 2013; Tutko, 2018), but further work is needed to investigate relationships between assessment cultures, policies and practices (Ndoye & Parker, 2010; Holzweiss et al., 2016). This article explores this area through an empirical study across three contexts internationally and examines how findings relate to the extant literature.

### Assessment Culture

Assessment culture is "the deeply embedded values and beliefs collectively held by members of an institution who influence assessment practices on their campuses" (Holzweiss et al., 2016, p. 20). It is said that assessment cultures are connected to quality (Kalu & Dyjur, 2018; Ylonen et al., 2018; Cardoso et al., 2019), continuous improvement (Goncalves et al., 2018; Stanny, 2018); and linked to accountability (Weiner, 2009). The empowerment of stakeholders and shared purpose have been common recommendations for developing a quality oriented assessment culture and navigating the tension between assessment for learning and assessment for accountability (Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Eastberg, 2011; Meyer-Beining, 2020). For example, Hong (2018) highlighted the importance of administrative support, the need for advocates within Faculties to shift the assessment culture, and the investment in academic development "to shift from a culture of compliance toward a culture of assessment with a focus on improving student learning" (p. 116). Other researchers have advocated shared governance approaches to shift assessment culture, for example, through adherence to a set of commonly agreed-upon regulations, procedures and approaches (Beckwith et al., 2010; Ndoye & Parker, 2010).

### **Evaluation of assessment culture**

There have been few empirical studies focused on evaluating assessment cultures, with the most sizable body of work conducted by Fuller and associates. Utilising a Delphi process, Fuller (2013) surveyed institutional leaders to pilot an assessment culture instrument. In the following research, Fuller et al., (2015) suggested that research on cultures of assessment fall into two categories: (a) institutional practices suggestive of a culture of assessment and (b) conjectural elements hypothesised as fundamental to a culture of assessment. Further work from the research team found meta-themes of organisational structure (linked to accountability) and organisational culture (Holzweiss et al., 2016). Organisational culture was broken into themes of the value of assessment, evolving cultures of assessment, discourse, the value of student learning, and artifacts, traditions/rituals. Additionally, assessment cultures were found to be highly context-dependent, with Skidmore et al. (Skidmore et al., 2018) empirically demonstrating that institutional cultures of assessment were bound between cultures of fear, compliance, and student learning. To examine the tension between assessment for accountability or assessment for learning, we step back to visit the larger accountability debate related to assessment and assessment culture.

### **Authority versus autonomy**

The focus on performance indicators and quality assurance is intended to improve practice and outcomes for students. Still, accountability requirements have the potential of reducing academic freedom for individuals and institutions in asserting preferences for assessment (Mollis & Marginson, 2002). Universities historically upheld academic freedom for their members (Tight, 1988). Craig et al., (2014) described an audit culture that undercuts autonomy over assessment choices; freedoms being challenged by external forces for accountability (Altbach et al., 2011; Cole, 2017). There is little chance of avoiding accountability in the current landscape, but institutions are in control of how their situation is framed. For example, evaluation of assessment culture found that institutions reporting student learning as their primary purpose of assessment scored significantly higher on the assessment culture instrument than those with accreditation as their primary purpose for assessment (Fuller et al., 2016).

### **The context of assessment culture**

In their literature review, authors found no empirical studies of assessment cultures spanning international settings and speculated that cultures were thought to be specific to an institution. The concept of 'academic tribes and territories' describes disciplinary subcultures in higher education, with disciplinary traditions, practices, rules, collaborations and terminology (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Academic tribes are explained in terms of disciplinary knowledge, for example, the hard knowledge of pure sciences versus soft knowledge in the social sciences. Yet, authors hypothesise that contextual specificities of the discipline are suggestive of assessment subcultures. Research on academic tribes draws on Bourdieu's theory; *Habitus*, the embodiment of systems of structures (traditions over time) and behaviours conditioned by unwritten rules, *Doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977). It is suggested that to characterise institutional support for assessing student learning outcomes, "one must look at the attitudes and behaviours of individuals within that institution" (Weiner, 2009, p. 28). Bourdieu's work refers to *agents* who hold cultural or social capital and can influence others. Advocates for the assessment of student learning outcomes might be referred to as agents. Cultural capital is generated through institutionalised knowledge, and social capital is built through relationships and trust (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Against this background, there appears to be a need to investigate the contexts (of the discipline and institution) related to assessment culture and change.

### **Research questions:**

1. What similarities and differences are there in assessment cultures between disciplines and across institutions?
2. What factors hinder or facilitate assessment change?

### **Methodological approach**

This research was inspired by narrative methodology (Clandinin, 2006), with assessment culture and change explored through a socio-cultural framework (Bourdieu, 1993), based on in-depth interviews to understand the particular experiences of participants. Building from the author's previous study (Simper, 2020), this paper presents an investigation of assessment cultures across institutions and disciplines, explores changes made to assessment, and provides insight into factors that present barriers or enablers for changing assessment.

### **Method**

The primary researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with thirty-five participants from three medium-sized, doctorate-granting, research-intensive universities in Australia (n=12), Canada (n=11), and Sweden (n=11). Interviews comprised three sections. The first section included questions about (1) the participant's role, (2) their teaching experience, (3) the typical way of assessing student learning within their discipline or Faculty, (4) whether their practices differ from the norm, and (5) the processes for changing assessment practices at their institution. In the second section, participants were asked to explain a significant assessment change they had made. In the third section, they were asked to describe their interactions with

colleagues related to teaching and assessment. This article focuses on the first section of the interview; see Simper (2020) for results from the second and third portions of the interview. Participants provided informed consent, consistent with the ethical guidelines at each of the institutions. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Participants were assigned a letter to indicate their institution and a number for anonymity.

A purposeful sampling of participants was employed (Patton, 1990) to target academics with first-hand experience of assessment processes and departmental and institutional change mechanisms. The sample was limited to those in an academic teaching role, targeting those who had been recognised in their departments or institutions for engaging in assessment improvement activities. Participants were also selected from a range of disciplines to provide diverse perspectives and support potential comparisons between disciplines across the universities.

**Table 1. Disciplinary and institutional distribution of the sample**

University (National setting)	*Business	*Education	Engineering	Health Sciences	*Humanities	Sciences	Social Sciences	Total
A (Australia)	2	1	4	0	2	2	1	12
B (Canada)	0	0	4	3	1	1	3	12
C (Sweden)	1	1	2	2	0	2	3	11
Total	3	2	10	5	3	5	7	35

\*Disciplines with fewer than 5 participants were not included in the analysis for the themes of Tribes and Habitus.

### Analysis and Findings

The lead author conducted the initial investigation, which included only the samples where there was a minimum of five participants from each of the institutions (initially excluding Education, Business, or Humanities participants). Interview data were coded to a socio-cultural framework (Bourdieu, 1993), and analysed thematically (Braun et al., 2018). The exploration of data was undertaken "to examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations and ideologies" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). A subset (15%) of all quotes were independently coded by another member of the research team, with an initial agreement of 76%. Differences were related to interpretations of categories, and some quotes were found to be applicable to multiple categories. The research team conferred on the coding of comments in categories and made refinements based on discussion and mutual agreement.

The next step was to observe similarities between disciplines. The research team noted that disciplinary differences were only evident in assessment norms and practices. Therefore, the remainder of responses (from Education, Business, or Humanities participants) were included. The analytical process was repeated, and results were included in the sections on habitus, motivations, barriers, and enablers for change. Findings across each setting were discussed, and comparisons were drawn between institutional cultures, with resulting themes compared to the assessment culture themes from Holzweiss et al. (2016) and mapped in Table 2.

**Table 2. Themes of assessment culture and change- mapped to Holzweiss et al., 2016 Assessment Culture**

Themes	Findings	Holzweiss et al., 2016 Assessment Culture	
		Organisational structure	Organizational Culture
Tribes	Embedded disciplinary practices	Organisational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Artifacts, traditions/rituals</li> <li>● Evolving cultures of assessment</li> </ul>
Habitus	Peer induction		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The value of student learning</li> </ul>
Motivations	Policy and agency		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Evolving cultures of assessment</li> </ul>
Barriers	Readiness, systems and logistics		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The value of assessment</li> <li>● Discourse</li> </ul>
Enablers	Capital, academic community and peer support		

## Tribes

It was common for participants to point out that there was no single way of assessing student learning, but all were able to describe general assessment norms in their discipline. These differed between disciplines, but there was a striking similarity in assessment practices for the same disciplines across universities. The following sections present disciplinary evidence of assessment culture tribes.

### Engineering disciplines

There were 10 participants from engineering who all initially focused on forms of assessment (such as exams and group projects). When asked to explain how they assess student learning, they all described criterion-based assessment rubrics to determine the level of competence for a range of articulated attributes. For example, *everyone has marking criteria* (A4), or *there were people who had real experience putting together rubrics* (B11), or *you set up your criteria and figure out a way of defining levels of performance* (C10). Engineering is an accredited field, meaning that industry bodies set professional competencies and audit the program to ensure they are met. Six of the participants spoke about professional or accreditation requirements as a driver for creating assessment rubrics. Two of the participants were sceptical about the effectiveness of rubrics in determining student competence, for example, *it doesn't matter if it's mechanical, biomedical, chemical, there's a particular technical skill... but it's subjective on whether they have achieved some level of competence in that area* (B4); or, the rubric, *will totally focus students into, well, all I have to do are these things, and if I do these things then I will pass my assignment'* (C10).

### Health sciences disciplines

There were five participants from health sciences who all focused on the differences between assessment of knowledge versus skills. The assessment norm being to test theoretical knowledge in exams, and practical skills in an applied way. As this participant put it, *assessment of knowledge is done by means of knowledge tests, and with very few exceptions, it's a final written exam. Practical procedures are assessed in various ways* (C2). Half of the participants mentioned team-based learning, two identifying challenges that it posed for evaluation of individual assessment. For example, *yes, well, that's formative* (C6), meaning they provided feedback but did not include these in the numerical calculation of grades.

A shift in assessment culture was suggested from a participant at each institution, such as, *that's how it's been until now, but it's beginning to change* (C2) and *there started to be a change in how people are thinking about assessing students* (B12). Participant C2 questioned the effectiveness of testing medical skills in isolation and spoke of a preference for authentic assessment. The example spoken about was describing a change to the OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Examination). For context, OSCE's have been used since the 1980s for the assessment of skills in medical and allied health fields. Historically, they have been implemented at the end of a course, separate from student's clinical practice. The participant remarked that the environment for changing this long-standing practice required reverting to the *wild west*. The participant instituted a change to an embedded method of assessing skills, called the Direct Observation of Procedure Skills (DOPS).

### Science disciplines

The five participants from the science departments suggested that there had been little change in forms of assessment in the sciences; *the dominant paradigm still exists; it's experimental, so laboratory reporting, exams and tests* (A1), or, *we have a course syllabus that's ten years old, but they are written in a way that doesn't become old... So, we do written exams much the same way as they did when I was a student* (C5). Individual assignments and reports were referred to, but as one participant mentioned, *the biggest way of assessing is in exams and mid-terms* (B8), and much of the assessment was weighted to the end of the semester. Even when prompted, there was very little mention of assessment methods from the sciences participants. Two participants mentioned rubrics, but as this participant said, *it was not rubrics that I necessarily would have chosen* (with a) *focus on the syntax and the spelling, and things like that* (C5), the other described marks being based on the correctness of the answer, but not explained in terms of quality (as they would be in a rubric). Marks were quantified, for example, *in chemistry if they drew the right structure, they get a mark, or if they forget a significant figure, they lose half a mark* (A6). This type of assessment presented problems with students cheating. One participant suggested that it was difficult to change things, saying, *when we aren't worried about every answer being google-able in four seconds, then we can have more creative ways of assessing things* (B8).

### Social science disciplines

There were seven participants from the social sciences; four described their assessment as traditional, but all suggested there was a reshaping of approaches. For example, *we have seen a move away from the traditional assignments to more authentic assessments over time* (A5), and there had been a concerted effort to focus on *conceptual and applied questions rather than just spinning out the definitions* (B5). Written and oral assessments were mentioned to allowing students to argue their position; *we want them to develop their own knowledge and (understanding in) their own role* (C7), and formative assessments methods were reported to make use of oral and

written feedback for improvement. Assessment methods considered the quality of achievement, with six of the seven participants mentioning either criteria, descriptions of expectations, or rubrics specifically. However, two commented on challenges in the application; for example, *it's not always that easy to follow these criteria* (C7). Overall, the evidence supported the proposition of disciplinary tribes, differences in norms and practices within each institution, but consistent in disciplines across settings. The evidence also suggested that some of the disciplinary norms were in an evolving state.

### **Habitus**

Uniformly across participant comments was the suggestion of inducting academics into their disciplinary practice to maintain the existing assessment practices. While different strategies were used (such as peer teaching, buddy system, line manager passing on curricula documentation), the intent appeared to be the same across universities in perpetuating current practices through socialisation. Examples of this were noted in comments such as, *they'd be buddied with someone more experienced and they'd get to learn the ropes and understand what's possible* (A1); *There are a lot of unwritten practices that have been passed on from previous instructors* (B7); *We have to just follow this road map that is already laid out* (C5). Habitus also pertained to the perpetuation of attitudes and dispositions, such as the minimal value historically placed on student learning suggested in this comment; *the advice from my then department head was, 'just be sure not to waste too much time on your teaching because tenure depends only on research'* (B3).

### **Motivations**

Within the participant responses, there were intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for change that appeared to be influenced by institutional contexts. Intrinsic motivation was found in the academic's freedom to reach their own goals for improvement. This was more apparent at universities B and C; for example, *I think that that's a charming part of this job is that one, 'here's your room, here's your course, and really do it as you like'. Take help from your colleagues if you want, and can, and need to* (C9). At University B, there was considerable freedom to change assessment. As this participant put it, *there's no prescribed, institutional way of doing things. It's up to individuals* (B8). Another comment, *the undergraduate teaching role is basically a collective agreement to provide the instructors with a lot of flexibility and freedom as to what they want to do* (B7). The freedoms afforded at Institution B also led to initiatives such as this one: *A kind of critical friends concept. I've actually done that with a colleague; she went to my course, and I went to her course and then we sat down together to develop how we can assess what we're doing* (B6).

The extrinsic motivation was most evident at University A. There was some resentment from academics at this university about the new assessment policy's implementation procedures, but it did provide motivation for change.

*We've got an almost singular focus here; curriculum is assessment. That is the view that's held by a number of bureaucrats through the higher education quality standards framework. You'd better agree on a set of outcomes, the outcomes have to be developed as a consequence of the student's experience, and they must be assessed and moderated. We're supposed to do moderation pre, inter, and post. It's expected that it's referenced to your intended outcomes* (A1).

Some participants reported novel ways to manage the demands of working within the policy, *with the new assessment policy, you can have three assessments. So, the way I've gone, is I have one that is cumulative; I call it 'professional practice portfolio', where I embed the lab component and the theory into the one portfolio* (A6). Some participants found a way to use the new policy in a constructive way. For example, *would we have gone down this path if we didn't have that extrinsic motivation? Probably not. So, we're making the best use of what we can* (A7). It was apparent that the universities had different cultures around freedom or control, but whether the drive was intrinsic or extrinsic, there was an underlying motivation to change assessment.

### **Barriers to change**

Participant responses suggested that there were three reported main barriers to change: (1) historical resistance, (2) university systems, and (3) logistical constraints. While these were similar across universities, there were some contextual differences. Firstly, resistance to change, based on historical expectations was evident in each setting. For example, a participant describing a change to the final assessment explained the nature of resistance, *they (his peers) were so irritated and confused by this at the grass-root level. That's where the main resistance was. And I think the resistance was mostly that teachers needed a final exam because if they didn't have a final exam, they couldn't say whether a student was fit or not, so in the mind of the teacher, the final exam was the only thing that was valuable* (B2).

Secondly, university systems presented constraints that were contextually specific to each institution. Ten of the twelve participants at University A referred to the approval systems or timelines required as a barrier to assessment change. For example, *if you want to do something bold, and particularly to shift the proportions of assessment, that would have to happen months ahead* (A1). The following participant indicated that they were working on strategies to navigate this constraint:

*They're (administration) not particularly agreeable to doing different assessments, they have to be the same, or relatively equivalent. There's all these rules and regulations, so I'm trying to work out how I can sail close to the wind and over the top of these things* (A3).

At University B, there was considerable freedom, yet, directives passed on without consultation (such as academic regulations) were seen as constraining by half of the participants (from three disciplinary areas). For example, *we have been very much stultified by the requirements that have been coming out centrally* (B5). Another participant spoke of the imposed constraints undermining student learning, saying *we don't have exams, and we've been told that everything has to be marked for a particular student within an hour, and if it's not, then you have to shorten the assessment so that it can be marked within the hour* (B3). At University C, seven of the eleven participants reported that they had little opportunity to make changes because of their teaching role. As explained by this participant, *the form of system is that you have different types of roles, and the examiner is the one who signs all the papers and is the one who gives the final word on things or actually decides how things are done, basically* (C3).

Thirdly, there were logistical constraints that presented barriers to change, such as limited time and issues associated with technology. There were five comments from different universities about not having enough time for assessments activities, with comments like *part of that wedge (for conducting moderation) was the workload component* (A1), or this explanation as to why they have not made as many changes to assessment as they would like to have because *it takes a lot of time to prepare and do it well* (B13). In addition, three participants mentioned technological constraints, one from each institution. One mentioning assessments for an online course that required access to software, to become *more flexible concerning time and so forth, and maximise the use of those resources that we were given* (C3). Another participant (B8) spoke about needing software for peer reviews, and participant A7 mentioned that the assessments she was implementing would not be possible without utilising software for simulations.

## **Enablers for change**

### **Social and cultural capital**

When considering a change, participants sought advice from individuals they trusted and respected. For example, *one of the things that I quickly picked up on way back when I first started was, 'okay, these are the key decision makers'. They may not necessarily have an official title, but I talk to them and get their opinion* (B4), and *our department manager who is also our Undergraduate Chair. She's important because she knows all of the policies* (B12). It appeared that change was easier for some participants to implement. A participant who had been teaching for 20+ years and identified himself as an innovator, *I pretty much don't go a semester where I'm not doing something new* (B2). There were also those who led by example, such as the change of the OSCE to DOP (see the section Health Science under the Tribes heading). When asked how they managed to instigate such a change, *"Oh, well it was sort of a coup. I just said, okay, no OSCE this semester, we're going to do this [swipe sound effect] and deal with it* (C2). Those participants held enough capital to make the change. On the other hand, when newcomers tried to force change, there was evidence of resistance. Like this example, *she came with all these new-fangled ideas to us... she didn't understand the culture here, and she alienated everybody* (B3).

### **The academic community and peer support**

Participants from all institutions mentioned that they had peers with whom they discussed teaching and assessment. For example, *my colleague next door, we've been working very close in tandem* (A12), *a very good friend of mine in the department; we do talk about teaching and learning, she also teaches a big course, and we also talk about our frustrations and support each other in that way* (B5). Another mentioned, *she is the expert on distance learning, so if it's something related to that, I would talk to her* (C4).

Collegiality was actively encouraged at each university, but with varying cultures around uptake. At university A, a firm system was in place for making changes to the curriculum or assessment, with *a broad level of consultation around change. There'd be proposals put to teaching and learning management committee, and those changes would be reviewed within the broader context of the curriculum itself* (A1). Teaching teams discussed matters related to their course, or committees met with an agenda; *we're trying to get mapping of our assessments across the undergraduate program, we tend to discuss it in the undergraduate team* (A5).

At university B, there were efforts to facilitate discussion, but comments suggested that organised events were not very frequent. One participant recalled, *the year before last, we hosted a teaching brown bags, yesterday we were going to hold one where people would just brainstorm about what you're doing in your course* (B6). One of the discipline leaders cited time pressures as a limitation, *we encourage them to talk to others about teaching and assessment, but everyone's so busy, they don't have time to do it* (B8). It was not part of the culture at university B to discuss teaching and assessment, and it seemed that few academics valued the opportunity. For example, *personally, I don't like* (attending meetings to discuss teaching) *... it's the banal conversations that often go on* (B4). However, all but one participant mentioned that they had informal conversations about teaching and assessment.

A collective community was more evident at university C, where participants from all disciplines prided themselves on their collegiality. In addition to informal gatherings, there were regular teaching team meetings (including student representation) where decisions were democratically made. As this participant said, *it is very often you have someone to discuss the grading and so forth. So, in this way, we are socialising our norms* (C7). Another participant spoke about group consensus and minimum standards for students; *they were trying to decide 'what's a fail' and 'what's not a fail?' 'does this mean it's a fail, or not?... So, we've been having a big practice that everyone can participate in and agree on* (C3).

Across the three settings, the most commonly mentioned factor in relation to assessment change was collaboration with peers. The sub-text to these socially-driven enablers for change was the appreciation of assessment demonstrated by participants, with discourse as the avenue to discuss viewpoints on assessment.

### Discussion

Looking across all of the data, it was apparent that disciplinary assessment norms and attitudes transcended institutional boundaries. Ylonen et al. (2018) argued for the effects of disciplinary assessment cultures, and we support their argument in the form of academic tribes. Becher & Trowler (2001) refer to territories shaped by practices with distinct characteristics discernible within disciplines. These ideas have been carried in the field of academic development, with the investigation of academic microcultures (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015). This converging research, together with findings from the current study, support the assertion of assessment microcultures. Academics being inducted into the systems of assessment appeared to create stability in the form of socialisation into a collective *Habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) suggest that people have a practical sense or a fuzzy logic informing their behaviours. Their strategies are based (consciously or unconsciously) on their perceived probability for success. Collectively, within the tribes and habitus sections, we see assessment culture characteristics that align with the artifacts, traditions/ rituals, and evolving cultures of assessment themes from Holzweiss et al. (2016).

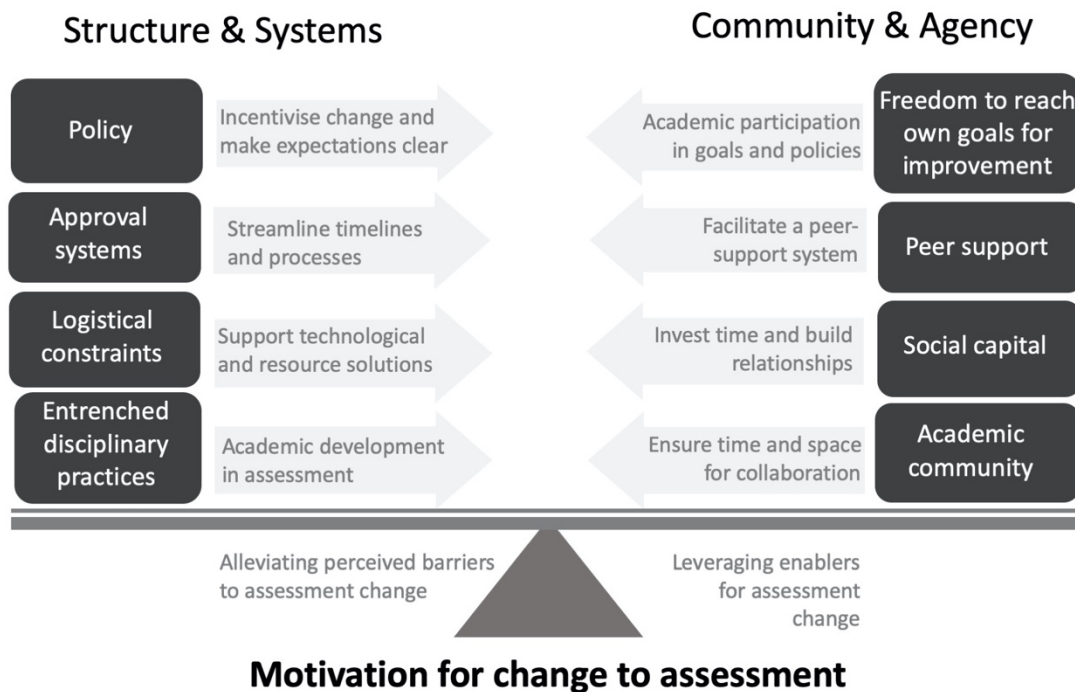
There were institutional influences on assessment cultures, manifested through structures and policies. Previous assessment culture research saw a breakdown between organisational structure and organisational culture (Fuller et al., 2016). Similarly, in this research, we saw these changes happen from the system (for example, external recommendations and deployment of policies). It is recommended that assessment cultures be built through the empowerment of stakeholders and shared purpose (Beckwith et al., 2010; Ndoye & Parker, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Eastberg, 2011). In the current study, a shared purpose was evident between peers but notably absent at the institutional level. Unwritten rules and situational factors, such as limitations in technology or resources, stymied change. Participants demonstrated readiness for change, but their institutional change mechanisms needed to be more flexible to enable prompt implementation. The implementation of a new assessment policy at institution A was not welcomed. It was seen as constraining and not in the students' best interests; nonetheless, it did create a stimulus for change, echoing Ndoye & Parker's (2010) comments related to the need for regulations and procedures.

The argument for the balance between structures and agency in higher education is not new (Ashwin, 2008). Debating this in context of assessment culture, we look to Hong (2018), who suggested that advocates within faculties could facilitate a shift from a culture of compliance to a culture of assessment. Sociologists use the term *agency* to describe the capacity of a person to act according to their wishes (Emirbayer & Mische, 1994). Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) suggested that *agents* who hold cultural or social capital are in a position to influence others. Participants from Universities B and C were motivated by the freedom to change facets of their assessment that they felt improved student learning, and an active discourse of assessment was enabled through community and peer support.



Figure 1 presents the synthesis of findings, suggesting a balance between policy and agency. Authors have extrapolated on findings to present a symbolic representation of the barriers weighing down change, and the enablers, balancing the load.

**Figure 1. Suggested strategies for facilitating assessment change**



### Limitations

This study's total sample size was 35, but the initial analysis was conducted on the 27 participants from disciplines with minimum representation. The nature of research question one required disciplinary representation across multiple universities, as such, focused on data from participants in Engineering, Health Sciences, Sciences and Social Sciences. Results from the whole sample allowed for modest institutional representation. A larger sample would have been preferable but was limited by the number of participants who could commit the time for the interview. While the sample comprised a range of participants, they were all actively involved in teaching and assessment improvement activities, potentially biased toward change. Further research is needed to determine how academics reluctant to change would respond to the suggestions made in the current study.

### Conclusions

This study explored assessment cultures across multiple settings to observe factors affecting assessment change. Investigation of data from narrative interviews with thirty-five academics from three universities (in Australia, Canada and Sweden) suggested that assessment cultures were shaped by disciplinary practices, institutional systems, expectations and the value academics place on assessment. Assessment practices were dependent on disciplinary traditions, perpetuated when new academics were inducted into disciplinary norms. The results in the current study add to previous findings that assessment cultures are intertwined between organisational and disciplinary cultures. Evidence suggested that habitus changes over time as academics build their own understanding of assessment principles and adapt to policies in place. Barriers to change were evident where disciplinary practices had become entrenched, where there were logistical issues, and when systems were inflexible. The freedom to act was found to be a motivator for change and was heightened by policy levers. People who held social capital were more readily able to make changes, and peer support was more evident where there was an institutional collegial climate.

As we have seen recently, the COVID-19 situation presented the need for an almost overnight shift to remote delivery and wide-scale changes to assessment. Institutions are now presented with an opportunity to help academics address assessment challenges while building a positive assessment culture. For institutional leaders and others wanting to affect change in assessment, the recommendations are to invest in the community and peer support mechanisms; change agents need to be respected and trusted. Secondly, utilise extrinsic motivation

through assessment policies or guidelines that describe requirements for quality assurance while safeguarding academic agency for change. Processes should include the scope for individual freedom to work within the guidelines, thus leveraging intrinsic motivation for quality improvement.

## References

- Altbach, P. G., Gumport, P. J., & Berdahl, R. O. (2011). *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century. Social, Political, and Economic Challenges*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Armstrong, L. (2016). Barriers to innovation and change in higher education. *TIAA-CREF Institute*.
- Ashwin, P. (2008). Accounting for structure and agency in ‘close-up’ research on teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47(3), 151–158.
- Baas, L., Rhoads, J. C., & Thomas, D. B. (2016). Are Quests for a “Culture of Assessment” Mired in a “Culture War” Over Assessment? A Q-Methodological Inquiry. *SAGE Open*, 6(1), 1–17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015623591>
- Barrie, S., Hughes, C., Crisp, G., & Bennisson, A. (2011). *AAGLO Summary 1: The ALTC AAGLO project and the international standards agenda*.  
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.638.4870&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Becher, T., & Trowler, P. R. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. SRHE. Open University Press.
- Beckwith, E. G., Silverstone, S., & Bean, D. (2010). Creating A Culture Of Academic Assessment And Excellence Via Shared Governance. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research (Littleton, Colo.)*, 3(2), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v3i2.175>
- Boud, D., Dochy, F., & others. (2010). *Assessment 2020. Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. [www.assessmentfutures.com](http://www.assessmentfutures.com)
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice: Vol. no. 16*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *Sociology in question* (Vol. 18). Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2018). Thematic analysis. In *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (P. Liamputtong (Ed), pp. 1–18). Springer.
- Cardoso, S., Rosa, M. J., Videira, P., & Amaral, A. (2019). Internal quality assurance: A new culture or added bureaucracy? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(2), 249–262.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1494818>
- Clandinin, D. J. (2006). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology*. Sage Publications.
- Coates, H. (2015). Assessment of learning outcomes. In *The European Higher Education Area* (pp. 399–413). Springer.
- Cole, J. R. (2017). Academic Freedom as an Indicator of a Liberal Democracy. *Globalizations*, 14(6), 862–868.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1325169>
- Craig, R., Amernic, J., & Tourish, D. (2014). Perverse Audit Culture and Accountability of the Modern Public University. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 30(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/faam.12025>
- Eastberg, J. R. B. (2011). Valuing in Decision-Making Ability: Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Across the Curriculum and Campus Culture at Alverno College. *Journal of College and Character*, 12(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1819>
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1994). What Is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962–1023.
- Ewell, P. (2012). The “quality agenda:” An overview of current efforts to examine quality in higher education: A discussion paper prepared for the American Council on Education (working paper Draft B). Retrieved from ACE Outcomes Papers: [Http://www. Nchems. Org/Pubs/Docs/ACEOutcomesPaper\\_ October2012. Pdf](http://www.nchems.org/Pubs/Docs/ACEOutcomesPaper_October2012.Pdf).
- Fuller, M. B. (2013). An Empirical Study of Cultures of Assessment in Higher Education. *Education Leadership Review*, 14(1), 20–27.
- Fuller, M. B., Skidmore, S. T., Bustamante, R. M., & Holzweiss, P. C. (2016). Empirically Exploring Higher Education Cultures of Assessment. *Review of Higher Education*, 39(3), 395–429.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2016.0022>
- Fuller, M., Henderson, S., & Bustamante, R. (2015). Assessment leaders’ perspectives of institutional cultures of assessment: A Delphi study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(3), 331–351.
- Gallagher, M. (2010). *The Accountability for Quality Agenda in Higher Education* (p. 22). Group of Eight Limited. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED538592>
- Goncalves, Z., Bennett, T., Murray-Chandler, L., & Hall, C. (2018). Inquiry Scholars Collaborative: Growing a Culture of Assessment. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2018(155), 105–112.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20309>

- González, J., & Wagenaar, R. (2003). Quality and European programme design in higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 38(3), 241–251.
- Gorran Farkas, M. (2013). Building and sustaining a culture of assessment: Best practices for change leadership. *Reference Services Review*, 41(1), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907321311300857>
- Harris, K.-L. (2009). International trends in establishing the standards of academic achievement in higher education. *An Independent Report and Analysis*. [http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/1669343/Intl\\_trends\\_standards\\_Harris\\_Aug09.pdf](http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1669343/Intl_trends_standards_Harris_Aug09.pdf)
- Hénard, F., & Roseveare, D. (2012). *Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education: Policies and Practices* (p. 53) [An IMHE Guide for Higher Education Institutions]. Institutional Management in Higher Education. <https://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/QT%20policies%20and%20practices.pdf>
- Holzweiss, P. C., Bustamante, R., & Fuller, M. B. (2016). Institutional Cultures of Assessment: A Qualitative Study of Administrator Perspectives. *Journal of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness*, 6(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jasseinsteffe.6.1.0001>
- Hong, R. (2018). Faculty Assessment Fellows: Shifting from a Culture of Compliance to a Culture of Assessment Advocacy. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2018(177), 105–119. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20259>
- Kalu, F., & Dyjur, P. (2018). Creating a Culture of Continuous Assessment to Improve Student Learning Through Curriculum Review. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2018(155), 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20302>
- Kezar, A. (2011). *Understanding and Facilitating Organizational Change in the 21st Century: Recent Research and Conceptualizations: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Volume 28, Number 4* (Vol. 28). John Wiley & Sons.
- Magruder, J., McManis, M. A., & Young, C. C. (1997). The Right Idea at the Right Time: Development of a Transformational Assessment Culture. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 1997(100), 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.10002>
- Meyer-Beining, J. (2020). “Of course we have criteria” Assessment criteria as material semiotic means in face-to-face assessment interaction. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 24, 100368-. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2019.100368>
- Mollis, M., & Marginson, S. (2002). The assessment of universities in Argentina and Australia: Between autonomy and heteronomy. *Higher Education*, 43(3), 311–330.
- Ndoye, A., & Parker, M. A. (2010). Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Assessment. *Planning for Higher Education*, 38(2), 28–35.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, 2nd ed. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Rhodes, T. L., & Finley, A. P. (2013). *Using the VALUE rubrics for improvement of learning and authentic assessment*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Roxå, T., & Mårtensson, K. (2015). Microcultures and informal learning: A heuristic guiding analysis of conditions for informal learning in local higher education workplaces. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 20(2), 193–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1029929>
- Salto, D. J. (2018). Quality assurance through accreditation: When resistance meets over-compliance. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72(2), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12151>
- Seagraves, B., & Dean, L. A. (2010). Conditions Supporting a Culture of Assessment in Student Affairs Divisions at Small Colleges and Universities. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 47(3), 307–324. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.6073>
- Simper, N. (2020). Assessment Thresholds for Academic Staff: Constructive Alignment and Differentiation of Standards. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(7), 1016–1030.
- Skidmore, S. T., Hsu, H.-Y., & Fuller, M. (2018). A person-centred approach to understanding cultures of assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), 1241–1257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1447082>
- Stanny, C. J. (2018). Putting Assessment into Action: Evolving from a Culture of Assessment to a Culture of Improvement. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2018(155), 113–116. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20310>
- Tight, M. (1988). *Academic freedom and responsibility*. Open University Press.
- Tutko, M. (2018). Problems of Quality Culture Assessment in Higher Education. *Przedsiębiorczość i Zarządzanie*, 19(6.1), 191–203.
- Weiner, W. F. (2009). Establishing a culture of assessment. *Academe*, 95(4), 28–32.
- Ylonen, A., Gillespie, H., & Green, A. (2018). Disciplinary differences and other variations in assessment cultures in higher education: Exploring variability and inconsistencies in one university in England. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(6), 1009–1017. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1425369>