

Exploring Assessment Practices in Higher Education: A Legitimation Code Theory Perspective

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Abstract

The aspect of advanced education that has received less attention is the academic discourse of examiners, particularly the assessment reports of PhD theses, leading to a lack of understanding of the evaluation process for novice researchers. This study examines the assessment practices of PhD examiners as reflected in doctoral assessment reports within the context of Pakistani higher education. 50 assessment reports were purposively collected from the English department of a Pakistani university (2022 and 2024) for qualitative discourse analysis. Drawing on Karl Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (2014), the dimensions of Specialisation and Semantics were employed to analyse these reports. The analysis revealed that the Knowledge Code is predominant, as examiners valued high-level theoretical engagement, methodological rigour and scholarly stance, legitimising abstract concepts and contextual understanding, which underscores disciplinary expertise. These findings offer insights into the knowledge of doctoral assessment practices in Pakistan and promote more contextually grounded and inclusive approaches to doctoral evaluation. The study demonstrates how LCT can serve as an analytical framework for examining educational discourse in higher education assessment.

Keywords: higher education, legitimation code theory, assessment reports, specialisation, semantics

1. Introduction

Demand for higher education has increased globally, leading to the rapid massification of postgraduate degrees. The doctoral degree grants scholars an independent identity by legitimising their work in a particular field, serving as a gateway into academia and equipping them with essential, highly sought-after skills and competencies (Boud & Lee, 2009; Nerad, 2020). As the proliferation of doctoral programs has increased, attention has shifted to defining learning outcomes for graduates to maintain academic standards and develop academic literacy (Solis Trujillo et al., 2025). This emphasis on monitoring and regulation in higher education helps shape assessment practices that extend beyond the evaluation of knowledge, making it necessary to understand the purpose and underlying assumptions of these practices. Assessment is a social practice because it influences multiple actors, so reflecting on the purpose of assessment and assessment practices, and shifting focus from AoL (assessment of learning) to AaL (assessment as learning) and AfL (assessment for learning) would benefit both learners and educators (Forde-Leaves et al., 2023).

Assessment reports at the doctoral level concretely render the discursive practices of evaluation and are accessible as empirical evidence for analysis. Examiners' written evaluation reports usually contain both summative and formative feedback: summative feedback evaluates research according to specific criteria, while formative feedback outlines the necessary changes in the research project to meet the stringent standards of the doctorate (Dally et al., 2019). Therefore, these reports written on PhD theses occupy a pivotal position in postgraduate research, serving as a critical educational instrument for upholding academic standards, enhancing the quality of scholarly works and fostering research capacity (Kumar & Stracke, 2011).

Extensive research has focused on the systematic content analysis of examiners' comments in the assessment reports (Afful, 2020; Holbrook et al., 2012; Johnston, 1997; Pitkethly & Prosser,

1995). Evaluation reports offer qualitative commentary on the suitability and worth of the research question, the scholar's theoretical knowledge, the suitability of the research methods, the sufficiency of the results, and whether the thesis is worthy of publication (Holbrook et al., 2008). Further studies have explored the intricate processes involved in supervision and assessment (Muriisa, 2015), and some have analysed the explicit criteria specified by higher education institutions and implicit criteria based on examiners' expectations (Chetcuti et al., 2022; Kobayashi & Emmeche, 2023). Corpus-based investigations of thesis examiners' feedback further illustrate how attitudinal markers standardise evaluative force while managing interpersonal risk (Kashiha, 2024; Starfield et al., 2015). These studies have employed qualitative content analysis, focusing mainly on the organisational features, evaluative patterns, and substantive content of thesis assessment reports.

Research on examination reports employing Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton, 2014) is limited. Few studies have highlighted the effectiveness of this assessment framework, which uncovers the organising principles of assessment practices and provides academic support to students and educators (Forde-Leaves et al., 2023; Khumalo et al., 2023). Some studies have explored the use of LCT metalanguage to analyse academic practices and have demonstrated that it is valuable in making implicit criteria underlying these practices explicit, overcoming 'knowledge blindness', enabling a clear understanding of teaching and learning practices (Brooke et al., 2023; McKenna et al., 2018; Wilmot & McKenna, 2021). Nevertheless, there is insufficient published literature addressing the intricacies of examiners' language that display the legitimation of discursive practices in doctoral reports.

Studies on the assessment practices of examiners are quite uncommon in the Pakistani context. Research was conducted on classroom assessment practices and research experiences of students (Batool et al., 2022; Nausheen and Zulfiqar, 2024). Some

studies highlighted systemic issues such as outdated curricula, inadequate resources, and challenges in academic writing (Ashraf & Zaki, 2019; Rafi & Moghees, 2023; Rehman et al., 2023), while others explore Pakistani doctoral students' academic identities within Western academic contexts (Ullah et al., 2021). Furthermore, several studies have investigated various academic genres within the Pakistani context: doctoral theses acknowledgements (Rofess and Mahmood, 2015), postgraduate theses abstracts (Aziz et al., 2021; Fatima et al., 2023), and stance features in the introduction sections of research articles (Bilal and Shehzad, 2019). These studies explore the research experiences, beliefs and judgements of doctoral students and provide valuable insights into academic writing practices of accessible genres: dissertations and articles, but predominantly do not focus on the discourse and practices of examiners evaluating doctoral theses.

While prior research explicitly explored genres like abstracts, acknowledgements, and introduction chapters, it did not focus on analyzing the assessors' discourse in the occluded genre (Swales, 1996) of assessment reports, as the written comments of examiners are not easily accessible except through anecdotal evidence from scholars or professors, making them inaccessible to the public. In addition, in the Pakistani academic landscape, few studies have examined how doctoral quality and academic legitimacy are discursively constructed in this genre, lacking the sound theoretical threads necessary to identify assessment practices legitimized in higher education. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by identifying specific assessment practices through the lens of LCT and how they are legitimised in higher education after scrutinising the evaluative language of doctoral assessment reports. This study investigates the following research questions:

- What assessment practices are legitimized by PhD examiners in the high-stakes institutional genre of reports?
- How are these assessment practices discursively legitimized in examiners' reports?

This study addresses a critical regional gap by investigating doctoral examiner feedback within the Pakistani context. By uncovering how evaluations are constructed in a high-stakes institutional genre, the research offers insights into the hidden norms and practices that influence PhD outcomes. The proposed study provides empirical evidence about the assessment practices in local universities, thereby apprising the development of feedback rubrics and explicit examiner guidelines. In addition, it will also support assessment literacy and academic writing conventions in higher education institutions, thereby supporting students and educators simultaneously.

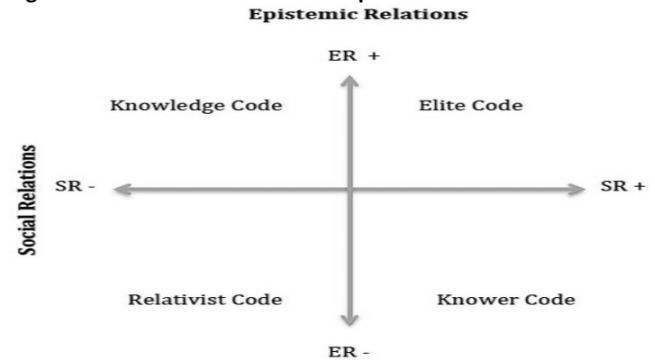
2. Theoretical framework Legitimation Code Theory LCT

Legitimation Code theory (LCT) is an "analytic approach and conceptual toolkit for substantial inquiry" (Maton, 2014, p. 3). It has gained recognition in the investigation of educational assessment (Monbec et al., 2021) and serves as a sociological framework to analyse the underlying organizing principles of assessment practices that may lead to achievement (Clarence, 2016). The framework seeks to uncover these principles, so they may be taught and learned. LCT denotes specific legitimation codes, which "conceptualise the organising principles of practices, dispositions, and contexts" (Maton 2016, p. 240). In this study, we apply two dimensions of LCT— Specialization and Semantics to comprehend the language of legitimation underpinning assessment practices (Maton, 2016).

2.1 LCT: Specialisation

The LCT dimension of Specialisation offers a means of 'seeing' what practices are legitimated. It consists of independent sets of principles and constitutive relations that produce legitimation codes. These codes can vary in strength, symbolically represented by '+' and '-' signs; thus, the specialization dimension of LCT results in four code modalities, as illustrated in Figure 1, which demonstrates these ideas on a Cartesian plane.

Figure 1: Illustration of Social and Epistemic Relations in LCT



Note: The Specialization plane (Maton, 2014, p. 30)

Maton contends that there are always knowers and knowledge within every profession. When evaluations concern the object of knowledge, epistemic relations (ER) invariably exist. Conversely, assessments are continually made about individuals, resulting in social relations (SR) related to the subject of knowledge. From this, four codes emerge based on the relative merits or demerits of the epistemic relations (ER) and social relations (SR): the knowledge, knower, elite, and relativist codes, as outlined in Table 1. Maton (2016) defines these codes as follows: Theory, concept, principle, and process are the primary points of emphasis in a 'knowledge code'. A specific perspective or attitude is prioritised by a 'knower code'. Being a particular type of knower and having specific information and practices form the foundation of legitimacy in an 'elite code'. A dominant 'relativist code' is prevalent in a field that does not prioritise specific types of knowledge or knowers.

Table 1:		LCT Specialization	
Dimension of LCT	Theoretical basis of the LCT dimension	Aspect of dimension	Legitimation code modalities
Specialization	Every assessment practice is oriented toward specific knowledge practices (ER) and legitimated by the personal attributes of those enacting them (SR).	Epistemic relations (ER), Social relations (SR)	Knowledge codes (ER+, SR-), knower codes (ER-, SR+), elite codes (ER+, SR+) and relativist codes (ER-, SR-).

Note: LCT dimensions adapted from Maton (2016)

The degree to which "the qualities of actors" are valued is what SR is all about, whereas ER is the degree to which "ownership of specialised knowledge about certain objects of study" is prized (Maton, 2014, p. 13). When the study object is highly stressed, the

ER is considered relatively strong (ER+); on the other hand, the ER is weaker (ER-) when there is less stress on the study focus and methodology. The stronger the SR (SR+) when certain attributes of the actors are highly appreciated, and the weaker the SR (SR-) when there are fewer recommendations about the type of knower that generates the study.

Using a translation device in qualitative research enhances analytical clarity and reduces ambiguity by making the foundations of analytical claims explicit (Bernstein, 2000; Maton, 2016). According to Pountney and McPhail (2017, p. 1069), translation devices facilitate the analysis of the organising principles in play in a given context. Moreover, as Maton and Chen (2016) state, 'the device is key to making explicit relations between concepts and data' (p. 50). Therefore, a combined language of description was developed in tabular form as a resource for translating LCT Specialisation codes – Epistemic Relation (ER+, ER-); Social Relation (SR+, SR-), along with the interpretations of (ER) and (SR). The analytic coding included comprehending how "epistemic relations" and "social relations" are applied to uncover the foundations of assessment practices in every comment unit, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Specialisation Translation Device

Specialization	Interpretation of concept
ER +	Evaluators foreground domain-specific knowledge, competencies, and methodological approaches within the research process.
ER-	The evaluators de-emphasize specialist skills, knowledge, and methods during the research process.
SR+	Evaluators emphasize knowledge claims by valuing the knower's dispositions and social characteristics
SR-	Evaluators understate the personal qualities of knowers.

2.2 LCT: Semantics

The data will also be examined through the lens of Semantics, a second LCT dimension that offers additional depth to the analysis of this academic discourse. This tool investigates 'how' assessment practices are legitimised through their semantic structures, as it analyses abstract concepts and conceptual coherence in evaluation claims related to a specific social environment. Maton (2016) defines semantic codes as the relative strengths and weaknesses of semantic gravity and density. Semantic gravity (SG) determines the context dependency as (SG+) increases with increasing context focus, whereas (SG-) decreases with decreasing dependence of meaning on a given context. The degree to which concepts and meanings are strongly integrated in higher education refers to stronger semantic density (SD+), while weaker semantic density (SD-) describes loosely connected concepts, as stated in Table 3.

Table 3: LCT Semantics

Dimension of LCT	Theoretical basis of LCT dimension	Aspect of dimension	Legitimation code modalities
Semantics	Contexts, dispositions, and practices can be examined through context specificity and conceptual complexity embedded within them.	Semantic gravity (SG), Semantic density (SD)	SG+ (Strong semantic gravity), SG- (Weak semantic gravity), SD+ (Strong semantic density), SD- (Weak semantic density)

As mentioned earlier, a translation device serves as a tool for bridging the "discursive gap" (Bernstein, 2000) between theoretical concepts and empirical data. Therefore, a translation device was developed (Table 4) to account for the 'particular empirical forms emerging in the problem situation' (Maton 2016, p. 32).

Table 4: Semantic Translation Device

Semantics	Interpretation of concept
SG+	Assessment is based on a strong focus on context
SG-	The focus of the assessment is on abstraction, with less emphasis on context
SD+	Assessment practices assess complex, specialised concepts.
SD-	Discrete tasks or simple, factual concepts are the focus of assessment practice

The study considers these concepts embodied in assessment practices — epistemic-semantic gravity (ESG) and epistemic-semantic density (ESD) to examine the strengthening and weakening issues of context dependence and conceptual coherence.

3. Research methodology

The study used an interpretive research paradigm, which employs qualitative methods that focus on reasoning to gain an understanding of social interactions. This research design was adopted because qualitative interpretative approaches help interpret how deeper meaning is constructed and uncover insights and perspectives within social contexts (Walter, 2013).

3.1 Data Collection

A well-reputed public-sector Pakistani (Islamabad) university's English department was selected for data collection, keeping in view its major contribution in the field of higher education. The present study selected a purposive sample of 50 assessment reports (2022-2024). These reports constitute the primary dataset for analysis and were utilised to examine the academic discourse of examiners.

In qualitative research, confirming privacy is essential for building confidence and attaining more precise and complex data. For this study, ethical clearance was formally obtained through the Research Ethics Committee in the Department and the concerned higher authorities of the institution before data collection. Collecting the examiners' assessment reports for investigation involves principal axiological implications, so obtaining consent and anonymising the reports to protect the candidates' and examiners' identities was mandatory.

After collection, the raw reports were saved as a Word document. The reports in PDF form or scanned images were converted into plain text by using free online tools like Small PDF. The texts in the assessment reports retain their actual format, but page numbers, headers and institutional headers were removed. The evaluative prose with the headings and subheadings remains, for instance, the bullet points were held intact, and later the students' and examiners' names were anonymised to retain confidentiality. Assessment reports were glossed by giving an abbreviation and numbering; DARs (Doctoral Assessment Report) 1-50 to avoid ambiguity. For example, reports were annotated as:

Doctoral Assessment Report DAR1 Doctoral
Assessment Report DAR2
Doctoral Assessment Report DAR 3 Doctoral
Assessment Report DAR 4

The annotated reports were placed into an MS Excel sheet for analysis.

3.2 Coding procedure: The fractal nature of LCT assists in analysing comments within each report, treating them as a unit of analysis,

and delineating the principal coding for each report. A comment unit is a segment of text that addresses an evaluative aspect (research design, methodology) of the thesis and can vary in length; it may be a sentence, several sentences, or a bullet point. A new unit begins when the focus of evaluation shifts from one aspect to another. These instances were recorded in an Excel coding sheet, where each item was tallied and classified under one of the four codes. Table 1 shows LCT Specialization, which deals with strong and weak epistemic and social relations, along with their coding ER (+, -) and SR (+, -), which co-exist and are explored in the selected data. After initial coding, the occurrences of all four codes (knowledge, knower, elite, and relativist) were counted and percentages calculated. As the length of the examiner reports varied (497–3556 words), the frequencies were normalised per 1000 words, enabling a meaningful comparison across reports of varying lengths.

Certain measures were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the manual coding process. The coders underwent training in Legitimation Code theory, with particular emphasis on the dimensions of Specialisation and Semantic to avoid ambiguity, and a shared coding manual was developed, specifying decision rules and illustrative examples to identify specialization codes and semantic density/gravity. Following training, coders engaged in iterative reading of the data and independently coded a representative subset (20%) of the corpus. The Cohen's kappa value > 0.75 demonstrated an inter-coder agreement between the two coders. Subsequently, all instances of disagreement were reviewed through the coders' discussion. Discrepancies between codes were resolved by consulting translation devices within the LCT framework and refining the rules of the coding manual to improve analytical consistency. To support the analytical claims, representative examples were also selected to demonstrate how epistemic and social relations functioned in context, making it easier for readers to interpret the textual evidence. This analytical framework with conceptual tools facilitates the systematic examination of assessment reports, enhancing the replicability of research.

3.3 Data Analysis

Specialisation dimension

In LCT, the specialisation dimension elucidates what legitimate knowledge is (epistemic relations ER) and who can be identified as a legitimate knower (social relations SR). These relations can be weak and strong, so legitimacy is represented in four codes: knowledge code (ER+, SR-), knower code (ER-, SR+), elite code (ER+, SR) and relativist code (ER-, SR-).

Knowledge codes were observed when content knowledge, principles, and procedures are foregrounded, and the attributes of the learner are downplayed. In this code, examiners prioritise epistemic relationships, highlight specialised methods or theories utilised to yield outcomes or emphasise current phenomena for exploration (for instance, research topics not studied earlier).

The research topic is appropriate as the study focuses on how cultural dislocation takes place in translated works. This topic has the potential to shed light on recent developments in cultural and ideological shifts. (ER+, SR-) DAR 2

In the absence of a fully developed single theoretical lens, it appears as if every selected poem is analysed from a different and distinct perspective. (ER+, SR-) DAR 3

Knower codes occur when attributes of the subject come to the fore, and the content is marginalised. When examiners emphasise social relationships, they tend to highlight specific individuals, authors, or actors in a particular field to indicate who is considered a valid knower.

His command of discourse conventions of academic research is quite impressive. (ER-, SR+) DAR 11

The topic and subject of her research are appropriate and relevant. (ER-, SR+)

The researcher has done a prodigious amount of work. Comprehensively written thesis. (ER-, SR+) DAR 4

Elite codes give importance to both specialised knowledge and the knower. These codes focus on the knowers' engagement with discipline-specific knowledge and personal reflection.

The literature review chapter discusses themes in isolation from one another without weaving a coherent and cohesive argument. At this level, researchers are expected to argue instead of just documenting the information. (ER+, SR+) DAR 12

The candidate demonstrates strong knowledge of the field, but arguments are presented without interpretations, leading to a weak authorial voice. (ER+, SR+) DAR 10

Critical reflections of the researcher in the chapter of the literature review demonstrate command of the subject. (ER+, SR+) DAR 14

Relativist code is the type where neither knower nor knowledge matters, which means 'anyone can learn' and 'anything goes.'

The topic of the thesis belongs to recent developments in the field of linguistics. (ER-, SR-) DAR 20

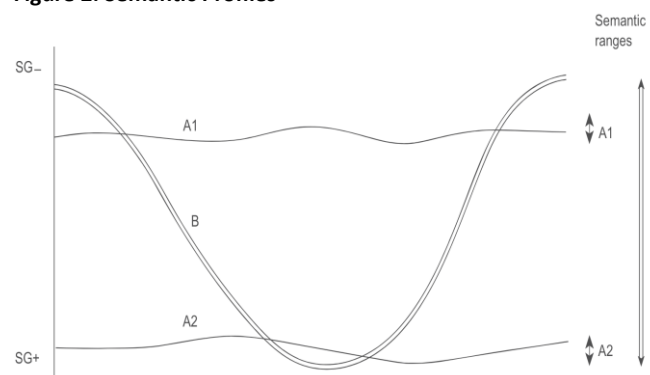
The thesis presents an interesting interpretation revealing the candidate's own perspective. (ER-, SR) DAR 15

Semantics dimension

The assessment practices in doctoral assessment reports were further examined using the semantic dimension of LCT, whose 'organising principles' are defined by the concepts of 'semantic gravity' SG (context dependence) and 'semantic density' SD (complexity of meaning) mentioned in Table 4. In this dimension, knowledge building depends upon the effective construction of 'semantic waves' over time, which involves shifting between theoretical insights and context-dependent empirical instances. The movement between SG+ and SG- and back to SG+ generates semantic gravity waves, as shown in profile B in

Figure 2. Flatlines are recorded as profiles with a very limited range (A1 and A2), where meaning remains consistently either abstract or contextualised.

Figure 2: Semantic Profiles



Note: Adapted from Maton (2014, p.13)

Figure 3 illustrates a semantic profile of a textual analysis of the semantic move of ESG and ESD in one of the assessment reports. Initially, the examiner instructs the candidate to stay closer to the context, demonstrating simpler knowledge practices, which results in stronger epistemic semantic gravity (ESG+) and weaker epistemic semantic density (ESD-).

The literature review and discussion of theoretical frameworks are appropriate, as they successfully lay the foundation for the

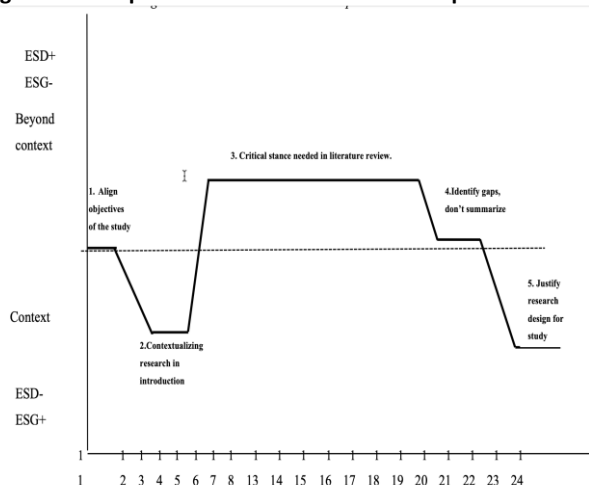
current study and situate the topic in context, indicating the gap to be filled. ESG+ (DAR 10)

The next stage involved moving beyond context and drawing on other studies and frameworks, which led to more abstract and technical concepts. This results in stronger epistemic semantic density (ESD+) and weaker epistemic semantic gravity (ESG-), thereby contributing to the formation of a semantic wave.

This study explores the teaching styles and the level of student teachers' sustainability consciousness with the help of a fine-grained conceptual framework. (ESD+) DAR 6

Throughout the assessment discourse, examiners rely on constructing semantic waves, which involve shifts between context-bound meanings and abstract, condensed meanings, thereby supporting the legitimization of integrated knowledge.

Figure 3: Example of a deconstructed semantic profile



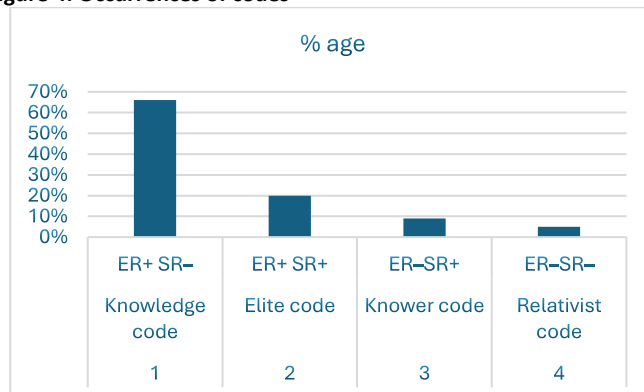
However, as Maton points out (2014, p. 116), if students “remain rooted within their contexts ... cumulative learning may be constrained” because cumulative knowledge building requires “the capacity to master semantic gravity, for knowledge to be decontextualised, transferred and recontextualised into new contexts.”

4. Findings and Discussion

In Pakistan, research on doctoral examiners' discourse using LCT is scarce. The analysis of the high-stakes institutional genre with the dimension of Specialisation reveals examiners' legitimise the use of robust, meticulous, theoretical, and analytical tools for research work and a scholarly identity. The outcomes of the study underscore the expectation that PhD scholars should engage deeply with theoretical frameworks, reinforcing the centrality of knowledge, recognising expectations of knower dispositions. In addition, analysis with the dimension of semantics demonstrates examiners emphasised context dependence, while problematising an issue and being capable of abstracting findings to contribute to the field as a whole, thereby highlighting cumulative knowledge-building that is, in fact, legitimate knowledge (Maton, 2014).

The findings of this study reveal that almost all the reports contain instances of both stronger and weaker SR and ER. Therefore, the occurrences of codes were calculated as in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Occurrences of codes



Specialization defines what counts as legitimate knowledge (epistemic relations) and determines who is authorised to be recognised as a legitimate knower (social relations) (Maton, 2014). A significant majority (66%) of examiner comments highlight the importance of demonstrating knowledge, skills and practices in research, which underpins legitimization and emphasises the Knowledge Code, with a strong epistemic relation (ER+). This finding reinforces existing literature on higher education research as a strong ER+ focus aligns with broader academic standards that prioritise disciplinary expertise, methodological rigour, and epistemological depth as key indicators of doctoral-level research quality (Forde-Leaves et al., 2023), but extends the discourse in a different context, emphasising the issue's impact.

In contrast, the analysis shows little emphasis on the Knower Code, with only 09% of the comments exhibiting a weak epistemic relation (ER-) and a strong social relation (SR+). This indicates that the knower is downplayed in favour of knowledge, reflecting epistemological legitimacy, giving less importance to the individual attributes, experiences, or backgrounds of the scholars (Walton & Wolff, 2022). The low percentage of Knower Code instances suggests that, within the Pakistani higher education context, assessors largely refrain from privileging scholars' personal insights, values, or subjective interpretations as a primary basis for academic evaluation. Instead, the focus remains on the knowledge production rather than the individual producing it.

Although the study underlines that the dominant code in the assessment reports was the Knowledge Code, instances of the Elite Code (20%) were also identified. This suggests that examiners acknowledge both strong epistemic relations (ER+) and strong social relations (SR+), legitimizing assessment based on the scholar's engagement with the theoretical framework as well as their authorial voice and scholarly stance, demanding critical interpretations and personal reflections by the doctoral candidate. The presence of the Elite Code indicates a dynamic trend where the demonstration of 'specialised' accumulated knowledge of the object (thesis), and the intellectual positioning of the learner, are the centre of legitimacy, suggesting a transparent understanding of assessment practice (Brooke et al., 2023).

Likewise, another finding after the data analysis suggests that the Relativist Code characterized by both weak epistemic and social relations (ER- / SR-), is not prominent in the assessment reports. Few reports focus on formatting and linguistic errors, with little or no emphasis on knower and knowledge. This finding implies that neither the object nor the subject operates within a paradigm that disregards structured knowledge or personal attributes altogether. The minimal presence of relativist perspectives (5%) reinforces the idea that Pakistani doctoral evaluation frameworks maintain a structured approach to knowledge assessment rather than

embracing an 'anything goes', context-dependent evaluation model.

The data collected for the study recognised the legitimization of strong ER+ epistemic linkages by examiners, while showing interest in the types of knowers the PhD scholars were becoming as they engage with the relevant knowledge during the completion of their doctoral degrees (Maton, 2014). These developments led to the conclusion that examiners predominantly value a stronger hold on theoretical insights and metatheoretical engagements as the primary means of legitimization, but a strong doctoral voice and ideological positioning were equally appreciated.

The semantic dimension of the LCT contains two main aspects: semantic density and semantic gravity, that addresses the conceptual coherence and context dependency, respectively. The analysis demonstrates that examiners demand formation of semantic waves by the scholars, suggesting that mere demonstration of abstract knowledge is not sufficient; its integration with data is highly desirable (Monbec et al., 2021). Candidates must interpret data using theory, having the ability to recontextualise meaning. Continuous shifts between theoretical constructs and empirical evidence legitimise strong epistemic intellectuality and scholarly competence, which leads to legitimate cumulative understanding and transferable learning.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the assessment practices of Pakistani examiners embedded within the PhD assessment reports in the discipline of English literature and linguistics. Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) was used as a framework, specifically the dimensions of Semantics and Specialization which unfold how examiners legitimize doctoral work and what forms of knowledge are privileged in their evaluative discourse. The findings reveal that doctoral candidacy is predominantly legitimized through the Knowledge Code, emphasizing epistemic strength and methodological rigour. It refers to examiners mostly associating doctoral success with learners' capacity to produce discipline-specific, robust knowledge. While occurrences of the Elite Code appear, particularly where the scholar's identity and knowledge engagement intersect, the overall assessment structure prioritises scholarly detachment and object-centred legitimization. Furthermore, the findings provide valuable insights into the shifts in semantic gravity (SG) and semantic density (SD) across examiner feedback, highlighting high-SD critiques for theory/methodology and high-SG input for writing and structure. This semantic movement demonstrates that while cumulative knowledge-building is significant, communicative clarity and organisation are also prerequisites for validating doctoral evaluation.

In sum, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how doctoral assessment practices in Pakistan reflect and reproduce particular academic values. It underscores a growing emphasis on knowledge legitimization and scholarly competence, offering evidence of a shift toward internationally aligned evaluative standards.

5.1 Implications

The study has important implications for education policy, pedagogy, and practice. It suggests workshops and training sessions for supervisors and examiners to strengthen the quality and transparency of doctoral education at the national and global levels. It further recommends assessment literacy and academic writing development in language-related higher education institutions, which led to quality assurance initiatives and ongoing reforms in the Graduation Education Policy (GEP, 2023). Although the study is aligned with national educational priorities in the Pakistani academic landscape, it is grounded in a global framework,

indicating the universal issue of assessment in higher education, making it a significant reference point for future researchers worldwide.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Fouzia Goreja: Writing –review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Prof. Dr. Wasima shehzad:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

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