

## **Tracing assessment policy discourses in neoliberalised higher education settings**

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Rille Raaper is a lecturer in Education and Durham University. Rille is interested in neoliberalisation of higher education and academic work, and she explores these themes by drawing on critical theory. Her current research explores Michel Foucault's work and questions the issues of discipline and governmentality in assessment policy and practice in neoliberalised universities.

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### **Abstract**

This article explores assessment policy in two European universities with different political, historical and social backgrounds: the University of Glasgow and Tallinn University. The University of Glasgow is a well-established Russell Group university in the UK; Tallinn University is a relatively new university in post-Soviet Estonia, shaped by very recent neoliberalisation processes. By applying a Foucauldian theorisation and Faircloughian methodology, this article approaches assessment policy as not only relating to institutional contexts but also national and global policy environments. The article argues that the assessment policy in Glasgow relates to globally dominant neoliberal discourses of accountability and excellence. These discourses have turned assessment into a complex technology of government that manages educational processes as well as academic and student subjectivities. While Tallinn University is shaped by neoliberalism at strategic levels, the policy documents in Tallinn still indicate a strong sense of local tradition where regulations have a modest impact on academic freedom and assessors' disciplinary power over students.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, assessment policy, discourse, Foucault

## **Introduction**

Extensive research has been done on learning-oriented assessment practices in higher education. This article, however, argues that not enough attention has been paid to the relationship between the assessment policy and its context. Moreover, the issues of how policy operates and shapes academic and student subjectivities require investigation. This is particularly the case in neoliberalised universities where institutional regulations are reformed and developed for the purposes of quality assurance and accountability. Guided by Foucault (2004), we can understand neoliberalism as a specific mode of government rooted in economic discourses of competition. Most Western universities are going through neoliberalisation processes related to increasing focus on economic competitiveness, educational quality and accountability (Olssen and Peters 2005). Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter (2009) also suggest that neoliberal agendas can limit the agency of academic communities and individuals through growing systems of accountability. I do not wish to argue that all Western universities have become homogenous neoliberal institutions; rather, I prefer to apply a term 'neoliberalised' which reflects an ongoing process of change and recognises that the process can take place in various forms and at different paces. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) explain these differences as relating to three intersecting dimensions and forces: global, national and local. The global factors shaping education policy and practice relate to economic globalisation forces, neoliberal ideologies and various educational and political agencies (Fimyar 2008a). For example, the global trends in assessment policy and practice in Western universities have included a shift towards making all required coursework formally assessed (Boud and Molloy 2013), and adding student retention, completion and employability targets into assessment functions (Clouder and Hughes 2012). Evans (2011, 218) argues that in many cases the government of assessment has become surrounded by discourses of administration that prescribe rules and replace traditional understanding of academic freedom with detailed authoritative directives such as 'staff will follow'. From this perspective, institutional assessment policies are expected to become increasingly complex, reflecting neoliberal influences on local policymaking. However, it could also be argued that there is no linear flow from the global influence to the local, but national and local contexts can challenge and alter the global patterns of influence (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). In other words, global, national and local elements exist in interaction, without any of these

elements determining the others on a permanent basis (Marginson 2004). Like Rhodes (1994), I suggest that university governance is not a simple choice between such processes like centralisation and decentralisation, but it is about regulating relationships in complex systems.

This article is framed by Foucault's theorisation of governmentality, and it draws on a doctoral research project carried out in 2013/2014 and involving discourse analysis of seven assessment-related policy documents in two European universities. Like critical scholars on this subject (see, e.g., Ball 2008, 2015), I approach education policy as a process that is ongoing, unstable and interactional. Any education policy is a discursive construct that relates to wider social processes and thereby shapes the purposes of schooling and the construction of 'the teacher' and 'the student' (Ball 2015, 308). This also means that policymaking is not just an official work of the state and institutions, but it involves material and discursive contexts in which policies are made (Fimyar 2014). As policy is social but also in a process of 'becoming' (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015, 487), it can differ in various national and institutional settings. Therefore, the involvement of two universities in this study allows us to question the ways in which assessment policies can be constructed and made to operate in different settings. While the University of Glasgow is geographically and politically located in Western Europe, it is more difficult to define the context of Tallinn University. Located in North East Europe, Estonia gained independence from Soviet Union in 1991 and joined the European Union in 2004. Most political discourses describe Estonia as a Nordic or Baltic country, rarely as an Eastern European country (see, e.g., Hõbemägi 2015; Ilves 1999). For the purposes of this article, I am going to refer to Estonia as a post-Soviet country that reflects its current connections with Western Europe as well as its political, historical and social past. Furthermore, this article does not favour one policy context over the other but recognises that both are exposed to globally dominant neoliberal influences. The analysis, however, aims to trace the local variations and differences in assessment policy construction and operation.

### **Theorising the study: from discipline to governmentality in assessment (policy) studies**

A Foucauldian understanding of student assessment as a disciplinary technology is not new. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) explains discipline as a specific technique of power that acts on individuals by approaching them both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. Like any other disciplinary technology, assessment controls and constrains subjects.

Examination for Foucault combines ‘the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement’:

It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them (Foucault 1975, 182).

From a Foucauldian perspective, an assessor becomes ‘the judge of normality’ who monitors, rewards and punishes students (Foucault 1975). This study recognises that assessment includes a significant element of power imbalance, particularly in a relationship of an assessor and assessed. The assessor is ‘an institutional agent invested with the authority to make judgements about learners’ (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2001, 108). Students, on the other hand, are subject to the application of the expert knowledge that the academic as an assessor represents (Barrow 2006). This power relationship – what Foucault would term sovereign power – between the assessor and the assessed is probably the most visible form of power in assessment. This is particularly the case if the assessor abuses power associated with assessment by penalising students whom they dislike, or setting difficult examinations (Bandaranayake 2011). Recent scholarly work on assessment has responded to the negative impacts of disciplinary power in assessment. Scholars as well as practitioners have been concerned about the ways in which assessment constrains student learning. Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue that assessment as it is currently practised in higher education affects student learning by shaping students’ confidence for future tasks. Many others (e.g. McDowell 2012; Dochy et al. 2007) argue that students use assessment as a key indicator that guides them in deciding what and how to study. It is therefore unsurprising that contemporary assessment scholars focus on developing new assessment methods (e.g. peer- and self-assessments) to balance the aspects of domination and normative behaviour in assessment. Furthermore, it would be naïve to argue that all institutional policy developments that promote transparency in assessment are negative; rather, they might help to balance disciplinary power in a relationship of an assessor and assessed. However, I would also argue that the prevalent scholarly focus on assessment practices underestimates the complexity of assessment policy and its impact on the subjects involved in assessment.

Foucault’s theorisation of governmentality - ‘a distinctive mentality of rule’ characteristic to modern liberal politics (Besley and Peters 2007, 136) allows us to question the ways in which student assessment relates to various policy contexts and the technologies of government. Fimyar (2008a) argues that a governmentality approach explores practices of government in

their complex relations, and it is interested in the ways in which a particular truth is constituted in social, cultural and political spheres. In other words, governmentality draws attention to ‘the interdependence between the exercise of government (practices) and mentalities that underpin these practices’ (Fimyar 2008a, 5). This is particularly important in Western universities where governance as well as educational policies are going through a major reform based on neoliberal understanding of education. For Foucault (2004), neoliberalism draws on diffuse power that balances between maximum and minimum, and where the minimum force is seen as being the ideal way of governing populations. It enforces self-government through which individuals learn to ‘refashion’ themselves as the ‘entrepreneurs’ who apply ‘certain management, economic and, actuarial techniques to themselves’ (Besley and Peters 2007, 164). This new form of university governance can be termed as New Public Management (NPM), reflecting a shift from ‘a public service ethos to one of private management’ (Doherty 2007, 275). Radice (2013, 408) describes NPM as ‘a combination of Stalinist hierarchical control and the so called free market’ in which a swing from professional management to executive power, financial incentives and performance targets have taken place. It could therefore be argued that NPM refers to a variety of processes driving administrative reforms (Rhodes 1994). These reforms have caused a fundamental change in the ways in which many universities reason about their existence:

The traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with an institutional stress on performativity, as evidenced by the emergence of an emphasis on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures, and academic audits (Olssen 2009, 436).

Clegg and Smith (2010) note that student assessment as well as other teaching and learning processes are also increasingly shaped via centrally set institutional policies and managerialist practices: the culture of NPM. There is an increasing expectation for transparency about graduate attributes in order to monitor what students learn and what qualities they might have after graduation (Jankowski and Provezis 2014). Furthermore, recent assessment studies have indicated that marking loads have increased (Bailey and Garner 2010). This also means that recent policy discussions in assessment are most often dominated by the certification function (Boud and Falchikov 2007), and the focus in assessment policies has shifted to the aspects of measurement and outcomes (Boud 2007): to the ‘discourses of administration’ as phrased by Evans (2011, 218). From a governmentality

perspective, assessment in most Western universities can and should be explored as a technology that operates as part of institutional politics and management and that acts on academic and student subjectivities. As in Foucault's work, technology here has a two-fold meaning, referring mainly to discipline and domination that constrain subjects but also recognising opportunities for individuals to respond to domination and to shape their own bodies and thoughts to some extent (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 2000).

Fimyar (2008b, 2014) argues that a governmentality approach (as it is highlighted above) is most commonly applied to research in a Western socio-political context; however, she also recognises the opportunity it offers for understanding education policy making in post-colonial contexts, particularly that of Ukraine in her own research. She introduces a term 'emerging governmentality' which allows us to explore the ways in which power is exercised in countries undergoing regime change (Fimyar 2008b, 573). According to Fimyar (2008b), an emerging governmentality draws attention to the gap between the new discourses (that of neoliberalism in this research) and former practices, demonstrating a distinctive nature of post-communist transformation that reflects in both continuity and discontinuity with the discourses of the previous regime.

### **Policy environments**

From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse can be understood as an organising principle of societal reasoning, allowing us to make sense of things (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 2000). Discourses and material practices interrelate and organise culture, subjectivity and knowledge (Ball 2015). In other words, discourse is 'a space of positions and of differentiated functioning for the subjects' (Foucault 1972, 232). Furthermore, Foucault (1970, 67) stressed the importance of understanding discourses 'as discontinuous practices, which cross each other, are sometimes juxtaposed with one another, but can just as well exclude or be unaware of each other'. From the same Foucauldian perspective, assessment policy like any education policy can be understood as a discursive construct relating to various past and present discourses, and reflecting global, national and local influences as explained by Marginson and Rhoades (2002). Ball (2015) sees all policies as discursive strategies in their various forms – texts, events, artefacts, practices – that relate to and shape wider social and educational processes. Guided by Foucault, we can see how discourse in this study becomes an entrée to understanding the ways in which assessment policies are constructed and how they operate in two European universities: the University of Glasgow and Tallinn University.

Both universities like most other higher education institutions across the world are shaped by global economic, cultural and educational forces, and they themselves are global actors shaping international politics (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). It can also be argued that global influences of neoliberalism challenge and press upon national higher education systems and might make some local cultures resist and promote their identity and independence (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). Furthermore, Marginson (2004) argues that it would be misleading to present the worldwide policy environment simply as bypassing nation-states; rather, higher education still continues to be regulated nationally based not only on economic prospects but traditions and sense of identity. The national and local contexts of the two universities will be presented below.

### ***UK example***

As in many other Western countries, the older universities in the UK have traditionally been highly stable and privileged spaces in which to study and work (Bohrer 2013; Lewis 2008). In the early 1960s, however, the Government became concerned about the global competitiveness of its higher education sector compared to other developed countries and the ways in which the low participation rate in universities could affect economic growth (Wyness 2010). These concerns led to several UK-wide policy developments such as the Robbins Report (1963) that was primarily concerned with the expansion of the higher education sector (Ross 2006), the White Paper (1989) on student loans, and the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) that granted university status to 48 former polytechnics (Wyness 2010). In addition to expansion of the sector, the Dearing Report (1997) aimed to reform university governance; the universities had to become more efficient, accountable, collaborative and responsive to financial dictates in organising academic processes and work (Trakman 2008). Wyness (2010) argues that the system became market-oriented; it shifted from one where the entire sector was funded by the taxpayer, to one where students themselves contribute to the cost of their university education. However, it is also important to note that the Scottish higher education system was granted relative autonomy in 1999, with devolved powers (Briggs 2006). The Student Awards Agency for Scotland pays undergraduate student fees for Scottish residents and students from the European Union. Scottish postgraduate education, however, still applies tuition-fees similarly to other areas of the UK.

While the UK universities are rooted in a traditional model of governance where universities are principally governed by their academic staff, Barnett (2011) argues that the element of bureaucracy has significantly increased over the decades. Firstly, there is a tendency towards regulating academic activities, and secondly, academics themselves are being increasingly controlled and managed, particularly by non-academic staff (Barnett 2011). In addition to increased local bureaucracy, Ball and Exley (2010, 151) argue that recent education policy making in the UK has shifted towards 'polycentric governance' through which policies are created by multiple agencies, sites and discourses. Some of these wider policy influences in higher education relate to worldwide discourses of neoliberalism promoted by global and national funding, research and quality assurance agencies and business-oriented think tanks. It is therefore unsurprising that many managerial reforms in the UK education sector have not been welcomed by those who are working in the sector but rather experienced as 'a secular threat to the sacred values of these professionals' (Laughlin and Broadbent 1994, 166). More specifically, academic freedom and strong faculty control over academic practices in both domains of research and teaching have been threatened (Ferlie et al. 2008). The forthcoming Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill (2015) aims to introduce additional changes regarding the composition of the governing bodies and academic boards of higher education institutions. This reform might interfere further with the traditional sense of autonomy in Scottish universities.

As evident above, the University of Glasgow operates in a highly complex political environment. It is a medieval university that belongs to the prestigious Russell Group<sup>1</sup> of universities in the UK. Similarly to many other British universities, it is influenced by various accountability measures, policy networks and business aspirations, particularly related to research activities, postgraduate education and internationalisation. As regards structure, the university has been centralised, and it has four academic units in disciplinary areas of Arts, Social Sciences, Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences, and Science and Engineering. In the academic year 2013/2014, there were approximately 25 000 students studying at undergraduate and postgraduate levels from more than 100 countries worldwide. The university has about 7000 staff members, including 3000 academics.

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<sup>1</sup> The Russell Group includes 24 UK universities 'which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector' (Russell Group 2015).



### *Estonian example*

Until the early 1990s, and Estonia's regaining of independence from the Soviet Union, the higher education sector in Estonia was under government direct control (Unt and Lindemann 2013). Saar and Mõttus (2013) describe the sector as currently going through a major modernisation; there have been significant reforms aiming to integrate higher education in Estonia 'into European models and practices of education and research'. These changes are taking place in support of a global market-based economy which is reflected in an increased number of universities, and in reforms in areas such as funding, quality assurance, links to job market and equity (Saar and Mõttus 2013). Most policy developments aim 'to increase the competitiveness of the Estonian economy through up-to-date education and cutting edge research' (Jaakson and Reino 2013, 219). However, Tomusk (1996, 279) argues that these newly emerging market forces in Estonian higher education 'battle' with a traditional understanding of governmental authority; the government 'cannot use the old means of controlling the system in a society where the basic principles of existence have largely changed'. This is particularly the case as the Estonian higher education reforms have been following the example of neighbouring Nordic countries. The Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015, for instance, aims to 'assure the quality of higher education on a level comparable to the Nordic countries and the European Union' (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2006). As in many other Western countries, recent higher education changes in the Nordic region have taken place in response to such processes as globalisation, advancing technology and New Public Management (Nokkala and Bladh 2014). Universities have been granted more rights to decide on their finances, organisation and academic procedures; however, they also need to cope with increasing performance targets, standard reviews and accreditation (Nokkala and Bladh 2014). It is therefore unsurprising that the key characteristic of Nordic higher education (and that of Estonian higher education) – trust towards the state as a guardian of academic freedom – has been threatened (Nokkala and Bladh 2014). This understanding of Estonian universities as going through 'a battle' and adopting the Nordic models of governance reflects what Fimyar (2008b) would term as an emerging governmentality. This means that the discursive space increasingly aligns with globally dominant neoliberal discourses, but the previous regime still persist on the levels of government and the self (Fimyar 2008a).

It could therefore be argued that higher education in Estonia is going through a change during which universities are forced to become more competitive neoliberal institutions characterised by Western ideals, or alternatively, required to express their resistance to the forces. Tallinn University in this particular study was founded in 2005 as a result of uniting several higher education institutions in the region. During the research process in academic year 2013/2014, the university had a relatively decentralised structure: more than 20 discipline-based institutes and colleges. However, Tallinn University has been recently reformed, and it currently has six institutes and two colleges. The university has about 9500 undergraduate and postgraduate students, and 900 members of staff, including 450 academics.

### *Assessment policy documents*

As part of policy discourses analysed, I looked at seven publicly available assessment-related policy documents from the selected universities (see Table 1). All documents are available in English on both universities' websites. The translated copies and the original documents from Tallinn University were compared to confirm the accuracy of the translations.

**Table 1. Analysed policy documents**

	<b>University of Glasgow</b>	<b>Tallinn University</b>
<b>Policy and regulatory documents</b>	Code of Assessment (2013-2014) Assessment policy (2011)	Study Regulation (2012)
<b>Guidance documents</b>	Guide to the Code of Assessment (2013-2014) Guidance on Moderation and Second Marking (2011)	Student Guide: Exams and Pass-Fail Tests (2012)
<b>Strategic documents</b>	Learning and Teaching Strategy 2011-2015 (2011)	

The *Code of Assessment* (hereafter: the Code) is the main assessment-related document in the University of Glasgow. The *Code* is accompanied by the *Assessment Policy*, which as a policy document explains the underlying principles in assessment. The *Assessment Policy*,

therefore, creates a more nuanced context for the assessment processes. The *Code* is also accompanied by the *Guide to the Code of Assessment* (hereafter: the Guide) which provides further explanations through commentary and examples. Similarly, the wider strategic document, the *Learning and Teaching Strategy* does not set unique orders but formulates strategic objectives in the area of learning, teaching and assessment. When tracing the ways in which these various assessment-related documents interrelate in the University of Glasgow, the *Assessment Policy* makes the aspects of intertextuality explicit:

*In some areas of assessment practice, the principles which shape the policy are translated into regulations. These regulations are contained in the Code of Assessment which is published in the University Calendar and reproduced with explanatory notes and examples in the Guide to the Code of Assessment. (Assessment Policy, Glasgow)*

By tracing the relationship between different documents, it becomes evident that the *Code*, the *Assessment Policy* and the *Guide* have to be read together in order to gain a complete understanding of the assessment processes in this university. The regulatory power of the *Code* is not enough for shaping practice; how to act requires explanatory notes.

Tallinn University has a single document - the *Study Regulation* - which includes all relevant regulations that influence learning, teaching and assessment processes in the university. However, compared to the *Code* in the University of Glasgow that is 16 pages long, the *Study Regulation* in Tallinn includes only a 2.5 page section on assessment of learning outcomes. In addition, there is a brief online page *Student Guide: Exams and Pass-Fail Tests* (hereafter: the Student Guide), introducing assessment processes to students. The analysis also demonstrated that the *Study Regulation* forms a discrete policy entity rather than being intertextually related to guidance or strategic texts. The only evidence of intertextuality emerges when the *Study Regulation* draws on state level regulations such as the *Estonian Public Information Act*; this is mentioned when describing the processes of dissertation defence. These differences in institutional policy contexts might already indicate that the operation of power through policy discourses of the University of Glasgow is more complex than in Tallinn University, possibly reflecting neoliberal governmentality that promotes regulation but also diffuseness of directives.

## **Discourse analysis**

In terms of discourse analysis of the assessment policy documents, I have combined Foucault's theories with Fairclough's practical tools of analysis. As many authors (e.g. Diaz-Bone et al. 2008; Graham 2005) argue, a Foucauldian discourse analysis as a method is not an integrated field but requires further amendment. Fairclough's (1992, 2003) understanding of discourse is shaped by Foucault's work. Similarly to Foucault, Fairclough (1992) defines discourse as a form of social practice that relates to society as well as constructs and constitutes social entities, relations and subjects. Interdiscursivity becomes the key in explaining that various discourses exist in a relationship when shaping a specific text and its operation (Fairclough 1993). Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is therefore a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and other elements of social practices such as subjects, values and instruments (Fairclough 2001).

In this study, Fairclough's analytic framework helped to operationalise a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a social practice that relates to societal forces and acts on subjects. By following Fairclough's framework (1992, 2001), each policy document was analysed in a spreadsheet format as a text, a discursive practice and a social practice. I would also like to note that these three dimensions overlap in practice, and therefore the data presented later in this article returns to textual details throughout the analysis.

### ***Text***

The first stage of the analysis could be summarised as a description of vocabulary, metaphors, grammar and textual structures. The analysis focused on the use of language such as passive language and the formality of language and metaphors (Fairclough 1992, 2001). Fairclough's (2001) textual focus allowed me to understand words and other linguistic expressions as existing in relationships that contrast and shape the meaning of words.

### ***Discursive practice***

The interpretative analysis of discursive practice explored the ways in which a particular discourse/text is related to other discourses/texts, and how different influences might be incorporated into the specific discourse (Fairclough 2003). Guided by Fairclough (2001), the analysis explored interdiscursivity with a particular focus on how discourses relate to social context and position subjects involved in assessment.

### ***Social practice***

The analysis of discourse as a social practice is related to a question of how the specific discourse operates in the world (Fairclough 2001). Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation, I questioned the ways in which the policy can make assessment operate as a technology of government in a Foucauldian sense. My particular interest here was targeted towards power relations relating to the discourses (Fairclough 2001).

The rest of this article demonstrates the ways in which Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis and Foucault's theories allow us to understand the discursive construction of institutional assessment policies. While the analysed assessment policies drew on a wide range of global and national discursive influences – accountability, excellence, scholarly research, client culture, and internationalisation – the analysis here focuses on accountability and excellence aspects of the documents. As it becomes evident below, these two discursive influences demonstrate the relationship between the policy and its context, and shape assessment as a (neoliberal) technology of government.

### **Exploring interdiscursivity (1): Accountability**

#### ***Textual perspective***

The ways in which analysed assessment-related documents justify the purposes of assessment regulations in terms of 'transparency', 'consistency' and 'fairness' provide a first insight into the discourses of accountability in the two universities:

*The assessment regulations which are gathered in the Code of Assessment are principally concerned with maintaining academic standards while ensuring fairness, consistency and transparency through the process leading to the award of degrees and other qualifications. (Assessment Policy, Glasgow)*

*The purpose of this Study Regulation is to provide equal treatment for all degree students and transparency in study organization. (Study Regulation, Tallinn)*

It is unsurprising that the policies emphasise transparency, as according to Jankowski and Provezis (2014) accountability measures are the key organising principles of university work in neoliberal times. However, the examples above explain accountability and fairness as existing in a causal relationship: scrutinised assessment procedures will lead to fair treatment of students. It might be the case that transparent and consistent procedures protect students from a traditional form of domination as argued earlier in this article. In this case, the

techniques of accountability could help to restrict any unjust behaviour of academics over students.

When tracing the textual characteristics further, the complexity of accountability in the University of Glasgow emerges: the policy documents ascribe agency to abstract agents such as the university, college and school. The *Assessment Policy* writes about the university as having beliefs about the ways assessment should be organised, while making it unclear who is addressed by this account. Similarly, the *Code* ascribes responsibility to the academic units who have power to set assessment requirements:

*[The] university believes that assessment processes should maintain standards, provide feedback on learning, report performance against the intended learning outcomes, be regularly evaluated, demonstrate progression and develop self-regulation in learning.* (Assessment Policy, Glasgow)

*Schools may specify further requirements such as monitored attendance at classes and examinations.* (Code, Glasgow)

The assessment regulation seems to have adopted ambiguity that has been formerly characteristic of strategic documents. Like many other strategies, the *Learning and Teaching Strategy* in Glasgow is phrased in terms of a larger collective ‘we’ that sets the overall indefinite tone: ‘*our current Learning and Teaching Strategy*’, ‘*our guiding principles*’, and ‘*we will provide a truly supportive learning and teaching environment*’. These phrases referring to ambiguous agents might demonstrate that everybody involved in assessment is responsible for making accountability work. It could therefore be argued that the textual analysis provides a first indication of indirect accountability in the University of Glasgow, and a lack of it in Tallinn University. The discourses of accountability are present but diffuse in Glasgow: the standards regulating teaching and research appear to exist outside the academic role, making academics dependent on institutional frameworks of accountability (Olssen and Peters 2005).

### ***Discursive perspective***

When tracing the discourses of accountability in terms of subject positions enforced by the policies, the differences in the two institutions keep emerging. Accountability in Tallinn University rests with academics as assessors, confirming what Trakman (2008) would term as

a collegial governance model. The example below illustrates the ways in which academics have power to establish, publish and monitor assessment procedures:

*[T]he responsible teacher also establishes the requirements for participation, independent work, sitting and passing examination/assessment, principles and criteria of assessment; outlines the times, topics and participation requirements for seminar work; lists compulsory and replacement literature; describes the content of the course and presents other information necessary for the participation in and completion of the subject. (Study Regulation, Tallinn)*

The Senate is positioned as a powerful other only when the regulations address the overarching conditions of study programmes:

*The Study Programme Statute adopted by the Senate establishes the conditions set for a study programme, the procedure for opening, developing, changing and closing them. (Study Regulation, Tallinn)*

Accountability in Tallinn University resembles university governance characterised by trust in professional integrity and peer-regulation (Lynch 2006). In other words, despite the increasing neoliberal reforms in the higher education sector in Estonia, the assessment policy in Tallinn University reflects university culture where academic freedom is essential to university governance (Tomusk 1996). In other words, accountability is necessary as long as it does not affect academic ownership over their practices. This is what Saunders (2009) would describe as a low fidelity approach in the practices of government: openness to institutional culture and difference. Land and Gordon (2013) explain low fidelity in relation to a sense of collegial ownership over practices. Assessment-related management roles in the University of Glasgow, however, are divided between various stakeholders. The *Assessment Policy* in Glasgow states that ‘*Assessment is the property of all stakeholders in the educational process*’. Interestingly though, it does not mention the role of academics in assessment:

*Assessment is the property of all stakeholders in the educational process. These include the state as funder of much of the process, higher education managers, consumers who as end users benefit from graduate skills, employers and validating professional agencies, all of whom have interacting interests with academics and students. (Assessment Policy, Glasgow)*

By engaging with different interest groups at the policy level, the discourses enforce neoliberalism, particularly in terms of consumerism, managerialism, employability and professionalism. Furthermore, this stakeholder approach demonstrates the ways in which the local level - the university - interacts with the stakeholders at the national level (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). At the local level, the *Code* highlights the following governing bodies in assessment: the Senate, the Heads of Schools, the Clerk of Senate, the Senate Office, the Registry, and the Boards of Examiners. It could be that these bodies reflect again the national governance tradition: power that acts on UK academics has always been hierarchical and divided between different decision making and administrative bodies. However, the ways in which these units are made to interact in recent assessment policies, still tend to reflect the influences of neoliberal accountability. This is particularly the case as the role of the Senate has been recently reformed in the University of Glasgow: since 2014, the university has the Council of the Senate, including 75 elected members who are 'empowered to carry out all of the normal business of Senate' (Senate Office 2014). As in many neoliberal universities, this reform might indicate the reduced powers of the Senate. In terms of assessment, the *Code* describes the Clerk of Senate as a person who '*consults*' and '*authorises*', and the Board of Examiners as someone/something that '*confirms*', '*reports*', '*recommends*' and '*approves*'. The positions of the Senate Office and the Registry, however, are often addressed by less authoritative verbs: the Senate Office '*administers*' and '*forwards*' certain assessment procedures, while the Registry '*publishes*', '*ensures*', '*produces*' and '*makes [things] available*', particularly in relation to assessment timetables and grades. It could be argued that all these bodies are responsible for making accountability work in assessment, and they are also made highly accountable to each other. The following example on managing assessment errors confirms the complex relationship between different governing bodies where none of the subjects has a right to make an ultimate decision:

*...where the erroneous result is more advantageous than the result to which the candidate is entitled, the Head of the Registry shall immediately notify the Clerk of Senate and inform the candidate that the result is suspended; the Clerk of Senate shall initiate a reconsideration of the result in conjunction with the relevant Head of College and Head of School and the Head of Registry. (Code, Glasgow)*

This kind of dual relationship in terms of power and control makes it possible to argue that governance of student assessment in the University of Glasgow has not only become discursively ambiguous as textual analysis indicated, but it has shifted from academics to



professional bodies. Olssen (2009) argues that multiple governing bodies demonstrate a shift towards executive and performance-related management models characteristic of neoliberal universities. One could argue that this change makes assessment more professional. However, Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) also highlight that recent managerial practices have resulted in weakening the role of academic communities and collegial bodies in university decision making. This shift in governance could be described as high fidelity approach where trust to collegial governance has decreased while the institutional requirements to comply with policies have become essential through such mechanisms as auditing, accreditations and student satisfaction surveys (Land and Gordon, 2013).

In terms of the micro context of assessment, the documents in Tallinn University employ the term ‘teachers’ when addressing academics involved in assessment. In contrast, the terminology in the University of Glasgow is highly formal: ‘*staff*’ (Assessment Policy) and ‘*examiner*’ (Code). Furthermore, academics in Glasgow tend to be further grouped based on their different roles in assessment. The *Code* distinguishes the roles of an ‘*internal examiner*’ and ‘*external examiner*’<sup>2</sup>. The internal examiner is often described as someone who ‘*determines, judges and assures*’ the grades and the external examiner as a person who ‘*comments, certifies, reports and adjudicates*’ the final assessment outcomes (Code, Glasgow). This detailed approach and division of roles demonstrates once again how power in the University of Glasgow is more divided but also monitored by different groups involved in assessment. Power in Tallinn University, however, tends to be located in the domain of individual academics and their professionalism.

### ***Social practice perspective***

One of the most visible examples of how the discourses of accountability operate in the two universities is related to managing time in assessment. As already expected, the regulations in the two universities differ in terms of policy ambiguity. While the *Study Regulation* in Tallinn University sets a clear timeline for academics as assessors to finalise the grades, the regulations in the University of Glasgow often emphasise the roles of multiple agents in time management:

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<sup>2</sup> All UK universities appoint external examiners to ensure the quality of the programmes. According to the HEA (2012, p. 12), ‘Generally there is an expectation that the external examiner will be an experienced academic with five or more years of experience of acting as an internal examiner, perhaps coupled with experience of being a programme leader’. There is no such role in Estonian universities.

*The responsible member of teaching staff has 10 working days to enter the results of exams/assessments onto the Study Information System (Study Regulation, Tallinn)*

*The Senate Office shall forward External Examiners' reports to Schools within eight weeks of receipt identifying points to which a response is required. (Code, Glasgow)*  
Furthermore, the policy discourses in Glasgow highlight the importance of management roles in ensuring the efficient use of time and resources in assessment. It is unsurprising that policies draw attention to efficiency, as according to Rhodes (1994), the policy discussions in Western higher education and in the public sector more broadly are dominated by phrases such as 'better use of resources' and 'value for money'.

*In order to minimise waste and inefficiency in the timetabling [examinations] [...] effective communication should be established and maintained between Assessment Officers, Advisers, School Disability Co-ordinators and the Examinations Section of the Registry. (Guide, Glasgow)*

The discourses of accountability are present in the assessment policies of the two universities; however, they relate to different types of national and institutional contexts. In Tallinn University, the discourses do not indicate any interaction between education (and assessment) and the wider social system: education is presented as an isolated model (Fimyar 2008b) that belongs to the communities of practice. Academics are trusted to govern their work and to design and practise assessment; the policy does not shape people's conduct (Fimyar 2008a). This is what Fimyar (2008a, 2008b, 2014) would describe as being characteristic of education policy in post-Soviet countries. In other words, academics' power over their practices is little if at all regulated, raising concerns about domination in assessment. In contrast, the discourses in Glasgow indicate a more neoliberalised form of university governance where accountability becomes a diffuse technology and in some sense an economic technology, helping to ensure efficient use of time and resources. While policy documents highlight so-called 'powerful others' who manage assessment, there is a significant element of ambiguity involved, making it look as if accountability in Glasgow balances between the techniques of domination and self-governance in a Foucauldian sense. This policy diffuseness is unsurprising as good government from a neoliberal perspective needs to manage foreseeable risks while also maintaining a level of uncertainty in order to make individuals 'exercise their freedom through such notions as responsibility, duty, discipline, enterprise' (Hay and Kapitzke 2009, 153). I would therefore suggest that the discourses of accountability in assessment policy in the University of Glasgow are shaping 'managed academics', a term borrowed from Fanghanel (2012, 15). These managed academics (often also self-managed

academics) need to sense that there are powerful others watching them and that they must constantly watch themselves (Engebretsen et al. 2012; Gonzales, Martinez, and Ordu 2013). It is accountability that relies on regulations and diffuse policy networks as much as on academics' internalisation of regulations and responsibility.

## **Exploring interdiscursivity (2): Excellence**

### ***Textual perspective***

Cribb and Gewirtz (2013, 342) argue that academic work in neoliberalised universities is increasingly shaped by 'the institutional obsession with reputation'. Excellent reputation has become inevitable as students are believed to choose their universities based on league tables that compare teaching and research quality in various universities (Pritchard 2005). Assessment policy documents in the University of Glasgow pay particular attention to institutional excellence, demonstrating further influence of globally dominant neoliberal discourses. For example, the key strategic document, the *Learning and Teaching Strategy*, applies words like 'top', 'best', 'leading', 'exemplary' when addressing the status of the university:

*We will maintain our position in the top quartile of the Russell Group.*

*To enhance our position as a leading postgraduate university through further development and expansion of our portfolio of high quality, relevant taught postgraduate programmes to complement our extensive undergraduate provision.*

When addressing student assessment, the *Assessment Policy* emphasises words such as 'progress', 'enhancement' and 'innovation' to ensure excellent student experience as becomes evident from the following example:

*Innovation in the tools and techniques of assessment can enhance the student learning experience, open up particular areas of the curriculum, and ensure a better match with subject and discipline benchmarks.* (Assessment Policy, Glasgow)

As the examples above indicate, excellence in the policy discourses of Glasgow is understood in relation to an institutional status: having a lead position in higher education markets. In addition, the more micro level excellence of student experience is also seen to be crucial. The next section will explore the relationship between student experience and excellence further, particularly in relation to such technologies as student satisfaction surveys. There is no such

reference to excellence in assessment policy documents in Tallinn University. Excellence is only used to refer to student achievement in terms of an A grade:

*A (excellent) – an outstanding and excellent level of achievement of learning outcomes characterised by free and creative use of knowledge and skills beyond a very good level.* (Student Guide, Tallinn)

However, institutional excellence in the wider policy discourses of Tallinn University is still present, demonstrating similar effects of national and global higher education markets. For example, Tallinn University Research and Development Strategy 2012-2016 aims to develop ‘*the centres of excellence in research*’ as one of its priority areas, and Tallinn University Internationalisation Strategy 2011-2015 argues that ‘*in order to maintain the current capacity of studies, the university must find new “target markets” and be successful in competition.* I would therefore suggest that (economic) success and excellence have become part of wider institutional discourses that reshape university governance and academic work in Tallinn University.

### ***Discursive perspective***

While discursive influences of accountability were highly diffuse in the University of Glasgow, a reference to excellence is much more clearly related to national developments (e.g. the National Student Survey). The National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK evaluates the experiences of final-year undergraduate students and makes the evaluations publicly available with an aim to inform the choices of potential applicants (Naidoo and Williams 2015). The *Learning and Teaching Strategy* in the University of Glasgow aims to maintain high student satisfaction rates in such exercises as the NSS:

*The percentage of students expressing satisfaction of their experience of the University, as measured by those who answer ‘mostly agree’ or ‘definitely agree’ with the statement ‘overall I am satisfied with the quality of the course’ in the National Student Survey, will be maintained above 90%.* (Learning and Teaching Strategy, Glasgow)

The focus on student satisfaction has become nationally dominant, and Sabri (2011, 657) argues that the phrase ‘the student experience’ itself has ‘acquired the aura of a sacred utterance’ in higher education policy over the last decade. For example, the official discourse of the Russell Group ‘brand’ emphasises ‘an outstanding student experience’ as a way to attract ‘the most outstanding students’:

Russell Group universities provide an outstanding student experience for both undergraduates and postgraduates. Their combination of teaching and research excellence creates an ideal learning environment which attracts the most outstanding students from the UK and across the world. (Russell Group 2014, 11)

The analysis therefore suggests that the aspects of excellence in assessment policy documents in the University of Glasgow are grounded in wider national (and global) policy discourses of student experience and satisfaction. Student satisfaction is needed to attract high performing students and to ensure a lead position in higher education markets. Naidoo (2005) argues that increasing focus on student satisfaction risks turning the pedagogic relationship between the student and academic into a commercial transaction where academics are the commodity producers and students the consumers. Excellence therefore risks having an economic rather than educational meaning, and assessment innovation can start operating as part of this economic plan.

### ***Social practice perspective***

When exploring the ways in which the discourses of excellence operate and shape the subjectivities of academics and students in the two universities, the key difference in assessment systems requires attention. The assessment system in Tallinn University operates based on a marking scale from A-F, aiming ‘*to differentiate between the levels in achievement of learning outcomes*’ (Study Regulation, Tallinn). Furthermore, pass/fail assessment – historically common assessment practice in Estonia - without any differentiation between positive achievements is a possible form of assessment in Tallinn. In line with a traditional marking system, grades as rewards for excellent student performance have a relatively meritocratic meaning, taken into account when organising the following processes:

*...appointing study allowances and bursaries, during re-matriculation, in preparing a list of candidates for the available SC [state covered] student places, in admitting students to defence of a final thesis/sitting the final examination, in issuing a cum laude diploma.* (Student Guide, Tallinn)

It could be expected that in the University of Glasgow, where ‘the student experience’ is greatly emphasised, the institutional assessment criteria would also become more explicit, providing students with detailed information on their performance. The University of Glasgow applies a 22 point marking scale that is highly detailed as well as structured. The

*Code* emphasises that *‘[assessment] judgement shall be expressed in terms of the primary grades and secondary bands’*. By allowing differentiation of performance based on 22 point scale, students can receive detailed information about their achievement which in the longer term can provide students, potential employers as well as wider stakeholders mentioned earlier in this article with information on student success. Yorke (2008) argues that employers in particular view grades as providing information about applicants’ achievements and helping to choose right candidates for particular positions. It is therefore unsurprising that grades and course credits are explained as ‘transferable currency’ in the University of Glasgow:

*Course credits represent a transferable currency – this University will recognise credits gained by students in other institutions, as other institutions will recognise the value of credits awarded here – and students must accumulate course credits in order to qualify for a certificate, diploma or degree.* (Guide, Glasgow)

Even if the example above reflects a commonly accepted understanding of course credits, the ways in which it applies economic terminology such as ‘currency’ and ‘accumulate’ raises questions about the economic value of assessment: grades and credits can be exchanged for qualifications or used as a proof of value both nationally and globally. This view of educational achievement aligns with prevalent higher education discourses that promote the culture of individualism, making students perceive themselves as responsible for their own success and failure (Manuel and Llamas 2006). Social relations in neoliberal times can therefore become ‘ephemeral constructs’ that do not encourage feelings of personal or collective belonging (Patsarika 2014, 529) but promote individual competition for this so-called economic ‘currency’. In addition to positioning students as individuals who drive for excellent performance and practise their economic decisions while being guided by the NSS and league tables, the analysis has revealed numerous rewards that honour excellent performance of academics in the University of Glasgow. The *Learning and Teaching Strategy* emphasises that teaching excellence gets rewarded in Glasgow through Teaching Excellence Awards: *‘We will ensure that exemplary performance in teaching is appropriately recognized in our promotions and recognition and reward procedures’*. I would therefore suggest that detailed differentiation and rewarding of students and academics based on their achievements can enforce further self-governance and pressurise them to become particular subjects: excellent students and academics. This is evident in the policy discourses of the University of Glasgow where institutional reputation as well as excellent performance have

turned into more complex 'currency' that is necessary for financial gain, status, academic progress, and promotions.

**Conclusions: what does interdiscursivity in assessment policy tell us about discipline and governmentality?**

Foucault's theorisation of governmentality is not a closed theoretical framework, but it is an analytical tool that helps to explore the technologies of government and their underpinning logic in various local, national and global settings (Fimyar 2008a). Furthermore, his theorisation allows us to understand that neoliberalisation of higher education can have different effects and outcomes in different contexts. Just as Marginson and Rhoades (2002) argue that no global or national phenomena can be totalising in their effects, but local traditions, politics and history interact with the wider policy forces. In other words, the key problematics of government from a Foucauldian perspective are the questions 'how to be ruled, how strictly, by whom, to what end, by what methods' (Foucault 1978, 202), and the answers to these questions will always be contextual. It is therefore unsurprising that student assessment is differently governed and made to operate in the two selected universities. Differences often depend on national context of higher education sector as well institutional culture that shapes the wider understanding of academic work and practices. Despite the recent neoliberal forces in higher education sector in Estonia, the assessment policy in Tallinn University still echoes a governance model that trusts academics: academics are allowed to organise and monitor their own work. This also means that the assessment policy in Tallinn has a very little impact on regulating assessment practices, positioning academics as professionals who have rights to design their practices and make judgements about students' performances. In other words, the assessment policy in Tallinn University, a post-Soviet university, reflects a context characteristic of emerging governmentality that according to Fimyar (2008b) demonstrates some influence of neoliberalism on the practices of government (particularly at strategic levels) and not yet on the governance of the soul: so-called self-governance. For example, recent strategic documents on research and internationalisation demonstrate an increasing influence of neoliberalism (e.g. discourses of excellence and marketisation) on university work. However, as most higher education in Estonia is still taught in Estonian language, it is more difficult to recruit international students or staff and to implement the change at local levels. Furthermore, as assessment (policy) in this university operates as a localised and individual process designed by academics, it also includes high risks of turning into a disciplinary technology in a Foucauldian sense that relies on

academics' domination over the procedures and the assessed. Assessment can become a process through which students are put 'under the thumb of a professor who abuses his authority' (Foucault 1984b, 299).

The globally dominant neoliberal discourses are highly visible in the policy documents of the University of Glasgow. The analysis has indicated that the assessment policy draws on accountability, excellence and various agents, and involves ambiguous use of language (e.g. non-human agents, passive voice). The aspects of standardisation (being regulated) but also diffuseness (regulating oneself) in policy discourses reveal that assessment can operate as part of neoliberal governmentality that helps to manage the academic and student population in the institution; it makes academics and students accountable to various subjects but also makes them monitor their own and others' behaviour. The technologies of (self-)audit and (self-)surveillance characteristic of the University of Glasgow do not just demonstrate the discourses of accountability and excellence, but according to Davies and Bansel (2010, 9), these technologies produce specific types of academic subjects that fit with 'the programmatic ambitions of government': accountable, responsible and excellent subjects. Policy discourses shape academics as being accountable for their action but also responsible for monitoring performances of their students. This also indicates that assessment policy for academics in particular operates as any other institutional policy that tries to manage them (Fanghanel 2012), just as technologies that assign and measure workload (Davies and Bansel 2005). My earlier analysis of academic experiences of assessment processes in one UK university (see Raaper 2016) confirmed a sense of procedural domination in assessment that often makes academics more concerned and constrained than that of traditional experience of assessment as a disciplinary technology and a domain of an academic. Academics as assessors tend to experience scrutiny that makes them feel as if they are tied to something that is not only used for educational purposes but is also linked to wider national and institutional management technologies such as auditing, monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms. Sadler (2011) explains the consequent tension between the academic and administrative communities: academics understand assessment as being their responsibility and expect no external interference, and administrators regard it as their duty to regulate academic standards. I would therefore suggest that student assessment has become highly complex in Western universities such as Glasgow: student assessment not only disciplines students but also academics, whose assessment practices and decisions are highly controlled and constrained. Disciplinary power in assessment has therefore been transformed: it has become



more diffuse. Power has shifted from the relationship between the assessor and the assessed to a complex field of university politics shaped by global, national and institutional contexts. This study therefore confirms once again that any education policy relates to wider societal processes and is always in a process of being recreated (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015). Furthermore, it indicates that neoliberalism does not necessarily affect the universities in the same way, but national and institutional contexts shape the conditions for policy developments.

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