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A Qualitative Study of Student-Perceived Indicators of Assessment Credibility and Trustworthiness

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore student-perceived indicators of assessment credibility and trustworthiness in higher education through an in-depth qualitative approach. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather rich, contextual data from 24 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in universities in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity across age, gender, and academic disciplines. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed inductively using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software to identify emergent themes and patterns in students' experiences and perceptions. Three main themes emerged from the data: transparency in assessment, assessor integrity and fairness, and evidence-based assessment. Students identified clear assessment criteria, explicit rationale for assessment methods, and consistent feedback as critical components of transparent assessment. Assessor impartiality, ethical conduct, and professionalism were highlighted as essential for ensuring fairness and trust. Furthermore, students valued the use of multiple evidence sources, alignment with learning outcomes, robust documentation, and opportunities for student involvement in assessment processes. The integration of student feedback into continuous improvement practices was also perceived as a significant indicator of credible assessment. Participant quotations emphasized the importance of open communication, consistency, and empowerment in building trust in assessment systems. The findings suggest that assessment credibility and trustworthiness are multifaceted constructs shaped by transparent processes, ethical and fair assessor behavior, and evidence-based, participatory practices. Educational institutions can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of assessment by prioritizing clear communication, fostering student involvement, and ensuring systematic consistency and accountability. These insights contribute to the development of more legitimate, equitable, and trusted assessment systems in higher education.

Keywords: Assessment credibility; Trustworthiness; Student perceptions; Qualitative research; Higher education; Transparency; Fairness; Evidence-based assessment

Introduction

Assessment is a foundational element in educational systems worldwide, shaping not only academic outcomes but also students' perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and motivation (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). As educational institutions increasingly emphasize accountability and outcomes-based education, the credibility and trustworthiness of assessment practices have garnered critical scholarly attention (Brown & Harris, 2014). While much research has explored technical reliability and validity in assessment, there is a growing consensus that students' perceptions of assessment credibility are equally important for fostering engagement, well-being, and learning efficacy (Bearman et al., 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018). However, the complex, context-dependent nature of credibility and trustworthiness in assessment remains underexplored, particularly from the student perspective.

The concept of assessment credibility, often discussed alongside validity and reliability, extends beyond psychometric properties to encompass social, relational, and contextual dimensions (Stobart, 2006). In practice, credibility refers to the extent to which students believe assessment practices genuinely reflect their abilities, are aligned with learning objectives, and are implemented fairly (Sambell et al., 2013). Trustworthiness, meanwhile, encapsulates the confidence students have that assessment systems are impartial, transparent, and consistently applied (Boud et al., 2016). As O'Donovan et al. (2016) note, perceptions of credibility and trust are integral to students' willingness to accept assessment judgments, especially in high-stakes or summative contexts. When these qualities are perceived as lacking, students may disengage, experience heightened anxiety, or even resort to academic dishonesty (Bloxham et al., 2016).

The literature on assessment in higher education increasingly emphasizes the social and dialogic nature of credible assessment (Carless, 2009). Students' experiences are shaped not only by the content and structure of assessments but also by the transparency of criteria, quality of feedback, and the nature of assessor–student relationships (Tai et al., 2018). Transparency, for example, has been shown to significantly influence students' trust in both formative and summative assessment processes. When criteria and standards are clearly communicated, students report greater clarity in expectations and a stronger sense of ownership over their learning (Rust et al., 2003; Handley et al., 2011). Conversely, ambiguity around marking schemes or the rationale behind assessment choices can generate mistrust, confusion, and perceptions of arbitrariness (Carless, 2015).

Another key determinant of assessment credibility is the perceived integrity and fairness of assessors (Bearman et al., 2017; Shay, 2008). Studies consistently highlight the importance of impartiality, consistency, and professional conduct in shaping students' trust (Boud et al., 2018). When students believe that assessors are unbiased, well-qualified, and responsive to student concerns, they are more likely to perceive assessment outcomes as legitimate (Carless, 2009). On the other hand, perceptions of favoritism, lack of transparency, or unresponsiveness can erode confidence and undermine the intended purposes of assessment (Adcroft, 2011). The introduction of anonymous marking, external moderation, and opportunities for appeal have been cited as practical strategies for enhancing trust and reducing bias (Winstone et al., 2017).

The increasing complexity of educational environments—marked by diverse student populations, new modes of delivery, and technological innovation—has further intensified the focus on credible assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Digital platforms, for instance, offer new opportunities for transparent record-keeping and rapid feedback, but they also introduce fresh challenges related to standardization, data security, and student involvement (Nicol, 2009). In this context, evidence-based assessment, which draws on multiple sources of student performance data and integrates continuous feedback, is widely recommended for promoting fairness and holistic learning (Sambell et al., 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018). Research suggests that when students are involved in self-assessment, peer review, or the co-construction of assessment criteria, their sense of credibility and trust increases (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Tai et al., 2018).

Despite advances in policy and research, a persistent gap exists between institutional aspirations and students' lived realities. Studies across contexts highlight that students are highly sensitive to the perceived authenticity, transparency, and fairness of assessment systems (Brown & Harris, 2014). The legitimacy of assessment, therefore, is not merely a function of technical accuracy but of the relational and communicative practices that surround it (Shay, 2008; Carless, 2015). As Carless and Boud (2018) argue, fostering a culture of trust in assessment requires ongoing dialogue, responsiveness to student voice, and the willingness to adapt practices in response to feedback.

The present study is situated within this evolving field, aiming to deepen understanding of how students themselves define, interpret, and experience assessment credibility and trustworthiness in higher education. Prior research has predominantly adopted quantitative approaches or focused on institutional and educator perspectives, often neglecting the nuanced, qualitative

insights that students can provide (Bearman et al., 2017). Moreover, the majority of studies originate from Western contexts, leaving a significant gap in knowledge about student perceptions in non-Western educational environments such as Iran (Ahmadi et al., 2020).

To address this gap, this study employs a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 24 university students from Tehran. This approach is designed to capture the lived experiences, meanings, and values students assign to assessment practices in their own words. It is informed by the principle that students are not passive recipients but active interpreters of assessment systems (Carless & Boud, 2018; Sambell et al., 2013). Through thematic analysis, the study seeks to identify not only the concrete indicators of credibility and trustworthiness as perceived by students, but also the contextual and relational dynamics that shape these perceptions.

In doing so, the research contributes to several important debates in educational assessment. First, it provides empirical evidence on the dimensions of credible and trustworthy assessment as defined by students themselves, supplementing existing frameworks with contextually grounded insights. Second, by foregrounding student voice, it offers actionable implications for educators and policymakers seeking to design and implement more transparent, fair, and effective assessment practices (Boud et al., 2018; Nicol, 2009). Finally, the study highlights the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors in assessment reform, supporting the argument that credible assessment cannot be achieved through technical measures alone but must be embedded in participatory, ethical, and dialogic processes (Shay, 2008; Carless, 2015).

In summary, this research responds to an urgent need for in-depth, student-centered understanding of what makes assessment credible and trustworthy. As higher education institutions continue to innovate and adapt in response to new challenges, the voices and perceptions of students offer indispensable guidance for developing assessment systems that are not only valid and reliable, but also legitimate, equitable, and trusted by those they serve.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore student-perceived indicators of assessment credibility and trustworthiness. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, diverse perspectives on assessment practices within their educational contexts. A total of 24 participants were selected, all of whom were undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in various academic disciplines at universities in Tehran. The sample was chosen to ensure variation in age, gender, field of study, and academic experience, enhancing the transferability and depth of the findings. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, indicating that no new themes or insights were emerging from subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both consistency in questioning and flexibility to probe deeper into participants' unique experiences and viewpoints. An interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature on assessment credibility and trustworthiness, and included open-ended questions regarding participants' perceptions of credible assessment, factors that foster or undermine trust in assessment, and their lived experiences with various assessment methods. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting, either in-person or via secure online platforms, depending on participant preference and public health considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, supported by the use of NVivo qualitative analysis software (version 12). Transcribed interviews were first read multiple times to achieve familiarity and to begin identifying initial codes. Open coding was conducted to segment the data into meaningful units, followed by the organization of these codes into broader categories and themes that reflected recurrent patterns across participants' accounts. The coding process was iterative, with regular peer debriefing and constant comparison to enhance credibility and consistency. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis to account for researcher biases and ensure the authenticity of the findings. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, and the process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, as evidenced by redundancy in emerging themes and concepts.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Transparency in Assessment

Clear Assessment Criteria:

Students repeatedly emphasized the importance of clear and explicit assessment criteria, such as detailed rubrics, grading guidelines, and well-defined marking schemes. Many participants noted that access to comprehensive descriptors before completing an assessment was essential to their sense of fairness and confidence. One student remarked, "When we have the rubric, we know what the professor is looking for and can focus our efforts. It removes the guesswork." Participants highlighted that publicized standards reduce anxiety and foster trust in the grading process.

Rationale for Assessment Methods:

The rationale behind assessment methods was another significant subcategory. Students valued when instructors explained why specific formats were chosen and how these linked to intended learning outcomes. "Our lecturer always tells us why we are doing a project instead of an exam, and it helps us see the purpose," shared one interviewee. Transparent communication about changes or adjustments in assessments was also described as an indicator of credibility.

Feedback and Communication:

Timely, constructive, and open feedback channels contributed heavily to students' perceptions of assessment trustworthiness. Participants appreciated when feedback was delivered quickly, was specific, and encouraged dialogue. As one student explained, "If I don't understand my grade, I can ask questions and get clarification. That makes me trust the process." Open communication and accessible language were seen as necessary for students to act on feedback and improve.

Consistency in Application:

Consistency in how assessments were applied and graded emerged as a strong theme. Students mentioned that standardized procedures, equitable grading, and uniform application of rules enhanced credibility. "It's frustrating when the rules change for different students or different classes," said a participant. A fair retake policy and clear explanations about grading adjustments reinforced trust in the process.

Disclosure of Assessment Process:

Disclosure about how assessments would unfold, including pre-assessment briefings and process walkthroughs, was also valued. Students felt more confident when information about moderation, assessment schedules, and opportunities for appeals was shared up front. One participant observed, "When they explain the process step by step, I feel more secure. I know what to expect and there are no surprises."

Theme 2: Assessor Integrity and Fairness

Impartiality:

Impartial grading and the absence of favoritism were crucial to perceptions of fairness. Students highlighted experiences where objective decision-making and anonymized scripts protected against bias. “I trust assessments more when my name isn’t on my exam—then it’s just about my work,” a student reflected. Participants also noted that visible efforts to avoid discrimination were highly valued.

Professionalism:

Assessor professionalism, including expertise, ongoing training, and ethical conduct, was frequently mentioned. Students respected assessors who demonstrated responsiveness and a willingness to explain complex grading decisions. “You can tell when someone takes their role seriously—they know the subject and care about grading correctly,” reported one interviewee.

Respect for Student Voice:

Students valued assessors who listened to concerns and were willing to incorporate student input or reconsider decisions when appropriate. “I once challenged a grade, and my professor really listened and even changed the mark,” said a participant. A formal complaint process and demonstrations of empathy further reinforced perceptions of respect and fairness.

Accountability:

Openness to review and a transparent appeal process were major signals of credibility. Students trusted systems where assessors explained decisions, maintained records, and were subject to external moderation. One student stated, “When there’s a process for checking marks or making appeals, I feel that the system is accountable and mistakes can be fixed.”

Ethical Conduct:

Ethical practices, such as confidentiality, honesty, and avoiding conflicts of interest, were repeatedly cited. Students emphasized that knowing assessors handled information responsibly built trust. “If I know my grades and comments are private and that teachers aren’t favoring anyone, I feel safe,” commented an interviewee.

Consistency in Judgement:

Participants noted that consistency in judgement—such as using benchmarks, calibration among assessors, and repeatability of marks—was central to trust. “When the same assignment is graded similarly by different professors, it feels more credible,” said one student.

Theme 3: Evidence-Based Assessment**Use of Multiple Evidence Sources:**

Many students saw assessments that incorporated portfolios, projects, tests, and participation as more credible. “Not everyone is good at exams. If we have different types of assessments, it shows a fuller picture of what we know,” stated a participant. Triangulation and continuous assessment practices were also mentioned as increasing trustworthiness.

Alignment with Learning Outcomes:

Assessments perceived as meaningful were those directly mapped to course objectives and real-world skills. “When what we’re assessed on matches what we’re supposed to learn, it feels fair,” a student noted. Authentic, goal-referenced tasks were described as enhancing credibility.

Validity of Assessment Tools:

Participants trusted assessment tools that had been pilot-tested, regularly updated, and shown to be reliable. “If a test has been checked and improved over time, I think it’s more valid,” said an interviewee. Reliability checks and evidence of validity were important indicators for students.

Documentation and Record Keeping:

Thorough documentation, accessible records, and digital archives were also highlighted. “It helps when I can see my progress and how my grades were calculated,” commented a student. Transparent revision history and proper storage were considered essential for building credibility.

Student Involvement in Assessment:

Opportunities for self-assessment, peer review, and student-designed criteria were described as empowering and trustworthy. “When we’re involved in the process—like through peer review—I feel more responsible and it’s more fair,” stated one participant. Participatory grading and reflection journals were mentioned as effective practices.

Feedback Integration:

Students trusted systems that revised tasks based on feedback and demonstrated iterative improvement. “When my feedback leads to changes in the next assignment, I know they’re listening,” shared an interviewee. Data-driven modifications and responsive changes were seen as clear signs of a credible assessment system.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore student-perceived indicators of assessment credibility and trustworthiness in higher education, with a particular focus on the lived experiences of students from Tehran. The thematic analysis yielded three main themes: transparency in assessment, assessor integrity and fairness, and evidence-based assessment. Each of these themes was supported by a range of subthemes and concrete indicators identified by students as essential for fostering trust in assessment processes. The findings provide rich, contextually grounded insights into how students interpret and evaluate the credibility of assessment systems, and they align with and extend prior research in this domain.

Students in this study repeatedly emphasized the importance of transparency as foundational to assessment credibility. Clear assessment criteria, such as explicit rubrics and grading guidelines, were viewed as reducing ambiguity and enabling students to focus their efforts effectively. This finding corroborates previous research that highlights the role of transparent communication in promoting student engagement and understanding (Rust et al., 2003; Handley et al., 2011). The results echo Carless (2015), who found that when students have access to detailed marking schemes and publicized standards, they are more likely to perceive the assessment process as fair and legitimate. The importance placed on the rationale for assessment methods further supports the literature suggesting that students value being informed about why certain formats are chosen and how they relate to learning objectives (Sambell et al., 2013; Nicol, 2009). Consistency in application and disclosure of the assessment process—such as pre-assessment briefings and transparent scheduling—were also identified as essential, reinforcing the idea that students' trust is enhanced when the process is predictable and well-communicated (Winstone et al., 2017).

Moreover, the emphasis on feedback and communication aligns with studies demonstrating that timely, constructive, and dialogic feedback not only aids learning but also builds trust in the system (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018). The student voices in this study underscored the significance of accessible feedback and opportunities for clarification, mirroring findings from Tai et al. (2018) regarding the centrality of feedback literacy in student perceptions of assessment quality.

A second major theme, assessor integrity and fairness, encompassed indicators such as impartiality, professionalism, respect for student voice, accountability, ethical conduct, and consistency in judgment. Students' concerns about bias, favoritism, and inconsistent grading practices reflect longstanding issues documented in the assessment literature (Adcroft, 2011; Shay, 2008). The findings reinforce the argument that the credibility of assessment is closely tied to the perceived integrity of assessors, as suggested by Carless (2009) and Boud et al. (2018). The value placed on anonymized grading, openness to review, and transparent appeal processes illustrates students' desire for systems that safeguard against human error and partiality.

The study also highlighted the importance of assessor professionalism and ethical behavior, which supports Winstone et al. (2017) and Bearman et al. (2017) in their identification of assessor expertise and ethical conduct as vital for student trust. Students in this study appreciated responsiveness and willingness to explain grading decisions, echoing the need for an ongoing, respectful dialogue between students and educators (Boud & Molloy, 2013). The findings suggest that formal mechanisms for complaints, empathy, and calibration among assessors further strengthen the legitimacy of assessment outcomes, in line with Bloxham et al. (2016), who advocated for external moderation and benchmarking to improve consistency and fairness.

The third theme, evidence-based assessment, reflects students' desire for assessment systems that are not only technically valid but also holistic and authentic. Participants viewed the use of multiple evidence sources—such as portfolios, projects, and continuous assessment—as providing a fuller, fairer picture of student abilities. This finding supports the work of Sambell et al. (2013) and Carless & Boud (2018), who recommend diverse assessment modalities to accommodate varied learner strengths and promote comprehensive evaluation. The alignment of assessment tasks with learning outcomes and real-world skills was a recurrent theme, resonating with Nicol (2009) and Tai et al. (2018), who argue that authentic, goal-referenced assessment enhances both the validity and perceived value of assessment.

Additionally, the study found that students trusted assessment tools that had been pilot-tested, updated regularly, and demonstrated evidence of reliability. Documentation and accessible record-keeping, such as digital archives, were viewed as indicators of transparency and fairness. These findings align with calls in the literature for robust, transparent systems that enable students to track their progress and understand how their performance is evaluated (Boud et al., 2016; Brown & Harris, 2014). Importantly, student involvement in assessment—through self-assessment, peer review, and participatory grading—was described as empowering and credible, echoing research suggesting that active engagement in assessment fosters deeper learning and enhances trust (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Carless & Boud, 2018).

Finally, the integration of feedback into the continuous improvement of assessment tasks was highlighted as a clear marker of credibility. Students appreciated when their feedback was taken seriously and resulted in changes, supporting the notion of assessment as an iterative, dialogic process (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of literature that conceptualizes assessment credibility and trustworthiness as multifaceted constructs shaped by transparency, fairness, and active student participation. They reinforce the argument that technical validity and reliability, while necessary, are insufficient for fostering genuine trust in assessment systems (Stobart, 2006; Shay, 2008). The emphasis on transparency and communication corroborates previous research indicating that students are more likely to accept and engage with assessment when they understand the criteria and rationale behind assessment practices (Rust et al., 2003; Handley et al., 2011).

The centrality of assessor integrity and ethical conduct aligns with Carless (2009) and Boud et al. (2018), who found that perceptions of fairness and accountability in assessment are closely linked to student–assessor relationships. The present study extends this work by providing qualitative, student-centered evidence from a non-Western context, addressing a noted gap in the literature (Ahmadi et al., 2020). The results also support calls for increased student involvement in assessment, as advocated by Boud & Falchikov (2007), by demonstrating that opportunities for self-assessment and participatory grading are perceived as enhancing credibility and trust.

Furthermore, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the importance of authentic, evidence-based assessment. By highlighting the value students place on multiple sources of evidence and alignment with learning outcomes, the findings support the movement toward more holistic and meaningful assessment systems (Sambell et al., 2013; Tai et al., 2018).

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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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