Journal of Education, 2026
Issue 106, https://ojs.sabinet.co.za/index.php/journal_of_education
http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i106a14

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Rethinking assessment in a time of polycrisis: Transformative practices for supply chain management education in South Africa

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(Received: 17 April 2026; accepted: 11 August 2026)

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines assessment practices within a Bachelor of Commerce in Supply Chain Management programme at a South African private higher education institution, set against the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions characteristic of contemporary professional practice. The research explores how assessment shapes graduate attributes in the context of overlapping global and local crises, including economic instability, climate disruption, and persistent structural inequalities. Drawing on Biesta's educational purposes framework, Barnett's concept of supercomplexity, and Nussbaum's and Walker's capabilities approach, the study interrogates whether assessment serves as a transformative mechanism for developing adaptive, ethical professionals or remains primarily a compliance-driven exercise. Data were generated through a single-case qualitative design comprising document analysis of assessment policies and programme information alongside semi-structured interviews with 15 academic staff participants. Thematic analysis reveals a persistent dominance of performative, outcomes-based assessment logics that privilege technical competencies over critical judgment and ethical reasoning. Findings indicate significant tensions between policy aspirations for transformative education and the realities of implementation, which continue to reproduce traditional assessment paradigms. The study concludes that a fundamental reconceptualisation of assessment is necessary to cultivate graduates capable of navigating VUCA environments characteristic of contemporary supply chain management practice. Recommendations include integrating reflective, scenario-based assessments, enhancing staff development, and aligning institutional cultures with transformative educational goals.

Keywords: assessment practices, graduate attributes, higher education, polycrisis, qualitative case study, supply chain management, transformative education, VUCA

Background

Global and local polycrisis in higher education

Higher education systems across the world are navigating a complex terrain of overlapping crises that have been characterised as a polycrisis. These interconnected challenges encompass economic instability, climate disruption, rapid digital transformation, and widening inequality, each compounding the effects of the others. Marginson (2011) argues that universities carry a distinctive public responsibility in periods of societal disruption, one that requires sustained engagement with purposes that extend well beyond market positioning or narrow credentialing. Similarly, White et al. (2024) emphasise that pedagogical responses to compounding crises must account for their emotional and ethical dimensions, particularly in contexts where historical injustices continue to shape educational experiences.

In South Africa, these global crises intersect with persistent structural inequities rooted in the country's apartheid past. The higher education sector continues to grapple with funding constraints, infrastructure deficits, and alarmingly high rates of youth unemployment. These conditions create intensified pressures on universities to produce graduates who are not only work-ready but also socially responsive and capable of contributing to national development goals. The Council on Higher Education (2023) notes that South African institutions face the dual challenge of expanding access whilst simultaneously enhancing the quality and relevance of educational provision. This context necessitates a critical examination of how assessment practices either support or constrain the development of graduates who can navigate and contribute meaningfully to addressing these multifaceted challenges. This global–local intersection sets up the specific question this article pursues: how assessment, as the point where these pressures become concrete institutional practice, either supports or constrains the development of graduates who can navigate and contribute meaningfully to addressing these multifaceted challenges—a question taken up disciplinarily below, in a field where the stakes of assessment practice are especially high.

Policy momentum but lagging practice

Having situated the polycrisis at the level of the system, this section turns to how South African higher education policy has responded, and where that response has, and has not, reached everyday assessment practice. Recent South African scholarship signals growing policy interest in transformative, socially just assessment practices. However, implementation remains uneven across institutions. Osiname and Kirk (2026) observe that whilst policy frameworks articulate ambitious goals for equity and transformation, pedagogical practices frequently reproduce traditional, compliance-driven models. Neboh et al. (2023) similarly highlights a persistent disjuncture between policy rhetoric and classroom reality, noting that assessment continues to privilege quantifiable outcomes over holistic development.

Key policy frameworks such as the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) and the National Framework for Quality Learning and Teaching (Council on Higher Education, 2021) explicitly articulate commitments

to equity, transformation, and social responsiveness. These documents emphasise the importance of preparing graduates who can contribute to social justice and economic development. Nevertheless, the translation of these policy aspirations into everyday assessment practices remains problematic. This gap between policy intent and pedagogical enactment underscores the urgent need for rethinking assessment in professional education, particularly in fields that have direct implications for social and economic well-being.

Why supply chain management matters

This policy–practice gap is not evenly distributed across disciplines; the remainder of this section explains why supply chain management is a particularly consequential, and, as the next section will argue, particularly under-examined field in which to study it. Supply chain management has emerged as a professional field of pivotal importance for economic stability, ethical governance, and social resilience. The field's significance has been amplified by recent global disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and climate-related shocks, all of which have exposed vulnerabilities in global supply networks (Christopher, 2016). Preparing adaptive, ethical supply chain management graduates therefore requires assessment approaches that cultivate not merely technical proficiency but also critical judgement, systems thinking, and responsiveness to complex socio-economic conditions (Owhoeke et al., 2025).

A critical concern in supply chain management education is the documented mismatch between the competencies developed through formal assessment and the capabilities demanded by industry. Whilst technical knowledge in procurement, logistics, and operations management remains foundational, employers increasingly identify deficiencies in graduates' capacity for ethical reasoning, stakeholder management, and adaptive decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Heckman and Kautz (2012) demonstrate that what they describe as soft skills, encompassing adaptability, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving, are strong predictors of professional performance. Yet, these competencies are systematically underweighted in formal assessment frameworks. This mismatch reflects a structural tendency for assessment to foreground those competencies most easily verified and quantified, whilst the embedded, relational, and contextual dimensions of professional practice remain largely unassessed.

Transformative assessment practices in supply chain management education can serve as a vital bridge between academic learning, industry relevance, and ethical responsibility. This alignment is particularly important in the South African context, where supply chain professionals are called upon to contribute to the country's broader development agenda, including goals related to poverty reduction, employment creation, and sustainable economic growth. As Neboh et al. (2023) caution, the promise of transformation in assessment will remain unrealised unless institutional cultures, curriculum design, and staff development initiatives align coherently with policy intentions.

Framing the urgency

The convergence of global crises with South Africa's persistent inequalities demands a reconceptualisation of assessment that prioritises adaptability and agency rather than mere credentialing. Assessment must be understood not simply as a mechanism for quality assurance or competency verification, but as a formative process that shapes who graduates become as professionals and citizens. This perspective requires moving beyond narrow conceptions of learning outcomes towards a more expansive understanding of education's purposes in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) framework as a conceptual lens for understanding the conditions within which contemporary professionals must operate (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). In supply chain management specifically, the frequency and severity of disruptions, from pandemics and geopolitical shocks to climate events and digital transformation, have rendered the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment the norm rather than the exception. Assessment frameworks that continue to prioritise technical knowledge and procedural compliance risk producing graduates who demonstrate mastery of established routines whilst remaining ill-equipped to navigate the adaptive challenges of contemporary practice. There is a critical need to examine how existing assessment approaches in supply chain management education measure up against these demands, and to identify the structural and cultural factors that sustain performative logics even in the face of mounting evidence of their inadequacy. Assessment that fails to engage with the embedded, ethical, and relational dimensions of professional competence not only disadvantages graduates but also reproduces systemic limitations within the profession itself.

The research gap

Despite this growing policy and scholarly attention to transformative assessment, empirical accounts remain concentrated in generalist and public-sector programmes. The specific dynamics of assessment in professional, market-facing disciplines such as supply chain management, and within the private higher education sector in particular, where market and quality-assurance pressures intersect in distinctive ways, remain comparatively underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining, through a single in-depth case, how assessment practices in a private higher education institution's (HEI) supply chain management programme shape graduate attributes amid overlapping global and local crises.

Purpose of the study

Research aim

This study aims to explore how assessment practices within a Bachelor of Commerce in Supply Chain Management programme at a South African private HEI shape graduate attributes. Drawing on Biesta's (2020) distinction between qualification, socialisation and subjectification, the research focuses on the development of the capacities, dispositions, and

ethical orientations required to operate within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous VUCA environment—deliberately in place of the narrower, outcomes-based language of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that the study itself sets out to critique. The VUCA framework has become increasingly relevant in understanding the contexts within which contemporary professionals must operate, particularly in fields such as supply chain management where disruptions and unpredictability have become the norm rather than the exception (Taşkan et al., 2022; White et al., 2024).

Research questions

The main research question is: "What role does the programme's status as a private higher education provider play in shaping how socially responsible graduate attributes are assessed?"

Case context

The study focuses on a Bachelor of Commerce in Supply Chain Management programme offered at a South African private HEI. Supply chain management represents a strategically significant discipline for national resilience because it underpins economic recovery, ethical business practice, and sustainable operations amid the various global and local polycrises. The programme therefore offers a valuable lens through which to examine how assessment design and practice can foster graduates who are adaptable, ethical, and systemically aware, or conversely, how assessment may inadvertently constrain the development of these crucial attributes. Fuller contextual detail on the programme and institution is provided in the Methodology, where it is more appropriately positioned alongside the sampling and data generation account, rather than repeated here.

Literature review

The dominance of outcomes-based and performative assessment

The contemporary higher education landscape is characterised by the dominance of outcomes-based education models that emphasise standardisation, accountability, and measurable outputs. These frameworks, which are prominently instantiated in the South African context through the National Qualifications Framework and the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework, are rooted in managerialist and neoliberal rationalities that prioritise performance indicators, compliance, and auditability (Council on Higher Education, 2021). At an international level, similar logics underpin systems ranging from the Bologna Process in Europe to competency-based frameworks in North American professional education. Ball (2003) and Bozkurt (2025) argue that such performative cultures fundamentally reshape educational relationships, transforming students into producers of measurable learning outcomes rather than ethical subjects or critical agents. This shift has profound implications for how assessment is conceptualised and enacted within HEIs.

Biesta (2020) describes this phenomenon as learnification, referring to the reduction of education to individualised learning outcomes and competency acquisition. Under this

paradigm, assessment becomes increasingly instrumental and technicist, focused on what can be measured rather than what matters educationally. The consequence is that critical, ethical, and creative capacities, which are essential for navigating complex, uncertain, and ethically fraught polycrisis contexts, are often marginalised or entirely absent from assessment frameworks. This narrowing of educational purposes represents a significant challenge for professional education programmes that aspire to develop graduates capable of addressing multifaceted social and economic challenges.

It is worth acknowledging that proponents of outcomes-based approaches do not regard standardisation and measurable accountability as inherently opposed to educational quality; in mass, resource-constrained higher education systems, clearly specified outcomes and rubrics can also support consistency, transparency for students, and defensible quality assurance. The critique advanced in this article is therefore not that outcomes-based mechanisms have no legitimate function, but that their near-exclusive dominance crowds out the space for subjectification and ethical formation that this study is concerned with.

Evidence from South African higher education contexts

Reddy and Mncwango (2021) argue that curriculum differentiation in South African higher education frequently reflects social stratification as much as pedagogical intent, producing programmes that respond to labour market demands whilst undermining the transformative potential of education. Within professional programmes, this tendency is expressed through a heavy emphasis on technical performance metrics and industry-aligned competencies that reinforce compliance-driven assessment approaches rather than transformative learning experiences.

Harley et al. (2000) similarly highlight a persistent disjuncture between policy rhetoric and pedagogical practice within South African institutions. Whilst assessment policies frequently reference transformation and holistic development, their implementation continues to privilege quantifiable outcomes, standardised rubrics, and efficiency models. These findings illustrate a pervasive performative logic within professional education, where assessment success becomes equated with procedural mastery rather than ethical or adaptive capability. This disjuncture is particularly concerning in a context where higher education is expected to contribute meaningfully to addressing social inequalities and fostering inclusive development.

Assessment in supply chain management and business education

Recent work in business and management education helps sharpen what is at stake in this case. Kashef and Townsley (2023) found that business faculty were broadly supportive of authentic assessment because it better reflected higher-order thinking and real-world practice, yet they also reported enduring logistical and institutional barriers, including large classes, grading subjectivity, and entrenched assessment cultures. This is important for the present study because it shows that business education already recognises the limits of traditional testing, even where institutional arrangements continue to reward efficiency and standardisation.

More specifically, emerging literature on business-linked project work and supply chain learning suggests that authenticity is most powerful when students engage realistic problems, produce consequential outputs, and are judged against workplace-relevant criteria. Mirzaei et al. (2024) show that business students experienced project-based and work-integrated assessment as more authentic when tasks involved real partners, realistic constraints, and collaborative problem-solving. In the supply chain field, Salinas-Navarro et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that experiential designs can connect students to live sustainability and systems challenges. Together, these studies indicate that supply chain management and business education do not have to remain limited to technical optimisation or decontextualised competency testing; they can also cultivate judgement, collaboration, and ethical responsiveness.

Transformative assessment and professional education

Alternative conceptualisations of assessment emphasise its potential as a transformative practice. Boud and Falchikov (2006) argue for assessment approaches that support learners in developing capabilities for lifelong learning, self-regulation, and critical inquiry. Similarly, Carless (2015) and David (2025) advocate for sustainable assessment practices that equip students to make informed judgements about their own learning and professional practice. These perspectives challenge instrumental views of assessment, positioning it instead as a formative process that shapes students' identities as learners and professionals. In professional education contexts, particularly those preparing graduates for complex, ethically demanding fields such as supply chain management, assessment must go beyond verifying technical proficiency. It should engage students with open-ended, uncertain problems that nurture dispositions for inquiry, ethical reasoning, and responsible professional judgement.

Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2006) argue that professional development is best understood not as the progressive acquisition of fixed competencies but as the ongoing transformation of one's way of being in practice, a conception that has direct implications for how assessment should be designed and what it should value. This understanding challenges the notion that assessment tasks with predetermined correct answers can adequately represent the complexity of professional performance. This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship on adaptive professionalism, which responds to the realities of practice environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) demonstrate that organisations and their personnel increasingly face conditions that cannot be addressed through existing solutions, requiring a VUCA-ready orientation grounded in contextual awareness, adaptive capacity, and collaborative decision-making. For supply chain management education, cultivating such an orientation requires assessment that deliberately confronts students with ambiguous, contested, and ethically complex scenarios rather than problems with calculable solutions.

Post 2018 scholarship has extended this discussion in ways that are directly relevant to the present study. Ajjawi et al. (2024) argue for a shift from narrow notions of authentic assessment towards broader authenticity in assessment, warning against equating authenticity only with task mimicry. Tai et al. (2018) further emphasise evaluative judgement as a core educational

capability: students need opportunities not only to complete tasks, but to judge quality, justify decisions, and engage critically with complex outputs and processes. Fawns et al. (2025) add an important caution that authentic assessment should not be treated as a panacea, but as a set of principled design aspirations that must be negotiated alongside fairness, inclusion, and feasibility. These contributions strengthen sustainable and transformative assessment arguments by locating assessment in ongoing professional judgement rather than in one-off demonstrations of compliance.

Assessment in times of crisis

Recent scholarship has begun to address the specific challenges of assessment in contexts characterised by crisis and disruption. Marginson (2011) argues that higher education carries a public good responsibility that extends beyond economic contribution, encompassing the cultivation of ethical citizens capable of addressing the conditions that generate and perpetuate crisis. This responsibility necessarily includes assessment, which plays a central role in defining what counts as valuable knowledge and legitimate forms of knowing. Watanabe (2025) extends this argument by emphasising the affective and ethical dimensions of education in crisis contexts, suggesting that assessment should attend to how students develop emotional resilience, empathy, and moral courage alongside technical competencies.

In the South African context, these considerations take on particular urgency given the intersections of global crises with ongoing struggles for social justice and economic inclusion. McPhail et al. (2024) caution that assessment practices that privilege narrow technical competencies risk producing graduates who are fitted for existing systems but incapable of transforming them, because such practices fail to provide access to the theoretical knowledge that enables critical engagement with professional structures and power relations. What is needed, therefore, is a shift from assessment of learning to assessment for ethical and critical becoming, valuing relational, contextual, and justice-oriented dimensions of professional capability. This shift requires not only new assessment methods but also transformed institutional cultures and educator capabilities.

The VUCA concept has itself been clarified and extended in recent scholarship. Taşkan et al. (2022) synthesise the concept's development and show why VUCA should be treated as analytically distinct but interrelated conditions rather than as loose managerial shorthand. Dadvand (2026), similarly argue that higher education now confronts multiple, overlapping crises that require pedagogies capable of working with instability rather than denying it. Even beyond management fields, recent applied literature continues to use VUCA to describe professions operating under turbulence, shifting information, and contested decisions. For the purposes of this article, VUCA is therefore not a fashionable label but a useful description of the conditions under which contemporary professional judgement is formed and assessed.

Theoretical framework

Biesta: Education beyond learnification

Biesta's (2020) critique of contemporary education provides a foundational framework for understanding assessment's broader purposes. He challenges the dominance of what he terms learnification, the reduction of education to measurable learning outcomes and competencies. Against this narrow conception, Biesta reasserts three interrelated functions of education that should guide educational practice, including assessment.

First, qualification refers to the function of equipping learners with disciplinary knowledge and skills necessary to perform effectively in professional and economic spheres. This is the dimension of education most readily recognised and measured within outcomes-based frameworks. Second, socialisation involves integrating learners into existing norms, values, and practices of professional and societal communities. This function acknowledges that education is inherently social and cultural, preparing individuals to participate meaningfully in established traditions and practices. Third, and most significantly for this study, subjectification concerns fostering independent, responsible, and ethical persons who are capable of critical judgement and transformative action.

Biesta (2020) argues that subjectification is the dimension most at risk in contemporary education systems dominated by performative logics. Assessment, within this framework, is understood not merely as a mechanism for verifying competence or qualification, but as a crucial site for supporting ethical agency and subject formation. This perspective directs attention towards assessment practices that create opportunities for students to develop as independent thinkers, ethical decision-makers, and agents of social change. It challenges academics to consider how assessment either enables or constrains students' capacity to act responsibly in contexts of uncertainty and moral complexity.

Barnett: Supercomplexity and adaptive professionalism

Barnett's (2000, 2007) concept of supercomplexity provides a complementary lens for understanding the conditions within which contemporary professional education operates. Barnett contends that higher education now functions within a supercomplex world characterised by uncertainty, unpredictability, and fundamentally contestable knowledge claims. In such contexts, traditional notions of professional competence, which assume relatively stable bodies of knowledge and predictable practice environments, prove inadequate.

Professionals working in supercomplex environments must cultivate what Barnett (2007) terms adaptive professionalism. This form of professionalism is characterised by reflexivity, ethical awareness, and resilience in the face of ambiguity. Rather than mastering fixed procedures or applying predetermined solutions, adaptive professionals must develop capacities for ongoing learning, ethical deliberation, and creative problem-solving in contexts where established frameworks may prove insufficient or inappropriate.

The implications for assessment are profound. If the goal is to develop adaptive professionalism, assessment practices must engage students with open-ended, uncertain problems that mirror the complexities they will encounter in practice. Assessment should nurture dispositions for inquiry and responsible judgement rather than rewarding procedural compliance or the reproduction of established knowledge.

Nussbaum and Walker: Capabilities and social justice

The capabilities approach, as developed by Nussbaum (2015) and applied to education by Walker (2006), offers a normative framework centred on human development and social justice. This approach emphasises education's moral purpose, which is understood as expanding individuals' real freedoms to think, reason, and act ethically within just social systems. Rather than focusing narrowly on human capital development or economic productivity, the capabilities approach foregrounds what people are able to be and to do as a result of their education.

Within professional programmes, this perspective demands that assessment promotes ethical reasoning, empathy, and agency alongside technical proficiency. Walker (2006) argues that higher education in unequal societies has a particular responsibility to develop capabilities that enable graduates to contribute to social justice and human flourishing. In the South African context, where education is explicitly positioned as a vehicle for transformation and social redress, this framework provides important grounding for reconceptualising assessment purposes and practices.

The capabilities approach directs attention towards what assessment enables students to become, not merely what it certifies they know. It raises critical questions about whose capabilities are being developed, whose voices are heard in defining graduate attributes, and whether assessment practices reproduce or challenge existing inequalities. For supply chain management education, this framework suggests that assessment should cultivate capabilities for ethical decision-making in contexts marked by power imbalances, resource constraints, and competing stakeholder interests.

Limitations of the theoretical frameworks

Each of these frameworks also has recognised limits, which this study takes seriously rather than treating them as universally explanatory. Biesta's distinction between qualification, socialisation, and subjectification is analytically powerful but resists straightforward operationalisation in assessment design; knowing when subjectification is "happening" is far harder to establish than measuring qualification. Barnett's supercomplexity offers a compelling diagnosis of the conditions professionals face but is comparatively thin on concrete guidance for how curriculum and assessment should be redesigned in response. Nussbaum's capabilities approach, meanwhile, has been critiqued for a degree of universalism in specifying valued capabilities, which can sit uneasily with more context-specific, participatory accounts of what graduates in a particular setting and discipline should be able to be and do; this study attempts to mitigate that tension by grounding capability claims in participants' own accounts rather

than a predetermined list. Taken together, the three frameworks are used here as complementary rather than fully reconciled lenses, and their combination is intended to compensate for, rather than resolve, each framework's individual limitations.

Integrative positioning: Assessment as ethical formation

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks position assessment as pivotal to the process of subjectification, the development of students as reflective, ethical professionals capable of navigating complex realities. In supply chain management education specifically, transformative assessment can integrate Biesta's emphasis on subjectification, Barnett's conception of adaptability, and Nussbaum's capabilities framework. Such integration would foster graduates who are not only skilled in the technical dimensions of supply chain management but also morally and socially responsive to the human and environmental consequences of supply chain decisions.

This integrative theoretical positioning reframes assessment as both a pedagogical tool and an ethical act. Assessment practices shape who graduates become in relation to society and its multiple, intersecting crises. They determine what forms of knowledge and ways of knowing are valued, what kinds of professional identities are cultivated, and ultimately, what contributions graduates are prepared to make to addressing pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Methodology

Research design and rationale

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore assessment practices and their influence on graduate attributes within an authentic institutional context. This methodological approach was selected for its capacity to generate in-depth, contextual understanding of how academics interpret and enact assessment within a complex professional programme. The case study design aligns with the study's interpretivist orientation, which recognises that educational practices are socially constructed, context-dependent, and imbued with meaning by the actors involved in their enactment.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that case studies are particularly appropriate when the researcher seeks to gain deep insight into a specific phenomenon within its real-world context. Yin (2018) further emphasises that case studies allow for the examination of how and why questions, which are central to understanding the complex dynamics shaping assessment practices. This study's focus on a specific Bachelor of Commerce in Supply Chain Management programme provided a bounded case that could be investigated intensively whilst also generating insights with potential transferability to similar contexts.

Case context and sampling

The case focuses on a Bachelor of Commerce in Supply Chain Management programme offered at a South African private HEI. Private HEIs occupy a distinctive position within the

South African higher education landscape, operating within market logics whilst simultaneously being required to meet national quality assurance and transformation imperatives. This context provides particular insights into tensions between commercial pressures and educational values.

Private HEIs in South Africa are established and funded independently of the state, though they remain subject to registration with the Department of Higher Education and Training and accreditation through the Council on Higher Education, distinguishing them from publicly funded universities that receive direct state subsidy and operate under separate governance arrangements (Council on Higher Education, 2021; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). This distinction matters for the present study because private providers operate within market logics competing for fee-paying students and demonstrating value to industry and regulatory bodies in ways that can create distinctive pressures on assessment design, discussed further below.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who were directly involved in assessment design and implementation within the programme. The final sample comprised 15 academic staff members including one programme coordinator, representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds and assessment responsibilities. This sampling strategy ensured that the study captured multiple perspectives on assessment practices, including those responsible for curriculum design, module coordination, and day-to-day teaching and assessment activities.

Data generation methods

Data were generated through two primary methods that enabled triangulation and enhanced the credibility of findings. First, document analysis was conducted on a range of institutional texts including module descriptors, assessment rubrics, programme learning outcomes, and relevant policy documents. These documents were examined systematically to identify how assessment principles and practices aligned, or failed to align, with transformative and capability-based educational goals. Document analysis provided insights into the formal structures and stated intentions shaping assessment within the programme. The documents that were analysed consisted of the programme information sheet, assessment bundles, and specific higher education policy (SAQA and HEQSF).

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff and the programme coordinator. These interviews focused on participants' lived experiences, pedagogical rationales, and perceived challenges in implementing assessment strategies. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in pursuing emergent themes whilst ensuring that key topics related to the research questions were addressed systematically. Interviews created space for exploring tacit beliefs, institutional logics, and contextual factors that shape assessment decisions but may not be evident in formal documentation.

Data analysis

Qualitative data from documents and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo Pro 12 and Microsoft Excel. Excel was used to organise and map documentary information, while NVivo supported systematic coding and theme development across the dataset (Bougie & Sekaran, 2025). Data analysis proceeded through thematic coding that was guided both deductively and interpretively by the theoretical frameworks outlined previously. Initial codes were generated from key theoretical constructs, particularly Biesta's three educational functions of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification, and Barnett's concept of adaptive professionalism. These deductive codes provided a structured starting point for analysis, ensuring systematic attention to the study's conceptual framing.

Subsequently, codes were refined inductively as patterns emerged from the data that extended beyond or complicated the initial theoretical categories. This iterative process allowed for themes to emerge around performativity, compliance cultures, authentic assessment, and ethical formation that captured the nuanced realities of assessment practice within the specific institutional context. Triangulation between document analysis and interview data enhanced the credibility and interpretive depth of the analysis, enabling identification of convergences and divergences between formal policies and lived practices.

Data quality was addressed through strategies associated with trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation of document analysis and interviews, systematic coding and theme development, careful documentation of procedures, and reflexive attention to researcher positionality (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution's research ethics committee prior to commencing data collection. All participants provided informed consent after being fully briefed about the study's purposes, methods, and their rights as research participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation, with explicit notification that they could withdraw at any point without penalty. Anonymisation protocols were rigorously applied to institutional and individual identifiers, and pseudonyms were used consistently in reporting to protect participants' privacy and maintain institutional confidentiality.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research captures a single moment in time within one programme at one institution; assessment practices are not static, and what is described here may already be in transition. Second, the purposive sample of 15 participants, while appropriate for the depth sought in a qualitative case study, means the findings speak to this particular context and cannot be generalised to supply chain management education, or private higher education, more broadly. Third, the study did not include student participants; this was an intentional boundary rather

than an oversight: the study focused on the perspectives of those who design and regulate assessment. At the same time, the exclusion of students limits what can be concluded about how assessment is actually experienced, received, and negotiated by learners. The analysis only reflects how academic staff and the programme coordinator understand and enact assessment, not how students experience or make meaning of it.

Fourth, as with any interview-based study of professional practice, participants' accounts may be shaped by social desirability, particularly given that assessment reform is an area of active policy scrutiny; participants may have presented themselves as more reform-minded than their day-to-day practice reflects. Finally, the document analysis captures intended assessment, what policies, rubrics and briefs specify, rather than enacted assessment, that is, how tasks are actually experienced and undertaken by students; the relationship between the two remains an empirical question this study cannot resolve.

Findings and discussion

The persistence of performative assessment logics

The analysis reveals a persistent dominance of performative, outcomes-based assessment logics within the supply chain management programme examined. Assessment tasks across multiple modules demonstrated a primary orientation towards qualification in Biesta's terms, focusing on verifying technical competence and procedural knowledge. This emphasis aligns with broader patterns identified in South African professional education by Boughey (2009), suggesting that the challenges observed in this case reflect systemic issues rather than localised problems.

The consequences of this performative orientation are significant. Assessment methods, as gleaned from the document analysis, such as case study examinations that test theoretical recall, multiple-choice questions on ethical issues, and standardised group presentations tend to privilege surface-level engagement with content over deeper critical and ethical reasoning. Whilst such assessments may efficiently generate marks and satisfy quality assurance requirements, they offer limited opportunities for students to develop the adaptive professionalism that Barnett (2007) argues is essential for navigating supercomplex professional environments. The dominance of measurable, standardised assessment formats reflects what Biesta (2020) characterises as learnification, where the richness of educational experience is reduced to what can be readily assessed and quantified.

Marginalisation of subjectification and ethical formation

Perhaps most concerning is the marginalisation of assessment practices that would support subjectification and ethical formation. Document analysis revealed that ethics modules, which ostensibly provide opportunities for developing moral reasoning and values-based judgement, frequently employed assessment methods that reduced ethical engagement to recognition of predefined correct positions. This approach treats ethics as a body of knowledge to be mastered

rather than as an ongoing practice of deliberation, reflexivity, and responsible action in contexts of moral complexity.

Interview data corroborated these documentary findings:

> We want students to think critically about ethical dilemmas, but the assessment structure forces us back into correct-answer formats because that is what external moderators and quality assurance processes expect. (Participant A)

Another participant noted:

> There is genuine tension between what I know good assessment should do and what I can actually implement within the module constraints. (Participant C)

These observations point to a structural problem in which individual pedagogical aspirations are systematically overridden by institutional compliance requirements. This tension between pedagogical aspirations and institutional constraints represents a significant barrier to transformative assessment practice.

Limited engagement with supercomplexity

The study found limited evidence of assessment practices that genuinely engaged students with the uncertainty, ambiguity, and contestability characteristic of supercomplex professional environments. Whilst some modules incorporated collaborative projects and real-world case studies, analysis of the assessment briefs revealed that even tasks labelled as problem-solving were structured around identifiable solutions, circumscribing the space for genuine ambiguity or ethical contestation. For example, one supply chain management module at National Qualification Framework (NQF) Level 7 brief instructed students to discuss the conflicts in supply chain which interface with other internal and external departments as evidenced at Finestone, within a fixed set of variables, foreclosing the kind of open-ended reasoning that supercomplex professional situations require. These tasks typically emphasised the application of established frameworks rather than critical interrogation of those frameworks' assumptions or limitations.

Reflective components in assessment tasks, where not clearly present, tended to be procedural rather than genuinely transformative. A representative assessment rubric allocated marks as follows: "Describe the steps taken in your analysis (5 marks); Identify what you would do differently (5 marks)." Such prompts invite description of process rather than interrogation of the values and assumptions underpinning professional choices. Participants acknowledged this limitation.

This limited engagement with complexity is particularly problematic in supply chain management education, where graduates will inevitably encounter situations involving competing stakeholder interests, incomplete information, ethical dilemmas, and rapidly changing conditions. A review of one ethics module's standardised rubric illustrates the issue: marks were awarded for correctly identifying the relevant ethical principle and applying the

principle to the scenario, with no criterion for evaluating the quality of moral reasoning where multiple principles conflict. The dominance of such assessments leaves students underprepared for the adaptive professionalism demanded by contemporary supply chain practice.

Institutional and systemic constraints

The findings illuminate how institutional contexts and systemic pressures shape assessment practices in ways that may undermine transformative educational goals. Participants consistently described constraints imposed by modularisation, standardised rubrics, and external examiner requirements. One participant observed:

> Every time I try to introduce a more open-ended assessment, I face questions about how I will ensure consistency and defend marks. The system is built for standardisation. (Participant B)

Another noted:

> If students feel uncertain about what is expected of them, satisfaction scores drop. Open-ended assessments are riskier for everyone. (Participant D)

Private HEIs face particular pressures related to student satisfaction, completion rates, and competitive positioning, which can incentivise conservative, predictable assessment approaches over more innovative practices. Quality assurance requirements, whilst intended to ensure standards, can inadvertently promote standardisation and compliance over pedagogical responsiveness and contextual appropriateness.

Additionally, the study reveals tensions between industry expectations and transformative educational values. Whilst industry partnerships and employability concerns are legitimate considerations in professional education, an uncritical emphasis on current industry practices may reproduce existing systems rather than preparing graduates to transform them. Walker's (2006) capabilities approach reminds us that education should expand students' freedoms to choose valued ways of being and doing, which may include challenging unjust or unsustainable practices within industries and professions.

Theoretical insights on the findings of the study

Key findings and their theoretical implications

The study generated four key findings that invite substantive theoretical engagement, each illuminating distinct but interconnected dimensions of the assessment challenge in contexts of polycrisis.

The first and most pervasive finding is that assessment within the examined programme remains predominantly oriented towards qualification and technical competency verification, with limited attention to subjectification and ethical formation. Walker's (2006) capabilities framework offers a powerful explanatory lens here. When assessment frameworks

operationalise graduate attributes primarily through technical performance, they implicitly define capable graduates as human capital rather than as ethical persons with expanding freedoms. The capabilities approach argues that such frameworks foreclose the very development they claim to support, because graduates shaped by narrowly technical assessment are poorly positioned to exercise the critical agency required to address the ethical complexities and power asymmetries that characterise contemporary supply chain practice in post-apartheid South Africa. Changing this orientation requires a deliberate reorientation of graduate attribute frameworks away from competency lists and towards capability descriptions that ask not what graduates can do, but who they can become.

The second finding is that performative and compliance-driven assessment logics persist despite explicit policy commitments to transformation and holistic development. Biesta's (2020) concept of learnification explains this persistence: when education systems become organised around the production of evidence of learning, assessment inevitably drifts towards the most readily evidenced forms of knowing. Overcoming learnification requires not merely adding assessment tasks that target higher-order capabilities but fundamentally questioning the audit culture that drives the primacy of quantifiable outcomes. In the context of polycrisis, where the most pressing challenges faced by supply chain professionals cannot be addressed through technical competencies alone, this questioning carries both educational and social urgency. Transformation in this direction requires policy frameworks that reward depth and complexity in assessment design, not only procedural compliance.

The third finding is that assessment practices inadequately prepare students for the supercomplex, volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments they will encounter in professional practice. Barnett's (2000, 2007) framework of supercomplexity provides the most direct theoretical resource for addressing this inadequacy. Assessment designed for supercomplex environments must abandon the assumption that professional competence can be verified through the application of existing frameworks to well-defined problems. Instead, it must deliberately cultivate the qualities Barnett identifies as essential to adaptive professionalism: ontological security, reflexive awareness, and the capacity for purposive action under conditions of uncertainty. Assessment tasks that present students with genuinely contested scenarios, require engagement with multiple competing frameworks, and value the quality of reasoning over the correctness of conclusions represent a necessary shift in this direction (McDiarmid & Zhao, 2022).

The fourth finding is that institutional constraints and systemic pressures significantly shape assessment possibilities, sometimes in ways that undermine transformative educational goals. This finding calls for structural analysis as much as individual pedagogical change. Ball (2003) argues that performative cultures in education are not simply the product of misguided individual choices but are the outcome of policy technologies that reshape what it means to be an educator and what counts as educational accountability. For private HEIs in South Africa, operating within both national quality assurance regimes and commercial imperatives, these pressures are compounded. Meaningful change therefore requires both policy-level reform of quality assurance frameworks to recognise diverse forms of learning evidence and institutional

leadership that actively protects space for pedagogical innovation. The Nussbaumian insight that structural injustices require structural responses applies as forcefully to assessment reform as to any other domain of social policy.

Recommendations

The discussion above points to five recurring patterns: an ongoing predominance of qualification-oriented assessment, persistent compliance-driven logics despite policy commitments to transformation, limited preparation for VUCA conditions, institutional and systemic constraints shaping what is assessable, and the centrality of educator agency and development. The recommendations below respond directly to each of these patterns.

Recommendations for assessment practice

Three targeted recommendations emerge from this study's findings and their theoretical analysis, each oriented to a distinct level of intervention.

The first recommendation addresses assessment within private HEIs. Private HEIs must critically examine how commercial pressures and quality assurance compliance requirements shape their assessment cultures. Institutions should review policies and rubric frameworks to ensure they create space for assessment tasks that value ethical reasoning, reflexive judgement, and adaptive problem-solving alongside technical competency demonstration. This review should be guided by capability-based graduate attribute frameworks that describe the kinds of professionals the institution aims to develop, moving beyond competency lists to foreground questions of professional identity, agency, and ethical responsibility. Leadership commitment must extend beyond policy statements to resource allocation, recognition, and reward structures that actively support pedagogical innovation.

The second recommendation concerns the assessment shifts needed specifically within supply chain management education. Assessment tasks should be redesigned to engage students with the genuine ambiguity, competing stakeholder interests, and ethical complexity characteristic of contemporary supply chain practice. Longitudinal reflective portfolios, scenario-based assessments requiring ethical reasoning under conditions of uncertainty, collaborative projects addressing authentic supply chain challenges without predetermined solutions, and structured opportunities for peer critique and self-assessment represent a qualitatively different approach to verification of professional readiness. Industry partnerships should be leveraged not merely to confirm technical relevance but to co-design assessments that reflect the supercomplex realities of contemporary supply chain environments, including disruption scenarios, multi-stakeholder conflicts, and sustainability dilemmas.

The third recommendation calls for a broader reconceptualisation of assessment within the polycrisis era. At a systemic level, higher education assessment frameworks must be reconceived as instruments of ethical formation rather than merely as measurement tools. Drawing on Biesta's (2020) tripartite framework, institutions should explicitly design for subjectification alongside qualification and socialisation, creating assessment tasks that require

students to demonstrate independent ethical judgement, responsiveness to contextual complexity, and capacity for transformative professional action. In the South African context, this reconceptualisation carries particular weight: higher education has a documented role in social redress, and assessment practices that produce technically proficient but ethically and adaptively limited graduates represent not merely a pedagogical limitation but a failure of social purpose.

Conclusion

This study has examined assessment practices within a supply chain management programme at a South African private HEI, considering how these practices shape graduate attributes amid overlapping global and local crises. Read through Biesta's, Barnett's, and Nussbaum's and Walker's frameworks, the findings point to a persistent dominance of performative, outcomes-based assessment logics that privilege technical competency verification over ethical formation and adaptive capability development, despite explicit policy commitments to transformation.

These patterns are unlikely to be unique to the case examined, and may reflect broader systemic pressures within South African and global professional education more widely, though confirming this would require the comparative research suggested below. Realising a more transformative approach to assessment would require coordinated change across several levels: educator development that goes beyond technical rubric design; institutional policies, resources and quality-assurance frameworks that enable rather than constrain innovation; and industry partnerships structured to support critical inquiry alongside practical relevance. Three directions for future research follow directly from the limitations noted above: systematic inclusion of student perspectives on assessment, longitudinal research tracking how assessment experiences shape graduates' professional practice over time, and comparative work across institutional types and disciplines to establish how far the patterns identified here generalise beyond this single case.

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