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Factors Contributing to Resistance Toward Alternative Assessment Models Among Faculty

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the key individual, institutional, and cultural factors that contribute to faculty resistance toward the implementation of alternative assessment models in higher education. This qualitative study employed a descriptive research design using semi-structured interviews to gain insights into faculty perspectives on assessment innovation. A purposive sample of 27 faculty members from universities in Tehran, Iran, participated in in-depth interviews. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically using Nvivo 12 software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's framework, and the credibility of findings was supported through participant validation and peer debriefing. The analysis revealed three overarching themes: individual-level barriers, institutional and structural constraints, and cultural and normative resistance. Within the first theme, faculty reported lack of familiarity with alternative models, perceived complexity, fear of losing authority, low self-efficacy, and concerns about workload. The second theme highlighted structural impediments such as unclear institutional policies, limited resources, inadequate professional development, and misaligned promotion criteria. The third theme emphasized cultural influences, including adherence to traditional academic identity, peer pressure, student expectations, and skepticism about assessment validity. These findings underscore that resistance is multifaceted and contextually embedded rather than rooted in mere unwillingness. Resistance to alternative assessment models among faculty is shaped by a complex combination of psychological, institutional, and cultural factors. Addressing these barriers requires an integrated approach involving professional development, supportive policy reforms, incentive structures, and cultural change at the departmental and institutional levels. Without systemic alignment and stakeholder engagement, efforts to implement assessment reform are likely to remain limited in scope and sustainability.

Keywords: Faculty resistance; alternative assessment; higher education; qualitative study; assessment reform; institutional barriers; academic culture

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education institutions worldwide have faced increasing pressure to reform traditional teaching and evaluation methods in response to growing demands for student-centered learning, competency-based education, and authentic assessment strategies (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). One major dimension of this transformation involves the shift from traditional summative assessments—such as standardized tests and final exams—to alternative assessment models that prioritize formative feedback, reflective practice, peer review, and project-based evaluation (Brown & Knight, 1994; Andrade, 2019). These models are designed to provide richer insights into students' learning processes, foster deeper engagement, and promote lifelong learning skills. However, despite growing support for these approaches in pedagogical theory and educational policy, their

implementation remains sporadic and met with considerable resistance, especially from faculty members (Macfarlane, 2015; Carless, 2015).

The literature suggests that one of the key impediments to assessment reform lies in the attitudes and beliefs of faculty members themselves (Fook & Sidhu, 2010). Faculty serve as the primary agents of pedagogical change, yet they often perceive alternative assessment as burdensome, vague, or incompatible with their disciplinary norms. Traditional assessment methods, long embedded within the academic culture of universities, are perceived as objective, efficient, and aligned with institutional expectations (O'Neill, 2002). In contrast, alternative models—such as self-assessment, peer review, portfolios, and project-based tasks—are viewed as subjective, time-consuming, and susceptible to bias, thereby creating skepticism and apprehension among educators (Tai et al., 2022). This resistance is not merely an individual-level reluctance; rather, it is often shaped and reinforced by broader institutional, cultural, and structural factors (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

A review of international studies illustrates the multifaceted nature of faculty resistance. For instance, in a study of assessment practices in Australian universities, Boud and Associates (2010) found that while most educators acknowledged the theoretical benefits of formative and authentic assessment, they lacked confidence in their ability to implement these models effectively. Similar findings were reported by Sambell, Brown, and Race (2012), who observed that faculty frequently expressed concerns about the reliability, fairness, and standardization of alternative methods. These concerns were particularly pronounced in disciplines with rigid epistemological structures—such as engineering, medicine, and law—where assessment has traditionally been used as a gatekeeping tool (Shay, 2008).

At the same time, faculty resistance cannot be fully understood without accounting for institutional and systemic influences. Resource constraints, large class sizes, inadequate training, and unclear policy support all contribute to the perception that alternative assessments are impractical (Hendry, 2013). For example, Carless (2007) emphasizes that without sustained institutional investment in faculty development and assessment literacy, even the most motivated educators are likely to fall back on familiar practices. Moreover, tenure and promotion structures often reward research output over teaching innovation, leaving little incentive for faculty to invest in pedagogical reform (Goff et al., 2015). This misalignment between institutional reward systems and educational best practices exacerbates resistance and discourages experimentation.

From a cultural perspective, resistance is also linked to entrenched academic norms and identities. Many faculty members define their professional roles through a traditional, transmission-based model of education, in which the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and students are passive recipients (Norton et al., 2005). Within this framework, traditional assessments reinforce a hierarchical relationship and serve as a form of control. Alternative assessments, by contrast, are rooted in a constructivist pedagogy that emphasizes dialogue, reflection, and shared responsibility (Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011). As a result, faculty may feel that adopting such practices requires not only a change in technique but also a fundamental redefinition of their pedagogical identity.

The psychological dimensions of resistance are equally important. Faculty may experience anxiety about losing control over the assessment process, especially in contexts where peer and self-assessment are emphasized (Han & Xu, 2021). Concerns about fairness, grade inflation, and student manipulation often surface, alongside fears of negative student evaluations and diminished authority (Yorke, 2003). Furthermore, many educators lack the self-efficacy to confidently implement new models. Without adequate support, they may feel ill-equipped to design effective rubrics, evaluate subjective tasks, or handle the administrative burden associated with non-standard assessments (Deeley & Bovill, 2017).

In the Iranian context, the adoption of alternative assessment models has been slow and fragmented, despite recent policy-level initiatives encouraging student-centered learning and curriculum reform (Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016). Studies conducted in Iranian universities indicate that while faculty are aware of international trends in assessment, many remain

skeptical of their applicability within local academic structures (Keshavarz & Kabiri, 2013). Factors such as centralized decision-making, lack of faculty autonomy, bureaucratic inertia, and absence of professional development have been identified as significant barriers (Shahvali, 2019). Additionally, cultural preferences for hierarchical teacher-student relationships and exam-based accountability continue to shape faculty attitudes, limiting the diffusion of alternative assessment strategies (Aslani & Mohammadi, 2022).

Despite the wealth of literature identifying various facets of resistance, there remains a lack of qualitative research that directly explores the subjective experiences and perceived barriers articulated by faculty members themselves, especially in non-Western contexts. Existing quantitative studies often measure attitudes toward assessment reform without probing the deeper institutional or psychological factors that underlie resistance (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Qualitative inquiries, by contrast, can offer nuanced insights into the narratives, beliefs, and contextual constraints that inform faculty decision-making. By focusing on faculty in Tehran-based institutions, the present study aims to address this gap and contribute to a localized understanding of the resistance phenomenon.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the following central question: What are the key factors contributing to faculty resistance toward alternative assessment models in higher education? Using a qualitative methodology grounded in semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this research investigates the interplay of individual, institutional, and cultural influences on assessment practices. The aim is to construct a grounded understanding of how resistance is experienced, justified, and sustained, thereby offering insights for policymakers, curriculum designers, and educational leaders seeking to facilitate assessment reform in higher education contexts.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study was designed to explore the underlying factors that contribute to faculty resistance toward the adoption of alternative assessment models in higher education. The study employed a constructivist paradigm to capture the subjective experiences, beliefs, and institutional constraints that inform resistance behaviors among academic staff.

The research utilized a descriptive-qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews to provide in-depth insights into the personal and organizational dynamics influencing assessment-related decisions. Participants were 27 faculty members from public and private universities in Tehran, Iran, selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in academic discipline, rank, and institutional affiliation. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least five years of teaching experience and demonstrated familiarity with institutional assessment practices. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new concepts or themes emerged in subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on their views while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes. An interview guide was developed, covering key topics such as experiences with traditional assessment methods, perceptions of alternative models (e.g., portfolio assessment, peer review, self-assessment), perceived barriers to change, and institutional culture surrounding assessment innovation. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted in quiet university settings to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis facilitated by Nvivo software (version 12). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The coding process was both inductive and iterative, allowing for categories to emerge naturally from the data while being constantly refined through repeated engagement with the transcripts. A peer debriefing procedure and participant validation were incorporated to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Initial codes were grouped into broader categories and then synthesized into overarching themes that represented the key dimensions of resistance.

Findings and Results

Category 1: Individual-Level Barriers

Lack of Familiarity with Alternative Assessments

Many faculty members reported a significant lack of exposure to alternative assessment models, such as portfolios, self-assessments, or performance-based evaluations. Several participants highlighted that they had never received formal training in designing or implementing such methods. One interviewee noted, "I've heard about portfolio assessments, but I have no idea how to use them or what standards to follow." This unfamiliarity contributes to hesitation and a default reliance on traditional exams.

Perceived Complexity

Participants expressed concerns about the perceived complexity of alternative assessments. They often described them as "complicated," "subjective," or "unstructured," leading to difficulties in implementation. One faculty member stated, "It's easier to design a multiple-choice test. These new models seem ambiguous and too open-ended." The additional time required to design rubrics and interpret qualitative outputs also discouraged adoption.

Fear of Losing Authority

Some faculty linked their resistance to fears of diminished control over the classroom. They perceived student-centered assessment approaches as threatening to their role as knowledge authorities. As one respondent remarked, "When students assess themselves or each other, I feel like my authority is being questioned." Such comments reflected deeper anxieties about pedagogical shifts that redistribute power dynamics in the classroom.

Low Self-Efficacy

Feelings of inadequacy emerged as a notable barrier. Faculty members expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to assess subjective work fairly or to use unfamiliar tools like rubrics effectively. One interviewee said, "I don't think I can evaluate a reflection paper the way it should be done. I'm not trained for this." These self-perceptions limited their willingness to experiment with innovative formats.

Fixed Mindset on Assessment

A strong attachment to traditional assessment methods was evident. Participants often equated standard tests with objectivity and academic rigor. "Assessment should be about testing knowledge directly. These alternative things are too soft," said one faculty member. This belief system reflected a fixed mindset that resisted pedagogical innovation.

Concern about Increased Workload

Many respondents cited workload concerns as a core reason for resisting change. The design, administration, and evaluation of alternative assessments were seen as time-intensive. "I have 120 students. How do I manage something like a project-based

assessment for all of them?” questioned a participant. This was particularly salient in institutions with high teaching loads and limited teaching assistance.

Lack of Motivation for Change

In the absence of institutional incentives or pressure, several faculty members reported low motivation to revise their assessment practices. “There’s no reward for trying something new. If it backfires, the blame’s on us,” one respondent explained. Others mentioned comfort in their current routines, highlighting that the cost of change outweighed perceived benefits.

Category 2: Institutional and Structural Factors

Inadequate Policy Support

Faculty emphasized a lack of clear institutional policies and guidelines for implementing alternative assessments. Ambiguity in what is allowed or expected led to hesitation. One participant noted, “We don’t have a unified policy. Everyone does what they think is right, and that makes it hard to take risks.”

Resource Constraints

Several interviewees cited logistical and infrastructural barriers such as insufficient staff support, large class sizes, and outdated technology. “Even if I want to try project-based learning, I don’t have the staff or the digital tools to support it,” one participant lamented. These constraints made the adoption of more time-intensive models impractical.

Evaluation and Promotion Pressures

The prevailing academic culture that prioritizes research over teaching innovation was also identified as a barrier. Faculty reported that innovative teaching efforts rarely influence tenure or promotion. “You get promoted based on papers, not on how you assess students,” said one participant, illustrating a misalignment between institutional goals and pedagogical change.

Absence of Professional Development

The lack of accessible and ongoing training was a recurrent theme. Most respondents mentioned that existing workshops were either too generic or infrequent. “We had a session three years ago, but it was mostly theory. There’s no hands-on follow-up,” one faculty member observed. This gap contributed to low preparedness and sustained resistance.

Bureaucratic Inertia

Some faculty described the system as administratively rigid, where even small changes required excessive approvals. “To change my assessment format, I need clearance from three committees. It’s not worth it,” one interviewee complained. Bureaucratic hurdles discouraged experimentation and adaptability.

Inequity in Assessment Implementation

Concerns were raised about equity and consistency in using alternative assessments across diverse student groups. Faculty feared that non-standardized formats might disadvantage students with limited resources or language barriers. “I worry that group projects or self-assessments might not be fair to all students,” noted a participant. The lack of universal protocols further exacerbated these concerns.

Category 3: Cultural and Normative Resistance

Traditional Academic Identity

Many participants identified strongly with traditional academic roles that emphasize lectures, examinations, and a one-directional flow of knowledge. “We were trained this way, and this is how we’ve always evaluated students,” one senior faculty member stated. This identity shaped their comfort zone and framed innovation as a deviation rather than evolution.

Peer Influence and Social Norms

Resistance was also reinforced by departmental norms and peer behavior. Faculty felt discouraged from deviating from standard practices, fearing professional isolation. “If I change how I assess, my colleagues might think I’m trying to show off or rebel,” one participant explained. This collective conservatism created a self-reinforcing resistance loop.

Student Expectations

Faculty reported that students themselves were often unprepared or unwilling to embrace alternative assessments, expecting “predictable” formats like tests. “When I tried to introduce peer reviews, students pushed back hard. They didn’t take it seriously,” said a participant. The pressure to conform to student expectations was strong, especially in competitive or grade-sensitive environments.

Fear of Diluting Academic Standards

Some faculty expressed concern that non-traditional methods could compromise academic rigor. “I worry that things like self-assessment may lead to inflated grades or lack of accountability,” one interviewee noted. This fear reflected a deep-rooted belief in the primacy of summative evaluation as a standard-bearer of quality.

Resistance to Student-Centered Models

Finally, some participants resisted pedagogical models that shift agency to students. They were uneasy with the perceived erosion of authority and skeptical about the fairness of decentralized evaluation. “I don’t trust students to evaluate each other or themselves fairly. That’s my job,” one faculty member said. These views underlined a discomfort with reconfiguring classroom hierarchies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the key factors contributing to faculty resistance toward the implementation of alternative assessment models in higher education. The findings revealed three overarching themes—individual-level barriers, institutional and structural factors, and cultural and normative resistance—each comprising multiple subcategories rooted in faculty members’ experiences. These themes reflect a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, contextual, and systemic elements that collectively sustain traditional assessment practices while impeding pedagogical innovation.

One prominent finding was the limited familiarity and confidence faculty expressed regarding alternative assessment strategies. Many participants associated innovative models such as peer assessment, reflective journals, and portfolio-based evaluations with ambiguity, subjectivity, and added complexity. These perceptions are consistent with existing studies emphasizing that the lack of assessment literacy is a major impediment to reform (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Andrade, 2019). Faculty members often equate reliability and fairness with standardized tests, viewing alternative approaches as lacking rigor. This belief is rooted in long-standing academic traditions where objectivity and quantifiability are prioritized (Boud & Molloy, 2013). As such, the psychological barrier of low self-efficacy—expressed through statements like “I’m not trained to evaluate reflections”—reinforces the inertia that prevents experimentation and change.

Closely related to this is the perception of increased workload. Participants consistently cited time constraints and logistical burdens as deterrents. Designing rubrics, managing project-based assessments, and offering detailed feedback were seen as unrealistic within the context of large class sizes and heavy teaching loads. These concerns echo findings by Han and Xu (2021), who observed that even when faculty are open to pedagogical innovation, the structural limitations of their institutions render implementation impractical. The lack of administrative support and teaching assistants exacerbates these pressures, particularly in settings like Iran where faculty often face multifaceted academic responsibilities (Shahvali, 2019). Without meaningful structural reforms, alternative assessments are likely to be perceived as aspirational rather than achievable.

Another critical issue was the influence of institutional culture and policy. Participants voiced frustration over the absence of clear guidelines, inconsistent expectations across departments, and bureaucratic rigidity. These align with Hendry (2013), who argues that successful assessment reform requires not only individual willingness but also institutional coherence and alignment. When faculty receive conflicting signals—such as encouragement to innovate on one hand and rigid curriculum constraints on the other—they are likely to revert to familiar practices. Furthermore, participants mentioned that innovation in assessment has little impact on promotion or tenure, which reflects a misalignment between institutional reward structures and pedagogical best practices (Goff et al., 2015). Without formal recognition and incentives, there is little motivation for faculty to invest in reform, especially when the risks include negative student evaluations or peer skepticism.

The cultural dimension of resistance was particularly salient. Many faculty identified themselves as “traditional academics,” equating authority with control over content delivery and assessment. They perceived student-centered assessment models as a threat to their role and a deviation from what they considered rigorous education. This finding aligns with Boud and Falchikov (2007), who note that assessment reform often requires a redefinition of academic identity—a process that can be emotionally and professionally destabilizing. The tendency to prioritize transmission-based teaching methods, especially in hierarchical educational cultures, undermines constructivist approaches that value dialogue, reflection, and shared responsibility (Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011). Moreover, peer and student resistance to non-traditional assessments was also cited, reinforcing the idea that assessment reform must be systemic, involving not only educators but also students and institutional leaders (Carless, 2015).

Peer norms and departmental culture also played a significant role. Participants reported that deviation from standard assessment practices often drew skepticism or ridicule from colleagues. This peer influence created a powerful disincentive to adopt innovative methods, especially in environments where conformity and standardization are valued. These findings are consistent with Norton et al. (2005), who argue that academic culture is a strong predictor of instructional behavior. In tightly knit departments, adopting alternative assessment methods can be perceived as undermining collective norms, leading to social isolation. Thus, resistance is not just an individual phenomenon but a socially negotiated stance shaped by group dynamics and professional identity.

Equity concerns were another theme that emerged, especially regarding the implementation of student-centered assessments in diverse classrooms. Faculty expressed apprehension that non-standardized models could create disadvantages for students with varying levels of digital literacy, language proficiency, or socioeconomic support. These concerns are echoed by Yorke (2003), who highlights the risk of unintended bias in subjective assessment formats. In contexts like Iran, where students may face unequal access to resources, the fear that alternative assessments might exacerbate inequalities is both legitimate and indicative of a need for tailored policy responses.

Despite these challenges, the study also uncovered latent openness to change. Some faculty acknowledged the pedagogical value of alternative assessments and expressed interest in exploring new models if given adequate support. This finding resonates with Carless (2007), who emphasizes that assessment reform is most effective when it is embedded in supportive institutional environments that include professional development, peer mentoring, and ongoing feedback. When such conditions are met, resistance often gives way to cautious experimentation, and over time, to meaningful change.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that resistance to alternative assessment models among faculty is multifactorial and context-dependent. It cannot be reduced to individual stubbornness or lack of will. Rather, it is embedded within a complex ecosystem of institutional policies, cultural norms, professional identities, and logistical constraints. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates faculty development, policy alignment, student

engagement, and administrative reform. Only then can assessment innovation become a sustainable and scalable reality in higher education.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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