Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences

Identifying Organizational Factors Affecting Assessment Policy Adherence in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify and analyze the organizational factors that influence adherence to assessment policy in higher education institutions. A qualitative research design was employed to explore institutional and cultural dynamics affecting assessment policy implementation. Twenty participants, including academic staff and administrators from various universities in Tehran, were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Thematic analysis followed an inductive coding process involving open, axial, and selective coding to extract key patterns and relationships within the data. The analysis revealed three overarching themes: leadership and governance, institutional culture and values, and structural and resource constraints. Within the domain of leadership and governance, participants highlighted issues such as inconsistent policy communication, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited decision-making transparency. Institutional culture factors included faculty resistance to standardization, informal peer norms, ethical dilemmas, and departmental autonomy that often conflicted with formal guidelines. Structural and resource constraints such as lack of assessment training, limited support systems, excessive administrative workload, and fragmented monitoring infrastructures were also identified as major impediments to policy adherence. Participants emphasized that policy implementation is shaped by a complex interplay of formal directives and informal institutional realities. Adherence to assessment policy in higher education is influenced by a combination of leadership engagement, organizational culture, and operational capacity. To improve implementation, institutions must align policy with local practices, invest in faculty development, ensure clarity and accessibility of guidelines, and foster a culture of shared responsibility and ethical accountability in assessment processes.

Keywords: Assessment policy; higher education; policy adherence; organizational factors; institutional culture; leadership.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, assessment has emerged not only as a tool for measuring student learning outcomes but also as a critical mechanism for accountability, quality assurance, and institutional improvement (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). However, the effectiveness of assessment systems depends heavily on consistent adherence to institutional policies designed to standardize and guide assessment practices. Adherence to these policies ensures fairness, comparability, and reliability across diverse academic programs (Newton, 2007). Despite the development of robust assessment policies at institutional and national levels, a persistent challenge in higher education institutions (HEIs) globally is the inconsistent implementation of these policies at the department and faculty levels (Carless, 2015). This discrepancy between policy and

practice has prompted a growing body of research to explore the factors that facilitate or hinder policy adherence in educational settings.

Assessment policies are typically formulated with the intention of promoting valid, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems. However, implementation is rarely linear or uniform across academic institutions. Studies have shown that while policies may reflect global best practices, local academic cultures, institutional norms, and structural limitations often mediate their enactment (Shay, 2008; Sambell et al., 2013). Within this context, organizational factors—ranging from leadership commitment and communication channels to institutional culture and resource allocation—play a central role in shaping whether assessment policies are embraced, resisted, or ignored (Harris & Brown, 2009).

Organizational adherence to policy in higher education cannot be solely understood as a technical process but must be interpreted through the lens of institutional behavior and cultural dynamics (Fullan, 2007). Leadership plays a pivotal role in modeling commitment to assessment principles and fostering a climate of accountability and reflection (Kuh et al., 2015). For instance, a lack of strategic alignment between institutional goals and assessment policies can lead to perceived irrelevance and low engagement from academic staff. Moreover, ambiguous communication, inconsistent role definitions, and exclusion of faculty from decision-making processes may undermine the legitimacy of policies and generate organizational resistance (Knight, 2006).

Academic staff attitudes and departmental cultures significantly affect how assessment policies are interpreted and practiced. In many cases, institutional assessment frameworks are perceived as rigid or misaligned with disciplinary norms, leading faculty to revert to traditional, autonomous grading practices (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Furthermore, entrenched norms—such as peer-driven informal assessment cultures—may perpetuate inconsistent practices across departments even in the presence of formal guidelines (Nicol, 2010). Studies have also identified resistance linked to change fatigue, where ongoing policy shifts create cynicism and disengagement (Elwood, 2006). Such resistance is compounded when faculty perceive policies as externally imposed and irrelevant to the complexities of classroom realities.

Ethical considerations also intersect with adherence to assessment policies. Research indicates that pressures to pass students, fear of student complaints, and departmental preferences for leniency can compromise assessment integrity (Brown & Knight, 1994). These informal norms, when left unchecked, contribute to grade inflation, inequity, and a weakening of academic standards (Yorke, 2011). Furthermore, the autonomy of academic departments to develop local assessment frameworks—while important for contextualization—can result in policy fragmentation if not adequately harmonized with institutional directives (Price et al., 2008).

Structural and resource-related barriers constitute another major impediment to policy adherence in higher education. Institutions often lack the infrastructural support necessary to operationalize their own policies, such as robust IT systems, professional development programs, and monitoring tools (Sadler, 2005). In many cases, faculty are burdened with excessive administrative tasks related to assessment, which reduces their capacity to engage meaningfully with policy requirements (Carless, 2009). Compounding this, new staff members may enter academic roles without formal training in assessment practices or familiarity with institutional policies, leading to inconsistent application of principles and standards (Bailey & Garner, 2010).

Interdepartmental coordination is also essential for coherent assessment practices. A lack of communication between academic units, quality assurance offices, and administrative staff often results in duplication of effort, fragmented data, and inconsistent implementation (Tan, 2013). When departments function in silos, the possibility of a shared understanding of assessment diminishes, and adherence to policy becomes uneven. Without a centralized system for policy dissemination and

monitoring, even the best-intentioned guidelines risk being overlooked or selectively interpreted by individual faculty members (Jessop & Tomas, 2017).

The accessibility of assessment policies, both in terms of physical availability and comprehensibility, further influences implementation. Policies that are difficult to locate, overly technical, or lack localized translations hinder faculty engagement (Harlen, 2005). Especially in multilingual or complex bureaucratic contexts, the linguistic and structural clarity of policy documents plays a vital role in enabling or constraining faculty compliance. Moreover, the absence of dedicated support systems—such as mentoring programs, advisory services, or technical help desks—can leave faculty members isolated in navigating policy expectations (Sadler, 2009).

While a growing body of literature has examined assessment practices in higher education, much of it has focused on student outcomes, feedback quality, or design of assessment instruments (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Fewer studies have delved into the organizational and systemic dimensions that influence policy implementation. Even less attention has been paid to how faculty interpret, resist, or adapt assessment policies in real-world institutional contexts, particularly in non-Western higher education systems. Given the complexity and variability of higher education structures globally, there is a pressing need to investigate the contextual organizational factors that shape assessment policy adherence.

This study aims to fill this gap by identifying and analyzing the organizational factors that influence adherence to assessment policies in higher education institutions. Focusing on academic staff and administrators in Tehran-based universities, the research adopts a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges associated with policy implementation. By foregrounding the voices of those directly involved in assessment processes, this study seeks to uncover the hidden organizational dynamics—both structural and cultural—that facilitate or hinder meaningful engagement with assessment policies. Such insights can inform institutional strategies, support policy refinement, and ultimately promote more consistent and ethical assessment practices across higher education systems.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the organizational factors influencing adherence to assessment policies within higher education institutions. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the research aimed to understand participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding institutional practices and challenges surrounding policy implementation in assessment contexts.

The research utilized a purposive sampling strategy to select participants with direct knowledge and experience related to assessment policy adherence. A total of 20 academic staff and administrators from various higher education institutions in Tehran were recruited. These participants included department heads, quality assurance officers, assessment coordinators, and senior lecturers who were actively involved in the development, enforcement, or evaluation of assessment policies. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of three years of professional experience in higher education and direct engagement with assessment-related processes.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews. This ensured that the data captured was sufficiently rich and comprehensive to answer the research question and support robust thematic analysis.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the sole method of data collection. This approach allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in participants' workplaces or virtually, depending on availability and convenience. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and institutional contexts that influence adherence to assessment policies. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Data were coded inductively to allow patterns and themes to emerge from the participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. Initial open coding was followed by axial coding to identify relationships between codes and organize them into categories. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate the categories into broader themes that reflect the organizational factors shaping assessment policy adherence. Throughout the analysis process, data were constantly compared and re-examined to ensure analytical rigor and consistency. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining a clear audit trail of analytic decisions.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Leadership and Governance

Policy Communication Clarity

Participants consistently emphasized the lack of clear and consistent communication regarding assessment policies. Many reported confusion stemming from contradictory messages from different administrative levels. One department head remarked, "Sometimes we get three versions of the same policy from different offices, and we don't know which one to follow." The absence of standardized documentation and overlapping mandates created ambiguity, making adherence difficult.

Leadership Commitment

Several participants noted that institutional leadership showed limited commitment to assessment integrity. Without active monitoring or visible prioritization from leadership, assessment policies were perceived as symbolic. One administrator observed, "If the top doesn't take it seriously, why should the rest of us?" The lack of consequences for non-compliance further diminished motivation for adherence.

Accountability Mechanisms

The findings revealed weak or non-existent accountability systems. Participants mentioned that follow-up on policy compliance was rare, and performance reviews often ignored assessment-related duties. A faculty member commented, "I've never been asked how I grade or assess students, even during evaluations." The absence of feedback loops reduced institutional learning and improvement.

Strategic Alignment

Many participants perceived a disconnect between assessment policies and broader institutional goals. Assessment strategies were often viewed as isolated tasks rather than integral to the university's mission. One interviewee stated, "The assessment policy looks good on paper, but no one relates it to our actual teaching or learning outcomes." This lack of alignment discouraged engagement.

Decision-Making Transparency

Participants frequently raised concerns about top-down decisions regarding assessment reforms. They felt excluded from important planning processes, which fostered resistance. As one academic put it, "Decisions are made without consulting those who actually do the assessment work." This exclusion undermined trust and reduced the perceived legitimacy of policy changes.

Role Ambiguity

Unclear delineation of responsibilities regarding assessment roles was another challenge. Participants described confusion over who was responsible for implementation, monitoring, and reporting. One respondent noted, "Sometimes we don't even know if the department or the faculty office is in charge." This ambiguity led to inconsistent practices across units.

Theme 2: Institutional Culture and Values

Faculty Attitudes toward Assessment

A recurring theme was faculty resistance to standardized assessment frameworks. Many perceived such policies as infringing on their academic freedom or being irrelevant to their disciplines. One lecturer explained, "They're asking us to apply the same rules to architecture and physics. It doesn't work like that." These attitudes contributed to selective adherence.

Collegial Norms and Practices

Peer culture played a strong role in shaping assessment behavior. Participants described informal, locally accepted practices that often contradicted official policies. One participant noted, "Everyone in our department grades the way they want; we've never sat down to compare approaches." Such norms reinforced the autonomy of individuals over institutional consistency.

Change Fatigue

Many participants expressed exhaustion with ongoing assessment reforms, describing them as top-heavy and inconsistent over time. Past failures created a sense of cynicism. A faculty member shared, "We've seen so many reforms come and go, it's hard to take the next one seriously." This fatigue led to disengagement from new initiatives.

Ethical Standards in Assessment

Concerns about ethical practices were widespread. Participants highlighted external and internal pressures contributing to lenient grading, favoritism, or inflating marks. One academic revealed, "Sometimes you're expected to pass students because failing them would mean more paperwork or complaints." These pressures compromised adherence to fair assessment standards.

Departmental Autonomy

Decentralized decision-making created significant variation in assessment practices. Participants reported that departments often had their own localized policies, which sometimes conflicted with institutional guidelines. One participant explained, "Our department has its own system, and we rarely consult the university's policy unless there's an audit." Such autonomy undermined standardization efforts.

Theme 3: Structural and Resource Constraints

Staff Training and Development

Participants identified a lack of structured training in assessment as a major barrier. New faculty often received no formal orientation on policy expectations, and professional development in assessment was rare. A participant stated, "I learned how to assess students through trial and error. No one trained me." This led to inconsistent and sometimes outdated practices.

Resource Availability

Insufficient resources—financial, technological, and human—were cited as critical barriers. Many units lacked assessment support offices or dedicated staff. One respondent said, "We don't even have a person to consult when we're unsure about grading standards." This lack of support infrastructure impeded policy implementation.

Infrastructure for Monitoring

The absence of effective digital systems for tracking assessment practices hindered oversight. Participants described reliance on manual documentation, often incomplete or inaccessible. A department chair noted, "There's no centralized system. If you want a report, you have to dig through individual files." This fragmented infrastructure reduced transparency and hindered improvement efforts.

Administrative Load

Excessive bureaucracy was another constraint. Faculty described being overwhelmed by paperwork associated with assessment procedures. One lecturer stated, "The forms alone take hours, and we're expected to do it on top of everything else." This administrative burden led to shortcuts and minimal compliance.

Interdepartmental Coordination

Silos between departments and offices led to poor information sharing and inconsistent interpretations of policy. Participants mentioned that different units operated in isolation, often unaware of each other's approaches. A quality assurance officer commented, "Each unit works like its own island. We don't have a shared system."

Assessment Policy Accessibility

Difficulties in accessing assessment policies were a surprisingly common theme. Participants noted that policies were scattered across platforms or written in dense language. One interviewee explained, "Even finding the latest version of the policy takes effort. It's not user-friendly." Limited accessibility created unintentional non-compliance.

Institutional Support Systems

Finally, the lack of institutional advisory and mentoring systems was noted. Faculty, especially early-career academics, expressed a need for structured support. One participant said, "When you're new, you don't even know where to ask for help. There's no support network for assessment issues." This absence of guidance reduced confidence in adhering to standards.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the organizational factors influencing adherence to assessment policy in higher education institutions by analyzing the perceptions and experiences of academic staff and administrators in Tehran. The qualitative findings highlight a multifaceted interaction between institutional structures, leadership behaviors, cultural values, and resource constraints, each contributing to either the facilitation or obstruction of consistent policy implementation. These findings underscore the notion that assessment policy adherence is not merely a procedural compliance issue but one deeply embedded in organizational dynamics and academic identities.

The first major theme—**leadership and governance**—emerged as a foundational determinant of policy adherence. Participants emphasized that unclear communication, lack of transparency, and inconsistent leadership commitment created institutional ambivalence toward assessment policies. This aligns with findings by Fullan (2007), who argued that meaningful policy implementation depends on visible and sustained leadership engagement. When faculty perceive assessment as a low priority for institutional leaders, adherence becomes optional rather than imperative. Moreover, Knight (2006) emphasized the damaging effects of opaque decision-making structures, which this study confirms through reports of exclusion from policy development and inconsistent accountability mechanisms. These structural weaknesses disrupt the feedback loops necessary for aligning assessment practices with institutional goals and expectations (Kuh et al., 2015).

The second theme—**institutional culture and values**—revealed how deeply held academic norms and collective attitudes influence assessment behaviors. Many participants expressed that faculty autonomy, resistance to standardization, and peer-driven informal practices often outweighed institutional guidelines. These findings resonate with the work of Bloxham and

Boyd (2007), who noted that disciplinary epistemologies and collegial traditions shape how assessment is practiced, often overriding top-down directives. Resistance to policy is not necessarily rooted in defiance but in a belief that generic frameworks do not account for disciplinary complexity and contextual realities. Moreover, the study confirms that change fatigue—well documented in the literature as a reaction to policy overload—leads to skepticism and disengagement among faculty (Elwood, 2006). The perception that assessment reforms are transient or bureaucratic diminishes their perceived legitimacy and fosters a culture of surface-level compliance.

Ethical dimensions also surfaced prominently within this theme. Participants acknowledged that institutional tolerance of leniency and grade inflation weakened the integrity of assessment systems. This confirms Brown and Knight's (1994) warning that without institutional checks, assessment may become vulnerable to favoritism, student pressure, or performance-based incentives that distort grading. Yorke (2011) further argues that when institutional norms tacitly endorse such practices, they compromise the credibility of student evaluation and erode public trust in academic standards. The study's findings thus support the view that policy adherence requires not only structural enforcement but also a shared ethical commitment to fairness and rigor in assessment.

The third major theme—**structural and resource constraints**—demonstrated that organizational capacity directly influences policy adherence. Participants highlighted the lack of assessment training, absence of institutional support systems, inadequate infrastructure for monitoring, and overwhelming administrative loads. These findings echo earlier research by Sadler (2005), who noted that institutions frequently underestimate the technical and pedagogical demands of policy implementation. When faculty are not supported with the tools, time, and training to internalize assessment principles, policy adherence remains performative rather than substantive. Additionally, Bailey and Garner (2010) emphasized that untrained or newly hired academics are especially at risk of deviating from policy due to insufficient induction programs. This study confirms that without institutional scaffolding—such as advisory units, peer mentoring, or accessible resources—adherence becomes a function of individual initiative rather than institutional design.

An important aspect of this theme was the fragmentation of interdepartmental coordination. Participants described a lack of synergy between quality assurance offices, academic departments, and administrative units. This fragmentation is consistent with the findings of Tan (2013), who observed that when departments operate in silos, shared understanding and implementation of assessment policy deteriorate. Moreover, the inaccessibility of policy documents—whether due to poor dissemination or technical language—further hindered faculty engagement. Harlen (2005) emphasized that policies must be not only technically sound but also user-friendly and contextually relevant to reach their intended audience. The present study's findings reinforce this need for clarity and accessibility in policy design and communication.

When viewed holistically, the findings suggest that **policy adherence is shaped by the intersection of leadership action, institutional culture, and operational capacity**. Even well-crafted assessment policies fail to achieve their objectives if they are decoupled from organizational realities. The study affirms the theoretical argument that assessment practices are socially situated and institutionally negotiated rather than merely procedural (Shay, 2008). Therefore, policy success depends on aligning institutional structures with the values, capacities, and experiences of the people tasked with enacting them.

Furthermore, the study has practical implications for understanding how to cultivate environments that support consistent and meaningful assessment practices. Kuh et al. (2015) have argued for a whole-institution approach to assessment, where leadership, faculty, and support staff work collaboratively within coherent systems. The present findings extend this view by illustrating the consequences of incoherent systems—namely, inconsistent practices, erosion of trust, and symbolic compliance. Institutions must address not only the content of assessment policies but also the organizational conditions that make adherence possible, sustainable, and culturally resonant.

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Authors' Contributions

Declaration of Interest

Ethical Considerations

Transparency of Data

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