

# A Study of Students' Experiences of Formative and Summative Assessment in Open Distance Learning: Insights from Meta-synthesis

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reports on the analysis of students' experiences of formative and summative assessment in order to articulate new insights relating to the most efficient and effective means of assessing students in distance education contexts. Relatively little research appears to have been carried out to ascertain students' experiences and beliefs regarding formative and summative assessments, and yet this is fundamental knowledge if one is serious about making changes in practice. This systematic document analysis purports to fill the gap in this area and confines itself to students at the University of South Africa (Unisa), a dedicated distance education university. The paper qualitatively surveyed the literature from 2005-2016. This paper was underpinned by the research question: *What are students' experiences of formative and summative assessments in open distance learning?* The analysis produced results that could be used to improve student learning and motivation.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with comparative studies on students' experiences of formative and summative assessments in the context of distance learning. The objective of this meta-analysis was to analyze and synthesize the findings from the literature reviewed. Despite much work having been done over many years, assessment has not been fully transformed to really attend to concerns about learning. However, there are useful studies that have been conducted on a variety of issues such as the challenges and benefits of formative and summative assessment as seen from the students' perspectives. Changed thinking about assessment is needed so that assessment is not mainly about formal structured assessment activities, but is about all those things that enable teachers and learners to make judgments about learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006). There are three main types of assessments that are found in both traditional and distance education namely assessment for learning, assessment of learning and assessment as learning. Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It is the type of assessment that supports the learning process through diagnostic feedback, and again, it is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners

and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (Black and William 2009).

Assessment of learning refers to strategies designed to confirm what students know, demonstrate whether or not they have met curriculum outcomes or goals of their individualized programs, or to certify proficiency and make decisions about students' future programs or placements. Assessment of learning is summative in nature and is used to confirm what students know and can do, to demonstrate whether they have achieved the outcomes, and occasionally to show how they are placed in relation to others. Assessment of learning includes not only tests and examinations, but also a rich variety of products and demonstrations of learning portfolios, exhibitions, performance, presentations, simulations, multimedia projects, and other written, oral, and visual methods. The last type, assessment as learning, is meant to guide and provide opportunities for each student to monitor and critically reflect on his or her learning. In assessment of learning, students are actively engaged in the assessment process, that is, they monitor their own learning. The purpose of assessment as learning is to provide descriptive feedback to peers and self-assessment. Boud and Falchikov (2006) have argued that whatever else it does, assessment should fundamentally be about building learners' ca-

capacity to make informed judgments about their work. It is these two types of assessment that is the focus of this paper.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this paper were first, to explore and describe students' experiences of formative and summative assessment in open distance learning environments. Second, to suggest intervention strategies aimed at providing constructive feedback in order to improve student learning and motivation. All these objectives were formulated in order to address the research question: What are students' experiences of formative and summative assessments in open distance learning? The paper begins by providing a discussion of the theoretical framework, which guided this study. The methodology section is discussed next. This paper concludes by providing a discussion of the research findings, limitations and conclusions.

### Theoretical Framework

The epistemology forming the basis of this paper originates from a social-constructivist paradigm as propounded by John Dewey. Dewey's followers (Piaget and Vygotsky) believed that each individual person perceives the world differently from each other, and constructs knowledge in his or her own way, in other words, each individual has his/her own way of constructing reality. Against this backdrop, this paper was conceptualized within a social-constructivist paradigm. According to Gibbs (2010), the main idea in any assessment is to provide students with constructive feedback that is aimed at motivating them. The paper used social-constructivist framework because of its ability to identify the gaps that exist in the learning process. Through a constructivist-framework one is able to provide relevant intervention strategies by engaging the learners in collaborative learning. It is these intervention strategies that help the students construct new knowledge. Constructivist-interventionist framework is relevant to this paper since it emphasizes and focuses on the importance of feedback as an effective teaching-learning tool. The aim of feedback is to enable the gap between the actual level performance and the desired learning goal to be bridged (Lizzio and Wilson 2008). Con-

structivist pedagogy sees the learner as an active participant in the learning experience rather than a passive vessel to be filled with information (Atherton 2009).

In constructivism, assessment is based not only on tests, but also on student observation, students' work and students' point of view following the notion that knowledge is constructed through observation, reflection and interaction with the surrounding environment such as their peers, teachers or technology (Hussain 2012). The role of the teacher in constructivism is to try to understand how students interpret knowledge and to guide and help them refine their understanding and interpretation to correct any mistaken understandings and improve learned knowledge quality. One of the primary goals leading to the use a constructivist paradigm is the fact that it allows students to be co-creators of knowledge since they take initiative for their own learning. Constructivists suggest that learning is more effective when a student is actively engaged in the learning process rather than attempting to receive knowledge passively. To take this further, a constructivist perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of learning where educators also learn from the students through dialogue and participation in shared experiences (Carless et al. 2011).

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative integrative literature review of interpretive synthesis of data from primary qualitative research studies conducted between 2005 and 2015 worldwide to determine students' perceptions as well as their experiences of formative and summative assessment in open distance learning. Despite the variations from a typical meta-analysis, the researcher began this metasynthesis in the manner common to all literature reviews, that is, by circumscribing a time period for inclusion from 2005 to 2015. The methodology and data collection strategies discussed here were used to answer the following research question: "*What does literature review from primary qualitative studies say regarding students' experiences of formative and summative assessment in higher distance education?*" The review began in 2005, that is at the same time several influential works on qualitative data analysis were published. Whereas a decade seems a long period, the researcher be-

lieved that it allowed time to find enough quality studies to develop themes useful for formative and summative assessment practitioners in distance education.

### **Selection and Identification of Studies**

In order to select and identify studies that were related to the topic and the research question, the researcher completed an electronic literature search by submitting the search terms to the Unisa librarians and other international primary search source indexes or databases that are available for information retrieval such as Pro Quest Dissertation and Theses, EBSCO HOST, Educational Resource Information Centre (ERIC), Google, Google Scholar, SAGE, and Academic Search Premier. Published and unpublished documents such as thesis, dissertations, conference papers, manuscripts, government or agency report, and peer-reviewed studies were also used. Further, studies were also identified by searching bibliographic databases and registers of education research, by hand-searching current and previous studies of relevant journals, and scanning reference lists of already identified reports. At the time of conducting this systematic document review the researcher realized that no search could be exhaustive. Failure to conduct a sufficiently exhaustive search is the most important threat to the validity of any integration. In this case, the researcher stopped searching for more information when the search engines ceased to produce any new relevant studies.

In this review, dissertations and theses were found to be appropriate for this paper because they adhere to the standards of academic rigor required by universities, whereas published reports may be more specifically shaped by editorial policy. The researcher found that dissertations and theses are often particularly useful in providing a more detailed appreciation for what was done in the research and how conclusions were derived.

The search terms for this research study were 'students' perceptions' and 'students' experiences', 'formative and summative assessment', and 'technology enhanced assessment.' Even though the researcher made use of the term "qualitative research" for the searches, a number of good quantitative research studies also surfaced from the search. Before undertaking the screen-

ing process, the researcher was guided by the following set of pre-determined quality assessment criteria:

1. Description of the study: This criterion was very important because a study should be easy for the reader to comprehend, and as a result the study should be logically constructed.
2. Research question: In a good peer-reviewed study, the research question should be well defined because it helps achieve the objectives of the study.
3. Sampling procedures and research settings

Since this was a qualitative research project, purposive sampling was used to locate studies on students' perceptions and experiences regarding formative and summative assessment in open distance learning. This is crucial because every study should show the reader the participants and the places where the study was undertaken and these should be clearly described in order to allow the reader comprehend the research context. Another important aspect, which the researcher considered, was the research method. The methods section should be presented in detail and in a logical fashion so that the reader can determine whether the data collection and analytical methods are adequate for the study under investigation.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

As previously mentioned in the preceding sections, before obtaining the full text of the identified studies, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to the abstracts from electronic databases. For the purpose of setting out the background and context of the review, a wider range of studies, such as commentaries on existing research, and discussion of relevant issues, was initially included. As noted in the background to this review, previous work has been concerned with assessment for formative and summative purposes and the aims of this review were to consider the evidence in relation to students' experiences of formative and summative assessments. The inclusion criteria used here decides which studies should be (and not) included in the review. A pre-developed inclusion criteria ensures transparency and a comprehensive process. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

1. Included studies were to be written in English. This inclusion criterion was due to the researcher's limited command of other languages.
2. Studies were included only if the reports were identifiable as qualitative research investigations in which the researcher(s) investigated students' experiences of formative and summative assessment.
3. Qualitative studies were included if they were published in a peer-reviewed journal, monograph, anthology, masters or doctoral dissertations, and made use of qualitative design and research focus. Furthermore, studies were included if they provided sufficient evidence of a data trail to demonstrate how the data was collected and analyzed.

However, all studies that did not respond to the research question and objectives were considered redundant and consequently they were discarded for use in this study. All studies published before 2005 were not included even though they had information on formative and summative assessment. To minimize bias against non-published research literature, a search through Pro Quest Dissertation and Theses was conducted to locate studies published between 2005 and 2015.

Before these studies were considered for inclusion, they had to pass through various standards of academic rigor for their suitability for inclusion in the final review. After different combinations of search terms and revising search strategies in the various databases, the final outcome of this long search yielded fifteen primary qualitative studies. From the fifteen studies screened, nine were rejected because they either did not directly refer to the students' perceptions or experiences of formative and summative assessment or they had a quantitative research focus. After passing various standards of academic rigor only six studies were selected for the final synthesis. As the concern of the review was to report on students' experiences of formative and summative assessment, most relevant studies were those reported from 2005 onwards.

## RESULTS

The findings in this paper are presented in the form of themes that emerged from the various studies reviewed. The following three major

themes emerged, that is, assessment as a driver of teaching and learning, assessment as feedback and guidance, and cooperative or group learning.

### Theme 1: Assessment Drives Teaching and Learning

In the literature reviewed students talked about the successful use of formative and summative assessment in teaching and learning. Notice in the following comment the student's description of how studying led to learning.

*'He expects us of course to pay attention in class, he expects us to study on our own. I guess it's good he gave us quizzes because that forces you to study specifics. I think it's really important to get that feeling of mastering something for once'* (Houghton et al. 2012).

### Theme 2: Assessment As Feedback and Guidance

The overwhelming emphasis from the students in relation to this theme is that they value personalized feedback and the opportunity to have face-to-face dialogue with their lecturers to facilitate understanding of the feedback. The above quotations reinforce that feedback is crucially important to students in open and distance learning contexts.

Furthermore, this theme relates to the guidance that students should be given when doing their course activities. This theme is in line with Holmberg's (2003: 79) guided didactic conversation theory, which states that: 'Friendly conversation is important to motivate the learners to work hard and achieve the outcomes in both traditional and distance education contexts'. The theme revealed that friendly conversation or dialogue is important to motivate students to work hard and achieve the outcomes. In other words a procedure that proves helpful in traditional education is also applicable in distance education. The study participants saw effective instructor feedback as both helping set the direction for the course and keeping them headed that way. Students acknowledged that they found 'supportive, positive, encouraging and friendly' (Thorpe 2010).

### Theme 3: Group Learning

This theme discovered that group work or collaborative learning plays an important role because it encourages the students to work together. They enjoyed the exchange of information and different points of view as indicated in the following comment:

*'Some of us had set up our own self-help group. There were seven of us originally and six of us got together. At first it was slow going with no one contributing until the last minute. It was a bit off-putting. I was expecting everybody to contribute right at the very beginning. I found nobody had contributed anything when I logged on each day'* (Thorpe 2010: 279).

The evidence from the above quotations indicates that group work plays a very important role in student learning and assessment.

### DISCUSSION

Studies by Evans (2010), Harris (2014), Houghton et al. (2012), Koh (2010), Tan (2008) and Kemp and Friesen (2009) helped answer the research question which is: 'What does literature review from primary qualitative studies say regarding students' experiences of formative and summative assessment in higher distance education?' A phenomenological study by Evans (2010) sought to investigate the lived experiences of faculty members engaged in undergraduate learning outcomes assessment in higher education institutions using structured interviews. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. The intention was to capture the essence of their experiences in the participants' own words. Data was analyzed using Collaizi's (1978) thematic data analysis framework. This framework was used because of its ability to provide step-by-step data analysis procedures. To maintain rigor and credibility triangulation was utilized.

The findings revealed that student involvement in formative assessment is important. A second study was also conducted to investigate the differing perceptions of assessment among students' and staff. The purpose of the study as perceived by both staff and students was to grade or rank student achievement. Findings of the study revealed that lecturers believed assessment should be developmental and that feedback had a valuable role to play, whereas students thought it was more about grading and

had very little to do with improving their own learning. Another study by Harris (2014) examined teachers' experiences and perspectives of administering alternative assessment to students with cognitive disabilities and determined how those experiences informed their perceptions of alternative assessment.

The study utilized a grounded theory methodology to explore the experiences and subsequent perceptions of teachers who have administered the alternative assessment to elementary students with significant cognitive disabilities. Interviews were used to collect data. Digital tapes were transcribed verbatim using Charmaz's (2006) data analysis strategy. Findings of the study revealed that the Georgia alternative assessment is an ineffective tool for measuring teaching and learning of students with cognitive disabilities.

Houghton et al. (2012) conducted a study on staff and students' perceptions and experiences of teaching and assessment in clinical skills laboratories. The study focuses on perceptions of teaching and assessment strategies of the faculty employed at the institution. The study used multiple case study methods of data collection such as document analysis, non-participant observer and interviews. A purposive sampling was employed to select academic staff from five study sites. To analyze the data collected, thematic analytical framework was used. Study rigor was achieved through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Findings from the study revealed that participants in the study underlined the value of having authentic environment.

In his qualitative study entitled, '*Academic Staff Perspectives of Formative Assessment in Education*', Koh (2010: 205) explored the perspectives of twenty educators on formative assessment and feedback of theoretical assessment using qualitative semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed using Collaizi's (1978) thematic data analysis framework. The interview data was analyzed and the following themes emerged, that is, purpose of formative assessment, involvement of peers in the assessment process, ambivalence of timing of assessment, types of formative assessment, and quality of good feedback. To maintain study trustworthiness, data was returned to the participants for review of accuracy of the interview content, which was confirmed. The study found that the

purpose of formative assessment was to give feedback. Tan (2008:15) conducted a study to investigate different ways in which academics experience student self-assessment in higher education.

Kemp and Friesen (2009) conducted a study on '*Student Assessment for Teaching and Learning: Teacher Perceptions and Practices*'. The study chronicles teacher experiences of student assessment in three different universities. The study seeks to give voice to the lecturers' challenges, needs, successes and hopes for improving their practice for the benefit of their students. The study used qualitative survey and focus group methods to produce a description of student assessment in higher education. An online survey was used to gather the perceptions of teachers concerning their assessment practices. A focus group was held in each of the participating institutions to explore the results from the survey in a deeper manner. To analyze its data the study used interpretive thematic data analysis framework. The study revealed that teachers are faced with a number of challenges some of which are time constraints and workload. Further, this researcher discovered that in developing their research methodologies Kemp and Friesen (2009) positioned themselves within the phenomenological philosophy and drew on its major characteristics to determine that the method should be descriptive and qualitative.

Overall, the review done found that all the primary studies included in this study had made use of a qualitative research design. Furthermore, this study found that six of the primary qualitative studies included for synthesis used semi-structured interviews to collect their data. Only a study by Evans (2010) used the questionnaire as its data collection strategy. All the studies clearly indicated how they went about collecting their data from information-rich participants. Studies by Koh (2010), Houghton et al. (2012), Evans (2010), Harris (2014) and Tan (2008) addressed the issue of ethical considerations sufficiently. The study by Houghton et al. (2012) used multiple data collection strategies such as non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Again, this analysis revealed that of the six studies used in this review, most of them used thematic data analysis framework. In summarizing this study, it could be concluded that all the primary studies reviewed were appropriate and relevant since

they addressed the issue of lecturers' experiences regarding student assessment in higher education even though they did not all use the same data collection strategies.

In all the studies reviewed, the researcher discovered that most of them used either cognitive or constructive theoretical underpinnings that were the focus of this research. It could therefore, be said that all the primary qualitative studies reviewed were able to offer insights not only on students' experiences, but on lecturers' as well. Although the researcher cannot claim categorically that the results of these studies converge, however, they certainly confirm the importance and usefulness of formative and summative assessment in student learning. Table 1 presents a summary of the studies and their data collection strategies that were used in this paper.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this paper indicate some fascinating conclusions regarding students' perceptions and experiences of formative and summative assessment practices in open distance and e-learning. As a descriptive qualitative research study, this research paper has provided some important exciting insights about student assessment in open and distance learning contexts. In the light of the issues identified during this document analysis, the review revealed that both formative and summative assessments are important since they improve and motivate student learning. Furthermore, the results of this study revealed that lecturers and students perceive and experience formative and summative assessment as a tool to improve student learning and reflect their teaching practices. Again, this paper has shown that student feedback and student engagement also affect the process of student assessment in a variety of ways.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by the findings from the literature reviewed, the paper offers recommendations for educational practice, theory and further research on student assessment in higher education. The general aim of this paper was to determine the perceptions and experiences of Unisa students with regard to formative and summative assessments. The ultimate aim was to provide student support. As discussed in this paper, assessment

**Table 1: Summary of sampled primary qualitative studies**

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Evans (2010)</i>	<i>Harris (2014)</i>	<i>Houghton (2012)</i>	<i>Kemp and Fritsen (2009)</i>	<i>Koh (2010)</i>	<i>Tan (2008)</i>
<i>Research design</i>	<i>Qualitative design</i>	<i>Qualitative design</i>	<i>Qualitative design</i>	<i>Qualitative design</i>	<i>Qualitative design</i>	<i>Qualitative design</i>
<i>Research Question</i>	What is the meaning of lived experiences of full-time faculty in baccalaureate or master's degree regarding assessment from public US institutions of higher education	How do special education teachers experience the administration of alternative assessment to students with cognitive disabilities?	What are staff and students' perceptions and experiences of teaching and assessment in clinical skills laboratories?	What are teachers' perceptions of student assessment for teaching and learning in higher education?	How do lecturers perceive formative assessment in nurse education?	What was important to each academic in his or her experience of student self-assessment?
<i>Research Objectives</i>	To describe the lived experiences of academics involved in undergraduate student assessment.	To examine teachers' experiences of administering alternative assessment to students with disabilities.	To explore students' perceptions of formative assessment.	To investigate different ways in which academics experience student self-assessment.	To describe the perspectives of educators of nurse education on formative assessment and feedback of theoretical assessment	To investigate different ways in which academics experience student self-assessment.
<i>Sample</i>	A purposeful sample of full-time educators was used.	A purposeful sample of 6 educators was used.	Purposive sampling of academic staff from 5 study sites was used.	Purposeful sampling	Purposeful sampling	16 academics were purposefully selected.
<i>Data Collection</i>	Semi-structured interviews were conducted.	Interviews were conducted to collect data.	Document analysis, non-participant observer, and interviews.	Survey and focus-group interviews.	Qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was adopted.	In-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted.
<i>Data Analysis</i>	Thematic analysis was used.	Thematic-data analyses were used.	Thematic-data analytical framework was used.	Thematic analysis was used.	Thematic-data analysis was used.	Thematic-data analytical framework was used.
<i>Key Findings</i>	Assessment provides opportunity to create meaningful conversations among the faculty.	Alternative assessment is not the best tool for assessing students with cognitive disabilities.	Study revealed that participant underline the value of having authentic environment, like time constraints and workload	The study found that faculty is faced with challenges like time constraints and workload	The study found that the purpose of assessment is to give feedback.	Findings revealed five conceptions that can help to understand student self-assessment.
<i>Rigor</i>	Rigor was achieved by using triangulation.	Member-checks	Credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability.	Member-checks	Data were returned to the participants for review.	Member-check was used.

is central and occupies a vital position in the process of teaching and learning whether in a conventional or distance learning system. The students' success and the success of the institution depend not only on the quality of the learning package that was sent to the student, but also on the quality and scope of the support that the student is given. Despite the fact that there were some limitations, the paper was able to show that indeed if one wants to change the curriculum change the assessment. Based on the documents reviewed and analyzed, the following recommendations were made. Assessment should provide support to learning and it should be integrated within teaching instead of seeing it as a separate structure within the institution. Furthermore, whatever assessment does, it must support and motivate student learning.

This paper found that student feedback is the cornerstone of student assessment in distance education. It is therefore important for the faculty to explain to the students what assessment feedback is for and how to use it by integrating it more clearly into the teaching and learning processes. Another factor, which is prominent in student assessment, is the issue of quality. Applying the principle of quality entails evaluating services and products against set standards, with a view to improvement, renewal or progress. Everybody who participates in any way in the development or implementation of assessment system is responsible for helping ensure that assessment and examinations are of very high quality.

Against this backdrop, this paper recommends that quality must be a concern at every stage of student teaching and learning. The researchers have enough evidence that assessment methods have a significant impact on student teaching and learning. However, there is a need for further research. Without further research, it is difficult to determine how assessment impacts student learning in distance education and the ways that assessment can be improved. In the light of the recommendation made above, further research could also be conducted to determine the effectiveness of lecturers' and students' perceptions/conceptions and experiences of formative and summative assessment in open distance contexts. While there is convincing evidence from literature review that formative assessment is highly effective in raising levels of student achievement there is still a

room to extend and strengthen research in this area.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any other research undertaking, this document review was faced with challenges and criticisms, which include among others the following, that is, data collection and analyses. When conducting and analyzing primary qualitative studies for this paper, one major challenge the researcher encountered was the limited number of qualified qualitative primary studies. To deal with this challenge it became imperative for the researcher to evaluate the quality of available studies.

The researcher assessed the issue of quality versus quantity in context, that is, is the topic under study a new area of investigation? What is the estimated number of relevant primary studies out there? The researcher decided to use quality rather than quantity to guide decisions regarding the adequacy of available studies if a choice had to be made.

According to Xu (2007: 246), one should consider a document review premature if there are fewer than 10-12 quality studies on an interesting phenomenon. Fortunately, in this paper the researcher obtained 15 primary qualitative studies, which are more than adequate to continue with the review. Another important challenge was the setting up of inclusion and exclusion criteria. However, this challenge was dealt with by setting parameters for time cut-off, location, subjects, language of publication and nature of publication. Thirdly, availability and accessibility of qualified primary studies was also problematic. To deal with this challenge a systematic and exhaustive literature search using multiple databases and a combination of electronic and hand searches was conducted. Another limitation was that some of the data sources did not describe the theoretical frameworks and data collection strategies.

Secondly, data analysis was also a challenge. When dealing with document analysis, the researcher discovered that there were studies, which contained both quantitative and qualitative data. When it was realized that there were qualitative primary studies that used mixed methods, qualitative component for inclusion into the study was extracted. In certain circumstances studies were based on identical samples. This



challenge was dealt with by including both or all studies in each report on different aspects or parts of the results. Further, a decision was taken to include each study on condition the findings were not repetitive. Another challenge was that of separating relevant data for analysis and validity of findings. To deal with this challenge the researcher engaged the services of two researchers with expertise in student assessment to select studies for use in this synthesis.

Further, the issue of extracting primary qualitative studies was also problematic because during the search for these studies, the researcher came across very good quantitative primary studies that were relevant to the research topic, but was forced to eliminate them on the basis that they were not qualitative in nature.

Had it not been the pre-determined clause “only peer-reviewed primary qualitative studies should be included” set at the beginning of the search, the studies were going to be included. To enhance the validity and credibility of the study’s findings the document triangulation and audit trail were used.

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