

Use of alternative assessments in institutions of higher education in lesotho

Dr Matselane Belina Khaahloe
Lesotho College of Education

Theme: Social Justice

Sub-theme: Scaling up Quality Education for All"

Introduction

This paper reports the findings from a broad Ph.D. study (Khaahloe 2008) that investigated the quality of assessment practices and the extent to which alternative assessments are used in institutions of higher education in Lesotho. The specific topic of this study is "Alternative quality assessment practices in institutions of higher education in Lesotho. The paper focused on the extent to which alternative assessments was utilised in higher education in Lesotho. Despite the fact that quality is a re-emerging global issue (Ecclestone 1996); quality improvement in education is at the top of most of the agendas worldwide (Sallis1993:35). Lewis & Smith (1994: Preface) highlights that the renewed focus on quality of higher education stems from several forces which impact on the quality of higher education. Students as valued citizens should be better prepared to meet future academic and business challenges hence assessment should provide valid evidence of students' capabilities to the stakeholders.

The definitions of quality are highly contextual and multidimensional because the problems of individual institutions are also contextual (Arcaro 1995:12). The operational definition of quality in this paper is fitness of purpose.

Background of the study

There is a growing mistrust of paper and pencil examinations globally. They are criticised for their detrimental effects on instruction and students. Eckstein and Noah (1992: preface); Smith (1996:88) and Adams (1996:127) points to the problems and weaknesses of paper and pencil assessment, and more in particular tests and examinations. These include among others: focus on irrelevant concepts that do not impact directly on students' lives; biasness that results from factors such as use of foreign languages, gender bias, and favour of certain ethnic groups; discrimination against other learners such as deprived students, students who live in poor socio-economic conditions and the less gifted learners which may cause learning problems

and lowered self-esteem in learners; unnecessary academic overloading or voluminous factual knowledge provided to students in preparation for examinations; alarming failure rates as a consequence of overloading, biasness and unreliable grading; superficial, rote learning and negligence of higher order thinking skills such as reasoning, problem solving, imagination and independent inquiry and; mismatch between education and job market that results in lack necessary skills required in the workplace (Abruscado 2000:33). These necessitate institutions of higher education to seek more valid alternative ways of assessing students. It is envisaged that use of alternative assessment practices may provide reliable evidence of the competences that are developed in the prospective labor force for any country. Alternative assessments entail a range of assessment methods designed to take the place of or to supplement paper and pencil tests and examinations (Schwartz Webb 2002:61). These may involve use of projects, extended essays, portfolios, paper presentations, exhibitions, examinations and tests to assess learners' achievements (Hart 1994:105).

Immerging Issues in assessment

Assessment of student achievements is subjected to several challenging and emerging socio-economic factors worldwide. These factors hit hard on the quality of assessment practices (Lewis and Smith 1994: preface). According to Brown, Race and Smith (1996: Preface) and Lewis and Smith (1994: Preface), some of these challenging and problematic factors include inter alia:

- **Accountability for public funds:** As a result of a growing dissatisfaction with the quality of higher education worldwide, there is an increasing pressure for more accountability in the use of public funds. The funding bodies demand high standards and that assessment practices should be more competence-based. In Lesotho, the government is concerned about the standards in education and the value for money spent on education by the public (Ministry of Education Report 2000:32).
- **Changing nature of higher education:** The world in which institutions of higher education is operating, is changing fast and so the structure and the environment of higher education. This is because of, among others, increased participation of parents, students and other stakeholders, student diversity, as well technological advancement (Furlong and Smith 1996:33).

- **Economic growth and market forces:** Sustainable development and economic growth demand a better educated workforce that is capable of delivering improved public services. There is also growing competition for finances and enrolling students in higher education demand high performance standards to satisfy stakeholders.
- **The changing and existing policies in higher education:** In Lesotho, some of existing policy statements emphasise the need for continuous quality improvement in all sectors of education (Ministry of Education Report 2000:32).
- **Innovative ways of instructional delivery:** Current theories of learning, such as Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, constructivism and learning styles theories emphasise application of thinking skills (Adams 1996:236).
- **Globalisation:** Formulation of global standards, objectives and principles of good practices as globalisation forces countries into greater international interdependence Smith (1996:89).
- **Technology:** Ever-changing technological demands that continually change the world of work and societies necessitates that quality of assessment practices should change and adapt with changing contexts and changing requirements of technology (Furlong and Smith 1996:33).

These dynamics and challenges of education impact on higher education to the extent that the nature of higher education is in a continuing flux. More than fourteen years ago, Kellaghan and Greaney (1992:65) indicated that the problem of the unsatisfactory quality of education was not new to Lesotho.

Higher education in Lesotho

Higher education in Lesotho is a sector comprising of post high school institutions which offer degrees and at least diploma programs. Five institutions of higher education were selected for this study. Some of the aims of higher education in Lesotho also indicate a striving towards quality and excellence. These are:

- To equip high-level personnel with the knowledge and skills required for socio- economic advancement.
- to establish quality assurance and improvement mechanisms and to

improve efficiency and relevance of higher education such that it is responsive to the demands of the labour market (Ministry of Education: Educational Policy Guidelines).

These promising good intentions are however subjected to challenges such as:

- Increased access to higher education on equitable terms; improvement of efficiency and relevance of higher education so that it responds to the demands of the labour market, both locally and internationally and;

- massification of higher education which refers to alarming increase of Students' enrolments may have negative on the quality of higher education (Ministry of Education: Lesotho Education Sector Strategic Plan 2005-2015 2005).

These challenges pose a major concern on the quality of higher education.

Problem statement

There is a continuing overdependence of assessment practices on paper and pencil tests and examinations in institutions of higher education in Lesotho. Assessment practices are often limited to paper and pencil tests, and as a result, use of traditional assessment is dominant and little recognition is given to the use alternative assessments practices. The examinations weigh more than coursework scores. This problem is perpetuating despite the worldwide call to move away from traditional ways of assessing students (Lewis & Smith 1994: Preface).

According to the Lesotho Government Report, in Kellaghan and Greaney (1992:135), the government has been aware of many problems with current instruction that stem from emphasis given to preparation for summative examinations, condoning attainment of critical objectives for economic development. Gardner (1993:29) strongly recommends that assessment of students should occur in different ways to match the differing ways in which intelligence is manifested.

Against the background of the stated problem of the research, the following main problem question and subsequent sub-questions guided the study.

To what extent are alternative assessments utilised in higher institutions of Lesotho?

Sub-questions:

- To what extent are alternative assessments practices utilised in institutions of higher education in Lesotho?
- What recommendations can be made with regard to the use of alternative assessment in the higher education system in Lesotho?

Purpose of the study

This paper reports the findings on the extent to which alternative assessments are used in higher education in Lesotho. The following objectives directed the study:

- To determine the extent to which alternative assessments practices were utilised in institutions of higher education in Lesotho.
- To make recommendations on the basis of the findings of the study.

Significance of the study

According to Adams (1996:235) the debate on how to assess comes to the surface with each new trend in education. This research may be useful:

- To close the hiatus in the existing knowledge on the use of alternative assessment practices in institutions of higher education in Lesotho and other areas with similar problems.
- To make informed inferences and recommendations on the use of alternative assessment practices to improve the quality of assessment.
- The study may also be a valuable staff training and for policy makers.

Literature review

Brief conceptual perspectives about alternative assessments are provided.

Definitions of alternative assessments

Alternative assessments may be defined as:

- assessment methods designed to take the place of, or to supplement traditional tests (Hart 1994: 6);
- assessment that requires a student to perform, demonstrate, construct and develop a product or a solution to a problem under defined conditions and standards (Khattri and Sweet 1996:3) or

- assessment that measures learners' ability to use acquired knowledge to solve novel problems and simulated exercises that to elicit original responses (Gipps 1998:98).

The researcher defines alternative assessments as the implementation of varied assessment methods, including paper and pencil assessment and avoiding over-dependence on any one method.

Main advantages of alternative assessments

Alternative assessments have some advantages over traditional forms of assessment. Their main advantages include:

- Instilling autonomous learning which promotes self-referenced growth in which self-determination, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-reflection and creativity are encouraged;
- achievement of more than one objective is in one task;
- multidimensional and holistic view of student performance which illustrates various domains of student attitudes and capabilities are provided;
- meaningful learning is enhanced because interdisciplinary skills and knowledge are used;
- promotion and support of learning are enhanced and as such the students gain confidence in their abilities;
- contextualized and integrated assessment and learning that are socially situated as knowledge is constructed by working groups (Anderson and Specks 1998:55).

Research methodology and procedures

A multi-method approach, embracing both qualitative and quantitative methods, was employed to collect data through semi-structured questionnaires. Lecturers' and students' questionnaires sought the opinions on the extent to which alternative assessments are used in institutions of higher education in Lesotho

Unstructured interviews were used to complement and validate data collected through the questionnaires and the findings of the empirical study. .Multi-method approach assisted in achieving triangulation. Reliability was enhanced through a test-retest pilot study to determine the feasibility of the questionnaires.

The sample of the study

Representative numbers of lecturers and students in the selected institutions of higher education in Lesotho were conveniently selected while three instructional leaders (HODS and deans) were purposively selected. Five selected public institutions served as clusters.

Presentation, analysis and discussion of data

Data collected through semi-structured interviews were presented in text, while data collected through semi-structured questionnaires were presented in tabular and text-form. Statistical analysis was employed to analyse the data collected through the questionnaires for both students and the lecturers. Department statistics (UFS) contributed to simplify and reduce the task of analysing the quantitative data in the study.

Responses of lecturers on the extent to which they use of alternative practices

The lecturers' questionnaire requested the respondents to indicate how often they use the provided types of techniques of alternative assessments (Table1).

Table 1: The lecturers use of alternative assessments practices

Alternative assessments	Very frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
	5	4	3	2	1
	Positive responses (%)		Negative responses (%)		
Experiments	7	19	26	23	25
Projects	7	26	48	11	8

Portfolios	5	12	22	17	45
Products	2	27	35	22	16
Performance of an action	3	26	33	25	14
Demonstrations (exhibitions)	11	19	24	27	19
Field work	11	17	38	16	19
Extended essays	22	32	23	10	12
Average percentage (%) scores	$\frac{246}{8} = 31\%$		$\frac{558}{8} = 70\%$		

Based on data in Table 1 it was concluded that:

- Assessment of students' experiments; projects; products, performance of actions, as well as fieldwork were executed only occasionally.
- Portfolio assessment was never used.
- Exhibitions (demonstrations) were rarely used.
- Extended essay assessment was frequently used.

The overall evidence of limited use of alternative assessments was clearly exhibited by the low scores of the positive responses. The use of portfolio assessment is conspicuously scarce. All these results necessitate the need for systematic policy-driven use of alternative assessments.

Responses of the students on use of alternative assessments practices

The student questionnaire required students to indicate the extent to which students were assessed using alternative assessments techniques as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' responses on use of alternative assessments practices

Different types of alternative assessments	Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never
	4	3	2	1
	Positive responses (%)		Negative responses (%)	
Experiments	15	25	36	25

Projects	22	32	28	18
Portfolios	10	28	30	22
Products	16	27	28	30
Performance of an action	18	23	25	33
Demonstrations or exhibitions	18	32	25	25
Fieldwork	20	31	29	20
Extended essays	22	37	27	14
Paper and pencil assessments.	48	32	9	11
Average percentage (%) scores	$\frac{456}{9} = 51\%$		$\frac{435}{9} = 48\%$	

Contrary to the information from the lecturers views (Table1), the information in Table 2 indicated that the quality of assessment practices relating to the use of alternative assessments was good. However, it was clearly indicated that:

- Portfolio and product assessment had the highest numbers of negative response.
- In contrast to lecturers' views, it is clear that the students are of the view that assessment of students' portfolios and students' own experiments are sometimes used.
- Students' projects, demonstrations or exhibitions, fieldwork and extended essays were mostly used.
- Assessment of product and performance of action were never used.
- Paper and pencil assessment got the highest positive responses they are always used and most of the time.

Interview questions and the responses

Information was sought to answer the questions that follow. The samples of responses are shown.

1) Do any policy guidelines exist with regard to the use of alternative assessments?

(... not aware if there is any) ;(There is none to my knowledge.); (No! No! Not there!)

2) What is your opinion on the quality of assessment practices?

(Some lecturers set very good examinations while some set faulty examinations. ... concern from the external examiners about the quality of some of the examination papers.);

(The quality is good but examinations need to be supplemented with practicals... for students' differences. Group projects are possible because students are too many);

(Not very good.... lecturers use past papers..., it is content based and the curriculum is exam based .The is always a race to catch up with the syllabus.).

3) What do you see as major quality aspects of assessment practices in your institution?

"... internal moderation of tests and examinations".

"... encouraged to use alternative assessments by the management... some follow the advice ... use assessments such as oral presentation and oral examinations. I myself use class presentations."

"Assessment of students prepares them for work."

"Assessment encourages practical work because it incorporates assessment of practical work"

4) What do you see as major weaknesses of assessment practices?

"... limited supervision for preparation for examinations such as construction of questions."

"Assessment is theory –based, not sufficient due to high student- lecturer ratio. The student numbers are just too high."

"There is also not enough resources"

"...financial constraints for students' projects; ... depending only on simple projects for growing vegetables. ...always no enough money to buy plant"

5) What quality improvement would you regarding assessment practices?

"Policy with regard to internal moderation should be formulated and implemented.."

More practical aspect is necessary in assessment, more learning resources and more manpower ..., there should be a tutors, assessors and lecturers. Students should be attached.)

"Financial support for students' projects is necessary. It is necessary to stick to the budget."

Conclusions and findings

This paper reports the conclusions of the study with regard to the extent to which alternative assessments were used in institutions of higher education as thus:

Use of students' portfolios is limited in institutions of higher education in Lesotho, it is indicated that they were sometimes used or never used.

It is clear that the use alternative assessments were found to be very marginal in institutions of higher education in Lesotho. The problem of the limited use of alternative assessments and the overuse of traditional assessments was uncovered and confirmed. In line with this, what transpired, as mentioned earlier, was that extended essay assessment as well as pencil and paper assessment was mostly used, while alternative assessment techniques such as portfolio and performance assessment in particular, were minimally applied.

The students were of the opinion that the student experiments, demonstrations or exhibitions and fieldwork were mostly used. Despite the conflicting views, the students shared the same views as the lecturers in that extended essays were mostly applied; and that projects and products were sometimes used while portfolios were minimally used.

In congruence to the conclusion drawn from the lecturers' questionnaire, it was also inferred from students' questionnaire that paper and pencil assessment was generally the most common approach to assess students in institutions of higher education in Lesotho.

The conclusions on interviews revealed the following important aspects of assessment of students' achievements in institutions of higher education in Lesotho:

Policy on general assessment of student achievement exists in higher education in Lesotho. However, there is an inevitable gap in the assessment policy regarding the use of alternative assessments. The need to use varied methods and strategies of assessment is further suggested.

Assessment of practical work, adequate staffing and availability of other relevant resources were also emphasised as major requirements to implement alternative assessments strategies successfully.

The problem of this study was once again confirmed. There was also an overwhelming evidence of the excessive use of traditional assessment and very marginal use of alternative assessment tools. This indicated a clear gap in the use of alternative assessments, more particularly, with regard to the use of portfolios and performance assessment. However, Gipps (1998:78) is of the opinion that traditional assessment, and especially paper and pencil examinations, still hold the status of raising educational standards in developing countries. The study confirmed that examinations may not be abandoned totally in Lesotho, but may be used together with some forms of alternative assessments to suit the existing economic context of Lesotho.

Use of alternative assessment practices may address the challenges and problems regarding the quality of assessment practices in institutions of higher education in Lesotho. Despite all the criticisms and the growing mistrust in paper and pencil assessment, examinations still play a prominent role in monitoring the quality of education systems in most countries worldwide hence they may not be totally abandoned.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that it is necessary to close a police gap through formulation of relevant policy guidelines for effective implementation of alternative assessment practices.

Assessment approaches and strategies should be varied by reducing overdependence on traditional assessment. Ashcroft (1995:129) asserts that standards may be maintained by the use of varied assessment approaches and techniques as best practices for continuous quality improvement.

Sound financial support for the assessment of students in higher education is necessary. Students' projects should be supported and proactive planning and efficient budgeting are necessary and students should be attached to workplaces.

Possibilities for further research

For continuous quality improvement, intensive research should be carried out on the following:

Benchmarking assessment practices for continuous quality improvement amongst local and or international institutions of higher education.

Identifying alternative assessment practices that may be adopted to improve the quality of assessment practices in context of Lesotho economic status.

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