

## Perceptions of Lecturers in Institutions of Higher Learning Regarding the Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning in Some Formerly Disadvantaged Universities in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of this paper is, through a review of literature, to explore the perceptions of lecturers regarding the assessment and evaluation of student learning in some formerly disadvantaged universities in South Africa. Findings indicate inadequate lecturers' evaluation of their class tasks; inadequate students' classroom assessments; inadequate classroom based action research and inadequate awareness and enforcement of institutional policies. The paper recommends increased lecturers' evaluation in order to expose grey areas for possible attention; evaluation to be a compulsory and an on-going process; student assessment to be increased; student assessment and evaluation policies to be enforced; and have action research emphasized and enforced

### INTRODUCTION

While some academics view assessment and evaluation to be synonymous, there are some differences that need to be succinctly understood. In a nutshell, this researcher contends that while evaluation leans on evaluating the quality of the teaching and the performance of the instructor, assessment leans on taking stock of the performance of the learner. However, more depth of the two concepts needs to be explored. According to Brown et al. (1997: 8), assessment consists, essentially, of taking a sample of what students do, making inferences and estimating the worth of their actions. South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (SAQA 2001) also defines assessment as a structured process for gathering evidence and making judgements about a learner's performance in relation to registered national standards and qualifications. In general, assessment, therefore, achieves but not exhaustively restricted to the following roles: serves as a feedback to the lecturer; measures the level of learning and progression of the students; gauges the level of understanding of the students; directs and informs changes in the planning of future student work; ensures that students' work or performance meets universal standards, whether institutional, national and international; serves to check learning outcomes or take stock of the desired outcomes; and serves as a student demonstration of "hands

on" experience (Luckett and Sutherland 2000; SAQA 2001).

Evaluation, on the other hand refers to the process of evaluating the work of the instructor/lecturer to deduce how much an instructor is fulfilling the set educational goals and objectives in teaching. In South Africa, these goals and objectives are spelt out in the Higher Education and Teaching (HET) (South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) 2001; Ministry of Education (MOE) 2001; Department of Education (DOE) 1997). Evaluation is also a process of reflecting on the quality of the teaching courses by the instructors/lecturers. It serves the needs of academic staff as individuals in their pursuit of teaching. It is believed that the quality of instructors' service delivery cascades to improved performance in students' performance (Boughey 2000). It is therefore important that instructors' evaluation is timeously done as spelt out in the institutional evaluation of Teaching and Courses institutional policies and other national policies (UFH Evaluation Policy 2008). This is to fulfil and align it with the expectations of HET. This researcher believes that there is a close link between instructors' evaluation and their students' performance. This is because evaluation helps instructors to fill in the teaching gaps in their teaching career.

### Problem Statement

Increased year-in-year-out student attrition rates especially in previously disadvantaged

institutions of higher learning, forms astonishing reports that scholars and institutions of higher learning administrators would not like to keep on hearing. Such reports have been documented in formerly disadvantaged institutions of higher learning. Literature and subjective information on the ground seems to suggest the following as possible underpinnings of the quagmire: inadequate evaluation of the lecturers' teaching content, inadequate evaluation of their pedagogical service delivery; low motivation of the lecturers and therefore negatively impacting upon the quality of teaching, and poor record of carrying out classroom based action research; and gaps pertaining to students' assessments. This justifies the need to critically look at the literature evidence of these gaps with the hope of suggesting how these gaps can be filled up.

### METHODOLOGY

The paper has used literature review methodology to explore perceptions of lecturers in institutions of Higher Learning regarding the assessment and evaluation of student learning using examples from some Black dominated universities in South Africa. It has relied on the researcher's experiential knowledge and observations while working in institutions of higher learning and after studying the Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Training. The paper has also consulted several education oriented papers.

### OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Exploring Evaluation and Assessment Environment Gaps at Some Black Dominated Universities**

##### *Inadequate Lecturers' Evaluation of Their Class Tasks*

Evaluation is a strong tool of quality assurance in an educational context (Boughey 2000). This is because it exposes grey areas that need to be subjected to action research or other conventional researches in order to come up with strategies to improve teaching and learning (Reason 2001; Gibbs 1995). According to Ramsden (1992), evaluation informs good teaching practices and learning instructions. This is because it entails constantly finding out what the effects

of instructions are on learning and modifying those instructions in the light of evidence collected. Where evaluation is well anchored and developed, the institutions have fully fledged separate evaluation centres. Such evaluation centres in Universities such as Fort Hare are also informed by evaluation policies (UFH Evaluation Policy 2008). In some of the universities, for example, evaluation has been a dragged-out process with subjective perceptions that usually it is the lecturers who are applying for promotion who usually apply for evaluation. However, this researcher does not fully agree with those perceptions because in the institution where he works, he always ask the evaluation unit to conduct evaluation for all his modules. However, he believes that all the lecturers should motivate themselves to have their modules evaluated in tandem with student evaluation of their teaching. However, such a process would need the administrators to strongly motivate their staff to have their modules and their teaching evaluated.

Indubitably, failure to have a lecturer's course evaluated by his/her students as well as his/her module evaluated for its content and organization may have implication on deducing the quality of teaching other than relying from the examination results (Kang'ethe 2014). Perhaps these are some of the reasons that could largely be contributing to high student failures and inadequate motivation in many institutions of higher learning making throughput to drop significantly. However, this researcher believes that when lecturers are exposed to courses such as the Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education and Training (PGDHET), they are likely to develop interest in various types of student assessments; and also wish to continuously have their modules evaluated (Kang'ethe 2014). Unarguably, student assessment of their tasks in tandem with the lectures' evaluation of the content and organization of the teaching materials could have an impact in improving students' throughputs. Such a state could have the result of reducing the number of students taking supplementary examinations (Kang'ethe 2014; Luckett and Sutherland 2000).

##### *Inadequate Students' Classroom Assessment*

Strong and effective assessment ensures that students are corrected in their on-going learning process (formative learning) other than wait

to be assessed at the end of the semester through summative examination (Kang'ethe 2014). Strong and effective assessment also ensures that measures to bridge student challenges in learning are nipped in the bud (Luckett and Sutherland 2000; Brown et al. 1997). It also makes the instructor/lecturer be able to refine his/her teaching methodologies to ensure that students are comfortable with his/her teaching; as well as get feedback. It is a way of asserting confidence and providing evidence based proof that learning is indeed taking place within the curriculum or institutional requirements (Luckett and Sutherland 2000).

This researcher perceives that although increasing the level of student assessment sometimes may stress and overload the students, too little assessment may deny the students ample learning (Luckett and Sutherland 2000). This is because inadequate assessment will mean that the instructors/lectures do not get adequate time to identify students' gaps and therefore fill them. In circumstances where students are only subjected to a single assessment, for example, in form of an assignment and that is used to constitute students' duly performance, commonly known as DP, or in most universities 50% of the summative assessment, this may not constitute adequate formative learning. Formative learning should explore as much as possible students' learning gaps. This is especially critical where students come from socio-economic backgrounds and poor learning environments in their secondary schools. Such students may have various learning challenges and impediments that can be tackled with adequate formative assessments. The scenario becomes critical when students have to do the assignment in a group, largely due to the phenomenon of large classes.

This researcher believes that exposure to PGDHET could help lecturers increase their level of student assessments. Indubitably, acquiring the Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education and Training qualification has exposed this researcher to adopt various assessment methods such as peer assessments, self-assessment, one minute assessments which he neither knew nor had motivation to practise them. Too few assessments, this researcher believes could probably explain the poor performance of students in many institutions where assessments are too few (Brown et al. 1997; Kang'ethe 2014).

### ***Little Involvement in Class-based Action Research***

Action research is conducting hands-on research that aims to look for solutions of the problems within the teaching context (Gibbs 1995; McNiff 2005). It is doing the research within a small spell of time and then evaluating to what extent the problem prompting the evaluation research has been met. It entails gathering evidence as practitioners carry out their occupations. It is also an empirically based research backed by evidence on the ground (Creswell 2008). During the year 2012 facilitation of the Higher Education and Training (HET 501) PGD-HET module, all the lectures and their instructor agreed that there was very little action research in the University of Fort Hare. The instructor, therefore, challenged all the lecturers to conduct a mini action research as an assignment that was going to provide both formative and summative examination results (Kang'ethe 2013). With lectures not adequately engaging in action research, this means that students' classroom problems are not subjected to an empirical enquiry (McNiff 2005). This could negatively be affecting scholarship of teaching and learning (Felder 2000; Cambridge 2001).

### **CONCLUSION**

Student assessments and their lecturers' evaluation of the modules they teach are two inextricably linked phenomena necessary to foster sustainable scholarship of teaching and learning. This is because while students' assessments have an impact in filling their learning gaps, lecturers' evaluation help strengthens their pedagogy. It is critical, therefore, that all the institutions of higher learning ensure student assessments and lectures' evaluation of their modules are timeously carried out. Their facilitation and effectuation in various universities would have a far reaching effect in strengthening scholarship of teaching and learning.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Evaluation Critical to Expose Grey Areas for Possible Attention**

Informed by the level of student failures especially in a few Black student dominated institutions, this lecturer believes that evaluation

could expose grey areas within the lecturers' work that would make them change. It is therefore critical that such lecturers' evaluation process is enforced and owned by the academics as well as the administrators. This could be one of the ways to strengthen the students' throughputs.

#### **Evaluation should be Made a Compulsory and an On-going Process**

Evaluation is the key to strengthening a lecturer's knowledge and confidence about his/her performance. It helps him/her in discovering his/her teaching gaps, revealing programme gaps and therefore helps him/her chart the right teaching terrain. It is therefore a quality assurance strategy. This researcher recommends that evaluation of lecturers' modules or the courses they teach be made compulsory in virtually all the institutions where evaluation is weak.

#### **Student Assessment Should be increased**

One of the critical roles of assessment is to ensure that students' learning terrain is tracked and gaps filled timeously. This helps the student to be confident and assertive that he/she is doing the right thing. The opposite of this means that a student would be groping in the dark only to wait his/her summative results that would indicate he/she was not going in the right direction. Assessment is a tool to facilitate students getting feedback of their tasks; and guides the student as to what he/she needs to do to fill in the learning gaps; as well inform him/her the requisite and appropriate materials to use. This lecturer believes that with effective student assessment, the phenomenon of increased failures and repeating of students in various institutions where students' failure is higher could be reduced significantly.

#### **Student Assessment and Evaluation Policies Should be enforced**

In institutions of Higher Learning with higher numbers of students failing or passing marginally, the phenomenon of inadequate student assessments and lecturers' evaluation could be blamed. It is therefore critical that administrators increase policy awareness and enforce student assessments and lecturers' evaluation of the modules they teach. Perhaps having all the lecturers take PGDHET courses could help adequately.

#### **Emphasize Classroom Action Research**

Lectures should be motivated to engage in continuous classroom based action research on various learning problems. This could mean that lectures would be addressing empirically proved problems other than generically groping to solve problems that are apparent but their magnitude may not be very clear in a lecturer's mind.

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