**Unlocking ‘Assessment Cultures’: towards a working definition**

**An Assessment Cultures SIG Steering Committee Position Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to offer a tentative definition of ‘assessment cultures’ that captures an understanding of this concept shared by members of the AEA-E Assessment Cultures SIG Steering Committee and will be used to inform and focus their activities as well as those of the wider SIG membership. The exchange of ideas that led to this definition was itself a very valuable exercise since it required participants to articulate their ideas clearly, and to exchange them and revisit them, in order to arrive at the shared understanding that our definition represents.

Before turning to “assessment cultures” we need to consider what “culture(s)” is/are. Anthropologists use the term to describe all aspects of forms of human life; a narrower approach focuses on the values and beliefs demonstrated by the form of life in question. We are concerned here with the form(s) of life engaged in educational assessment.

One definition of assessment cultures that has attracted a broad professional consensus has been offered by Alarcón and Lawn (2018) who define assessment culture in a very broad way as

*“the totality of interpretation patterns, symbols, discourses, structures, techniques, systems, and /or practices of assessment in the context of a specific space and time”* (p.14)[[1]](#footnote-1)*.*

However, this definition does not encompass some characteristics of assessment cultures that we believe are important to its understanding.

A definition of Assessment Cultures from a francophone perspective is provided by Mottier Lopez (2013):

*“a construction in and by a given social group of shared practices, norms, values, discourses, tools in the field of assessment, but always in relation to their pre-existing socio-historical and institutional dimensions”* (p. 203)

A fuller explanation of assessment cultures is offered by the International Educational Assessment Network (IEAN) (<https://www.iean.network/>). They refer to a definition of *culture* offered by Guy Rocher (1992) - a linked set of more or less formalised ways of thinking, feeling and acting which, being learned and shared by a plurality of people, serve, in both an objective and symbolic way, to constitute these people into a particular and distinct community – which can be considered at very different levels in an education or assessment system and are subject to change. The IEAN explanation addresses the manner in which assessment cultures are developed and change and notes that cultures and sub-cultures can exist and interact within a system.

Other descriptions of assessment cultures emphasise long-term student development and considers the teaching practices necessary to support students’ learning. Hence, from this perspective, teachers consider that alignment between assessment, teaching, curriculum, and learning a key point (DeLuca et al., 2019; Pasquini, 2019). Further conceptualisations assume that assessment cultures reflect a mindset, defined as an implicit theory or a set of beliefs held by teachers that influences their feelings, choices, behaviours and outcomes (Birenbaum, 2016; Dweck, 2006).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Building on the foregoing and based on our knowledge of other published understandings and on discussions about these, it seems to the members of the AEA-E Assessment Cultures Steering Committee that a definition of assessment cultures should include the following ideas:

* that they comprise ideas, customs, attitudes, behaviours and values learned and shared within groups of stakeholders in an educational assessment system;
* that cultures and sub-cultures may exist within a system and interact in important ways;
* that cultures and sub-cultures may change over time and in response to a range of factors;
* that the process of culture change is inhibited by a range of internal and external barriers to such change.

Our proposed working definition reflects these understandings:

“An assessment culture (or sub-culture) comprises the ideas, customs, attitudes, behaviours and values learned by and broadly shared among particular groups of actors in an assessment system. Assessment cultures and sub-cultures develop and change in response to internal and external influences, including cultural change and debate in wider society beyond education; other internal and external factors can present barriers to such change.”

The Assessment Cultures SIG exists to explore the characteristics and implications of assessment cultures in relation to assessment policy and practice, to encourage actors in assessment cultures to examine the influences on and of their own assessment cultures - an examination that can help us to move away to some extent from our own perspectives and consider those of others - and to develop the field more generally. By proposing a working definition, the Steering Committee aims to stimulate discussion amongst those interested in their own assessment culture and in assessment cultures more widely. Comments on this working definition are invited (see details below).

In the meantime, our working definition immediately prompts a number of questions in relation to assessment cultures at different levels of an assessment system. For the purposes of this paper, we identify three system levels, and offer just a few example questions within those: [[3]](#footnote-3), [[4]](#footnote-4)

Macro level which relates to educational system-wide features including jurisdictional assessment policies and guidelines, large-scale testing frameworks, and college/university admissions, as well as socially transmitted sociocultural traditions implanted within an educational system.

* To what extent can we talk of a national assessment culture?
* How far have our own assessment practices been influenced by adopting international assessment practices or by historical influences within our own nations?

Meso level which relates to institutional policy and practice, policy guidance, support and facilitation.

* Is it possible to identify the influences of assessment culture on policy and practice in a particular context?

Micro level which relates to socially constructed, highly contextual classroom beliefs, classroom and cultural knowledges, methods, practices/procedures and tools.

* What kinds of interactions exist between formative and summative assessment cultures within a school?
* What characterises classroom assessment practices within different subjects or professions; what differences are found in vocational rather than academic studies, and in assessment of children compared to assessment of adult learners?

Members of AEA-E are warmly invited to comment on our working definition, to respond to the questions we have offered and to propose others. Please contact us directly at [assessmentcultures.sig@aea-europe.net](mailto:assessmentcultures.sig@aea-europe.net). We hope you will contribute freely to what we hope will be stimulating discussion which can be used to inform the activities of this SIG and may lead to new knowledge in this important field.

1. Cristina Alarcón and Martin Lawn (eds.) Assessment Cultures. Historical Perspectives. 11-22. *Studies in the History of Education*. Vol. 3. Peter Lang: Frankfurt a. M. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. DeLuca. C, Coombs. A., MacGregor. S. & Rasooli, A. (2019). Toward a Differential and Situated View of Assessment Literacy: Studying Teachers' Responses to Classroom Assessment Scenarios. Front. Educ. 4:94. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2019.00094; Pasquini, R. (2019). Élargir conceptuellement le modèle de l’alignement curriculaire pour comprendre la cohérence des pratiques évaluatives sommatives notées des enseignants: enjeux et perspectives. Mesure et évaluation en éducation, 42(1), 63–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066598ar>; Birenbaum, M. (2016). Assessment Culture vs. Testing Culture: The Impact on Assessment for Learning. In A. Laveault (Ed.) Assessment for Learning: Meeting the challenge of implementation, Chapter 16. (pp.235-250). Springer. DOI:[10.1007/978-3-319-39211-0\_16](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39211-0_16); Mottier Lopez, L. (2013). [Vers une culture de l’évaluation conjointement construite.](https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:39890) In J.-F. Marcel & H. Savy (Eds.), Évaluons, évoluons. De l’évaluation dans l’Enseignement agricole (pp. 197-207). Educagri Editions Recherche; Dweck C. S. (2006). Mindset: The new psychology of success. New York, NY: Random House. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. IEAN invoke the thinking of Thijs & Van Den Akker who advocate five layers of an education system: Nano (classroom interactions); Micro (school-level practices); Meso (policy guidance, support and facilitation); Macro (national level policy intentions); Supra (transnational discourses about education). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Allal, L. (2016). The co-regulation of student learning in an assessment for learning culture. In D. Laveault & L. Allal (Eds.), Assessment for learning: Meeting the challenge of implementation (pp. 259–273). Springer; DeLuca, C., Rickey, N. & Coombs, A. (2021) Exploring assessment across cultures: Teachers’ approaches to assessment in the U.S., China, and Canada, Cogent Education, 8:1, 1921903, DOI: 10.1080/2331186X.2021.1921903 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)