

University Assessment in the Age of Excessive Normativity: Examining Academic Professionalism and the Roles of Teachers and Students

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Universities in Spain, as well as globally, are currently witnessing a surge in regulations covering all aspects of operation, including teaching, learning and assessment. The present paper endeavours to explore the repercussions of excessive regulations on the roles of educators and students. It examines how these prescriptions pose a threat to academic freedom, faculty agency and teaching professionalism. The analysis is based on an examination of institutional assessment-related institutional policy documents from eight Catalan universities. The documents reveal a disconnect between the expectations surrounding the professionalism and agency of academics and the prescribed directives, which often leave room for interpretation by those tasked with their implementation. The documents also shed light on the perception of an escalating centralisation of control over strategies that can enhance student learning. This raises questions about the autonomy and professional judgment of educators when selecting the instructional methods that are best suited to and most advantageous for their students.

Keywords: assessment, academic autonomy, academic freedom, assessment policy

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Ocenjevanje na univerzah v dobi pretirane normativnosti: preučevanje akademske strokovnosti ter vlog visokošolskih učiteljev in študentov

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∞ Na univerzah v Španiji in po svetu se trenutno pojavlja vse več predpisov, ki zajemajo vse vidike delovanja, vključno s poučevanjem, z učenjem in ocenjevanjem. Ta članek si prizadeva raziskati posledice pretiranih predpisov na vloge visokošolskih učiteljev in študentov. Raziskuje, kako ti predpisi ogrožajo akademsko svobodo, avtonomijo fakultete in profesionalnost poučevanja. Analiza temelji na pregledu dokumentov o institucionalnih politikah, povezanih z ocenjevanjem, z osmih katalonskih univerz. Dokumenti razkrivajo razkorak med pričakovanji glede strokovnosti in avtonomije akademikov ter predpisanimi smernicami, ki pogosto dopuščajo več mogočih razlag tistih, ki so zadolženi za njihovo izvajanje. Dokumenti osvetljujejo tudi zaznavanje vse večje centralizacije nadzora nad strategijami, ki lahko izboljšajo učenje študentov. To poraja vprašanja o avtonomiji in strokovni presoji učiteljev pri izbiri učnih metod, ki so najprimernejše in najugodnejše za njihove učence.

Ključne besede: ocenjevanje, akademska avtonomija, akademska svoboda, politika ocenjevanja

Introduction

Assessment practices within institutional constraints

The field of research on assessment in higher education is populated by studies exploring the role of assessment for learning (e.g., Boud, 2000; Nicol & Macfarlane, 2006; Carless, 2017), effective or less effective assessment practices (Banta et al., 2009) and student participation in assessment (Dinsmore & Wilson, 2016; Panadero et al., 2019). However, less attention is devoted to the contextual conditions influencing assessment decisions. The practice of assessment is influenced by different discourses, pedagogical traditions and cultures, as well as by the institutional conditions and policies in place at each university.

As on many other occasions, when changes occur they are seen as an opportunity for a broader reform or a more extensive structural change in systems (Gaber & Tašner, 2021). In recent years, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, universities have witnessed a surge in regulations pertaining to teaching practices. This increase represents a natural and swift response to an uncertain situation, with the primary objective of facilitating academics' practices and providing them with guidance on how to navigate the challenges presented by the new educational landscape. In this recent scenario, as well as on many other occasions, in challenging times, university policies play a significant role in shaping and in some cases exerting a substantial influence over broader structural and pedagogical changes, such as academics' choices in teaching and assessment, their classroom practices and, ultimately, the learning experiences of students.

As an illustration, in Spain, the Conference of Rectors (2020) introduced a set of guidelines that institutions embraced, resulting in the creation of documents featuring assessment guidelines tailored to a distinctly normative perspective. These guidelines aimed to ensure the preservation of authorship rights for works and the verification of identity during evaluative tests. As Del Castillo and Del Castillo (2021) point out in the context of the pandemic, "in general [...], procedures are decreed to approve addenda to official programs, and formal recommendations are issued for assessment adapted to the new circumstances" (p. 99). These regulations clearly establish online assessment procedures (oral exams, open written tests, objective tests, academic work, concept maps, reflective journals, portfolios, observations, projects and case problems) and provide clear indications for the regulation of image rights, the accreditation of the identity of students during exams, and the control of authorship during online tests.

The urgent need to adapt to a nonfamiliar context, such as online teaching, has led to a proliferation of ‘recommendations’ regarding assessment processes, some in the form of regulations to be applied directly, in yet another attempt to shed doubt on the decision-making capacity and professional judgement of teaching staff. Most universities have made recommendations available to their teachers in a ‘good practices’ format, with examples of assessment activities or guidelines to reorient assessment processes.

Student assessment policies in the contemporary university landscape

The pandemic times offered just one example on how policy and norms are put in place. University discourses and practices have been operating in a ‘political scenario’ for decades, with accountability and customer/user-oriented expectations becoming guiding organisational principles (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012, p. 475). Numerous studies (e.g., Harris, 2005; Raaper, 2016) indicate that, in the twenty-first century, modern universities have introduced emphasised strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance and academic audits in an effort to align with a neoliberal approach and integrate market concepts into the education system. These practices are considered essential for structuring academic work and educational processes, reflecting the evolving culture and ethos of higher education.

The neoliberal lens has gained strength in explaining the current scenario of universities (Raaper, 2016). It champions individual autonomy and underscores the significance of the market, while simultaneously exerting heightened control in order to realise institutional objectives. According to Clegg and Smith (2010), universities are impacted by neoliberalism across the board. As a result, it also has an impact on educational processes including teaching, learning and assessment, which are increasingly influenced by top-down management techniques and centralised institutional decisions. According to this logic, the governance of assessment is “dominated by discourses based on norms and rules that replace the definition/understanding of academic freedom with a more authoritarian tone regarding the norms that teachers must follow” (Evans, 2011, p. 218).

In the Spanish context, the linkage of neoliberal policies in the non-university sphere (Díaz-Gutiérrez, 2010) has focused more on the freedom of creation of schools and the freedom of choice of school by families than on how it affects the freedom of teaching or ‘in teaching’ (Díaz-Gutiérrez & Bernabé-Martínez, 2021). Despite not being numerous, there are some very revealing

analyses in this regard. The way in which neoliberal policies provoke a new professionalism, where the terms effectiveness or productivity prevail and where professionalism is restricted, has been repeatedly pointed out (Han, 2014). There is a profusion of standardised procedures, sometimes uncritically adopted under the pressure of measurable performance (Luengo & Molina-Pérez, 2019), even promoting policies as pernicious as linking student performance with an increase in teacher remuneration (Luengo & Saura, 2012). In the same vein, Silva and Peña-Sandoval (2014) comment on the OECD recommendations regarding financial incentives for teachers. Faced with this, it is necessary to reclaim 'resistance', understood as critical and deliberative praxis (Luengo & Molina-Pérez, 2019, p. 109) in the face of limited and performative professional autonomy (Luengo & Molina-Pérez, 2019, p. 102).

Neoliberal logic is implemented by technology and institutional practices that "define, regulate, and optimize academic life" (Morrissey, 2013, p. 799). According to Raaper (2016), work practices can also have an impact on academic work through student assessments in higher education.

For decades, researchers have examined assessment procedures and neoliberalism. According to Madaus and O'Dwyer (1999), the rise of industrial capitalism influenced assessment processes in colleges and schools through ideals of "standardization, uniformity, precision, clarity, quantification, and rational tactic" (p. 692). The authors back up this claim by analysing historical developments and establishing the groundwork for understanding how, despite the passage of time, neoliberal practices continue to shape the functions and organisational structure of assessment policies and practices.

In the same vein, Evans (2011) argues that more specific assessment policies may be a reaction to the "casualization of the academic workforce" (p. 219): the growing number of academics who are hired part time (as is the case of part-time lecturers in Catalan universities) may find hyper standardisation useful through the provision of specific normative documents. Evans' argument may reflect a trend in UK institutions, where full-time academic positions are increasingly being replaced by zero-hour contracts. Data from Catalan universities reveal a similar situation. Consequently, it is unsurprising that assessment norms have become more concrete and prescriptive in order to accommodate those with time constraints due to their primary job responsibilities.

However, the influence of the neoliberal perspective on academic processes extends beyond administrative aspects. For instance, some authors view certain educational practices, including assessment, as tools for exercising the authority of teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Jedemark & Londos, 2021). They argue that the bureaucracy of assessment contributes to enhancing this

authority while limiting academic freedom (Graeber, 2016). In fact, practices aimed at limiting the freedom of academics are noted in other research, such as a study by McGaughey et al. (2022) that highlights an “enhanced managerialism” (p. 31) in teaching organisation at universities, with dire effects on people’s health and on university culture. Neoliberal governance practices that devote less consideration to the well-being of teachers and students are indicated in these studies as causing such imbalances.

Teachers’ professionalism and autonomy in assessment practices

This scenario of challenging times marked by the pandemic and neoliberal measures has also opened the context to considerations related to teachers’ academic freedom. The crisis of liberal democracy, which reveals a lack of trust in local dimensions, prompts intellectual circles to question how these social dynamics impact the academic freedom of teachers. Macfarlane (2021) identifies two ways to define academic freedom: as a defence mechanism against external influences and as the ability to make responsible decisions about teaching. He argues that the latter form of freedom “is threatened from within the university itself by the growth of management and bureaucratic power over the teaching function” (p. 3). Citing Rider (2018), Macfarlane also notes that, according to Enlightenment thinking, freedom in teaching – and by extension in assessment, research and other actions of higher education institutions – is viewed as a means to an end in academic life.

In the university context, academic freedom is linked to the traditional university professional culture based on intellectual inquiry and research, values opposed to standardisation or quantifiable criteria such as “strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures, and academic audits” (Olssen, 2009, p. 436). Academic freedom is directly linked to academic professionalism. In this sense, Kolsaker (2008) lists the following important features of the academic profession: “shared values, altruistic concern for students, educational experience, high level of autonomy, generation of new knowledge, application of logic, use of evidence, conceptual and theoretical rigor, and the disinterested search for truth” (p. 516). Along the same lines, the dimensions of academic professionalism that include responsibility, integrity and intellectual freedom also appear in the works of Evans (2008), Sadler (2011) and Ibrahim et al. (2012), among others. Hence, autonomy and professional freedom can be regarded as integral components of academic professionalism, perpetually intertwined with academic responsibility to uphold the standards of quality education, maintain scientific rigor and adhere to professional ethics.

Under market and hyper-normative logic, however, academic professionalism is currently losing its prestige and autonomy (Margison, 2000). Revisiting the idea of excessive regulations conflicting with academic freedom, one might argue that the overabundance of assessment policies from this hyper-regulatory stance indicates a fundamental lack of trust in the academic community and puts teacher's agency in question. Based on Bandura's definition of agency as a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the contexts in which the individual works and lives, teacher agency is "enacted when teachers attempt to influence curriculum change in their school, department, and/or classroom to achieve a desired outcome" (Jenkins, 2020, p. 170). Jenkins (2020) goes on to suggest that "agentic teachers negotiate the implications of policy changes". Such changes actively influence the many social, political and cultural environments in which they operate by choosing what to prioritise (Willis et al., 2019, p. 4). A number of things need to be done in order for this agency to function well, one of which is the creation of policy documents.

Starting from these premises – and acknowledging that policy documents are a "discursive construction" (Raaper, 2017, p. 323) intricately connected to broader academic processes at the university level, significantly influencing the purposes of education and the representation of key participants in the educational act – in the current paper, we analyse assessment-related policy documents, examining the quantity and quality of regulations regarding assessment practices. We explore possible elements related to university governance that may have contributed to this excess of regulations in terms of assessment, and we delve into the neoliberalist universities argument, questioning whether excess university regulations regarding assessment are detrimental to academic freedom and the way academics and students are reflected in assessment discourse. We examine the assessment-related documents of eight universities in Catalonia, Spain, enabling us to investigate how assessment policies influence discourse and assessment practices across different contexts, and how they shape the teaching practices of educators.

The analysis was undertaken with the following questions in mind: 1) How is the role of teachers and their teaching professionalism reflected in assessment regulations? 2) How do students and their roles appear in assessment-related documents?

Method

Research design

The present case study about document-based learning assessment policies in public universities of Catalonia was conducted throughout documentary analysis (Stake, 1995). Documental analysis is a research process that involves locating, selecting, assessing and combining the information found in documents in order to study or evaluate them (Bowen, 2009). Cardno (2018) indicates that it appears to be especially relevant for case and policy studies. According to Bowen (2009, p. 32), this methodological approach combines “elements of content analysis and thematic analysis” with reading and iterative interpretation.

Sample

In order to analyse assessment policies, an analysis of the 2023 regulations of the following eight Catalan universities was carried out: University of Barcelona (UB), Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Pompeu Fabra University (UPF), Open University of Catalonia (UOC), Polytechnic University de Catalunya (UPC), University of Lleida (UdL), University of Girona (UdG) and Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV). All of these institutions are public and in-class universities except for the UOC, which is virtual and mixed (public-private management). The sample represents all of the public universities in the region. The list of documents analysed and links to their locations are detailed in Table 1.

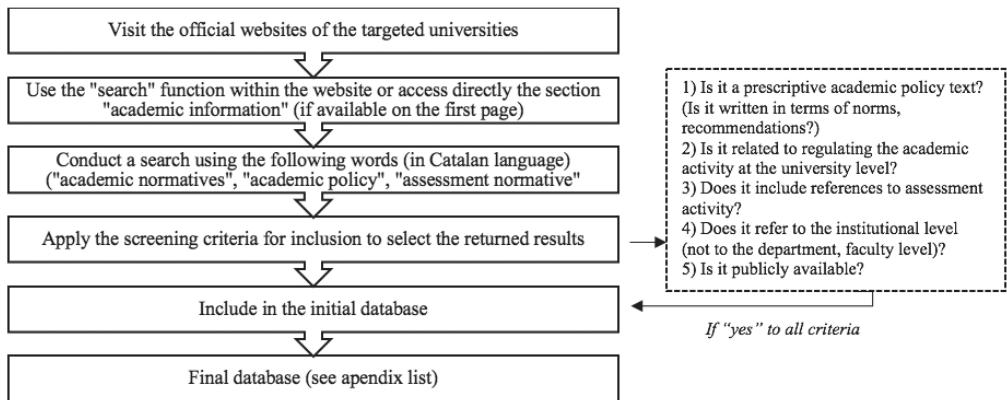
Table 1
Documents analysed

University	Document analysed (titles translated from Catalan)	Documents available at (retrieved in June 2023)
University of Barcelona (UB)	Academic Regulations of Studies at the University of Barcelona	http://www.ub.edu/acad/noracad/
Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)	Academic Regulations of Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona	https://www.uab.cat/web/la-uab/itineraris/normatives/normativa-academica-1345668305783.html
Pompeu Fabra University (UPF)	Official Studies Academic Regulations	https://seuelectronica.upf.edu/normativa-academica-d-estudis-oficials
Open University of Catalonia (UOC)	Academic Regulations of the Open University of Catalonia Applicable to EHEA University Studies	https://seu-electronica.uoc.edu/content/dam/e-office/docs/ca/Normativa_acadvmica_EEES_CAT_consolidada.pdf
Polytechnic University de Catalunya (UPC)	Regulations for Bachelor's and Master's Studies at the UPC, 2022-2023 Academic Year	https://www.upc.edu/sga/ca/normatives/NormativesAcademiques
University of Lleida (UdL)	Regulations for Evaluation and Teaching Qualification in Undergraduate and Master's Degrees at the UdL	http://www.udl.cat/export/sites/universitat-lleida/ca/udl/norma/galleries/docs/Ordenacio_academica/Normativa-davaluacio-i-qualif-graus-i-masters-modif-CG-27-4-16.pdf
University of Girona (UdG)	Regulatory Norms Governing Student Evaluation and Qualification Processes	https://www.udg.edu/ca/estudia/Tramits-normatives-i-preus/Normatives/Processos-avaluacio-i-qualificacio-dels-estudiants
Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV).	Academic Regulations for Bachelor's and Master's Degrees	https://www.urv.cat/media/upload/arxius/normatives/propia/activitat_universitaria/docencia_estudi/2021-22_NA_GM.pdf

The documents analysed are texts that regulate teaching and assessment policy. Available on the institutional websites of each university, these documents and can be found under various names, such as teaching regulations, study regulations or assessment regulations. The documents were located via a search performed from May 2023 to July 2023, corresponding with the end of the 2022-2023 academic year, which is typically when universities update their academic regulations in preparation for the next academic cycle. A set of criteria were first established for document inclusion: 1) we aimed to locate official academic norms at the institutional level, excluding documents applying to a specific department or faculty, or proposed by individual teachers in their teaching guides or similar texts; 2) we focused on accessibility, conducting our search through university webpages where documents are typically publicly available; and 3) given our research focus, we excluded all documents not

related to assessment. The process of searching for the documents is illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 1
Data search flow



Instruments

The data analysis began by conducting open coding of the selected documents to determine the fundamental content of the policies. Subsequently, we addressed specific research questions derived from those outlined at the outset of the study:

- Q1. How do the policy documents portray academic professionalism?
- Q2. How is assessment conceptualised concerning the strategies and procedures involved?
- Q3. How are students depicted within these texts?

The analysis was iterative rather than linear, involving continuous cycles of analysis, reflection and dialogue between the authors.

Table 2
Overview of the coding scheme

Main themes	Code	Data analysis
Academic professionalism (Q1)	Academics' role in planning and designing teaching (AR)	Explicit statements that define the role of teachers as active agents involved in the definition of teaching activity. For example, key words were searched for, such as "teaching design", "agents involved in teaching planning".
	Teachers' role in the design of assessment practices (DA)	Explicit statements referring to the process of designing assessment, selection of assessment methods, assessment tools, agents involved in assessment.
	Reflected professionalism (RP)	This category covered aspects related to the level of teachers' self-awareness and self-efficacy reflected in the text.
	Requirements set by university leaders and authorities (LA)	Explicit references to the role of academic coordinators, deans or vice deans (or similar figures), academic developers in shaping assessment/teaching decisions.
Factors involved in assessment design and implementation (Q2)	Structures and actors involved in operationalising assessment regulations (SA)	Explicit references to the role of academic coordinators, deans or vice deans (or similar figures), academic developers in shaping assessment/teaching decisions.
	Teacher's autonomy (TA)	Statements making reference to the position of teachers as primary decisionmakers in the assessment process, reflecting elements of their autonomy.
	Regulations regarding assessment practice design and delivery (ADD)	Elements referring to norms regulating assessment activity, such as percentage of different activities in the final mark, grading system, assessment tools, rubrics, checklists.
Representation of students (Q3)	Language expressions defining students' position in assessment practices (SP)	Explicit references to students.
	Role of students in assessment practices (active participation or recipient) (RS)	This category incorporated any reference to the active role of students in designing, planning or acting upon assessment and feedback, being an active agent in the selection of assessment procedures.
	Participative assessment practices (PA)	This category referred to any assessment strategies, methods or tools that in some regard involve students as active agents, such as self-assessment, peer-assessment, co-assessment, peer-feedback.

Results and discussion

Teachers' professionalism reflected in assessment policies

The present study identified diverse representation of teachers and their role in shaping teaching and assessment activities. In the majority of the policy documents, it is academics who must apply the regulations through subject teaching guides and who are the organic units of faculties, in charge of approving and monitoring the application of regulations that are usually set at the central level:

“It is up to the faculty, through an assessment commission, to establish the general assessment criteria and guidelines for all its degrees and resolve any question related to the assessment process, in accordance with current regulations” (UAB, 2022, p. 12, code DA).

In the universities investigated, the responsibility for designing a subject falls on the subject coordinator, who is the one who

“will elaborate its design. He/she will also take care of its finalization. In the case of no subject design, the responsibility corresponds to the coordinator of the subject. Once finalized, the design of the subject cannot be modified” (UdG, 2020, p. 34, code LA).

The actor responsible for the subject is usually obliged to finalise the design of the assessment activities 4–5 months before the start of the course, and this design is exempt from any change or adaptation during the academic year. In addition, all groups of students must follow the same system:

“All groups in the same subject must share a single assessment system” (UdG, 2020, p. 34, code AR).

“Each enrolment group in a subject will be assigned a professor responsible for properly applying the evaluation criteria and guidelines approved by the department and detailed in the respective teaching guides. This professor will also be responsible for assigning the final grade to the students enrolled in the subject, which will be recorded in the corresponding assessment record. The professor must be assigned to teach in the subject for which they are responsible.” (UAB, 2022, p. 14, code RP)

For the UOC, the person responsible for the design of the assessment processes is not specified, although there are 67 articles in the specific regulations that refer to assessment, along with their corresponding points. As far as

we could detect, the generally applicable criterion prevails over factors concerning the characteristics of the class group or the pedagogical criterion of the teachers of each group.

The imposition of administrative directives – which, in the majority of the cases, cannot be modified during the academic course and are often driven by non-academic technical personnel within organisational units – places undue pressure on the decisions made by academics, impacting their choices related to pedagogical professionalism as well as their commitment to research ethics. These are academics and specialists in disciplines within the framework of their professional communities (Jedemark & Londos, 2021), together with specialists in university teaching and assessment, whose criteria should prevail over the regulations, which tend to be general in nature.

All of these component elements of academic professionalism are reflected in the task of teaching as well as in assessment, as noted by Raaper (2016, p. 180): “The exploration of academics’ experiences of assessment, the ways in which they interpret, enact, modify and resist the dominant policy discourses of assessment, would provide insight into the processes of subjectivation via assessment technologies but also into academics’ ‘practices of freedom.’”

Overcrowding, ‘accountability’ requirements and quality standards, as well as the simplification of the curriculum, may be associated with less teaching autonomy (Akalu, 2016). This is further impacted by the size of classes and standardised teaching practices, with teaching often being carried out by several teachers who divide groups of students into parallel seminars.

Furthermore, the assignment of teaching does not always guarantee its connection with the research topics of the teaching staff, generating a disconnect between the research profile and the teaching profile, resulting in an apparent need for more institutional prescription. This standardised dynamic therefore also leads to a limitation in the autonomy of academics to ‘personalise’ their classes with elements derived from their own research (Hammersley-Fletcher & Qualter, 2009).

Factors shaping assessment strategic choices

The analysed norms provide little room for teachers to make decisions during the academic year. There are scarce references – or no references at all – to the possibility of modifying the assessment process once the course has started. There is indeed limited flexibility to adapt and adjust teaching and assessment procedures and strategies according to the contextual needs or expectations of students, or to integrate the latest research advances into the teaching

process. However, it is university academics, given their privileged position as researchers, who should have criteria that allow them to make informed decisions regarding university teaching and the discipline of teaching. So-called 'scholarship of teaching and learning' (SoTL) offers an interesting perspective on the role of teachers as agents actively involved in studying the relationship between teaching practices and student learning outcomes, with the aim of identifying strategies and effective teaching tools that can be used to enhance student learning (Hutchings et al., 2011). In the regulations analysed, however, no reference can be found to the research-teaching link or to other criteria for the teacher's decision making.

This issue is not a question of improvising or making unilateral decisions about assessment; it is necessary to guarantee the rights of students with respect to transparent and fair processes that not only have a formative effect, but also certification and grading consequences. It is about (a) decisions informed by evidence; (b) decisions delegated to teaching teams of respective disciplinary areas; and (c) a space of freedom within the agreed teaching guide to specify a programme appropriate to the group of students with whom teachers work. It is about preserving academic freedom (as stipulated by the University Law, in article 3.3. when referring to "*academic freedom that manifests itself in freedom in teaching, research and study*") and the agency of the teaching staff. In fact, "*academic freedom is a prerequisite for the existence of a society that reconciles the freedom of an individual with the common good*" (Godłów-Legiędź, 2021, p. 733).

Freedom in the choice of assessment methods is also linked to the ethical ethos of the teaching profession, which the academic understands as a professional prepared to practice their profession within an ethical framework, based on the results derived from research and analysis of student outcomes. The exercise of assessment – and, consequently, of qualification with a grade – therefore appears as a manifestation of the professional judgement of the teacher, who has valid criteria for this judgement. Professional judgement is afforded by university teaching professionalism, i.e., professors are academics connected with the research in their field. As stated by Jaspers (1959, p. 58), "*those actively engaged in research are truly capable of teaching at university because they are able to bring the student into contact with the real process of discovery*", an argument in line with the liberal tradition and the Humboldtian model of universities.

In the case of the universities investigated, each department is responsible for offering specific methodological indications (under the category of criteria of the teaching plan, as is the case for the Faculty of Education of the UAB), which academics are invited to incorporate into their teaching.

“Each subject will have a responsible professor who will develop its design. They will also be in charge of finalizing it, which must be done no later than the date established in the academic calendar for each academic year. In cases where the design of a subject does not exist, the responsibility falls to the study coordinator.” (UdG, 2020, p. 35, code DA)

However, the margin of adaptation is minimal because the regulations offer precise indications regarding the number of tests or the percentage weighting of each test.

“The continuous assessment process must include a minimum of three evaluative activities of two different types, distributed throughout the course, none of which can represent more than 50% of the final grade” (UAB, 2022, p. 15, code ADD), or

“The assessment systems and instruments and the evidence can be diverse, but in no case can a value of a test or evidence be more than 60% of the final grade for the course” (UB, 2020, p. 65, code ADD).

For the UdL, a list of tests to which teachers must adhere in order to carry out their assessment is offered:

“The tests that make up the assessment system of a subject or matter can be some of the following: a) written and oral exams; b) academically directed assignments related to the contents and competencies of the subject; c) practices in the classroom, laboratory, or field; d) tests; e) problem solving and case methods; f) academic trips; g) oral presentations; h) active participation in master classes; in classroom, laboratory or field practices; in academic outings; and in seminars and workshops related to the training objectives of the subject; and i) other types of assessment tests proposed by the professor responsible for the subject, provided that they guarantee an objective and quantifiable assessment” (UdL, 2014, p. 23, code ADD).

For the UOC, two forms of assessment are established: *continuous and final assessments* (UOC, 2013, p. 5, code ADD). The latter can be a validation test, a synthesis test or a final exam; each modality has a series of application conditions, without much margin for intervention by the teacher, and, as in other cases, the modalities come established from the beginning of the course. Possible changes or adjustments to the assessment regulations may occur in specific cases of students who, during the course, find themselves in cases of force majeure.

These prescriptive policies on teaching and assessment processes have raised questions about the professionalism of teachers and have limited the

autonomy of academics in making teaching-related decisions (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Concerns in this regard derive from efforts to create a more uniform and standardised professional context in which the role of academics is reduced to being merely technical and deprofessionalised.

Assessment policies and the position of the student

Although a large part of the body of work on the effects of neoliberal influences in education has focused on institutional structures and governance models that regulate teaching-learning and assessment processes, such effects are also reflected in the representation of the figure of the student and the role of students reflected in university policy documents.

If we examine the regulations of the universities analysed, we find barely any references to the active role of the student body. In fact, the assessment regulations seem to have incorporated ambiguity in the definition of roles, opting for a language in terms of 'rights' and 'responsibilities': students have the right to two calls for assessment (URV, UAB and UB, code SP). Regulations also appear as a mechanism for regulating possible complaints by students:

“In the case of oral tests, the faculties must establish the necessary mechanisms to guarantee the right of students to an objective assessment and the possibility of filing an appeal in case of disagreement with the assessment.

As a general rule, in the case of oral examinations whose grade represents 40% or more of the grade for the subject, the department must appoint a commission that must be composed of two members of the same department, and one of them must be the teacher of the subject” (URV, 2021, p. 78, code SP).

“The students have the right to be assessed in all the subjects for which you have enrolled in the academic year, provided that you comply with the other associated rules established by the University” (UdL, 2014, p. 23, code SP).

For the UOC, for example, we find the same language in the code of the 'recipients' of the assessment processes, almost always linked to their rights and responsibilities.

The vision of the student as a 'consumer' has been reflected in several studies. O'Leary and Wood, (2018, pp. 9–10) point to the passive role assigned to the student in contrast to the vision of "active co-constructors of that experience in collaboration with their peers and the academic staff that teach them", as promoted by the Bologna Declaration. In this sense, Moutsios (2013) affirms

that the reforms of the Bologna Process transformed the way in which European students were perceived. According to certain studies from the United Kingdom (Raaper, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017), The vocabulary of consumerism is also explicitly linked to students, academic staff and political actors.

The logic of the student as a consumer rather than an active agent is also reflected in the most recent studies carried out in Europe, such as those by Jayadeva et al. (2021), which suggest a passive role of students, a representation “related to the idea of students being a resource to be exploited in the present or in the future” (p. 12). In the case of Spanish students, in comparison with their European colleagues, their self-representation demonstrates “depicting hopelessness and frustration at their situations and possibilities” (p. 16).

When examining indicators of students’ active participation in assessment, such as self-assessment, feedback, peer-feedback or peer-assessment, no references were found in any of the analysed documents (codes RS and PA). Although empirical research refers to the importance of peer assessment or self-assessment activities in engaging students in their learning (Brown & Harris, 2013; Panadero et al., 2017), these techniques are underrepresented in recommendations or university standards. Panadero et al. (2019) discovered that final exams, which are created and graded by teachers, continue to be the most highly weighted component in calculating final marks, while assessment patterns show that traditional techniques continue to dominate the syllabi of Spanish university courses. The normative sources examined make no mention of formative assessment processes such as self-evaluation and peer assessment. According to Rodríguez-Gómez et al. (2013), instructors may experience obstacles while implementing these practices autonomously due to a lack of regulatory assistance. Although research highlights the impact of student practices (Winstone et al., 2017) and evaluative processes that enhance student agency, which are crucial for their future professionalism (Adie et al., 2018; Stenalt & Lassessen, 2022), institutional norms often overlook these findings.

Conclusion

In the present paper, we have discussed the impact of assessment-related policy documents on students and academics’ positions. We have used the neoliberalist views in the recent literature as an explanatory lens to illustrate the excessive regulations, and we have carried out an analysis of eight assessment regulations, a pioneering analysis in the Spanish context.

The teaching policy documents reflected in the assessment regulations of the Catalan universities analysed clearly reveal the presence of the neoliberal

discourses that currently prevail worldwide. The documents are highly prescriptive, leaving little margin for the teachers' freedom to choose the most appropriate designs for the needs of the students or based on an ethos of trust in teaching professionalism. The analysis has shown that, in most cases, assessment policies use ambiguous terminology or impersonal constructions when referring to 'schools', 'degrees' and 'teaching guides'. Moreover, there is an excess of references to the 'obligations' and 'rights' of teachers or students, with the latter being perceived as the recipient of the assessment and not as an active agent. Assessment is also expressed in the terminology of assessment tests, the number of tests and the weight of each test in the final grade as a percentage. The norms are seen as a protective shield in the face of possible complaints from students, or as a way to deal with unexpected situations that leave students vulnerable.

Although there is solid evidence in favour of teaching professionalism and the empowerment of both students and academics, the regulations analysed show a mismatch between what scientific evidence considers to be effective practices and the instructions that must be implemented. In many cases, these regulations leave room for interpretations by those who have to apply them. Furthermore, the documents analysed highlight a perception of increasing centralisation of control over strategies that can enhance student learning. This situation raises tensions between the autonomy of academics, their professional judgment and the university's prescriptions when academics select the most effective and tailored instructional approaches for their students.

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to keep the sample and analysis constraints in mind. First and foremost, the institutional sample is contextual: although the study is comprehensive, as it covers the entire population of Catalan public universities, it is primarily concerned with a geographical and cultural setting. This may compromise the transferability of the results to other situations, thus necessitating additional investigations. Secondly, the authors' categorisation is based on the present study objectives and research questions, which may differ from those of other researchers. Finally, methodological and data triangulation including strategies to collect the views of academic staff and students (through interviews or focus groups) could be interesting in the future as a means of verifying the documental analysis.

Assessment must be a formative process for all of the agents involved; it offers students valid information about their learning processes and competence development, but also provides teachers with solid evidence regarding their teaching performance and an empirical basis for professional improvement. We therefore consider assessment to be an intrinsic part of teaching and

learning processes in which academics possess sufficient autonomy to make appropriate decisions within the framework of their professionalism and to choose the most suitable methods and strategies for the assessment of their students.

The achievement of this objective also depends on and requires a shared responsibility regarding the development of a safe and healthy university governance ecosystem, where all agents demonstrate commitment to the university mission of educating students. This points towards an understanding of teaching and assessment as a formative, scientifically rigorous and ethically robust process.

At the university level, assessment policies should position academic leaders as being responsible for building organisational cultures that empower teachers to experiment and take direct responsibility for the education of the students they have in their classrooms, using research as a valid source of information and development. It is therefore important to create communities of practice in which there is an opportunity to experience participatory assessment and empower teachers to make decisions and intervene in the institutional policies that determine assessment processes (Dunlop, 2014). These cultures of mutual support, which value pedagogical dialogue, the formative capacity of exchange and the educational sense of participation, are essential elements when rethinking the logic on which assessment decisions should be based. Collegiate cultures of this kind are best supported by collaborative work processes and distributed leadership that value the individual potential of each teacher and stimulate individual and collective reflection on teaching practices as fundamental steps to create a culture of trust and drive academic and professional development.

In conclusion, the analysis of assessment policies in Catalan universities reveals a strong influence of neoliberal discourse in the configuration of regulations, limiting the autonomy of teachers and restricting academic freedom. Although these regulations seek to guarantee transparency and accountability, there is a disconnect between institutional guidelines and pedagogical practices that promote active learning and the development of student competencies.

The excessively normative approach not only reduces teaching professionalism, but also marginalises the active participation of students in their own assessment process. In order to move towards a more inclusive and effective higher education scenario, it is essential to foster an organisational culture based on collaboration and pedagogical reflection, where assessment is conceived as a formative and flexible process in which both teachers and students can exercise their agency and contribute to the continuous improvement of learning.

The following future policies and practices could be proposed to improve this situation: (a) periodic review of regulations to ensure that they remain up to date and aligned with best pedagogical practices; (b) distributed leadership and participation in decision making, involving teachers in the creation of regulations, which would ensure that policies are more realistic and better adapted to educational needs; (c) teaching autonomy and flexibility in assessment, developing regulations that allow assessment methods to be adapted to the students, the discipline and the context; (d) the identification of formative and continuous assessment for some areas; (e) active participation of students in their own assessment processes in order to foster their evaluative judgment and agency; and (f) communities of practice and professional development for sharing experiences, reflecting on assessment practices and collaborating on the design of more effective assessment strategies.

These policies and practices would contribute to greater democratisation of assessment processes, increasing the shared responsibility between teachers and students while preserving quality and academic integrity in university teaching.

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