



STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF LECTURERS' ASSESSMENTS: A CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST, GHANA

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Abstract:

Assessment approaches employed by lecturers in higher education institutions play a significant role in the quality of teaching and learning. While instructors see the goals of the curriculum as basics for school assessments, learners have their own perception of assessments which shape their future learning activities. This study aimed at examining students' perception of lecturers' assessments at the University of Cape Coast. An explanatory sequential design was adopted by first selecting 830 students through a multi-stage sampling procedure and later, randomly sampled 12 students to be interviewed based on the quantitative results. A standardised questionnaire called "Students' Perception of Assessment Questionnaire" (SPAQ) was adapted and used to gather the survey data. An interview guide was employed to collect the qualitative data. Students were of the view that assessments in their institution are congruent with their learning activities. Further analysis discovered that assessments in the university, as perceived by the students, failed to reflect the activities of the world of work. Conclusions and recommendations were outlined based on the outcome of the study.

Keywords: assessment, tasks, authenticity, planned learning, university students, higher education

1. Introduction

The assessment approaches employed by instructors in institutions of higher education play a significant role in the quality of teaching and learning (Fernandes, Flores, & Lima, 2012; Flores, Veiga Simão, Barros, & Pereira, 2015; Hue, Leung, & Kennedy, 2014; Pereira, Flores, & Niklasson, 2015). Thus, teaching and learning activities must be consistent with assessment approaches, by taking into consideration the learning objectives (Biggs, 2003).

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The use of a given assessment procedure and its suitability to teaching and learning objectives are, thus, of supreme significance in the educational arena.

Apart from learning objectives, which is of prime importance, other several factors (such as the content being assessed, class size, the grade level of students, subjects being studied, among others) influence the choice and use of specific assessment procedures (Biggs, 2003; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Watering, Gijbels, & Dochy, 2008). It must be emphasised that these assessment approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. The traditional assessment approaches, for example, may not be appropriate for assessments which require behavioural outcomes, and may as well inspire memorisation and reproduction of what students have learnt throughout instruction (Biggs, 2003; Pereira & Flores, 2012). Existing literature on assessment has discovered that traditional assessments, like multiple choice or true/false tests, encourage low levels of comprehension and application (Dochy, Segers, Gijbels, & Struyven, 2007; Quansah, 2018), reproduction of facts, and may also inspire students to adopt shallow learning style (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997).

The alternative assessment approaches, like collaborative assessment, portfolios, self- and peer assessment, projects, simulations, among others (Struyven et al., 2005; Flores et al., 2015; Pereira et al., 2015; Webber, 2012), on the other hand, stimulate collaborative learning, promote deep learning and professional attitudes, and new skills development. These approaches also facilitate effective learning (Birenbaum & Feldman, 1998; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005; Tang, Lai, Arthur, & Leung, 1999), promotes independence, sense of reflection and responsibility (Sambell & McDoweel, 1998), and influence optimism in learning (Sluijsmans, Dochy, & Moerkerke, 1998). These approaches also offer learners with feedback about their achievements (Brown et al., 1997), and prepare them for the world of work (Biggs, 2003).

In most tertiary educational institutions across the globe, assessments are executed in an outmoded way and highly centred on examinations, assignments and other forms of traditional assessmentsⁱⁱ (Boud, 2009). Boud (2009) further mentions that assessment activities in most universities are incongruent with students' learning, and as well fails to reflect the activities occurring in the business world. Other scholars have also argued that instructors in higher education institutions have conventionally focused on preparing learners for knowledge acquisition instead of life-long learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Fook & Sidhu, 2011, Quansah & Asamoah, 2019; Quansah, Ankoma-Sey, & Asamoah, 2019).

According to Segers, Gijbels, and Thurlings (2008), the learning styles adopted by students in institutions of higher education have not been the best. Several students have resorted to the "chew-and-pour" style of learning and emphasis has been placed on

ⁱⁱ Traditional assessments are the conventional approaches of testing in schools which normally produces written document like class tests and quizzes. These assessments consist of tasks which is usually conducted by the teachers to measure how much the students have learnt over a period of instruction (Quansah, 2018). Examples are short answers, true/false tests, multiple-choice tests, and some essay type tests.

attaining certificates rather than attaining the required competencies (Baah-Boateng, 2013). This has been attributed, partly, to the kind of assessment procedures employed by lecturers (Drew, 2001; Segers et al., 2008; Quansah & Asamoah, 2019). Other studies also have confirmed that the learning style adopted by students are influenced by the form of assessment tasks and assessment approaches used by the instructor (Struyven et al., 2005; Fletcher, Meyer, Anderson, Johnston, & Rees, 2012). According to Biggs (2003), the issue of students adopting a shallow learning approach, most often, has to do with assessment tasks, which is linked to teachers' classroom practices and the alignment with the teaching objectives.

It must be stated that learners first pay attention to the nature of the assessment tasks and, then based on this, construct a 'picture' of the curriculum and future assessment in which they will be involved in (Dochy & McDowell, 1997; Meyers & Nulty, 2009; Ramsden, 2004). Gielen, Dochy, and Dierick (2003) also argued that the way students prepare themselves for an assessment depends on how they perceive the assessment (before, during and after the assessment). This suggests that if students' learning outcomes are to be in line with the course or programme objectives, then, students' perception of assessment is very critical. Understanding students' perception of assessment helps to better appreciate the way students learn and how well they are preparing themselves for the business world (Fletcher et al., 2012). It is, therefore, important to examine the students' perception of assessment in higher education institutions.

Assessments in the University of Cape Coast (UCC) are, at large, a 'sit-down' examination where students are assembled in a confined place and administered a test. These forms of assessments are usually seen in two forms: continuous assessment and end-of-semester examination. The continuous assessment component consists of take-home assignments, class quizzes and tests, term papers, and practical work (Academic Programmes, Policies & Regulations for Undergraduate Studies, 2017). The academic policy for the university requires that the continuous assessment component offer the students the chance to demonstrate their abilities on a wider variety of learning tasks and a broader variety of work environment than is possible under formal examination conditions. End-of-semester examination, on the other hand, is a largely "paper and pencil test" and takes different forms depending on the course and programme.

With the extensive use of traditional forms of assessment in UCC, potential issues regarding students learning are of concern. Our observations have revealed to us that assessments in UCC largely focuses on quizzes and end-of-semester examinations. We have come across students who have lamented over the "chew-and-pour" approach to assessment and learning by lecturers and students, respectively. This suggests that students have formed their perception of assessments employed by lecturers in the institution. In this study, we explore the perception students have concerning the lecturers' assessments in UCC.

In our search for literature, we found out that several studies conducted on students' perception of assessment have placed much emphasis on feedback, formative

assessment, summative assessment practices, and fairness of assessment (e.g., Brown & Wang, 2011; Fernandes, Flores, & Lima, 2012; Wren, Sparrow, Northcote, & Sharp, 2009). This study, takes a different turn, by examining how students perceive assessment tasks in UCC in terms of its congruence with planned learning and whether it reflects activities of the real-life world of work. Also, the majority of these studies were conducted in other countries and at different educational levels (i.e., high school), where the education systems seem to differ from that of Ghana (Kefela, 2010). It is only recently that Quansah and Asamoah (2019) surveyed the perception of university students regarding authentic assessment in higher education institutions in Ghana. In their study, students from several institutions responded to the survey instrument, however, their analysis failed to capture institutional-based results. The results may differ from one institution to another. Again, their study was quantitative and, as such, did provide further interpretations and more insight into the situation. In this study, the explanatory sequential design was utilised to provide further clarification of the quantitative results.

1.1 Theory of Constructive Alignment and the Context of the Study

The Constructive Alignment (CA) theory is based on two fundamental concepts: constructive and alignment (Biggs, 1996). According to Biggs, the “constructive” aspect states that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities. The alignment aspect, according to Biggs (1996), refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes.

This study seeks to find out students' perception of assessments. Just like what is done in any other university, lecturers in UCC assess their students after teaching to examine the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Therefore, lecturers often plan the instructional objective for a course, then devise the teaching and learning activities, and then carry out the assessment. As have been earlier indicated, when students enroll on a course, they are likely to first find out how the course is being assessed and then decide on the learning activities they need to engage in to meet the assessment requirements (Quinn, 2015). If, however, a course curriculum is designed in such a way that when students work towards meeting the assessment requirements, they are achieving the purposes and outcomes of the course, then, assessment as a ‘lever’ has a valid educational purpose. In short, if the ‘planned’ objective and the attained/actual learning outcome are the same, then students will engage in the desired learning activities.

As part of the objectives of undergraduate programmes in UCC, it is expected that the students should be able to develop self-confidence, innovate habits of honest scholarship and adopt a constructive and development-oriented approach to problem-solving (Academic Programmes and Policies and Regulations for Undergraduate Studies, UCC, 2017). It is the objective of the university to also equip students with specialised knowledge and skills needed for the pursuit of careers in different sectors of the economy (Academic Programmes and Policies and Regulations for Undergraduate

Studies, UCC, 2017). It is, thus, expected that students who have gone through any undergraduate programme in UCC, depending on their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), should be able to demonstrate these abilities, skills and competencies to match their CGPA.

In line with the theory of CA, it is expected that assessment in UCC should seek to gather valid and reliable information about students' learning which is expected to be consistent with planned objectives of courses or programmes in the university. It is vital to reiterate that assessment is much more important to students' learning than what is taught (Biggs, 2003). Therefore, examining students' perception of lecturers' assessment in the university is necessary to further investigate whether students' actual learning outcome is consistent with the planned programme/course objectives. Biggs theory of CA is useful for reminding curriculum/course designers, of the need for coherence between all the elements of the curriculum (Biggs 1999; Biggs & Tang, 2011). The course purpose, outcomes, teaching methods and especially, the assessment methods (approaches and criteria) should all be aligned to ensure that the desired learning is achieved.

1.2 The Purpose and Scope of the Study

Students are required to prepare themselves by attending lectures and learning materials presented to them by the course instructors to excel in their examination. Existing literature, as discussed earlier, have alluded to the fact that students, after being assessed, build their perception based on the assessment system in the institution and this influences their learning. In this study, we examined how students perceive assessment tasks presented to them in their institution. Particularly, the study examined whether assessment tasks in the institution: (1) matches learning objectives of the courses students take, and (2) reflects real-life activities and events which they are likely to encounter in the world of work.

2. Research Methods

An explanatory sequential design was employed for the conduct of this study. This research design is appropriate for this study because we first gathered data from a large pool of students and a quantitative analysis was conducted, and later, specific results from the quantitative analysis were followed up using a qualitative approach. The intent is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the initial quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

The study targeted level 100 to 400 students in the UCC. Level 500 and 600 students were not involved due to that fact that they were often on the field/on-site and did not frequently engage in classroom activities. Through a multi-stage sampling procedure, 830 students were selected to participate in the study, however, 630 of the respondents participated completely. Out of the sample of 630, 422 of them were males (67%) whereas 208 were females (33%). This suggests that the responses were dominated by male students since they were approximately two-third of the sampled respondents.

Students were sampled from four colleges in the university: College of Education Studies (CoES) - 191, College of Health and Allied Sciences (CoHAS) - 64, College of Humanities and Legal Studies (CoHLS) - 246, and College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences (CoANS) - 129. For students who were sampled under CoES pursued education programmes like Arts, Basic Education, Accounting, Science, and Social Science. For CoHAS, the students were pursuing Biomedical Science and Nursing. Students under CoHLS pursued programmes like Accounting, Hospitality Management, Art, Population and Health, and Social Science. Students reading Chemistry, Agriculture and Laboratory Technology were sampled to represent CoANS.

A standardised questionnaire called "Students' Perception of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ)" developed and validated by Darrell Fisher, Bruce Waldrup and Jeffery Dorman in 2005 was adopted for this study. The items were on a four-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). The questionnaire had 2-dimensions: assessment tasks congruence with planned learning and authenticity of assessment tasks. The scales yielded a reliability coefficient of .79 and .83 for the first and second scale respectively. Results from confirmatory factor analysis revealed factor loadings between .58-.89. An interview guide, on the other hand, was utilised to obtain the qualitative data.

A survey was first conducted with the 830 students to quantitatively examine the perception of students on assessment tasks congruence with planned learning and authenticity of assessment tasks. After the quantitative results, four students from each college were sampled based on their responses from the survey. These students were randomly sampled from those with the predominant view from the quantitative strands of analysis. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, volition, protection of vulnerable participants and anonymity were emphasised in the process of data collection, both the survey and the semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2012). The data were gathered after obtaining ethical clearance from the Ethical Review Board of the CoES, UCC with reference number CES-ERB/UCC.EDU/18-11. The quantitative data were gathered with the help of six trained research assistants whereas the qualitative data was gathered by the authors.

One-sample t-test analysis was used to analyse the quantitative survey data. For inferential analysis, the researcher checked for the normality assumptions together with other significant assumptions depending on the type of statistical analysis. For the interviews, the audio data were first transcribed and thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006) were obtained to analyse the data. Pseudonyms were used in ensuring the anonymity of the responses provided.

3. Results

3.1 Students' Perception of Assessment

Results in Table 1 presents the analysis of responses on students' perception of assessment.

Table 1: Students' Perception of Assessment

Dimensions	No. of items	Test value	Test variable	df	t	p-value	Decision
Congruence of assessment with planned learning	7	17.5	22.45	629	4.40	.000*	Assessment is congruent
Authenticity of assessment	9	22.5	20.44	629	6.54	.000*	Assessment not authentic

*significant at $p < .001$

It was revealed that students were of the view that assessment is congruent with students' planned learning, $t(629)=4.397, p < .001$. A follow up revealed that students perceived that assessment tasks developed by lecturers emphasised so much on the content taught. However, the students interviewed expressed concerns about the nature of tasks; most tasks demanded the recall of facts and emphasised less application. The following are some of the excerpts:

"Looking at the courses I take this semester, the lecturers assess the class on what they have taught. My only concern is that the questions are "chew-and-pour". So I always have to read in-between lines of the materials to be able to do well." (Excerpt from Akkpolo)

"I must be honest the test we take, that is quizzes and end-of-semester, put a lot of cognitive demands on us. One need to memorise the lecture notes and reproduce when the need arises. Sometimes, I try to understand just for my development and not for examinations." (Excerpt from Bubuny)

"The assessments in this university are largely the form which students need to sit down exams. In instances like this, students need to read their notes and answer the given questions off-head...there is a little avenue to apply what you have learnt in class." (Excerpt from Quoesir)

Other interviewees believed that they have relied on past questions as a means through which they perform well. Closely examining the excerpts appear to us that these students who focus on past questions do so because they have found it to be rewarding, and hence, such practice. The interviewees said:

"Normally, the content of assessment tasks reflects whatever we did during lectures. In most cases, the questions demand remembering what you have learnt. There are some courses you need past questions and you will go through with ease." (Excerpt from Yinkule)

"When I came here, I mean to this university, my senior I met from SHS called me and gave me all his past questions because we happen to pursue the same programme. He added that I should always study these past questions after I have studied my lecture notes. I did that and it has helped me." (Excerpt from Kedey)

Another interviewee narrated her ordeal when she was first admitted to the university. She indicated how she wanted to position herself for university education but met a different story. She said:

"Let me tell you this: when I came to the first year, I was reading some many books from the library, thinking that this practice will help me understand the issues discussed in class. Indeed it helps me understood whatever I was taught. However, I couldn't perform well in the quizzes because the questions were directly from the course packs which were given us. I simply had to stick to my course packs to perform creditably." (Excerpt from Kellia)

The results in Table 1 again revealed that the students perceived assessment in their institutions as not authentic, $t(629)=-6.536, p<.001$. In a follow-up interview, it was discovered that the students believed that assessment in the institution did not reflect what happens in reality or the world of work. One of the interviewees reiterated that:

"Lecturers handling courses in my programme set questions which are loosely applied to learning situations in a real-life context. Much emphasis is on theoretical things. Just know the content of the course materials provided, write them back and you will pass." (Excerpt from Yinkule)

Another interviewee stated:

"For me, I do not see the quizzes and semester examinations we do here as useful because when we go for internships we do not even see those contents we learn in class. The assessments we mostly take are not too relevant." (Excerpt from Zalley)

The students opined that the assessment tasks they took do not help them to apply whatever they have learnt. The respondents attributed this to the kind of questions the lecturers used in assessing them. In his own words, Iyarobew indicated:

"The quizzes and examinations we write in this university do not offer me the chance to learn the values and processes of teamwork. I am in my final year now and I can count the

number of assignments and presentations I have done; very few! They are all group works. The lecturers like us to be writing quizzes and examinations instead of engaging us in assignments and presentations which will expose us to what is happening in the business environment.” (Excerpt from Iyarobew)

Another interviewee said:

“The quizzes and assignments which are given by most lecturers in this university, I feel is just a way of certifying us and not to train the students for work. Most of the exams we write fail to assess my ability to apply what I know to real-life problems. For the few very assessments which are applied, students perform abysmally because it is uncommon for them to answer practical questions in their field of study.” (Excerpt from Akkpolo)

4. Discussion

University students perceived that there exist congruence of assessment tasks with planned learning. If this perception held by the students is true about what is practised, then, it is really good practice in the university. This is what was encouraged by Biggs (1996) that assessment tasks should be consistent with what has been learnt in class. Previous studies also found similar findings (Dhindsa, Omar, & Waldrip, 2007; Gao, 2012). Dhindsa et al. (2007), for example, evaluated the perception Bruneian secondary school students have of assessments practices and revealed a strong congruence between assessment and classroom teaching and learning. Other studies also found findings which contradict that of this study. Dorman, Fisher, and Waldrip (2006), for instance, explored students' perception of assessment and found a weak congruence of assessment with planned learning as reported by 499 students in Queensland. This, according to the authors, have a detrimental effect on students' confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks.

The result gives an implication that students who can memorise facts or their notes, as well as those who focus much on learning past questions, are those who are going to excel academically. Therefore, those who are not able to do these things will perform poorly. This is likely to result in a situation where students just become interested in memorising and as a result pay less attention to the understanding of issues. This is not far from the observations made by some scholars that most of the present universities tend to encourage memorisation of facts and thus, their assessment system often do not reward deep learning among students (e.g., Fook & Sidhu, 2014; Gijbels, Van de Watering, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2005; Mazur, 2015; Watkins, 2001).

This is worrisome as this has a debilitating effect on students learning. Take, for example, a course like “Statistics” where students instead of paying attention to understand and apply what has been taught, these students will end up engaging in rote learning since the assessment demands that for one to excel. It would not be surprising to find such students finding it difficult to explain and apply concepts taught in class

some few weeks after the examination. This result is not different from the observations of Boud and Falchikov (2006) that tertiary education has focused on preparing students for the acquisition of knowledge rather than participation in learning. This is unlikely to help prepare students for lifelong learning.

To find out how authentic assessments are, this present study revealed that there is a low degree of authenticity in assessment with the institutions; this is the perception of the students. This suggests that assessment did not help students to apply their learning to a real-life situation and as a result, the students perceive assessment in the institution as not useful and relevant to what they do outside of work. Students believed that assessment does not help them to apply what has been taught which confirms an earlier result in this study which revealed that assessment focused on memorisation and learning of past question. With this perception held by the students, the possibility will be that such students may learn by rote, get their grades and then complete the university and leave. As to the skill and competence attained is something little is known about. This finding is consistent with the outcome a study by Quansah and Asamoah (2019) who revealed that assessment in higher education institutions in Ghana, in most cases, did not reflect the application of what has been learnt in real-life situations. Just like this study, Quansah and Asamoah (2019) found that students rated authenticity in their lecturers' assessment as low indicating that the authenticity in assessments was loosely connected to issues of the world of work.

As an academic policy in UCC, students are required to be assessed by their respective lecturers and thus, these assessments, especially the continuous assessment are supposed to help students learn the values and processes of teamwork, and plan and solve real-life problems. Students' perception of assessment practices contradicted the academic policy of the institution. The students held the perception that assessment in the institution did not give them the chance to demonstrate their abilities on wider learning tasks and as a result did not have the chance to learn values and processes of teamwork. The students argued that assessment tasks did not examine their ability to answer practical questions in their field of study. If these perceptions held by the students reflect the practices of the lecturers in the institution, then these lecturers are not adhering to the academic policy of the school and consequently, to the vision and mission of the school.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be concluded that students in UCC hold the perception that assessment is congruent with planned learning. This suggests that students saw the content of assessment as consistent with what was taught in class. Given this, students are likely to focus on areas which were taught in class. Also, the opinion of the students is that the assessment did not allow them to demonstrate their abilities and skills. The implication is that students who held these perceptions may go through a programme by just practising rote learning, and learning of past questions since they perceive that the test

would not measure any high order reasoning skills. In this case, students might go through a four-year programme without learning any practical skill.

Based on the findings and the conclusions drawn, we recommend that the Directorate of Academic Planning and Quality Assurance (DAPQA) of the universities in Ghana should effectively monitor the assessment procedures of lecturers by evaluating the quality of assessment procedures adopted by the lecturers. The various departments within the universities should have assessment officers whose work should be different from the examination officers. Among the responsibilities, the assessment officers would be tasked with reviewing test items constructed by lecturers, supervise the assessment practices of the lecturers and as well organise frequent training on assessment for lecturers. The officer would also be there as an advisor to the lecturers on the assessment procedures appropriate for respective courses based on the course objective.

6. Strengths and Limitations

The findings of this study fill in a knowledge gap on assessment practices in higher education institutions. For instance, a greater proportion of the studies conducted on assessment practices used teachers as the respondents and were carried out at different education level (e.g., Anhwere, 2009; Kankam et al., 2014). This study, thus, provides an understanding of how students also perceive assessment practices in UCC since students' perception of assessment has been found to significantly affect learning and achievement (Mazur, 2015; Rust, 2002). This study, therefore, provides a foundation for further studies to be conducted.

The findings of the study are beneficial to both lecturers as well as the management of UCC. Obtaining information on students' perception of assessment practices enlighten lecturers on the areas of their assessment practices which need to be improved or changed. This results will provide insight for lecturers to make efforts in improving their assessment practices. With regards to management, the result of this study provides useful information for the Academic Board of UCC to inform policies on assessment.

The study, however, had some limitations. The study outcome only reflects the perception of students regarding lecturers' assessment and this only reflects students' understanding of lecturers' assessment practices. Students may not comprehensively understand what goes into the assessments. Therefore, the results of this study should not be interpreted as a fact but only serving as a prompt for further investigation into the issue of lecturers' assessments. Also, the students were required to provide their perception of assessment practices in general and were not limited to a particular course. Students might likely provide responses which only apply to a few courses and not the majority of courses. This, to some extent, reduces the objectivity of the responses provided since the perceptions of assessment practices given was not tied to a particular course/subject.

Conflict of Interest Statement

We, hereby, state that there is no conflict of interest, whether professional, personal or financial.

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