

The burden of proof

Citation for published version (APA):

Schut, S. (2021). *The burden of proof: Agency and Accountability in Programmatic Assessment*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20211209ss>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2021

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20211209ss](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20211209ss)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

www.umlib.nl/taverne-license

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

Summary

Assessment is often a burden to those involved in education. It is believed to have a strong impact on learning, however, neither necessarily desirable nor positive. Assessment can lead to surface learning approaches, strategic choices, teaching and learning to the test, anxiety, stress, and fear of failing. The ambitions to overcome the undesirable and unintended consequence of assessment and to use assessment for more than accountability are high. Specifically, the assessment challenges accompanied with competency-based medical education (CBME) have led to the conceived consequential need to simultaneously use assessment of learning with assessment for learning. In this dissertation, three empirical studies, a knowledge synthesis, and two commentary papers, are included, which have sought to further explore and better understand the mechanisms explaining the complex relationship between assessment and learning within CBME. Overall, the dissertation sets out to gain an in-depth understanding of a whole-system assessment approach coined as programmatic assessment and the concept of assessment as a continuum of increasing stakes within such a system from a sociocultural perspective and an interpersonal perspective.

The first two empirical studies explored the meaning and experiences with assessment stakes and programmatic assessment from individual perspectives. **Chapter 2** explored how learners perceive assessment stakes within programmatic assessment and which factors influence these perceptions. Data were gathered by interviewing twenty-six learners from three different countries and five different programmes, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate medical education. The interviews explored learners' experience with and perception of assessment stakes. An open and qualitative approach to data gathering and analyses inspired by the constructivist grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data and reveal underlying mechanisms influencing learners' perceptions. Learner agency emerged from the analysis as key for understanding learners' perception of assessment stakes. Several design factors of the assessment programme afforded learners' opportunities to exercise agency over the assessment experience, mainly the opportunities to influence assessment outcomes, to collect evidence and to improve. Teachers played a powerful role in learners' assessment perceptions. In this study, factors were identified that influenced learners' perception of assessment stakes and which can help the design of assessment programmes in which assessment supports learning and competency development. As teachers appeared to play a key role in learners' assessment perceptions, the study in **Chapter 3** turned to the perspective of teachers. The study explored how teachers conceptualise assessments within programmatic assessment and how they engaged with learners in assessment relationships. Twenty-three interviews were conducted at two different graduate-entry medical training programmes following a theoretical sampling approach. Results showed that teachers conceptualised the meaning and purpose of low-stake assessments in three different ways: to stimulate and facilitate learning; to prepare learners for the next step, and to use as feedback to gauge teacher's own effectiveness. Teachers intended to engage in and preserve safe, yet professional and productive working relationships with learners to enable assessment for learning while securing high-quality performance and achievement

of standards. When teachers' assessment conceptualisations were more focused on accounting conceptions, this risked creating tension in the teacher-learner assessment relationship. Teachers struggled between taking control and allowing learners' independence. The study concluded with the notion that teachers believed programmatic assessment can have a positive impact on both teaching and student learning. However, teachers' conceptualisations of low-stake assessments are not focused solely on learning and also hold significant stakes for teachers themselves. Important design features were identified that support teachers and preserve the benefits of prolonged engagement in assessment relationships, which were the sampling across different assessments and assessors, and the introduction of progress committees.

The third empirical study presented in **Chapter 4** took an interpersonal perspective and investigated assessment perceptions through the lens of teacher-learner relationships. A focussed analysis using sensitising concepts from interpersonal theory was conducted to elucidate the influence of the teacher-learner relationship on learners' assessment perceptions in five different settings of programmatic assessment. The study showed a strong relation between learners' perceptions of the teacher-learner relationship and their assessment task perception. Two important sources for the perception of teachers' agency emerged from the data: positional agency and expert agency. Together with teacher's communion level, both types of teachers' agency are important for understanding learners' assessment perceptions. High levels of teacher communion had a positive impact on the perception of assessment for learning, in particular in relations in which teachers' agency was less dominantly exercised. When teachers exercised these sources of agency dominantly, learners felt inferior to their teachers, which could hinder the learning opportunity. This work showed how agency is negotiated within interpersonal assessment relationships and when and how this is done effectively in order to stimulate assessment for learning. The Interpersonal Circumplex offers a useful reference for understanding assessment relationships and provides opportunities for faculty development that help teachers develop positive and productive relationships with learners in which the potential of low-stakes assessments for learning is utilised.

Chapter 5 and **Chapter 6** offer two commentary papers. The first paper reflects on the role of and consequences for remediation in educational pathways when taking on a programmatic approach to assessment. The second paper offers a perspective on the decision-making processes of assessment in a whole-system approach and questions the role of learner agency in this process. In this chapter the way in which heuristics and other decision-making processes are commonly considered in the literature was juxtaposed. The paper calls to reconsider the role of learners in this high-stakes process, especially if one aims to benefit self-regulated learning.

The understanding gained from the empirical work guided the systematic integrated review presented in **Chapter 7**. Conducting a knowledge synthesis allowed for further finetuning as insight was gained in the underlying mechanisms based on other implementations and researchers' interpretations of their impact in practice. Characteristics of the twenty-seven included studies, which used a variety of methods and data sources, were extracted and

ADDENDUM

synthesised using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Programmatic assessment was found to enable meaningful triangulation for robust decision-making and used as a catalyst for learning. However, several problems were identified, including overload in assessment information and the associated workload, counterproductive impact of using strict requirements and summative signals, lack of a shared understanding of the nature and purpose of programmatic assessment, and lack of supportive interpersonal relationships. Thematic analysis revealed that the success and challenges of programmatic assessment were best understood by the interplay between quantity and quality of assessment information, and the influence of social and personal aspects on assessment perceptions. The knowledge synthesis led to the conclusion that although some of the evidence was compelling to support the effectiveness of programmatic assessment in practice, tensions will emerge when simultaneously stimulating the development of competencies and assessing its result. The paper offers inferred strategies from the literature that can provide guidance for navigating these tensions.

Finally, in the general discussion presented in **Chapter 8**, the results of the individual studies were summarised and synthesised to answer the overall research question and to contribute to the academic debate on the use of assessment for learning in a context in which current conceptualisations of accountability risk dominating the assessment culture. The main conclusion of this dissertation was that assessment for learning in a high-stakes context requires careful consideration of three concepts: agency, trustworthy assessment relationships, and critical inquiry. It was argued that the importance of learner agency in assessment is not only a logical consequence of the social-interpretivist paradigm but based on the research findings presented in this dissertation, is key to enable the dual-purposes aspired with the introduction of programmatic assessment. Assessment that potentially benefits learners beyond formal education calls for the democratisation of the assessment process, which implicates a shift to assessment as a process of co-inquiry to negotiate and determine what counts as legitimate. A culture in which critical inquiry is exercised and embraced by all parties involved is more likely to ensure quality of competence and build on valuable knowledge traditions of the field while simultaneously embracing diversity and learner agency to equip learners for ongoing learning after formal education.