Standardised Minds: A Literature Review of McDonaldization in Assessment and Learning

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Abstract: Standardised and technology-based assessment now shapes how higher education evaluates students, yet little is known about what this does to learning. This literature review asks how McDonaldization, Ritzer's principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, shapes assessment and learning in higher education. Three research questions guide it: how these principles affect feedback quality and deeper learning; how standardised evaluation compares with formative methods in its effects on achievement and engagement; and which humanised alternatives the literature proposes. Forty-two peer-reviewed sources published between 2020 and 2026 (nine baseline works and 33 core studies from 2025–2026) were identified through ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight and Google Scholar, screened against stated inclusion criteria and synthesised thematically against Ritzer's four principles. Automated and standardised assessment delivers scale and consistency but is associated with less personalised feedback, weaker contextual judgment and reduced student agency. One meta-analysis found no detected difference in learning performance between AI and human feedback, although human feedback was perceived as more contextual. Outcomes depend more on design than on standardisation itself. The literature proposes six types of alternative approach: formative and dialogic feedback, hybrid human–AI feedback, student co-creation, flexible assessment, holistic evaluation and institutional reform. The review extends McDonaldization theory from university governance to everyday assessment in the age of artificial intelligence, offers a framework linking each principle to its effects and counter-approaches with four testable propositions, and separates evidence from argument in a young field.

Keywords: Mcdonaldization; Standardised Assessment; Formative Assessment; Feedback; Higher Education; Artificial Intelligence

1. Introduction and Background

Assessment in higher education has changed profoundly over the past two decades. Accountability demands and ever-larger cohorts have pushed universities toward standardised testing, automated grading, learning management systems (LMS) that track engagement, and outcome-based metrics. Generative artificial intelligence has accelerated the shift. Feedback that once took a tutor an hour can now be produced in seconds. These changes have divided opinion. Proponents argue that such systems improve consistency, reduce marker bias and make large-scale assessment possible where resources are scarce. Critics counter that they flatten feedback, narrow what counts as learning, erode student agency and reward what is measurable over what matters (Zaky et al., 2026; Tabe & Machiwenyika, 2026; Beighton & Naz, 2025). Ritzer's (1993) McDonaldization theory provides a coherent way to name this tension. Earlier work applied the idea to the "McUniversity" (Hartley, 1995; Parker & Jary, 1995; Hayes & Wynyard, 2002), a university organised like a fast-food chain around standardised procedures, measurable outputs and managerial control, but mainly at the level of governance and curriculum. Assessment deserves particular attention because it is where learning is converted into grades and records that institutions count, compare and report. The title's phrase "standardised minds" names the concern behind this review, namely that assessment which rewards the predictable and the countable may teach students to think in predictable and countable ways.

1.1 Problem Statement

McDonaldization principles are increasingly embedded in assessment through standardised testing, AI-generated feedback, learning analytics and algorithmic management, yet no integrated, theory-informed account explains how they operate or affect learning. Universities are expanding automated feedback, analytics and standardised rubrics to manage larger cohorts and accountability demands (Williamson et al., 2020; Swiecki et al., 2022). Learning management systems track student activity (Zaky et al., 2026), professional standards frameworks regulate academic practice (Beighton & Naz, 2025), and research-focused performance metrics reduce the value placed on assessment (Nzuza, 2026). In the Global South, open distance e-learning faces similar pressure toward standardised, market-driven models (Tabe & Machiwenyika, 2026). The growing research is fragmented across disciplines, countries and methods, and rarely names McDonaldization. Evidence on AI feedback is mixed (Ali et al., 2025; Kaliisa et al., 2025), studies of alternatives are mostly small and course-level (Emerson, 2026; Maguire et al., 2026), and discourse often presents AI as inevitable rather than chosen (Bearman et al., 2023). It remains unclear whether automated systems reduce feedback quality or merely

change its form, and which alternatives protect deep learning at scale. Unresolved, adoption of AI-assisted marking and outcome-based accountability will outpace evaluation. Practices adopted before their effects are understood may weaken feedback and encourage shallow learning (Swiecki et al., 2022; Lipnevich & Mattern, 2025), while one-size-fits-all designs may keep disadvantaging diverse students (Tai et al., 2023). This study offers an integrated synthesis, a framework linking each principle to its effects and counter-approaches, and testable propositions.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this review is to synthesise recent scholarship on how McDonaldization shapes assessment and learning in higher education. The first research question examines how McDonaldization principles affect feedback quality, learning outcomes and opportunities for deeper learning. The second compares standardised, performance-based evaluation with formative methods in terms of their effects on achievement and engagement. The third explores the alternative, balanced or humanised approaches proposed in the literature to reduce standardisation in technology-driven assessment.

2. Theoretical Framework: McDonaldization and Assessment

Ritzer (1993) extended Max Weber's account of formal rationalisation to show how fast-food principles have come to organise ever more areas of social life, and his most recent edition carries the theory into the digital age of platforms and algorithms (Ritzer, 2021). Each of his four dimensions has a recognisable counterpart in assessment.

- **Efficiency** is the pursuit of the most output for the least time, effort or cost. In assessment it appears as automated grading, AI-generated feedback, standardised rubrics and online examinations, creating pressure to assess what is easiest to administer rather than what is most educationally meaningful.
- **Calculability** privileges what can be counted, such as grades, rankings, completion rates and dashboards. It sidelines capacities that resist numbers and, in Marton and Säljö's (1976) terms, may favour surface rather than deep approaches to learning.
- **Predictability** standardises processes and outcomes through formulaic rubrics, templated assignments and repeated examination formats. These serve fairness and transparency, yet they can also teach students to optimise for the expected rather than engage with the unknown.
- **Control** replaces human judgment with technology and procedure through LMS analytics, digital proctoring and governance frameworks that define valid assessment. It can strengthen accountability, but it can also displace the relationships and contextual judgment that constitute good teaching.

Taken together, the four dimensions produce what Ritzer called the **irrationality of rationality**, in which formally rational systems generate substantively irrational results. In assessment, the paradox appears when efficient, calculable, predictable and controlled evaluation yields shallower learning, weaker feedback and less student agency.

The theory has been criticised as a totalising metaphor that overstates uniformity and understates resistance (Smart, 1999), and research on performativity (Ball, 2003) and measurement (Biesta, 2009) offers sharper accounts of how measurement reshapes those who are measured. This review therefore treats Ritzer's four dimensions (efficiency, calculability, predictability and control) as tendencies that the literature can confirm, qualify or contest, rather than as a law-like account.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a literature review methodology. It interprets recent scholarship through a theoretical lens rather than pooling effects, so it is neither a systematic review nor a meta-analysis. Searches were run in September 2026 across ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight and Google Scholar. Search terms combined McDonaldization and its four principles with higher education, assessment, feedback and alternative approaches, and key sources were followed up through their reference lists. Selection followed four stages, all conducted by the author. First, database and reference-list searches generated a candidate pool. Second, titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria below. Third, full texts were read to confirm that each source met them. Fourth, retained sources were classified by research design.

3.1 Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they (1) were set in higher education; (2) addressed standardisation, feedback, learning outcomes or alternatives to standardised assessment; (3) were published between January 2020 and September 2026; (4) were peer reviewed, as journal articles, conference proceedings, or scholarly books and chapters; and (5) were available in full text in English, or in Spanish or Portuguese with an English abstract.

3.2 Exclusion Criteria

Sources were excluded if they (1) were set only in schools or corporate training; (2) were preprints, repository deposits or other non-peer-reviewed material; or (3) did not address any of the three research questions. Works published before 2020 were not part of the corpus and are cited only as seminal theoretical foundations.

The final corpus comprises 42 peer-reviewed works. Nine from 2020–2023 provide a pre-generative-AI baseline (Williamson et al., 2020; Winstone & Carless, 2020; Blum, 2020; Ritzer, 2021; Swiecki et al., 2022; Bearman et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2023; Green & Chewning, 2020; Hayes & Wynyard, 2022). The core comprises 33 studies from 2025–2026, spanning primary empirical studies, evidence syntheses (Kaliisa et al., 2025; Gabbi et al., 2026) and conceptual or guidance papers. Preprints and repository deposits identified during screening were excluded and, where they addressed a relevant theme, replaced with peer-reviewed sources on the same theme.

Findings were coded first by research question and then against Ritzer's four principles, with each claim labelled as supporting, qualifying or contradicting the expected McDonaldization effect. Qualifying and contradicting evidence was deliberately retained, each source was weighted by research design, and figures are reported as given in the cited sources.

4. Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

Table 1 maps the main themes under each research question and the direction of the evidence.

Table 1: Thematic map of the reviewed literature by research question.

RQ	Theme	Key Sources	Direction of Evidence
RQ1	Efficiency versus personalisation	Williamson et al. (2020); Zaky et al. (2026)	Scale gained; personal relevance lost
RQ1	AI feedback	Swiecki et al. (2022); Ali et al. (2025); Kaliisa et al. (2025)	No detected performance difference; human feedback perceived as richer
RQ1	Standardisation versus context	Beighton & Naz (2025); McGuire (2026); Zadeh & Ferrari (2026)	Mixed; depends on design
RQ1	Feedback as development	Winstone & Carless (2020); Huang & Huang (2026)	Favours dialogic feedback
RQ2	Performance	Li et al. (2026); Nzuza (2026)	Varied assessment associated with gains; metrics may distort
RQ2	Motivation and fairness	Blum (2020); Tai et al. (2023); Emerson (2026); Sulthana et al. (2025)	Grades suppress motivation; fairness needs design
RQ3	Formative and hybrid models	Lipnevich & Mattern (2025); Sethi & Hidayat (2026)	Most frequently advocated
RQ3	Co-creation, flexibility, holistic evaluation	Maguire et al. (2026); Ni & Lam (2025)	Course-level evidence
RQ3	Institutional reform	Sarkar (2026); Yusoff et al. (2026)	Mainly conceptual

Note. RQ = research question.

4.1 RQ1: Feedback Quality and Deeper Learning

4.1.1 Efficiency Versus Personalisation

Critical studies argue that technology-driven assessment gains scale but loses personal relevance. Zaky et al. (2026) describe LMS as a "digital panopticon" that quantifies learners, and Green and Chewning (2020) show that LMS are used mainly to deliver grades and information rather than to support teaching; both extend Williamson et al.'s (2020) warning about the datafication of teaching.

4.1.2 AI Feedback

The AI literature qualifies this critique. AI-supported formative assessment predicted performance and raised achievement in one university course (Li et al., 2026), yet in one comparative study medical students rated tutor feedback higher on clarity, relevance and usefulness (Ali et al., 2025). A meta-analysis of 41 studies found no statistically significant difference between AI and human feedback in learning performance ($g = 0.25$, 95% CI [−0.11, 0.60]; Kaliisa et al., 2025); given the wide interval and high heterogeneity, this is the absence of a detected difference, not evidence of equivalence. Efficiency may therefore preserve measured performance while eroding the perceived relational quality of feedback, as earlier work anticipated (Swiecki et al., 2022).

4.1.3 Standardisation Versus Context

Professional standards frameworks regulate academic practice (Beighton & Naz, 2025), and standardised virtual learning environments reduced pedagogical agency (McGuire, 2026). In contrast, in a single-institution survey 91.9% of online engineering students reported deep learning approaches after scaffolded weekly assessment with personalised feedback (Zadeh & Ferrari, 2026), an association rather than a demonstrated effect. Structure may therefore harm learning mainly when it replaces responsive teaching.

4.1.4 Automation and Feedback as Development

Algorithmic assessment needs human oversight (Sethi & Hidayat, 2026). Feedback supports deep learning when it is dialogic and developmental (Sadler, 1989; Winstone & Carless, 2020), as recent studies of score-free examination feedback (Huang & Huang, 2026), formative partnership (Suyo-Vega et al., 2026), dialogic teacher feedback (Robles et al., 2026) and psychologically safe feedback (McGuire, 2025) suggest. Feedback thus appears to be the main site where McDonaldization becomes visible, which provisionally answers RQ1.

4.2 RQ2: Achievement and Engagement

4.2.1 Performance

Achievement gains were associated with varied and formative assessment rather than single standardised measures (Li et al., 2026), although the evidence comes from a few single-course studies. Metrics that reward research over teaching are argued to distort assessment incentives (Nzuza, 2026), so calculability appears to narrow what institutions notice more than it lowers performance.

4.2.2 Motivation

Grade-centred systems can suppress the motivation that alternatives release. Blum (2020) argued that grading displaces intrinsic motivation, and students in an ungraded online course said it made them want to "work harder" (Emerson, 2026), while limited, structured choice in task design was associated with higher engagement (Maguire et al., 2026).

4.2.3 Fairness

Alternatives are not automatically fairer. Uniform designs can disadvantage diverse students (Tai et al., 2023), while AI-supported self-assessment (Inomata & Shirasaka, 2026) and AI individualisation (Sulthana et al., 2025) move the risk of bias rather than remove it. Some outcomes resist fair measurement altogether (Huggins-Manley et al., 2026; Samin et al., 2026), and few studies measured effects for particular student groups. RQ2 therefore cannot be answered by a simple contrast between standardised and formative assessment; outcomes depend on design.

4.3 RQ3: Alternatives to McDonaldized Assessment

The literature proposes six types of alternative approach, each targeting one or more of Ritzer's principles.

- **Formative and dialogic feedback** is the most frequently advocated. Building on Black and Wiliam (1998), recent sources advocate aligned tasks, timely feedback and peer and self-assessment (Lipnevich & Mattern, 2025; Gabbi et al., 2026; Gaitán & Sandoval, 2026), although institutional conditions often constrain it (Pereira et al., 2026).
- **Hybrid human–AI models** reconcile scale with judgment. In one study, 62.3% of medical students saw AI and tutor feedback as complementary (Ali et al., 2025), and human-in-the-loop designs keep educators responsible for high-stakes decisions (Sethi & Hidayat, 2026).
- **Student co-creation** shares a bounded degree of control. Structured choice raised engagement (Maguire et al., 2026), ungrading increased motivation (Emerson, 2026) and partnership positioned students as knowledge creators (Suyo-Vega et al., 2026).
- **Flexible assessment** challenges predictability. AI-aligned, process-focused assessment (Stellenboom & Ncube, 2026), peer review in work placements (Valencia-Forrester, 2026), flexible work-integrated learning (Gottlieb et al., 2026) and virtual laboratories (Girmay et al., 2026) suggest that authentic assessment and scale can be compatible.
- **Holistic evaluation** contests calculability. AI-assisted portfolios supported multiliteracies development (Ni & Lam, 2025), and goal-free evaluation captured outcomes that standard measures missed (Samin et al., 2026).
- **Institutional and ethical reform** underpins the other five alternative approaches, with proposals that include valuing pedagogical quality in teaching evaluation (Sarkar, 2026), adopting responsible metrics (Yusoff et al., 2026) and strengthening ethics education (Dwivedi, 2026).

5. Discussion

5.1 The Four Principles Revisited

The literature broadly supports McDonaldization while refining it (Table 2). Efficiency delivers speed and reach (Li et al., 2026) but weakens developmental feedback when optimised for throughput (Lipnevich & Mattern, 2025), unless human oversight is designed in. Calculability means that institutions tend to reward what can be counted, such as grades and scores (Hayes & Wynyard, 2022; Nzuza, 2026). However, no reviewed study directly measured whether students focus on chasing marks, so the link to shallow learning is still an interpretation. Predictability can make students follow rules instead of being curious (Hayes & Wynyard, 2022; McGuire, 2026). Flexible assessment counters this by removing the fixed formula students can rely on. **Control** is the most common principle. Technology and rules decide what knowledge matters and what counts as valuable (Obeng-Nyarko, 2026; Tabe & Machiwenyika, 2026). The recurring recommendation is that technology should support human judgment, not replace it (Nzuza, 2026). No single alternative solves all four problems, so the strongest proposals combine several different approaches.

Table 2: Ritzer's four principles in higher education assessment: manifestations, documented effects and counter-approaches.

Principle	Manifestation in Assessment	Documented Effects	Counter-Approaches
Efficiency	Automated and AI feedback; online exams	Scale, but less personal feedback	Hybrid human–AI feedback
Calculability	Grades, rankings, metrics	Incentives toward measurable output	Ungrading; portfolios; holistic evaluation
Predictability	Rubrics; templated tasks	Compliance over inquiry	Flexible, co-designed assessment
Control	Analytics; surveillance; standards	Reduced professional and student agency	Peer assessment; human oversight

Source: Author's synthesis of the reviewed literature.

5.2 The Paradox and its Limits

The central interpretation of this review is the irrationality of rationality, whereby systems built to improve outcomes through standardisation can undermine them because they optimise for what they can measure. Yet well-designed structure improved learning (Zadeh & Ferrari, 2026; Li et al., 2026), and alternatives carry their own risks (Pereira et al., 2026). Harm appears to follow when efficiency becomes the dominant value, not from structure or technology as such. Generative AI may mark a new phase, standardising not only the format of assessment but the response to students' work (Bearman et al., 2023), and several sources respond by shifting assessment toward dialogue and process (Stellenboom & Ncube, 2026).

5.3 Proposed Conceptual Framework

The synthesis yields the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, the review's main theoretical contribution.

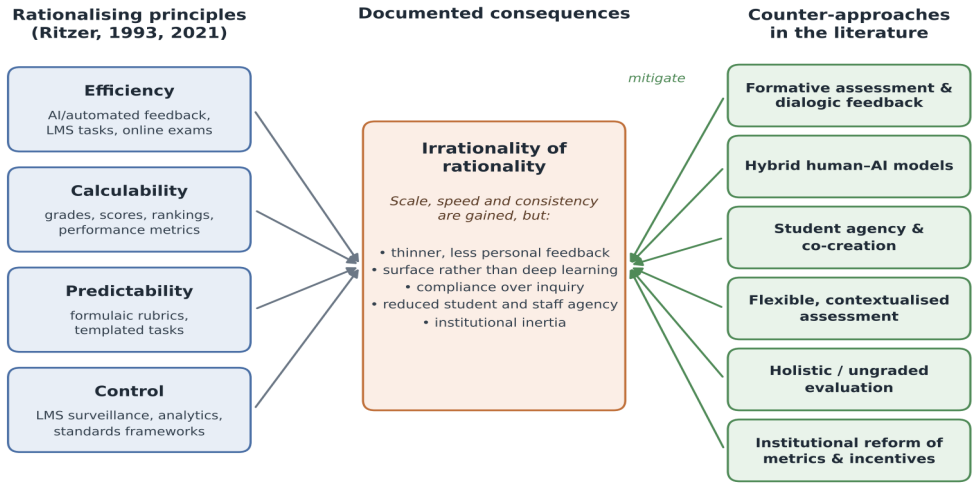

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework of McDonaldization in higher education assessment: rationalising principles, their consequences and counter-approaches. Source*:* Author's synthesis, drawing on Ritzer (1993, 2021) and the reviewed literature.

The framework has three linked components. The four principles enter assessment through specific practices (left) and converge on the irrationality of rationality, in which gains in scale are offset by thinner feedback, surface learning, compliance and reduced agency (centre). Six counter-approaches then redirect structure toward learning, with institutional reform underpinning the others (right). The framework reframes the debate from a choice between standardisation and humanisation to a question of design, and yields four testable propositions:

- **P1 (efficiency):** where efficiency dominates design, dialogic feedback will decline even when measured performance is unchanged.
- **P2 (calculability):** where grades are the main reward, students will report more mark-oriented learning than in ungraded or portfolio formats.
- **P3 (predictability):** templated tasks will raise rubric compliance but lower transfer performance compared with flexible tasks of equal rigour.
- **P4 (control):** hybrid human–AI feedback will match AI-only feedback on performance and exceed it on perceived quality and trust.

The framework makes three contributions. First, it moves McDonaldization analysis from the university as an institution, the "McUniversity" (Parker & Jary, 1995), to individual assessment tasks, where students experience rationalisation directly. Second, whereas earlier reviews describe the risks of AI in assessment in general terms (Swiecki et al., 2022; Bearman et al., 2023), it links each principle to a specific practice, its likely effect and a matched counter-approach. Programme teams can therefore use it as an audit tool, asking which principle dominates an assessment's design, which harm is likely and which counter-approach is missing. Third, it locates harm in design rather than in standardisation itself, turning a normative critique into four testable propositions (P1–P4).

5.4 Implications for Practice

The findings suggest five design principles: intentionality, balance, human-centredness, student involvement and systemic thinking. Lecturers can use automation to free time for feedback dialogue; programme leaders can protect that time in workload models and evaluate teaching on feedback quality (Sarkar, 2026); and institutions can govern AI transparently while keeping humans accountable for consequential decisions (Sethi & Hidayat, 2026). Each has costs. Dialogic feedback is expensive in large cohorts, and human oversight can become a formality if workload is not adjusted.

5.5 Limitations

Scopus and Web of Science were not searched, searches were conducted in English, and the corpus is concentrated in 2025–2026, with a thin pre-2024 baseline. Many sources are conceptual, and few name McDonaldization, so mapping them to Ritzer's principles involves interpretation. Although every source is peer reviewed, the conclusions on feedback and on formative, hybrid and flexible assessment rest on empirical studies, whereas claims about metrics and institutional reform rest mainly on conceptual work and should be read as hypotheses.

5.6 Future Research Areas

Longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies should test propositions P1–P4 and how assessment paradigms affect learning and well-being over time. Implementation research should examine how hybrid feedback and ungrading scale within institutional constraints, equity research should extend assessment for inclusion (Tai et al., 2023), and studies from the Global South and student-voice research would correct the corpus's imbalances.

6. Conclusion

On RQ1, rationalised assessment appears to improve scale and consistency but weaken the dialogic feedback on which deep learning depends, although no difference in measured performance was detected. On RQ2, varied and formative assessment is often associated with gains in achievement and engagement, but the evidence does not support a simple contrast with standardised assessment, and metrics narrow what institutions reward. On RQ3, the literature offers six types of alternatives that work best in combination and use technology to support, not replace, human judgment. McDonaldization appears deeply embedded in assessment but is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Because much of the evidence is conceptual or recent, these conclusions are provisional. The task for universities is to meet legitimate needs for fairness and scale without surrendering the judgment on which meaningful learning depends.

Ethics Declaration

This study did not require ethical clearance, as it did not involve human participants or personal data. All sources used were publicly available.

AI Declaration

AI tools were used in a limited capacity to support language refinement. The intellectual content, analysis, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

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