

Legitimacy and Competence of Students' Assessment in Higher Education: Quality Assurance Query

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Abstract

The higher education and training sector focus on lifelong learning, world of work and the future. With regard to this, the current focus of higher education sector is on quality assurance procedures that emphasise accountability, compliance and standards which could be acquired through quality assurance of student's assessment. This paper demystifies the quality of students learning in further education training college and higher education sector. Quality assurance of student's assessment is the most important activity and further education and training college is also the specialisation that needs to be natured for economic development of any global community. But in contrary quality assurance of student's assessment is the most overlooked activity further education training college sector within the holistic higher education paradigm – the academic culture that has endangered and alienated students and staff to the detriment of the system as a whole. If quality assurance system as pertained to higher education assessment of students learning parameter of further education and training college are to be recognized, the increasing diverse nature of higher technical and vocational education institutions, in the millennium, accountability, high standards and compliance will need to be balanced by a greater emphasis on encouraging and promoting innovation, self-improvement and credentials of higher calibre of individual student's ability and competence in combating local and regional poverty. It is of salient phenomena for both quality assurance agencies and institutions themselves to operationalise viable mechanism and adapt their policies, procedures and culture if higher education and training system is to respond positively to student's quality assurance assessment and be provided with essential required skills in lifelong learning, work and the future framework for the new millennium. This paper argues that whilst quality assurance of student learning assessment is understandable within the theoretical and practical academic framework in higher education institutions, there have erupted heuristic issues that deserve immediate and particular attention in the 21 century.

Keyword: quality, assessment, valid, assurance

1. Introduction

The discussion on concepts of quality of teaching and learning in higher education was given boosts, first in the 1980s by the introduction of what can broadly be called 'new public management', with its predilection for management models developed in the business world, then in the 1990s by the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, and most recently in the 2000s by the Bologna and Lisbon agendas in Europe. With each of these drivers went different instruments for quality assurance (QA): starting from quality assessment for 'value for money', but also for quality improvement, a trend can be seen towards accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions (HEI's). While there is a relationship between the political concepts of quality and the QA instruments chosen, the choice of instruments also has consequences for the concept of quality that is best served by it (Westerheijden & Leegwater, 2003).

New century and new millennium inevitably encourage consideration of reflections and predictions. It is time to consider what has been achieved in the last century, to build upon, to decide what should be our mission and vision and how to achieve our goals and objectives to conceptualise responsive Higher Education (HE) and Further Education Training College (FETC). The distinctive feature of students' assessment in HE FETC sector is its attempts to encourage scientific, technological literacy and lifelong learning, work and the future and its emphasis in meeting societal needs and importance of developing ethos of social responsibility.

Countless assessment practices remain valid, as they have ever been in these sectors. However, new encounters have arisen in HE and FETC sector of which traditional approaches fail to address. There is also an increasing amount of research being carried out in the HE sector (Vettori 2007). The purpose of this article is not to repeat what is readily available, not overturn much of what has been written. It is to bring reflect on QA of students' assessment in these

sectors, highlight procedures and viable remedial mechanisms and recommendations portrayed which encompass the following:

- ❖ Knowledge base for QA of students' assessment in HE and FETC sector; bring new ideas on quality assurance of students' assessment in these sectors
- ❖ The attention of practitioners, administrators and those with responsibilities for setting policy;
- ❖ The need to focus on competence as a gist toward socio-economic development and enhance its capacity building;

Not all the developments described in the following paragraphs in this article have yet made their appearance widely in QA of students' assessment in HE and FETC sector. Others are not entirely novel but reflect a dimension of impact. Some are limited to other locations and universities. Notably, reports suggest that technological advances and move towards international mobility and globalisation of many human endeavours are fast spreading. What is a puzzle today is often tomorrow's innovation and creativity and the following year's orthodox. The researcher believe in useful inclusion within the topology parameters as comprehensive coverage as possible of known existing innovatory activities in quality assurance of students' assessment in HE and FETC sector.

While QA of students' assessment in this article applies to all forms and aspects of HE and FETC sector in nature, provided either in educational institution or under their respective authority (Middlehurst 2001). Some of the issues outlines will be of adequate relevance in some other subject areas than others, and in other countries, there may be a need to draw demarcation as there may be differences in definition and structure.

2. Rationale

In the history of HE, a system approach to curriculum development is relatively a continuing process in these sector. Due to lack of resources, experience and traditions, there have been certain tendencies in some developing countries to simply to implement existing curriculum packages from industrialised nations without proper adaptation to the local situations and needs, which has often proved to be inappropriate and expensive (UNESCO 2001). With regard to UNESCO's depiction, during the past decade, there has been awareness of the need to bring greater innovation and creativity to the process of curriculum development and implementations in HE in order to be responsive with the changing requirements for employment created by rapid socio-economic and technological requirements and development.

Today reference is made to the accumulation of discoveries, applications and know-how that constituted an unprecedented source of knowledge, information and power. Never have there been discoveries and innovations that promised a greater increase in material progress than today, but neither has the productive – or destructive – capacity of human kind left unresolved so many uncertainties. The major challenge of the coming century lies in the ground between the power which humankind has at its disposal and the wisdom that it is capable of showing in using it (UNESCO 2001).

3. Background

European Network for QA in Higher Education – Middlehurst (2001) acknowledges the new ways of delivering HE with opportunities to enhance the quality and quantity of learning, assisted by advances in information and communication technology whereby quality assurance in students' assessment in HE has been the central focus.

The White Paper (1997:28) further unpack the process as followed by the promulgation of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101 of 1997). In particular, HE Act makes provision for the establishment of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and indicates that one of the functions of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is to assist the HEI in encouraging the culture of quality assessment through the process of external moderation. While University of Glamorgan Wales ascribed that the QA agencies' mission is to promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in HE are being safeguarded. Facilitate the development of benchmark information to guide standards (Miller 2002).

It is for this reason that assessment is portrayed as the most vital of all the processes in vocational education. If HE has a QA mechanism in place, students can be confident of their training and employers can have confidence in quality of the graduates that enters the labour market. Without them, either of these can be placed in jeopardy.

4. Quality Assurance of Students' Assessment in HE and FETC Sector

According to Hodson and Thomas (2004) the last few years of the second millennium have been characterised by tension with HE system that have transcended nationality and functional speciality. Hodson and Thomas further argued that whether we focus on the process of democratisation in Central Eastern Europe, the ending of apartheid regime in South Africa or the comparatively mundane moves towards a mass system of HE in United Kingdom, education system are faced with pressure associated with financial constraints, demands for public and societal accountability and a defence with institutional autonomy.

From Hodson and Thomas' argument, it is deducible that QA of students' assessment is encompassed within the demands for accountability, within international turbulence, the growth and advancement of quality assurance mechanisms. A range of issues is beginning to emerge that question the effectiveness of current issues, trends, policy and practice in quality assurance or students' assessment in HE and FETC sector. It is evident that the nature and calibre of HE and FETC in the later years will be different from how they are now.

In various respects the key concern will be on diversity whether that diversity is in terms of institutional mission and vision, programmes aims and objectives in modes of instructional delivery, student's clientele performance, structure of systems or staff motivation, development and expectations.

Fundamental to education is the need to evaluate students' learning outcomes as reflections to effective teaching methods and programme offered, as in HE and FETC; it is of prime importance to evaluate whether students have acquired valid academic competence skills. Assessment also allows fine tune teaching methods and expands motivation and creativity of educators and assessors. Finally, assessment allows department of division heads to evaluate the effectiveness of entire programme.

5. Current Issues and Trends

To assess a department and or programme, a rubric is created that assesses the goals of the programme. Assessing the course and assessing the whole programme allows both individual faculty members and departments division chairs to refine and design course materials that allow for maximum learning for all students, both traditional and adult learners (Miller 2002).

There is a need to find alternative methods of instructional delivery for HEI's. Institutions and academics should be oriented to use flexible teaching and learning materials. Some of these should include: the development of modularised curricula and assessment methods; the development and use of appropriate technologies for instruction – online services and training materials, computerised learning packages and others (UNESCO 2001).

Continuing classroom assessment provides a continuous monitoring of students learning. The faculty receive continuing feedback about their effectiveness; students receive a measurement of progress. Although assessment strategies used to depend on the course, most courses lend themselves to a different and variety of methods (Vettori 2007). Such variety of methods lend themselves to a code of practice for assessment which intern evoke and form QA of academic quality standards which could be enforced in quality assurance of students assessment in HE and FETC sector subscribing to the QA Agency for Higher Education.

6. Quality Assurance Code

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education transcribed that code of quality assurance identifies a comprehensive series of system – wide expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in HE (Vettori 2007). In so doing it will provide an authoritative reference point for institutions as the consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications. The code assumes that, taking into account nationally agreed principles and practices. Each institution has its own system for independent verification both of its quality and standards and of effectiveness of its quality assurance system. As bodies responsible for academic standards, HE and FETC institution should have effective procedure for:

- Designing, approving, supervising and reviewing the assessment strategies for programmes and awards;
- The consistent implementation of rigorous assessment practice which ensure that the academic/professional standards for each award element is set and maintained at the appropriate level and that individual student's performance is properly judged against this (QAAHE).

In considering how their own policies and practices reflect this precept, and in line with QA Agency for HE

perception, institution need to consider, in addition to their own policies, the implications of the introduction in QA of students' assessment in HE benchmarking statements and the national qualification frameworks.

The range and types of assessments used and how these measures appropriately the achievement by students of those skills, areas of knowledge and attributes identified as intended learning outcomes for the module or unit programmes, and allow the strengths and weakness of the students to be demonstrated; How to ensure that assessment is operated fairly within the programmes, and that the principles for QA of student's assessment in HE and FETC are applied consistently across the institution; How the reliability of QA in HE and FETC is demonstrated, for example, the consistent use of agreed marking and grading schemes, and moderation arrangements; The extend of any discretion that may be exercised in relation to students whose assessment performance might have been affected by extenuating circumstances; The keeping of appropriate records of the procedures and decisions of each QA panel and board of examiners as in the agency code of practice on external examining (Vettori 2007).

7. Scheduling Summative and Amount of Assessment Marking and grading

HE sector should publish and implement consistently clear criteria for the marking and grading assessment, HE institutions should ensure that there are robust mechanisms for marking and for the moderation of marked scripts (Stensaker 2007).

Precepts and guidance relating to external scrutiny and moderation of marking are to be found in the quality assurance agency code of practice: external examining of such robust activities that quality assurance of students should pander (Vettori 2007). In so far as mechanism for marking and internal moderation is concerned, in developing its policies and procedures institutions will wish to consider, for an example:

- The range of guidelines for marking memoranda and grading that are used throughout and within the institution;

The basic elements and principles of assessment are that I should be valid, reliable, flexible and fair. In competence based assessment system, assessors make judgements, based on evidence gathered from various sources, about whether an individual meets a standard or criteria set. The notion of competency standards is essentially a development of criterion reference assessment, with the addition of focus on the importance of assessment of performance, and its application particularly to HE. Competence cannot be observed directly, but it can be inferred from performance (Stensaker 2007).

8. Research Methodology

The approach gives an in-depth focus on research methodology and outlines the methodology chosen for this study, the sample of the study and the research instrument used. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2007) the decision to determine which method should be chosen depends entirely on the nature of the research. These choices did also have a significant role in the method of data collection and the organisation of the study with regard to documental exploration.

This information, together with the information gained in the literature study did assist establish good practices of the assessment process.

8.1 Methods, material and process

This study draws on the data of six departments in the four faculties. The legitimacy and credibility assessment process completed between 2010-2012 were analysed. The total data set did include almost 6 heads of department (HoD's).

Conforming with the purpose of this research the study which intends to collectively support the assessment process and give more credibility QA in HE and furthermore to analyse the previous assessment, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this study, because it was considered to be most relevant.

In the process of soliciting further data, the researcher was perusing a number of question paper as well as moderators report. During the evaluation the researcher wanted to find out what the common factors w did indeed cause some serious challenges in the assessment process. Secondly, how those factors impede on quality of assessment within an institution and what the guidelines were.

Population and Sample: The population of this study consisted of 6 HoD's in four different Faculties. It is true that a specific sector of the population was further explored in order to reduce the sample to a certain cluster. These departments were regarded as targets for this particular study, simply because of the assessment query by the

assessment review committee. Furthermore, this representative sample is an underlying epistemic criterion for a valid, unbiased sample (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006:49-51). It is in this regard that from a total of eight HoD's, the researcher decided to select six HOD's to participate in the study. Owing to the nature of the study purposeful sampling was used, as the sample of this study did not depend on the available HoD's, but on their reports by the assessment review committee.

Data collection and recording: The particular instrument used in any study depends on the nature of the investigation; in this study documental analysis was used in the form of assessment committee review report. The researcher can look directly at what is taking place in situ rather than relying on second-hand information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:462-643). In this research, data were collected and analyses to identify emerging issues from reports.

The nature of this study also involved the collection of assessment report from the examination section as well as the moderators' reports. The reason for collecting the reports was based on the purpose of triangulation with the data collected through the documental analysis. These reports did assist the researcher to confirm the validity of the data collected. Lastly, the researcher was able to gather direct information from moderators.

9. Results and Discussion

In order to provide a transparent and veracious account on the effectiveness of the current assessment practice, various research tools were employed. Such tools, viz, documental analysis and a literature survey were adopted because they would provide first-hand information, and eventually draw different custodians of QA into this research project.

9.1 Feedback to students

Due to practicality and nature of HE, the sector should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to students on assessed work, in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement. In meeting the needs of students on their progress and attainment, HE institutions will need to consider:

- The timelines of feedback on all the practical procedures that students have been engaged in, with the attempt to acquire necessary practical orientated skills and competence;
- The effective use of comments on returned work, including relating feedback to assessment criteria, in order to help students identify areas for improvement as well as commending for evident achievement;
- Specifying the nature and extend of feedback that students can expect in relation to particular types and units of assessment, and this is to be accompanied by the return of assessed work with which reflections on individual capacity are portrayed;
- The role of oral feedback, either on a group or individual basis as a means of supplementing written feedback;
- Feedback informs students about their respective performance, strengths and weakness, therefore, students having completed any task, have to be assessed and feedback given;

Feedback plays an important role in the learning students undergo. However, the distinction is not made between giving feedback on a particular piece of work, or demonstration of skills on the other hand. Client feedback is frequently seen as part of increasingly consumerist and marketized trends in HE. Students are transformed into 'customers'. Research has 'users' whose needs should be met. At its simplest, client feedback is little more than the one-page questionnaire in the hotel bedroom. Typically these days in many HEIs, students spend a lot of their time repeatedly completing rather long questionnaires. And academics find themselves attempting to prove that their activities are meeting the needs of a client or client group beyond the walls of HE. These processes may themselves be largely compliant, i.e. the important thing is to demonstrate that the feedback has been collected rather than to do anything as a result of it. But they can also be used to promote market behaviour, as when the results of 'student satisfaction' surveys are published on websites in order to inform the decision-making of future generations of students (clients) on what and where to study. Another element of the approach taken to quality assessment is whether it is holistic or segmented. In the latter, separate functions of teaching and research will be assessed separately and there may also be separate assessments of

9.2 Staff Development and Training

Quality assurance of students' assessment in HE cannot be under emphasised. Students' performances are indicators

for those members of the staff who duly need further education in their skills competence. These institutions should ensure that all staff involved in the assessment of students is equipped with competent skills to undertake their roles and responsibilities. Institutions should consider how staff development can;

- Enable staff to learn about new approaches to assessment as well as the best ways to operate existing or traditional methods; promote understanding of the theory and practice of assessment and its implementation and meet the training needs of bureaucratic administrative involvement in assessment procedures.

9.3 *Language of Quality Assurance of Students' Assessment*

HE sector's language of assessment and teaching will normally be the same. However, if for any reason, this cannot be achieved, institutions must ensure that their academic standards are not put at risk and quality cannot be jeopardised. HE sector are subject to the requirements of the legislation and acts. Institutions involved with multi-cultural languages other than that not used for teaching and study, should publish:

- Procedures for considering students' requests for assessment to be undertaken in a language used for teaching, including the time at which such request should be made;
- Criteria to be used when considering how to respond to such request in determining the criteria institutions will need to consider;
- How to employ personnel with required expertise in the appropriate language (s), subject knowledge and quality assurance assessment methods and procedures;
- Suitable external examiners fluent in the relevant language(s) of instructional delivery will be identified, appointed and involved with the assessment process;

9.4 *Accreditation Body and Professional Requirements*

HE sector should ensure that where a programme forms part of the qualification regime, and framework of a professional or statutory body, clear information is available to staff and students, about specific QA assessment requirements that must be met for progression towards the professional qualification and accreditation. Institutions should ensure that there is clear information at hand about:

- Which options, priorities and modules must be passed to meet the requirements of the body;
- The level at which the programme, or any part of it must be passed to meet requirements of the body.

Procedural compliance can occur as a feature of most forms of quality assessment, but it is probably most often found when the focus of the assessment is at the institutional level and where there is an external obligation to carry it out. It may also be linked to external moderation of papers as well as examination of research project. Thus codes of practice and guidelines are created and those undergoing the assessment must demonstrate that they are complying with them. The assessors will come and check or 'audit' whether practices conform to the codes and guidelines. While the notion of compliance carries with it rather negative connotations, it is of course perfectly defensible if the behaviours that compliance requires are desirable ones and beneficial in their outcomes.

9.5 *Review of Regulations*

Quality assurance of students' assessment in HE sector has effective mechanism for the review and development of assessment regulations. With this notion in anticipation, institutions should consider:

- How proposed changes are discussed with staff, students and external examiners for justification and validity;
- In developing and implementing such mechanism, organisations need to consider the frequency and processes for review of their assessment regulations;
- Procedurals that involve any appropriate staff, students, external examiners and participating stakeholders in the review and discussions of proposed developments and changes;
- The procedural and time scales for enacting any changes to assessment regulations.

9.6 *Recording, Documentation and Publication of QA Assessment Decisions*

HE sector should ensure that assessment decisions are recorded and documented accurately and systematically. Institutions should ensure that the decisions of relevant examination boards are published as quickly as possible,

consistent with our rigour of quality assurance assessment and accuracy. Nevertheless, institutions will be compelled to consider providing;

- Clear statements of the responsibilities of all those involved in computation, checking and recording of assessment decisions;
- Systems for back-ups when using information technology equipment or transmission of assessment data;
- Clear policies on access to information of assessment judgement about individuals.

10. Conclusions

The significance of assessment issues in HE is often not appreciated. There is, for example, probably more bad practice and ignorance of important issues in the area of QA of students' assessment in HE. For instance, students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching to succeed, they cannot, even if they want to succeed in a course, escape from the effects of poor assessment. QA of students' assessment in HE sector acts as mechanism with more control on students, and has more effect on students than most teachers or administrators are prepared to acknowledge.

That is to say, QA of students' assessment in HE is important in its own right, it cannot be separated from the social context, and it also aids or inhibits the attempts of educators to improve teaching and learning. It is with this in mind that the article, focusing on current QA issues is of magnificent importance within the qualitative paradigm of students' assessment in HE sector for HE to be more responsive whatsoever.

The complication in HE may be that there are many different stakeholders rather than a single category of customers. Partly, this depends on a lack of clarity of focus or level in the discussion. If HE is considered to be what happens between teachers and students in the classroom, laboratory, etc., then it is clear that the 'customers' are the students. If a macro perspective is taken, things are more complicated: HE's 'business' is to deliver graduates to the economy, and then, at the highest level of abstraction, the employers (among them the public sector represented by the state) are the customers, or, taking a step back towards the micro level, the graduates are the customers, who have 'purchased' a package of knowledge and skills which they can trade for an income on the labour market. Much depends therefore on the theory applied to HE.

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