



Rethinking Assessment in Malaysian Public Universities: A Conceptual Framework for Authentic and Continuous Assessment

Sheik Badrul Hisham Jamil Azhar*

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Melaka, Malaysia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700229>

Received: 16 July 2026; Accepted: 21 July 2026; Published: 29 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The increasing emphasis on graduate competency development, Outcome-Based Education (OBE), and the rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) have prompted higher education institutions to reconsider the continued reliance on high-stakes final examinations as the primary measure of student achievement. Although final examinations remain an established assessment practice in many universities, growing evidence suggests that they may not adequately evaluate the diverse knowledge, skills, and professional competencies required of contemporary graduates, particularly within the social sciences. This conceptual paper examines the educational rationale for rethinking the role of high-stakes final examinations in undergraduate social science programmes in Malaysian public universities. Drawing upon contemporary literature on assessment reform, authentic assessment, continuous assessment, graduate employability, and higher education policy, the paper synthesises current evidence to examine the opportunities and challenges associated with transitioning towards more diversified assessment practices. The discussion is situated within the Malaysian higher education context by considering the principles of Outcome-Based Education, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework, and the quality assurance expectations of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency. Building on this synthesis, the paper proposes the **Malaysian Authentic Assessment Transition (MAAT) Framework**, a conceptual model that integrates institutional policy, curriculum design, assessment practice, student learning processes, and graduate competency development to guide assessment reform in Malaysian public universities. Rather than advocating the complete abolition of final examinations, the framework promotes a balanced assessment ecosystem in which authentic, continuous, and appropriately designed summative assessments collectively provide more comprehensive evidence of student learning. The paper contributes to the growing discourse on assessment reform by offering a theoretically grounded and contextually relevant framework that may inform future research, institutional practice, and higher education policy in Malaysia.

Keywords: Assessment reform; Authentic assessment; Continuous assessment; High-stakes final examinations.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays a critical role in higher education because it influences not only how student achievement is evaluated but also how students approach learning. Traditionally, universities have relied heavily on high-stakes final examinations to assess academic performance due to their perceived objectivity, efficiency, and ability to evaluate large student cohorts (Brown & Knight, 1994). However, contemporary educational research increasingly argues that assessment should extend beyond measuring knowledge acquisition to support learning, promote higher-order thinking, and develop professional competencies required in the twenty-first century (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2015).

The growing adoption of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), authentic assessment, and continuous assessment has transformed assessment practices in higher education worldwide. Rather than relying predominantly on a single end-of-semester examination, many universities are incorporating multiple assessment methods that enable students to demonstrate learning through authentic tasks while receiving continuous feedback throughout the semester (Biggs & Tang, 2011; French et al., 2024). At the same time, the rapid emergence of generative



artificial intelligence (GenAI) has further accelerated discussions regarding assessment redesign by encouraging universities to develop assessment approaches that emphasise critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and the authentic application of knowledge rather than information recall alone (Xia et al., 2024).

These developments are equally relevant within Malaysian higher education. National initiatives such as the *Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025*, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), and the implementation of Outcome-Based Education emphasise student-centred learning, constructive alignment, and holistic graduate development (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015; Malaysian Qualifications Agency [MQA], 2024). Nevertheless, despite these policy aspirations, high-stakes final examinations continue to contribute substantially to student assessment in many Malaysian public universities. This raises an important question as to whether examination-dominated assessment remains the most appropriate approach for evaluating the diverse knowledge, skills, and professional competencies expected of contemporary graduates, particularly within social science programmes.

Although the international literature provides growing evidence supporting authentic and continuous assessment, relatively few conceptual studies have examined how these developments can inform assessment reform within the Malaysian higher education context. Existing studies have largely focused on the implementation of Outcome-Based Education or individual assessment practices, with limited attention given to developing an integrated framework that links assessment theory, national policy, graduate competencies, and institutional practice.

Therefore, this conceptual paper examines the educational rationale for rethinking the role of high-stakes final examinations in undergraduate social science programmes within Malaysian public universities. Specifically, the paper aims to: (1) synthesise contemporary literature on assessment reform and the educational value of authentic and continuous assessment; (2) examine the opportunities and challenges of reducing reliance on high-stakes final examinations within Malaysian public universities; and (3) propose the Malaysian Authentic Assessment Transition (MAAT) Framework as a conceptual model to guide future assessment reform. It is anticipated that the proposed framework will contribute to ongoing discussions on assessment innovation while providing practical guidance for policymakers, university leaders, curriculum developers, and academics seeking to strengthen assessment practices in Malaysian higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT REFORM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Evolution of Assessment in Higher Education

The role of assessment in higher education has evolved considerably over the past several decades. Traditionally, assessment was primarily viewed as a mechanism for measuring students' knowledge acquisition at the end of a learning period, with written examinations serving as the principal method for determining academic achievement (Brown & Knight, 1994). This assessment philosophy was largely influenced by behaviourist perspectives that emphasised objective measurement and standardisation. Consequently, high-stakes final examinations became widely accepted because they provided a practical and efficient means of assessing large student cohorts while maintaining consistency in grading.

Contemporary educational theory, however, has broadened the purpose of assessment beyond the measurement of learning outcomes. Constructivist approaches argue that assessment should actively support learning by providing students with opportunities to apply knowledge, receive feedback, reflect on their progress, and improve continuously throughout the learning process (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This shift has led to the emergence of concepts such as assessment for learning and assessment as learning, both of which position assessment as an integral component of teaching and learning rather than solely as a tool for certification (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2015).

A key development accompanying this shift is the principle of constructive alignment, whereby intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods are deliberately aligned to ensure that students



are assessed on the competencies they are expected to demonstrate (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Consequently, assessment has become increasingly recognised as a means of facilitating learning while simultaneously evaluating student achievement.

Rethinking High-Stakes Final Examinations

Although high-stakes final examinations continue to play an important role in higher education, their educational value has been increasingly questioned. Traditionally, final examinations have been valued for their objectivity, administrative efficiency, and ability to provide a standardised assessment of student performance (Brown & Knight, 1994). However, growing evidence suggests that excessive reliance on a single end-of-semester examination may not adequately capture the breadth of knowledge, skills, and professional competencies expected of contemporary university graduates (French et al., 2024).

One frequently cited limitation of high-stakes examinations is their tendency to encourage short-term memorisation and surface approaches to learning. Students often focus on recalling information for examination purposes rather than developing deeper conceptual understanding and long-term knowledge retention (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Biggs & Tang, 2011). In contrast, assessment distributed throughout the semester encourages continuous engagement with learning materials and provides opportunities for students to progressively develop their understanding through feedback and reflection (Carless, 2015).

Another concern relates to student well-being. Concentrating a substantial proportion of course marks in a single examination may increase anxiety and place excessive academic pressure on students. Continuous assessment, by comparison, distributes assessment across multiple learning activities, reducing dependence on one assessment event while providing students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate achievement (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; French et al., 2024).

Authentic and Continuous Assessment

The growing emphasis on graduate competency development has contributed to the increasing adoption of authentic and continuous assessment in higher education. Authentic assessment requires students to apply disciplinary knowledge in realistic contexts through activities such as case studies, research projects, policy analyses, presentations, portfolios, simulations, and reflective journals (Gulikers et al., 2004). Unlike traditional examinations that often prioritise information recall, authentic assessment evaluates students' ability to analyse problems, communicate ideas, collaborate effectively, and apply knowledge in situations that resemble professional practice.

Research consistently demonstrates that authentic assessment promotes deeper learning, strengthens critical thinking, enhances student engagement, and improves the transfer of knowledge to workplace settings (Gulikers et al., 2004; Villarroel et al., 2018; Carless, 2015). Similarly, continuous assessment enables lecturers to monitor students' learning progress throughout the semester while providing timely formative feedback that supports continuous improvement (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). These approaches are particularly valuable within Outcome-Based Education because they generate multiple sources of evidence regarding students' achievement of programme learning outcomes rather than relying solely on performance in a single examination. The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has further reinforced the need for authentic assessment. As AI technologies become increasingly capable of generating sophisticated written responses, universities are reconsidering assessment formats that primarily measure information recall. Instead, assessment is increasingly being redesigned to evaluate critical reasoning, creativity, ethical judgement, and the authentic application of disciplinary knowledge—competencies that remain fundamentally human and are less susceptible to inappropriate AI assistance (Xia et al., 2024).

Assessment Reform and Graduate Competencies

Assessment reform is closely linked to the broader objective of producing graduates who are equipped with the competencies required in contemporary workplaces and society. Beyond disciplinary knowledge, employers



increasingly value graduates who can think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate in multidisciplinary teams, solve complex problems, demonstrate ethical judgement, and adapt to changing environments (Yorke, 2006; Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Consequently, universities are expected to ensure that assessment methods provide valid evidence of these competencies.

Within this context, authentic and continuous assessment offer significant advantages because they allow students to demonstrate graduate attributes through meaningful learning activities conducted over time. Rather than viewing assessment solely as an endpoint for measuring achievement, contemporary higher education increasingly positions assessment as a process that simultaneously supports learning, develops professional capability, and prepares graduates for lifelong learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2015).

Collectively, the literature demonstrates a clear international movement towards more diversified assessment systems that integrate authentic, continuous, and formative assessment alongside appropriately designed summative assessment. While high-stakes final examinations continue to have a place in higher education, growing evidence suggests that they should form only one component of a broader assessment strategy capable of evaluating the diverse competencies expected of twenty-first-century graduates. This international shift provides an important foundation for examining the opportunities and challenges associated with assessment reform within Malaysian public universities.

Assessment Reform in Malaysian Public Universities

Malaysia has undergone significant higher education reforms over the past two decades to enhance educational quality, graduate employability, and international competitiveness. Central to these reforms is the adoption of **Outcome-Based Education (OBE)**, supported by the **Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF)** and the **Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025**. Collectively, these initiatives advocate student-centred learning, constructive alignment, and holistic graduate development, requiring universities to ensure that graduates possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable skills, ethical values, and professional competencies (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015; Malaysian Qualifications Agency [MQA], 2024).

Within the OBE framework, assessment is expected to provide valid evidence that students have achieved the intended programme learning outcomes. Consequently, assessment should evaluate multiple dimensions of learning, including knowledge, practical skills, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, ethical reasoning, and lifelong learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Spady, 1994). The *Guidelines to Good Practices: Assessment of Students' Learning* published by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency further recommend that assessment should be valid, reliable, fair, transparent, and aligned with programme outcomes while incorporating diverse assessment methods appropriate to the intended learning outcomes (MQA, 2024).

Despite these policy aspirations, assessment practices within many Malaysian public universities continue to rely substantially on high-stakes final examinations. Although coursework components such as assignments, presentations, projects, laboratory work, and practical activities are increasingly incorporated into undergraduate programmes, final examinations frequently remain the largest contributor to students' final grades. While this approach provides administrative efficiency and facilitates standardisation across large student cohorts, it may not fully reflect the diverse competencies expected under Outcome-Based Education, particularly within disciplines that emphasise analytical reasoning, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving (French et al., 2024).

The issue is particularly relevant in undergraduate social science programmes. Graduates in fields such as education, communication, psychology, sociology, economics, political science, and public administration are expected to analyse complex social issues, evaluate evidence, communicate effectively with diverse audiences, exercise ethical judgement, and develop practical solutions to contemporary challenges. These competencies are developed progressively through inquiry, discussion, reflection, collaboration, and authentic application of knowledge rather than through memorisation alone. Consequently, authentic and continuous assessment



approaches may provide a more comprehensive evaluation of graduate capabilities than reliance on a single end-of-semester examination (Gulikers et al., 2004; Villarroel et al., 2018).

Assessment reform is also increasingly relevant in response to changing employer expectations. Contemporary employers seek graduates who demonstrate adaptability, critical thinking, communication skills, teamwork, leadership, digital literacy, and the ability to solve real-world problems. These competencies extend beyond disciplinary knowledge and are often difficult to evaluate through conventional written examinations alone (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Diversified assessment methods, including case studies, research projects, policy analyses, presentations, portfolios, simulations, and community-based learning, enable students to demonstrate these competencies while simultaneously preparing them for professional practice.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has further reinforced the need for assessment reform within Malaysian higher education. As AI technologies become increasingly integrated into teaching and learning, universities must reconsider assessment approaches that rely primarily on information recall or routine written assignments. Rather than viewing AI solely as a threat to academic integrity, higher education institutions have an opportunity to redesign assessment so that it evaluates students' critical judgement, creativity, ethical decision-making, and authentic application of disciplinary knowledge (Xia et al., 2024). Such assessment approaches are consistent with the objectives of Outcome-Based Education and better reflect the competencies required of graduates in an AI-enabled workplace.

Nevertheless, transitioning towards a more diversified assessment system presents several institutional challenges. Authentic assessment often requires greater investment in assessment design, clearer marking rubrics, more detailed feedback, and comprehensive moderation processes than traditional examinations. Academics may also require additional professional development to strengthen assessment literacy and confidence in designing authentic assessment tasks. Furthermore, institutional factors such as large class sizes, academic workload, technological infrastructure, and existing assessment policies may influence the pace and effectiveness of assessment reform (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2015).

These challenges, however, should not be viewed as barriers to reform but as considerations that require strategic institutional planning. Sustainable assessment reform depends on strong leadership, supportive university policies, continuous professional development, appropriate technological infrastructure, and effective quality assurance mechanisms. More importantly, assessment innovation should be guided by educational purpose rather than administrative convenience. Assessment methods should be selected because they provide the most appropriate evidence of student learning and graduate competency, not simply because they are familiar or easy to administer.

Overall, Malaysian higher education is well positioned to reconsider the role of high-stakes final examinations within undergraduate social science programmes. Existing national policies already support student-centred learning, constructive alignment, authentic assessment, and continuous quality improvement. The challenge therefore lies in translating these aspirations into coherent assessment practices that balance academic rigour with authentic evidence of student learning. This provides the rationale for the development of the **Malaysian Authentic Assessment Transition (MAAT) Framework**, proposed in the following section as a conceptual model to guide assessment reform in Malaysian public universities.

The Malaysian Authentic Assessment Transition (Maat) Framework

The preceding discussion demonstrates that while assessment reform has gained considerable attention internationally, there remains limited guidance on how Malaysian public universities can systematically transition from examination-dominated assessment towards a more balanced assessment system. Although Outcome-Based Education (OBE), the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) advocate authentic, student-centred, and outcomes-oriented assessment, many undergraduate programmes continue to rely heavily on high-stakes final examinations. This highlights the need for a contextually relevant framework that translates educational theory and national policy into practical assessment strategies.



To address this gap, this paper proposes the **Malaysian Authentic Assessment Transition (MAAT) Framework** (Figure 1). The framework is not intended to eliminate final examinations entirely. Instead, it advocates a gradual transition towards a balanced assessment system in which authentic and continuous assessment become the primary means of evaluating student learning, while final examinations are retained only where they are pedagogically appropriate. The framework is grounded in four complementary principles: **Outcome-Based Education, constructive alignment, assessment for learning, and authentic assessment** (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2015).

The MAAT Framework comprises five interrelated components that collectively guide assessment reform within Malaysian public universities.

Institutional Drivers

Assessment reform begins at the institutional level. National policies, accreditation requirements, university leadership, and employer expectations collectively influence curriculum and assessment practices. Universities should establish assessment policies that encourage innovation while maintaining academic standards, fairness, and quality assurance.

Institutional commitment is also required to strengthen academics' assessment literacy through continuous professional development and to provide adequate technological and administrative support for diversified assessment practices.

Curriculum and Assessment Design

The second component focuses on aligning assessment with programme learning outcomes. Consistent with the principles of constructive alignment, assessment methods should be selected according to the competencies they are intended to measure rather than administrative convenience (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Within undergraduate social science programmes, learning outcomes frequently extend beyond disciplinary knowledge to include communication, collaboration, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, leadership, and problem-solving. Consequently, diversified assessment methods such as research projects, policy analyses, case studies, presentations, portfolios, simulations, and reflective journals should complement, and where appropriate replace, high-stakes final examinations. Assessment should also be distributed across the semester to provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate achievement and receive constructive feedback.

Student Learning Processes

Assessment directly influences students' approaches to learning. The MAAT Framework therefore emphasises continuous engagement, active participation, reflection, and self-regulated learning. Rather than concentrating learning efforts immediately before a final examination, students are encouraged to engage consistently with course content through authentic learning activities and formative feedback. The framework also recognises the growing influence of generative artificial intelligence in higher education and encourages assessment tasks that require critical judgement, ethical reasoning, originality, and authentic application of disciplinary knowledge.

Graduate Competency Development

A central objective of the framework is to ensure that assessment provides meaningful evidence of graduate competency. Beyond disciplinary knowledge, social science graduates should demonstrate analytical reasoning, communication skills, teamwork, leadership, ethical decision-making, digital literacy, and adaptability.

Authentic and continuous assessment allows these competencies to be demonstrated progressively through diverse learning activities rather than relying solely on performance in a single examination. This approach is consistent with Outcome-Based Education, which emphasises demonstrable graduate outcomes rather than knowledge acquisition alone.



Educational and Institutional Outcomes

The final component represents the anticipated outcomes of assessment reform. At the student level, diversified assessment is expected to promote deeper learning, stronger engagement, improved critical thinking, enhanced self-regulated learning, and greater readiness for professional practice. At the institutional level, the framework supports constructive alignment, continuous quality improvement, improved evidence of programme learning outcomes, and greater responsiveness to technological and societal change. Collectively, these outcomes contribute to producing graduates who are academically competent, professionally prepared, and equipped with the transferable skills required in an increasingly dynamic workforce.

The five components of the MAAT Framework should not be viewed as independent stages but as an integrated assessment ecosystem connected through continuous feedback and quality assurance. Institutional policies influence curriculum design; curriculum design shapes assessment practices; assessment practices influence student learning; student learning contributes to graduate competency development; and graduate outcomes provide evidence for continuous curriculum improvement. This cyclical relationship reflects the principle of continuous quality improvement that underpins Outcome-Based Education and quality assurance within Malaysian higher education.

The MAAT Framework contributes to the existing literature by integrating contemporary assessment theory with the Malaysian higher education policy context into a single conceptual model. While previous studies have examined authentic assessment, continuous assessment, or Outcome-Based Education independently, the proposed framework demonstrates how these perspectives can be operationalised collectively to support assessment reform in Malaysian public universities. As a conceptual model, the framework provides a foundation for future empirical research examining its implementation, effectiveness, and impact on student learning, graduate employability, and institutional quality assurance across different academic disciplines.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The evolving landscape of higher education has prompted universities worldwide to reconsider the role of high-stakes final examinations within broader assessment systems. While final examinations continue to serve important functions in assessing certain forms of disciplinary knowledge, contemporary educational research suggests that excessive reliance on a single end-of-semester examination may not adequately evaluate the diverse competencies expected of twenty-first-century graduates. The growing emphasis on Outcome-Based Education, authentic assessment, continuous assessment, and graduate employability highlights the need for assessment approaches that support learning while generating comprehensive evidence of student achievement.

Within the Malaysian context, national higher education policies have already established a strong foundation for assessment reform through the implementation of Outcome-Based Education, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework, and the quality assurance principles promoted by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency. However, assessment practices in many public universities remain substantially influenced by traditional examination-oriented approaches. This paper argues that greater alignment between national policy aspirations and institutional assessment practices is necessary to ensure that assessment reflects the knowledge, skills, and professional competencies expected of contemporary graduates, particularly within undergraduate social science programmes.

The principal contribution of this paper is the proposed **Malaysian Authentic Assessment Transition (MAAT) Framework**, which integrates contemporary assessment theory with the Malaysian higher education context. Rather than advocating the complete abolition of final examinations, the framework proposes a balanced assessment approach in which authentic and continuous assessment play a greater role alongside appropriately designed summative assessment. By linking institutional policy, curriculum design, student learning, graduate competency development, and educational outcomes, the framework provides a practical conceptual guide for universities seeking to modernise assessment while maintaining academic standards and quality assurance.



As a conceptual paper, this study has several limitations. The proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated, and its applicability across different disciplines and institutional contexts remains to be investigated. Furthermore, the discussion focuses specifically on undergraduate social science programmes in Malaysian public universities; therefore, assessment practices in professional disciplines such as medicine, engineering, and law may require different considerations. Future research should examine the implementation of the MAAT Framework across multiple institutions, evaluate its impact on student learning and graduate employability, and explore academics' readiness and institutional capacity to support sustainable assessment reform.

In conclusion, assessment reform should not be interpreted as replacing one assessment method with another, but rather as creating a balanced assessment ecosystem that better reflects the purposes of higher education. By strategically integrating authentic, continuous, and summative assessment, Malaysian public universities can strengthen student learning, enhance graduate preparedness, and ensure that assessment remains aligned with contemporary educational priorities and the evolving needs of society.

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