Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education
ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 40: June 2026
https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi40.1667

PAPER

# Constraining Innovation: a critical discourse analysis of power and assessment policy in higher education

David Yarwood

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

## ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine how university assessment policies constrain pedagogical innovation. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I analysed policy documents from five UK universities to identify dominant discursive patterns influencing assessment governance. Four key themes emerged: efficiency, surveillance, standardisation, and pastoral power. Each reinforces institutional control and limits opportunities for flexible, student-centred assessment. Assessment policies prioritise compliance and administrative convenience over pedagogical innovation, embedding a discourse of risk aversion that restricts creative practice. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence are framed within surveillance narratives rather than as tools for formative feedback or adaptive questioning. This study addresses two questions: the extent to which assessment policies inhibit innovative methods, and whether barriers arise from policy texts or broader institutional discourses. Institutional discourse plays an equally significant role as formal policy. I recommend repositioning AI as a formative tool, decentralising governance, and embedding academic staff in policy development.

**KEYWORDS:** critical discourse analysis, assessment policy, neoliberalism, managerialism, pedagogical innovation, higher education policy.

**ARTICLE HISTORY:** Received 18 July 2025. Accepted 20 April 2026.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0) (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

## Introduction

Assessment policy is increasingly shaped by neoliberal agendas in higher education, embedding institutional compliance and standardisation that constrain pedagogical innovation (Evans, 2013; Raaper, 2017). Policies designed to ensure academic standards increasingly prioritise consistency and manageability at scale, creating tensions with more creative and flexible forms of assessment. These sector-wide pressures have raised growing concerns about how assessment is governed and how far policy environments shape the behaviours and expectations of staff and students.

This study positions Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (2010) as the central theoretical lens to examine how assessment policies function as discursive mechanisms that construct particular understandings of standards, accountability, and academic conduct. CDA foregrounds the ways that policy language establishes institutional priorities and maintains relations of power, often presenting assessment as a regulatory activity rather than a pedagogical one. Such discourse aligns with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2024), which advocates reliability, validity, and transparency as universal benchmarks. These expectations support consistent assessment but may inadvertently embed compliance at the expense of innovation.

Assessment has also become more contested due to intensified pressures associated with league tables, large cohorts, and risks linked to inconsistency in marking and feedback practices (Ashwin, 2020; Hazelkorn, 2018). Calls for alignment between assessment methods, outcomes, and criteria can support clarity, although they may also reinforce standardisation in ways that limit local flexibility (QAA, 2024). These dynamics become more complex in the context of accelerated digitalisation. The rapid growth of generative AI has prompted institutions to revise policies with a strong focus on academic integrity and risk mitigation (Moorhouse et al., 2023). AI has the potential to support iterative feedback and formative assessment practices, yet early policy responses tend to emphasise surveillance and detection (Ardito, 2024; Smolansky et al., 2023). This reflects not only a managerialist impulse towards control but also unresolved questions about responsibility and accountability when agency over emerging technologies is delegated to individual academics without corresponding institutional frameworks to support it.

This study investigates how assessment policies that seek to uphold standards may simultaneously restrict innovation. It examines assessment policy discourse to explore how language constructs particular interpretations of acceptable practice and reinforces institutional power relations. CDA provides a structured means to connect micro-level textual features with wider institutional and societal forces that influence assessment policy (Fairclough, 2010). This paper addresses two questions: the extent to which university assessment policies inhibit innovative assessment methods and whether such barriers arise from the policy texts themselves or from broader institutional discourses that shape how policies are interpreted.

The literature review examines theoretical perspectives on power, policy, and assessment, highlighting tensions between standardisation, efficiency, and innovation. It then outlines how AI is currently positioned in assessment policy discourse. This sets the foundation for the methodological approach, findings, and implications for future assessment policy reform.

## Review of literature

### *Power, policy, and innovation in assessment in higher education*

Assessment policies serve multiple institutional functions, including upholding academic standards, managing student progression, and ensuring institutional accountability (QAA, 2024). These functions are often framed as neutral, yet research demonstrates that policy texts establish behavioural expectations and regulate both staff and students. This contributes to the reproduction of institutional power structures. Despite long-standing calls for innovative and competency-based assessment practices (Brown & Glasner, 1999; Serdyukov, 2017), universities encounter persistent barriers such as risk aversion, procedural constraints, and the dominance of standardisation (Tidd & Bessant, 2020; Torugsa & Arundel, 2017). The integration of artificial intelligence in assessment policy reflects these tensions. AI has potential to personalise feedback and extend formative opportunities, although institutional responses have largely situated AI within a discourse of regulation, focusing on monitoring and misconduct detection (Ardito, 2024; Smolansky et al., 2023). This echoes wider policy orientations that privilege compliance and control over pedagogical flexibility.

### *Theoretical foundations of power and assessment*

Building on the CDA framing established in the introduction, studies applying Fairclough's model to educational policy illustrate how institutional language constructs expectations, legitimises practices, and embeds particular understandings of academic work (Fairclough, 2010). In the context of educational policy, language is a mechanism through which institutions articulate priorities, regulate academic conduct, and construct what is legitimate within assessment. Research applying CDA to policy texts shows how discourses of compliance, accountability, and performativity are embedded within institutional language (Jessop, 2010; Mulderrig, 2024). These discourses often reinforce managerialist priorities and constrain academic autonomy.

Standardisation and performativity remain dominant influences on assessment policy. The pursuit of measurable and comparable outcomes reinforces uniformity in assessment design and criteria (Evans, 2013; Maclaren, 2012). Transparent assessment criteria can support clarity but may also embed hierarchical assumptions and limit opportunities for innovation (Arthur, 1994; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Risk aversion within institutions strengthens these tendencies, creating a culture that privileges procedural correctness over creative pedagogical approaches (Hughes et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Raaper, 2017; Torugsa & Arundel, 2017). Raaper's (2017) comparative analysis reinforces how policy language enacts neoliberal logics of accountability and control, shaping academic expectations and limiting pedagogical diversity.

### *The case for innovation in assessment*

Research consistently highlights the value of assessment models that develop creativity, agency, and real-world competencies (Barbot et al., 2011; Lonka, 2018). Approaches such as phenomenon-based learning and ungrading foreground reflection, autonomy, and deeper engagement with learning tasks (Kohn & Blum, 2020). Competency-based education and portfolio assessment offer holistic representations of achievement (Bok et al., 2013; Dannefer & Henson, 2007). These approaches remain marginal in many institutions due to bureaucratic and regulatory pressures that prioritise efficiency and procedural conformity (Deneen & Boud, 2013; Maclaren, 2012).

### *The role of artificial intelligence in assessment*

The integration of artificial intelligence into assessment discourse amplifies these concerns because AI rapidly becomes embedded within existing policy logics. AI is positioned as a tool for efficiency and surveillance, particularly regarding academic integrity (Ardito, 2024; Smolansky et al., 2023). This reinforces existing institutional discourses rather than expanding conceptions of assessment innovation.

### *Research questions*

The literature suggests a persistent tension between policy-driven standardisation and pedagogical innovation. It also reveals limited attention to the role of policy discourse in shaping these tensions. This study, therefore, addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent do university assessment policies inhibit the implementation of innovative assessment methods?
2. Do formal policy texts explicitly restrict innovative assessment methods, or is the broader institutional discourse surrounding assessment more significant in creating these barriers?

## Research design

### *Researcher positionality*

As a teaching practitioner with experience implementing innovative assessment methods, I have consistently encountered barriers stemming from the broader discourse surrounding assessment within institutional settings. My efforts to introduce alternative methods, such as portfolio-based assessments, have been met with resistance driven by entrenched expectations of standardisation, efficiency, and accountability. These experiences inform my research and highlight the need to critically examine how assessment discourse shapes pedagogical practices and institutional decision-making. My dual role as both practitioner and researcher provides a unique lens that bridges theory and practice, enabling deeper exploration of how policy frameworks interact with day-to-day teaching realities. Recognising the influence of my own professional experiences, I engaged in ongoing reflexive note-making to separate personal assumptions from the discursive patterns identified in the texts.

### *Conceptualisation of the research*

The methodological approach for this study is informed by Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which provides a structured framework for exploring the relationship between language, power, and institutional practices. Fairclough's CDA operates through three interrelated dimensions:

1. Textual analysis: examining specific language features in policy texts, including vocabulary choices, grammar, modality, and rhetorical structures.
2. Discursive practice: investigating how these texts are produced, disseminated, interpreted, and operationalised within institutional contexts.
3. Social practice: analysing the broader socio-political, cultural, and ideological conditions that policy discourses both reflect and sustain within the higher education sector.

By explicitly following this three-dimensional framework, my analysis systematically links micro-level textual elements to broader institutional and societal power dynamics, clearly aligning with the study's aim to examine how assessment policies constrain pedagogical innovation.

### *Research sample and selection*

The study examines policy documents from five UK universities selected based on institutional diversity and their role in shaping assessment discourse. The selection was guided by three criteria: institutional diversity, variation in policy architecture, and the availability of mature, public-facing regulatory frameworks. This ensured a coherent sample that reflected variation in institutional size, mission, and approach to assessment governance. These universities were chosen to reflect a range of institutional priorities, governance structures, and policy orientations. The dataset consists of formal policy documents, assessment regulations, programme-level guidance, and university-wide policy statements, providing representation of both regulatory and interpretive layers of assessment governance. The selection criteria ensure that the sample represents diverse research artefacts by including policies that influence institutional decision-making, faculty autonomy, and student assessment experiences.

**Table 1. Overview of institutions included in the study.**

| Institution | Status | Mission focus | Ranking profile |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | Post-1992 (1992) | Professional and vocational | Top 70 |
| B | Research-intensive (1960s) | Research and teaching excellence | Top 15 |
| C | Distance Learning (1960s) | Open access, lifelong learning | Non-traditional |
| D | Post-1992 (2005) | Teaching, employability | Lower quartile |
| E | Russell Group Equivalent | Research-led, multidisciplinary | Global top 50 |

## *Research methods*

This study employed qualitative thematic analysis guided by Fairclough's CDA framework. Policy documents from each selected university were systematically analysed through an iterative, inductive coding approach, following Braun and Clarkes' (2017) established guidelines for thematic analysis. Initially, policy documents were reviewed in their entirety to familiarise myself with their content and context. NVivo was used to organise and manage the dataset rather than to generate themes autonomously, which ensured that analytical decisions remained grounded in close reading of the texts. Documents were then coded line-by-line to capture recurring patterns, linguistic features, and underlying assumptions about assessment practices.

This iterative process involved multiple coding cycles, during which initial codes were refined, merged, or redefined as patterns emerged more clearly across the dataset. Through continuous comparative analysis of the coded data, initial categories were grouped into broader thematic clusters (Braun & Clarke, 2017). These themes were continually reviewed and revised, ensuring each theme accurately represented salient discursive patterns identifiable in the textual, discursive, and social dimensions of Fairclough's framework.

Adopting Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework explicitly guided each stage of thematic identification and interpretation. At the textual dimension, attention was paid to specific language use, such as vocabulary choices and modality, in addition, a text frequency analysis was also conducted to support the findings. At the discursive practice dimension, I

considered how policy texts were likely produced, distributed, and interpreted by institutional stakeholders. Finally, at the social practice dimension, the themes were connected to broader ideological and institutional contexts, such as managerialism, neoliberal governance, and pedagogical constraints, that shape assessment policies in higher education.

This approach is particularly suited to Research Question 2 because the three CDA dimensions enable analysis of both the explicit content of policy texts and the broader institutional discourses that shape how those texts are constructed and interpreted.

### *Ethical considerations*

This study draws on publicly available policy documents and therefore did not require formal ethical approval. Ethical integrity was maintained by ensuring institutional anonymity and grounding interpretations in the data. Where the analysis extends beyond the documents themselves to consider implications for academic agency and pedagogical practice, this is presented as interpretation informed by the theoretical framework rather than as empirical claim about lived experience.

### *Limitations*

The study's exclusive focus on policy documents is appropriate for a CDA-based investigation of discourse, although it does not capture how staff or students interpret or enact these policies in practice. The analysis therefore examines institutional discourse rather than lived experience. Variation in the structure and detail of documents across universities also shapes how assessment discourse is articulated. These limitations indicate the value of future research that incorporates interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic methods to explore how assessment policy is negotiated and operationalised.

## Findings

The analysis generated four dominant discursive themes across the policy documents: Efficiency, Surveillance, Standardisation, and Pastoral Power. Together, these themes illuminate how policy discourse constructs the boundaries within which assessment operates, addressing both Research Question 1 (constraints on innovative methods) and Research Question 2 (the role of policy texts relative to wider institutional discourse). Each theme reflects patterns at the textual, discursive, and social levels of Fairclough's CDA, revealing how

seemingly neutral policy language creates a regulatory environment that restricts pedagogical flexibility.

## *Theme 1: Efficiency*

### *Textual analysis*

Assessment policies across all institutions prominently emphasise rigid deadlines, structured reassessment limits, and capped grades, establishing efficiency as a core institutional priority. Institution A explicitly mandates compliance through clear penalties: 'Students must submit all coursework by the stated deadline. Late submissions will receive a maximum capped grade of 40%'. Institution D similarly enforces strict limitations on reassessment opportunities: 'Students are permitted only one reassessment opportunity per failed module, with no further attempts allowed'.

Textual frequency analysis, conducted within NVivo across the full corpus, highlighted recurrent terms such as 'submission' (0.34%), 'requirements' (0.74%), and 'progression' (0.41%), signalling that efficient throughput and administrative predictability are central priorities. This language positions timely completion and procedural compliance as primary indicators of academic success.

### *Discursive practice*

By establishing strict deadlines and reassessment constraints, assessment policies position students primarily as compliant subjects who must adhere to prescribed administrative expectations rather than as autonomous learners. The language used constructs the role of academics as administrators responsible for enforcing compliance and ensuring procedural conformity. In doing so, these policy discourses limit opportunities for pedagogical experimentation or iterative learning processes, prioritising predictability and standardisation in assessment outcomes.

### *Social practice*

Analysis across the three CDA dimensions shows how these policy texts reflect broader institutional priorities. Efficiency-focused discourse directly interacts with other thematic findings, particularly Surveillance and Standardisation. Policies emphasising rigid deadlines and limited reassessment opportunities often intersect with surveillance mechanisms designed to monitor and enforce these expectations, reinforcing institutional power

structures centred on control and accountability. Similarly, the efficiency discourse contributes to the standardisation of assessment practices, explicitly constraining opportunities for innovation by imposing uniform expectations and reducing flexibility in assessment design.

At a broader social level, this institutional focus on efficiency constructs and normalises a managerial discourse that prioritises measurable outcomes, timely progression, and institutional predictability. The repeated textual emphasis on compliance and procedural adherence contributes to maintaining existing power structures, reinforcing institutional control over assessment practices and marginalising opportunities for creative pedagogical approaches.

### *Theme 2: Surveillance*

#### *Textual analysis*

Assessment policies across the institutions consistently emphasise surveillance through explicit monitoring measures, including plagiarism detection software, mandatory submission systems, and institutional control over student-produced work. Institution C clearly demonstrates this surveillance-oriented discourse: 'All student work will be subject to plagiarism detection software. Any flagged content will be reviewed by the academic integrity panel'. Institution E further extends institutional surveillance beyond initial submission processes: 'Examination scripts remain the property of the university and cannot be returned to students'.

It is notable that explicit references to artificial intelligence detection tools were largely absent from the core policy documents analysed. Where AI was addressed, it appeared in supplementary institutional guidance rather than formal assessment policy, indicating that AI-specific surveillance discourse occupies a peripheral rather than central position within mainstream assessment governance. The textual frequency analysis identified repeated references to regulatory mechanisms and formal processes, such as 'regulations' (0.84%) and 'board' (0.46%). These terms cumulatively construct an environment in which assessment is closely monitored and controlled.

*Discursive practice*

The policy texts position students as inherently requiring surveillance, constructing their academic work as subject to ongoing institutional scrutiny. This discursive framing constructs students primarily as potential violators rather than trustworthy learners. Consequently, academics are implicitly positioned as regulators tasked with enforcing procedural compliance rather than as educators facilitating learning. This discursive shift prioritises monitoring over meaningful pedagogical interactions, thereby reinforcing an institutional culture of compliance and suspicion.

*Social practice*

Interpreting the policies through the CDA framework shows that surveillance is closely interconnected with the themes of Efficiency and Standardisation. Surveillance mechanisms, such as plagiarism detection and tightly regulated submission protocols, reinforce institutional efficiency by ensuring procedural adherence and timely completion. Similarly, these surveillance strategies further reinforce the broader institutional emphasis on standardisation, limiting pedagogical autonomy by constructing strict parameters within which student performance is measured and regulated.

At a broader social practice level, surveillance-oriented discourse serves institutional risk-management strategies, maintaining institutional control and reputation by rigorously policing student compliance. Such practices not only reflect but actively reinforce existing power structures within higher education, embedding managerial priorities of control, accountability, and institutional protection firmly within everyday assessment practices.

## *Theme 3: Standardisation and control*

*Textual analysis*

The analysis revealed that assessment policies explicitly promote standardisation through the enforcement of uniform grading structures, centralised moderation processes, and restrictions on assessment formats. Institution B clearly illustrates this emphasis on standardisation: ‘All assessments must be marked out of 100, with fixed grade boundaries applied across all departments’. Similarly, Institution A explicitly establishes moderation as an institutional mechanism to maintain consistent standards: ‘Moderation processes ensure consistency across all examiners, with deviations subject to review’.

Textual frequency analysis identified recurrent terms such as ‘marks’ (1.30%), ‘assessment’ (2.20%), and ‘credits’ (1.32%), reflecting the dominance of quantification in assessment discourse. This emphasis on numerical comparability constrains the development of assessments that rely on qualitative judgement or creative demonstration of learning. For example, disciplines where interpretative judgement is central may find fixed boundaries misaligned with their epistemic norms, limiting opportunities to design more nuanced assessments. These examples illustrate how standardisation discourse operates within policy texts, embedding institutional control mechanisms that privilege measurability over pedagogical flexibility.

### *Discursive practice*

Through standardisation policies, students are explicitly constructed as measurable outputs, assessed predominantly against fixed and universal criteria. The discursive framing of these policies positions students’ academic achievements primarily as quantifiable performance indicators rather than reflecting nuanced, individualised learning. Consequently, academics are discursively positioned as technicians responsible for applying predefined marking schemes and enforcing uniform assessment practices, thereby significantly restricting their capacity to exercise professional and pedagogical judgment in assessment.

### *Social practice*

Analysis of the textual, discursive, and social levels indicates that standardisation is fundamentally interconnected with the themes of Efficiency and Surveillance. Standardisation policies reinforce institutional efficiency by creating streamlined, uniform assessment processes that facilitate management, oversight, and procedural compliance. Simultaneously, these policies interact closely with surveillance practices, as moderation and standardised grading provide additional mechanisms for institutional monitoring and regulation, thus embedding deeper institutional control over both students and academics.

At the broader level of social practice, the emphasis on standardisation reinforces institutional managerialism, embedding accountability, comparability, and predictability as dominant educational values. Through repeated textual emphasis on measurable outcomes and centralised control, policies naturalise an audit-focused culture within assessment practices, significantly constraining opportunities for innovation, flexibility, and academic autonomy.

### *Theme 4: Pastoral power*

#### *Textual analysis*

Analysis of institutional policies revealed that measures for student support and flexibility are explicitly framed as conditional and subject to institutional approval and oversight. Institution D exemplifies this conditional approach clearly in its assessment policies: 'Extensions of up to 14 days may be granted for students with extenuating circumstances, subject to formal evidence submission'. Institution C similarly emphasises institutional control through formal panel oversight of student support requests: 'Applications for special consideration must be reviewed by an academic panel, with all decisions final'.

The repeated use of terms such as 'students' (2.76%), 'support' (0.23%), and 'requirements' (0.74%) suggests a strong textual emphasis on regulation and conditions rather than genuine responsiveness to individual circumstances.

#### *Discursive practice*

Institutional policies discursively position students as regulated subjects who must formally justify their eligibility for flexibility and support. This framing constructs flexibility not as a pedagogical entitlement but as a conditional concession that must be earned through evidence and formal processes. Correspondingly, academics are positioned as gatekeepers administering bureaucratic procedures rather than educators who can exercise professional discretion to support individual needs. This positioning narrows the relational space in which staff and students interact, as pastoral processes become procedural rather than dialogic. By presenting support as conditional, the discourse emphasises rule-following and verification, reinforcing institutional authority and limiting opportunities to use flexibility as a genuinely pedagogical tool. Yet this conditionality also reflects institutional responsibilities around fairness and consistency, raising questions about how agency, accountability, and responsibility can be balanced when flexibility is extended to individual circumstances within a large and diverse student body.

#### *Social practice*

Examining this theme through the CDA lens demonstrates clear intersections with Efficiency, Surveillance, and Standardisation. Policies that appear supportive operate through processes that maintain institutional efficiency by ensuring uniform handling of extensions and

mitigating circumstances. The evidence requirements and academic panel reviews function as surveillance mechanisms that continually monitor student behaviour under the rationale of safeguarding standards. These processes also contribute to broader standardisation practices, as discretion is replaced with uniform procedures that regulate how flexibility is granted. At the social practice level, pastoral power reflects wider managerial discourses where care is operationalised through oversight and compliance. The framing of support as conditional on institutional approval reinforces established power relations and embeds a regulatory logic that restricts meaningful pedagogical flexibility within assessment.

### *Interrelationship of themes*

These themes are interrelated, collectively shaping the institutional discursive space around assessment. For instance, Efficiency frequently overlaps with Surveillance, where measures intended to optimise resources and streamline assessment processes (such as stringent submission deadlines and tightly regulated grading procedures) are reinforced by explicit surveillance mechanisms like plagiarism detection software and online submission monitoring. Consequently, policies explicitly designed to enhance efficiency simultaneously normalise institutional surveillance, embedding a managerial discourse focused on compliance and control.

Similarly, the emphasis on Standardisation within assessment policies interacts closely with themes of Efficiency and Surveillance, constructing a discursive environment in which consistency, predictability, and control are privileged over pedagogical flexibility. Standardisation policies typically mandate uniform assessment criteria, modes of examination, and marking practices, thus reinforcing a discourse that implicitly marginalises innovation and pedagogical experimentation.

The theme of Pastoral Power appears ostensibly to offer a counterbalance to rigid standardisation and surveillance. Policies regarding mitigating circumstances, extensions, and academic support services suggest institutional recognition of individual student needs and circumstances. However, closer examination through Fairclough's CDA reveals that pastoral policies predominantly function within the same discursive framework of control and compliance. While offering flexibility, they simultaneously reinforce power hierarchies by requiring institutional approval and surveillance of student claims, further entrenching

institutional authority and control rather than genuinely supporting pedagogical innovation or student autonomy.

Collectively, these themes combine into a dominant institutional discourse that privileges managerial accountability, consistency, and control. By repeatedly articulating these values within policy texts, institutions implicitly reinforce and naturalise existing power dynamics and normative expectations around assessment. This synthesis illustrates how these discursive mechanisms shape both explicit policy texts and broader institutional expectations, clarifying how the findings address the study's research questions. The CDA framework clarifies that the persistent reiteration of these discourses within institutional texts not only reflects existing social practices but also actively constructs the parameters within which innovation in assessment becomes narrowly constrained.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that university assessment policies operate as powerful discursive mechanisms of institutional governance. Through Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study highlights how institutional policies create a compliance-driven environment, significantly constraining pedagogical flexibility and innovation. This has direct implications for learning developers, whose work often sits at the intersection of institutional policy, academic practice, and student experience.

These findings align with Raaper's (2017) critical analysis, confirming that neoliberal accountability frameworks within assessment policies constrain academic autonomy and pedagogical innovation. The discursive constraints identified undermine innovative pedagogical models, such as phenomenon-based learning, competency-based assessments, and ungrading (Bok et al., 2013; Kohn & Blum, 2020; Lonka, 2018). Explicitly addressing the research questions, this study demonstrates that formal policy texts significantly inhibit innovative assessment practices, and broader institutional discourses substantially reinforce these constraints.

Formal policies establish structural barriers; however, broader institutional discourses reflecting shared beliefs and risk-averse cultures equally maintain the status quo. This distinction between what is written in policy texts and what circulates through broader institutional discourse directly addresses Research Question 2 by clarifying how constraints

on assessment practice extend beyond formal documentation. Institutional risk aversion, previously highlighted by Torugsa and Arundel (2017), is evident. Discourses prioritising compliance, accountability, and standardisation reinforce reluctance to adopt innovative practices despite recognised pedagogical benefits. It is important to acknowledge that policy discourse does not always reflect lived practice, although the strength of the discursive patterns identified suggests that these constraints are structurally embedded rather than isolated anomalies.

This study does not evaluate AI as a technology but examines the discursive environment within which AI is being framed, permitted, and constrained by institutional policy. As the findings demonstrate, explicit references to AI were largely absent from core policy documents, appearing instead in supplementary institutional guidance. This peripheral positioning is itself a discursive finding: it reflects AI's marginalised status within mainstream assessment governance and suggests that institutions have not yet integrated AI into their foundational policy frameworks. Where AI does appear in the wider literature, it tends to be positioned within existing surveillant logics, emphasising misconduct detection rather than pedagogical possibility (Ardito, 2024; Smolansky et al., 2023). This framing may reflect not only managerialist impulses towards control but also a genuine knowledge gap: as Moorhouse, Yeo and Wan (2023) observe, institutional responses to generative AI have been reactive, shaped by uncertainty about how the technology functions rather than by considered pedagogical design.

Repositioning AI discourse towards formative support could represent an important step in reclaiming assessment as a pedagogical rather than purely regulatory practice. However, this repositioning raises unresolved questions about responsibility and accountability. Delegating greater agency to individual academics in their use of AI does not automatically transfer institutional accountability, and without corresponding policy frameworks to support that delegation, individuals are left to self-govern based on their own interpretations of guidance. Policy, in this sense, serves not only as a discursive constraint but as a necessary ethical and moral baseline for shared practice across institutions.

These findings exemplify Fairclough's (2010) argument that discourse is both representation and action. Here, policy discourse entrenches power structures, significantly restricting space

for pedagogical innovation, resonating with Evans' (2013) insights into neoliberal governance shaping academic identities towards managerial accountability.

Overall, the dominance of efficiency, surveillance, and standardisation in assessment policies reflects a neoliberal accountability agenda (Raaper, 2017), prioritising conformity and control over pedagogical creativity. Consequently, a critical reorientation of assessment discourse is needed, repositioning assessment as inherently flexible, student-centred, and pedagogically innovative. For learning developers, these findings highlight how institutional discourses shape the advice, guidance, and developmental support that can realistically be offered to students and staff.

Practical steps include explicitly incorporating flexibility and creativity into formal policy texts, encouraging academic engagement in policy formation processes, and accommodating disciplinary-specific pedagogical needs. This study thus contributes by highlighting linguistic practices reinforcing managerialist, compliance-driven cultures, offering critical insights into how policy texts shape educational practices.

## Conclusion

This study has critically examined how university assessment policies constrain the implementation of innovative assessment methods, demonstrating how standardisation, surveillance, efficiency-driven discourse, and institutional control collectively shape assessment practices. Using Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the findings illustrate that assessment policies function as mechanisms of institutional governance, significantly limiting opportunities for pedagogical innovation.

This study reveals that assessment policies explicitly embed standardisation, surveillance, and procedural compliance within institutional governance structures. Broader institutional discourses further reinforce these barriers by constructing risk-averse academic identities, embedding resistance to change even without explicit policy mandates. These findings resonate with Evans (2013), emphasising that entrenched neoliberal values significantly restrict opportunities for pedagogical flexibility and innovation, reinforcing managerial accountability and risk aversion. This directly addresses the study's research questions by demonstrating how constraints arise not only from what policy texts state explicitly but also from the broader discourses that shape institutional expectations.

The application of Fairclough's CDA illustrates how policy language naturalises risk aversion, ensuring that innovative assessment methods such as ungrading, competency-based education, and portfolio assessments remain marginalised. Institutional narratives around accountability and performativity prioritise measurable outcomes and standardisation, significantly constraining the adoption of flexible and student-centred assessment approaches.

To overcome these discursive and structural barriers, this study recommends several institutional changes:

- Repositioning AI in assessment: institutions should reframe the use of artificial intelligence, shifting its application from surveillance and detection towards formative feedback and personalised learning support. Such a repositioning would enhance iterative and developmental assessment processes, reducing reliance on punitive, compliance-driven technologies.
- Decentralising assessment governance: greater autonomy should be granted to academic faculties, allowing discipline-specific assessment designs that align with subject-specific pedagogies rather than generic institutional standards.
- Piloting alternative assessment approaches: universities should pilot innovative assessment methods, such as ungrading, competency-based assessments, and portfolios, within selected modules or programmes to empirically evaluate their effectiveness and facilitate broader adoption.
- Embedding staff engagement in policy design: academic staff should actively participate in shaping assessment policy to ensure that frameworks are pedagogically aligned rather than administratively driven. Collaborative policy development would use educator insights and their practical experiences, enhancing policy relevance and efficacy.
- Challenging surveillance-driven assessment cultures: institutions should shift from punitive models of academic integrity towards developmental approaches that emphasise trust, ethical engagement, and intellectual exploration. This could involve reducing dependency on plagiarism detection tools in favour of supportive, scaffolded, and authentic assessment designs.

For learning developers, these findings highlight the importance of understanding how discursive constraints shape the guidance, resources, and support that can feasibly be offered to students and academic colleagues.

Future research should explore how assessment policies are enacted and negotiated in practice, examining the lived experiences of academics and students. Empirical investigations into institutional pilots of innovative assessment practices would also provide valuable insights into whether incremental innovations can drive systemic change. Such work would also help clarify the extent to which the constraints identified in policy discourse are reproduced, negotiated, or resisted in everyday academic practice. Discipline-specific analyses could further elucidate how different academic fields navigate policy constraints, while additional exploration of AI's role in formative assessment could expand understanding of technology-enhanced pedagogical practices.

This research makes clear that barriers to innovation in assessment are deeply embedded within institutional discourses and practices. To move beyond rhetorical commitments to innovation, universities must fundamentally reframe assessment as a dynamic, flexible, and student-centred process. By prioritising formative development, pedagogical creativity, and disciplinary autonomy, institutions can meaningfully address the limitations imposed by current assessment policies and promote genuinely innovative educational practices.

## Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the support of Professor Paul Ashwin and the academic staff on the Doctoral Programme in Higher Education Research, Evaluation and Enhancement at Lancaster University, from which this publication has arisen. https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/social-sciences/educational-research/phd/phd-in-higher-education-research-evaluation-and-enhancement/

## Disclosure statement

The author used the AI tool ChatGPT-4.0 during the preparation of this manuscript. The initial draft was written entirely by the author. ChatGPT-4.0 was subsequently used to refine phrasing, improve clarity, and enhance overall readability. The AI did not generate content,

arguments, or structure; all ideas and analysis remain the intellectual work of the author. The author affirms adherence to the JLDHE's principles of AI use.

## Funding

The author received no funding for this research and declares no competing interests.

## References

Ardito, C. (2024). Generative AI detection in higher education assessments. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, (182), 11–28. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20624

Arthur, W. B. (1994). *Increasing returns and path dependence in the economy.* University of Michigan Press.

Ashwin, P. (2020). *Transforming university education: A manifesto*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Barbot, B., Besànçon, M., & Lubart, T. (2011). Assessing creativity in the classroom. *The Open Education Journal*, *4*, 58–66. https://doi.org/10.2174/1874920801104010058

Bloxham, S., & Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing effective assessment in higher education: A practical guide*. Open University Press.

Bok, H., Teunissen, P., Favier, R., Rietbroek, N., Theyse, L., Brommer, H., Haarhuis, J., Van Beukelen, P., Van Der Vleuten, C., & Jaarsma, D. (2013). Programmatic assessment of competency-based workplace learning: When theory meets practice. *BMC Medical Education*, *13*, Article 123. https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6920-13-123

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 297–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Brown, S., & Glasner, A. (1999). *Assessment matters in higher education: Choosing and using diverse approaches*. McGraw-Hill Education.

Dannefer, E., & Henson, L. (2007). The portfolio approach to competency-based assessment at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine. *Academic Medicine*, *82*(5), 493–502. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0B013E31803EAD30

Deneen, C., & Boud, D. (2013). Patterns of resistance in managing assessment change. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *39*(5), 577–591. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.859654

Evans, C. (2013). Making sense of assessment feedback in higher education. *Review of Educational Research*, *83*(1), 70–120. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654312474350

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language.* Routledge.

Hazelkorn, E. (2018). Reshaping the world order of higher education: The role and impact of rankings on national and global systems. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, *2*(1), 4–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2018.1424562

Hughes, D., Lee, A., Tian, A., Newman, A., & Legood, A. (2018). Leadership, creativity, and innovation: A critical review and practical recommendations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *29*(5), 549–569. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2018.03.001

Jessop, B. (2010). Cultural political economy and critical policy studies. *Critical Policy Studies*, *3*(3–4), 336–356. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171003619741

Kohn, A., & Blum, S. D. (2020). *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.

Lee, A., Legood, A., Hughes, D., Tian, A., Newman, A., & Knight, C. (2020). Leadership, creativity and innovation: A meta-analytic review. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *29*(1), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1661837

Lonka, K. (2018). *Phenomenal learning from Finland.* Edita.

Maclaren, I. (2012). The contradictions of policy and practice: Creativity in higher education. *London Review of Education*, *10*(2), 159–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.691281

Moorhouse, B. L., Yeo, M. A., & Wan, Y. (2023). Generative AI tools and assessment: Guidelines of the world's top-ranking universities. *Computers and Education Open*, *5*, Article 100151. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2023.100151

Mulderrig, J. (2024). *Critical policy discourse analysis in higher education.* Oxford University Press.

QAA. (2024). *Assessment.* https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/2018/advice-and-guidance-18/assessment#

Raaper, R. (2017). Tracing assessment policy discourses in neoliberalised higher education settings. *Journal of Education Policy*, *32*(3), 322–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2016.1257160

Serdyukov, P. (2017). Innovation in education: What works, what doesn't, and what to do about it? *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, *10*(1), 4–33. https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-10-2016-0007

Smolansky, A., Cram, A., Raduescu, C., Zeivots, S., Huber, E., & Kizilcec, R. (2023). Educator and student perspectives on the impact of generative AI on assessments in higher education.

*Proceedings of the Tenth ACM Conference on Learning @ Scale*, *Denmark*, 378–382. https://doi.org/10.1145/3573051.3596191

Tidd, J., & Bessant, J. R. (2020). *Managing innovation: Integrating technological, market and organizational change.* Wiley.

Torugsa, N., & Arundel, A. (2017). Rethinking the effect of risk aversion on the benefits of service innovations in public administration agencies. *Research Policy*, *46*(5), 900–910. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RESPOL.2017.03.009

## Author details

David Yarwood is a Senior Lecturer in Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability in the Faculty of Business and Law at Manchester Metropolitan University and a doctoral researcher at Lancaster University. His research focuses on knowledge, creativity, and curriculum in business and higher education, with particular interest in assessment policy, critical discourse analysis, and legitimation code theory. He has sixteen years of secondary school teaching experience and writes on the relationship between disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical innovation, and institutional governance in higher education.

## ORCID

*David Yarwood* https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9167-2510