



An exploration of factors influencing institutional cultures of assessment



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ABSTRACT

Theorisation about institutional cultures of assessment in higher education is hindered by an inability to measure the influence of institutional factors on assessment. The authors explore the factor structure of the *Survey of Assessment Culture*. A three factor model with strong reliability coefficients was developed and included the following factors fundamental to institutional cultures of assessment: (a) *Clear Commitment*, (b) *Connection to Change*, and (c) *Vital to Institution*. Future uses of the *Survey of Assessment Culture* and implications for research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Higher education assessment practitioners face a complex state of affairs regarding the documentation of evidence of student learning. There is no shortage of technical guidance for conducting assessment (e.g. Allen, 2004, 2006; Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Bresciani, 2006, 2007; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Walvoord & Anderson, 2010), and a great deal of energy and resources are expended gathering, analyzing, interpreting, disseminating, and using data generated through this methodological advice. Yet, the advancement of assessment methods has outpaced explorations of assessment's philosophy and discourses of how assessment and institutional cultures are changed have been slow to emerge. In essence, the art and science of assessment are divided and, as Snow (1959) cautions, "when those two senses have grown apart, then no society is going to be able to think with wisdom" (p. 29). As higher education places greater emphasis on empirical data from standardised learning, research regarding why assessment is conducted, how it is leveraged for change, and the ramifications of assessment's purposes must be elevated.

The precipitous advent of assessment in higher education warrants a deeper consideration of its philosophy and logic. The strong body of methodological guidance has overshadowed the deeper, philosophical reasons assessment is done. The advancement of methods into common assessment practice has outpaced the exploration of questions regarding the meaning and value of assessment, leaving assessment practitioners with much guidance on how to do assessment and little guidance on why assessment is done. An emerging line of scholarly inquiry focuses on institutional commitments to assessment theorised under the banner of a *culture of assessment*. However, the systematic study of how institutions organise and install cultures of assessment is currently limited by a lack of empirical studies exploring the nature and structure of a

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culture of assessment. In short, studies of cultures of assessment in higher education are hampered by a lack of instruments and tools useful in measuring and discussing institutional cultures of assessment. This study provides validity and reliability statistics for a new instrument, the *Survey of Assessment Culture*, and highlights how this instrument advances the exploration of factors that influence institutional cultures of assessment. Specific practices related to the factors measured in this study are also discussed.

2. Theory and review of relevant literature

The theoretical underpinning of the present study stems from Maki's (2010) *Principles of an Inclusive Commitment to Assessment* and the broader literature on a culture of assessment in higher education. Much of the literature generated by higher education assessment scholars takes the form of technical guides. However, some scholars (Banta & Associates, 2002; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009) offer foundational perspectives on what is meant by a culture of assessment. Though the term "culture of assessment" has many meanings, its scholarship has advanced little past issues of defining a culture of assessment and articulating practices suggestive of a culture of assessment. This *Theory and Review of Relevant Literature* outlines traditional and international definitions of cultures of assessment and articulates the perspectives assumed in preparing for this study.

2.1. Defining 'culture of assessment' in U.S. contexts

Scholars in the United States (Banta & Associates, 2002; Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2010) refer to a culture of assessment as the deeply embedded values and beliefs collectively held by members of an institution influencing assessment practices at their institution. A culture of assessment is the primary and often unexplored system undergirding assessment practice, the overriding values and practices that direct much of the way in which an institutional community discusses, theorises, and practices assessment. It is the system of thought and action reinforcing what "good" conduct of assessment looks like at an institution. In the present study, a culture of assessment is defined as institutional contexts supporting or hindering the integration of professional wisdom with best available assessment data to inform decisions that lead to improved student outcomes for decision making purposes. This definition also reflects influences by a variety of U.S. (Maki, 2010; Whitehurst, 2010) and international scholars mentioned below.

2.2. International perspectives of assessment culture

Many international scholars (Anderson, 2006; Borland, 2009; Brown, 2004; Duarte & Rossier, 2008; Haapakorpi, 2011; Malau-Aduli, Zimitat, & Malau-Aduli, 2011; Liu, 2013; Yonezawa, 2002) have compared different national perspectives on assessment and to a lesser extent, cultures of assessment. In many countries, assessment of student learning is practiced under the monikers of *quality assurance* or *evaluation*. For example, Australian (Anderson, 2006), British (Brown, 2004), Chinese (Liu, 2013), Finnish (Haapakorpi, 2011), and Japanese (Yonezawa, 2002) scholars note the use of 'quality assurance' to discuss what the current authors refer to as assessment. Yonezawa (2002) noted that Japanese quality assurance efforts have been heavily influenced by market and economic forces and Japanese efforts to maintain or grow a strong economic standing in a global economy. Thus, a culture of assessment can often be driven by political priorities and economic pressures (Quality Assurance Association, 2013). Many nations are guided by governmental, independent accreditation, or professional organisations such as the U.K.'s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012) or Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, or Japan's National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation [NIADUE] (NIADUE, 2012). Internationally, such boards and organisations have sought to "...solidify evaluation culture..." (NIADUE, 2012, p. 4), discern the differences between a culture of assessment and a culture of compliance (Quality Assurance Association, 2012), and determine which practices lead to improved student learning (Quality Assurance Association, 2013). Clearly, institutional cultures of assessment, evaluation, or quality assurance have been internationally touted as beneficial conditions to advance student learning, though few measures of such institutional cultures are noted.

However, Tremblay, Lalancette, and Roseveare (2012), discussing the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's new international, annual study – Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes – noted the term *culture of assessment* has traditionally been associated with U.S. higher education. In contrast, scholars (Anderson, 2006; Haapakorpi, 2011; Liu, 2013) noted that discussions about institutional quality often focus on institutional *commitments to quality*, *culture of evaluation*, and *quality frameworks*, which may be closely related to the present study's definition of a culture of assessment. As Towil (1998) noted in an address to the World Conference on Higher Education, "The need for a culture of assessment, or a 'culture of evaluation', in order to ensure quality is now no longer contested, although debate remains on who should conduct such evaluations..." (p. 48). More recently, Ndoye (2013), offering his perspective from experience in Qatari higher education, noted that much work remains in regards to engaging higher education faculty to support their involvement in assessment and that such work is dependent upon institutional leaders developing and sustaining a culture of assessment. Ndoye and Parker (2010) also argued that higher education leaders are "now looking for guidance on models and best practices...to establish a culture of assessment..." (p. 28). Ndoye and Parker (2010) also contend that higher education leaders are offered limited guidance from the scholarship on how to develop or sustain

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