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Original Research

Students' and Teachers' Conceptions of Continuous Assessment Practices in Wollega University

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Abstract

In line with the introduction of a competency-based modular approach to teaching and learning in public universities in Ethiopia, continuous assessment (C.A.) as a prime mode of assessing students' learning achievement has been in place since 2013. The aim of this study was to analyse the conceptions of teachers and students concerning the practise of this assessment technique. To put this into effect, the study employed a qualitative research methodology in which focus group discussions (FGD) and interviews were used as primary data collection tools and document reviews as secondary data collection tools. Data were collected between February and March 2017 from thirty teachers, one Academic Quality, Testing, and Assessment Directorate Director (the Director), and thirty-two undergraduate students in year I and above. The results of the study indicated that students across all programmes at the university were used to being assessed at least seven times for every course they took, and the types of assessments were found to be similar across all courses and programmes offered at the university. This practise was conceived by teachers as a kind of one-size-fits-all practise that has been decided and imposed by the university authorities. Teachers were also found to hold the view that, unlike the legislation expected to guide their practise, they consider it an imposition from top officials, and the practise was not governed by the available policy. The study has also found that students were overwhelmed by the number and frequency of assessments, which led them to be more grade seekers than knowledge and skill seekers. On top of that, the practise of providing feedback has also been found to be very minimal, and thus the whole assessment practise in the university was predominantly meant to serve evaluation and grading rather than the learning of students. Based on these findings it was concluded that the way C.A. was assumed to serve and implemented and the way it has been conceived by teachers and students have been found to be parallel and as a result, this practise has not been

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INTRODUCTION

Assessing students' learning achievement and performance level is one of the major

activities all teachers at all educational levels are expected to perform. Even though the way

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it is practised differs from institution to institution and from level to level, assessment practises are common to all teachers and students, depending on the nature of the course, the purpose of learning, perceived objectives and outcomes, and other available policies and regulations. It is considered one of the major activities undertaken in the process of learning and teaching as a means to measure the progress of learners and whether they have acquired the necessary skills, knowledge, or changed their behaviour.

In the context of higher education institutions, assessment helps students to be effective in their study, develop a good approach to their learning, and become lifelong learners. Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates (Rust, 2002). Race, Brown, and Smith (2005) outlined some of the most common reasons for assessing students. Out of the list they provided, the following are worth quoting:

To guide students' improvement; allow students to check out how well they are developing as learners; help students decide which options to choose; help students learn from their mistakes or difficulties; classify or grade students; cause students to get down to some serious learning; give us feedback on how our teaching is going; translate intended learning outcomes into reality; and add variety to students' learning experience. (Race, Brown, & Smith, 2005, pp. 5-7)

With the introduction of a competence-based modular approach to public universities in

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Ethiopia, all universities have revised, reorganised, and harmonised their curricula. In line with this 'new approach' the concept of the student-centred teaching-learning method has been highly pronounced, and C.A. as the prime mode of assessing students' learning achievement has been in vogue too. C.A. in public universities in the country has gotten such attention with the understanding that it would help to track the progress in students' learning achievement supported by feedback and build the capacities of students who are found to be low achievers through team learning and tutorial support.

Continuous assessment, according to Mwebaza (2010), cited in Awofala & Babajide (2013), is an assessment carried out in an ongoing process. Awofala and Babajide (2013) stated that "it is an assessment approach that involves the use of a variety of assessment instruments (e.g., tests, projects, portfolios, assignments, interviews, checklists, rating scales, inventories, anecdotal records, and sociometry" (p. 38). This type of assessment helps to assess various components of learning, such as the thinking processes (cognitive), attitudes, motives, beliefs, behaviours, personality traits (affective), and dexterity (psychomotor) (Awofala & Babajide, 2013). It helps to identify a student's growth, or lack thereof, in acquiring desirable knowledge, skills, attitudes, and social values; it helps to motivate the student and encourages their sense of discipline and systematic study habits (Embele, 2014). In addition to this, some studies conducted in other contexts (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2011) argue that attitudes towards and expertise in assessment by university faculty have an impact on the assessments they use, how assessments are incorporated into the teaching and learning process, and whether their assessment practises provide students with the opportunity to improve their performance.

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Statement of the Problem

The practise of continuous assessment has been implemented in public higher education institutions in Ethiopia since the introduction of a modular approach to the system, including Wollega University, for studies at both undergraduate and graduate levels since 2013. Even though it has been over four years since CA has been implemented in Ethiopian public universities, to my knowledge, there has been little empirical study regarding its effectiveness as well as the conceptions of teachers and students towards it. With respect to the implementation of the modular approach at the graduate level at Addis Ababa University, a study conducted by Solomon, Ayalew, and Daniel (2011) focused on academic staff's views and practises of modular course delivery, in which the issue of assessment was discussed as a move towards student-centred and continuous. Regarding the undergraduate level, however, even though some attempts have been made to assess the implementation status of this approach, to the best of my understanding, no further empirical studies specific to C.A. have been done.

Thus, this study is assumed to be the first of its kind to thoroughly and specifically investigate the conceptions of teachers and students concerning the practise of C.A. at the undergraduate level in an Ethiopian public higher education context. The harmonised academic policy of Ethiopian public higher education institutions, which governs its implementation, states that C.A. must account for at least 50% of the overall assessment weight for each course, with the remaining 50% going towards the final exam (Harmonised Academic Policy of Ethiopian Public Higher Education Institutions, 2013, Article 56). The actual practise at Wollega University, however, is 70% C.A. and the remaining 30% for the final exam (70:30). Irrespective of this large proportion dedicated to C.A., students

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who used to be assessed through this technique (assumed to be classroom assessments not more than 10% each), once when they were required by the university to sit for mid-exams (about 20% or 30%), it was observed that they severely complained about sitting for such mid-exams.

From this observation and as a lecturer in the university and similar other universities I have served before, I am interested in investigating the perceptions of both teachers and students towards the practise of C.A. in the university. With this in mind, I would like to raise the following basic research questions:

Research Questions

1. What are the conceptions of students and teachers concerning the assessment practise at the university?
2. How do students and teachers view the practise of providing feedback to assessments provided to students at the university?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study were expected to have the following benefits:

Significance of the Study

Since the participants of the study were university teachers and undergraduate students, the results of this study would help them to be effective in their assessment practises. For teachers, it would help them to conceive of assessment as crucial as other teaching-learning activities and thus develop effective assessment methods that would encourage students to be effective learners. For the students, it would help them understand the benefits of assessment and develop a positive attitude towards the different assessment methods, which would help them follow deep learning approaches. Furthermore, it could also inform university

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officials and education policy makers to devise effective assessment guidelines, which could help teachers and students, are effective in assessment practises that would directly or indirectly contribute to quality higher education.

Literature Review

The way students and teachers perceive the benefits and contribution of assessment practise plays a significant role in its effective implementation. The term 'conception' according to Pastore and Pentassuglia (2016) means "all that a teacher or a student understands, feels, and thinks about the rationale of complex systems like the education process" (p. 112). According to Fletcher, Meyer, Anderson, Johnston, and Rees (2012), conceptions of assessment refer to one's beliefs, meanings, and understandings of assessment, which influence one's actions. Pastore and Pentassuglia (2016) further noted that conceptions are cognitive structures consisting of beliefs, meanings, concepts, and preferences that affect instructional activities. Having a clear understanding of how teachers perceive the benefits of assessment and the way they put it into practise has a paramount impact on educational policies related to assessment, as they are the forerunners and implementers of such policies (Brown & Yu, 2011).

An assessment practise could be good or bad, depending on its outcomes. As Boud (1995) argued, there are always unplanned outcomes resulting from assessments. "Students will learn to adopt surface approaches to study in some circumstances and will adopt deep or strategic approaches in others. In so doing, they will be prompted partly by the forms and nature of assessment tasks (Boud, 1995, p. 2).

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Deep and Surface Approaches to Learning

Depending on the types of assessment strategies and values attached to such assessments available to them, students are likely to follow different approaches to their learning. Accordingly, Rust (2002) explains the two types of approaches they take. The surface approach occurs when a student reduces what is to be learned to the status of unconnected facts to be memorised. Alternatively, a deep approach to learning happens when the student attempts to make sense of what is to be learned, which consists of ideas and concepts and involves the student in thinking, seeking integration between components and between tasks, and 'playing' with ideas (Rust, 2002). In addition to this, Weber (2012) argued that, apart from its function as an evaluation mechanism for students' comprehension of factual knowledge, assessment in contemporary education has to primarily be designed to foster students' learning. Moreover, students can adopt either surface or deep approaches to their learning as a result of the design of the course and the assessment strategies used. According to Rust (2002), course characteristics associated with a surface approach are: a heavy workload, relatively high class contact hours, an excessive amount of course material, a lack of opportunity to pursue subjects in depth, a lack of choice over subjects and a lack of choice over the method of study, and a threatening and anxiety-provoking assessment system (Rust, 2002).

Assessment of student learning

Often times, assessment is considered the core activity in the teaching-learning process,

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which frames students' learning and shapes their focus more than other activities in educational systems. It is also supposed to contribute to the enhanced learning of students. "Assessment of student learning is a process to improve the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired through study and practise", (Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning, 2008). It is the ongoing process of establishing clear, measurable expected student learning outcomes and systematically gathering, analysing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches institutional and faculty expectations (Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness).

Assessment defines what students regard as important and how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. If you want to change student learning, then change the methods of assessment" (Rust, 2002). The way assessments are managed and delivered, plus the types and techniques in practise, determine the importance and attention students attach to them. Student-centred assessment is supposed to be delivered on an ongoing basis so as to track and improve students' learning. One such technique is C.A.

Meaning and Nature of Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment has the potential to support student learning through feedback and to increase students' motivation for learning (Hernández, 2012). Continuous assessment, according to Adaramaja (n.d.), "is an assessment approach that involves the use of a variety of assessment instruments aimed at assessing various components of learning, including learners' thinking processes, their behaviours, personality traits, and dexterity, over a long period of time" (p. 3). Ovute and

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Ede (2015) also defined continuous assessment as "a systematic and objective process of determining the level of a student's learning achievement from start to finish so as to guide and shape their progress.

Feedback

Assessment practises are considered effective in serving the intended benefits if they are supported by timely and constructive feedback. Effective assessment practises can play a powerful role in the learning experience when students receive meaningful and timely feedback on their performance (Wilson & Scalise, 2006). Feedback is the main feature of any assessment meant for learning in which students are given the chance to exercise the achievement of knowledge, skills, and understandings (Pastore & Pentassuglia, 2016). Teachers may use different strategies for providing feedback to their students' assessment activities. They may provide written comments on assignments, oral comments and criticisms of presentations made by students, or prompt feedback during class teaching sessions (Yorke, 2003).

Research Design and Methodology

In order to conduct this study, a qualitative research methodology was employed. "Qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives" (Berg, 2001). This methodology was preferred with the assumption that it would help me to get an in-depth understanding of the conceptions of teachers and students towards the practise of C.A. in the university. This methodology has been used by authors like Pereira and Flores

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(2016) in their study of teachers' conceptions and practises of assessment in five Portuguese public universities. Additionally, Pastore and Pentassuglia (2016) employed this methodology to investigate teachers' and students' conceptions of assessment within the Italian higher education system.

Research Site

Wollega University is one of the second-generation universities established in 2006. It is located in the west part of the country, about 330 km from the capital, Addis Ababa. It has three campuses, namely Shambu, Gimbi, and Nekemte, the main campuses. This study was conducted on the main campus. On this campus, the total number of undergraduate students was about 10795 males and 7272 females, for a total of 18067. The total number of academic staff was about 839, out of which 734 were male and the remaining 105 were female.

Participants

The study aimed at investigating the conceptions of teachers and students towards the practise of C.A. in the university. Accordingly, teachers and undergraduate students were the major participants in this study. Additionally, the Academic Quality, Testing, and Assessment Directorate has also participated in providing data on the implementation of assessment practises in the university. In the recruitment of teachers for participation in FGDs, I first presented my letter of cooperation, already signed by the vice president and the respective college deans, to the department heads. Then, department heads helped me meet with all the

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available teachers under their jurisdiction. After meeting with all available teachers, I briefed them about the purpose of the study and asked them if they were willing to participate in the FGDS with other teachers from other departments in their college. For those who were willing to participate, a convenient time for all members of the college was set, and the discussions were held as per the schedule we agreed to meet.

Student participants were contacted through their class representatives, who were identified by their programme leaders. After the purpose of the study was briefed to them, they were asked if they were willing to participate in the FGD and provide data. Those who were not willing to participate were permitted to leave, and the remaining volunteer students were given an appointment time that fit the convenience of other students from other programmes. Accordingly, a convenient time that suited all participants from the same college was set, and the discussions were held. This procedure was applied to all the FGD sessions at the remaining colleges.

Instruments

The data collection instruments for this study were focus group discussions (FGD), interviews, and document reviews. As Hennink (2007) argued, focus group methodology is now embraced in the social sciences as one of the central tools of qualitative inquiry. The essential purpose of focus group research is to identify a range of different views around the research topic and to gain an understanding of the issues from the perspective of the participants themselves

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(Hennink, 2007). Thus, in this study, the conceptions of teachers and students as groups regarding assessment practises in the university were investigated using this method. As this practise was similar across different departments and programmes in the university, it was assumed that all teachers and students constitute homogeneous groups and actively participate in the discussion and generate valuable data. Furthermore, interviews were used to get an in-depth view of the director's view of this practise, as this person was assumed to be the one who guides and directs the implementation of assessment activities in the university. Additionally, the Student Information Management System (SIMS) and the harmonised academic policy were reviewed so as to get the policy perspective and guidelines pertaining to the implementation of assessment practises in the university.

Procedure for Data Collection

There were four FGDs conducted with teachers from four different colleges. Each session was conducted with teachers from the same college, and teachers were allowed to use either English or Amharic, whichever was more convenient for them to express their ideas comfortably. Accordingly, the first session was conducted with eight teachers constituted from different departments in the Institute of Journalism and Language Studies. The second FGD session had seven members from the College of Natural and Computational Science; the third had eight teachers from the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences; and the last had seven teachers from the College of Health Sciences.

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Altogether, thirty teachers have participated in all four FGD sessions conducted. In all the FGD sessions, I used my smart phone to record their voices. I simultaneously jotted down some major ideas in my notebook.

Similarly, four FGD sessions were conducted with students from different colleges. Students in all the FGD sessions were allowed to use English, Amharic, or Afan Oromo to express their ideas comfortably. The first FGD session was held with eight students from the College of Business and Economics, whereas the second session was with six students from the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences. The third session was conducted with ten students from the Institute of Language Studies and Journalism, while the fourth session was held with eight students from the College of Natural and Computational Sciences. Totally, thirty-two students have participated in the four FGD sessions. Similar to what I employed during FGDs with teachers, here too, I used my smart phone for recording the discussions and some note-taking efforts. Finally, an interview was held with the Academic Quality, Testing, and Assessment Directorate Director (the Director). In addition to these, the Student Information Management System (SIMS) platform, through which teachers submit students' assessment results, was reviewed.

Data Analysis

After the FGD and interview data were transcribed, the major themes and conceptual categories were found by reading the transcripts again and listening to the audio recordings. The identified themes and concepts were coded and presented in the

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form of direct quotations and paraphrases in the analysis. Direct quotations are identified by codes given to the FGD participants. Accordingly, male teachers were identified as "MTP1,2..", whereas female teachers were identified as "FTP1,2...". For the students who participated in the FGDs, male students were coded as "MSP1, 2..." and female students were given codes as "FSP1, 2...". This study is based on the interpretative paradigm, which focuses on the interpretation of a phenomenon by understanding its meanings through the experiences of individuals (Blaikie, 2010; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008). Using this framework, the data were analysed and interpreted.

Results and Discussions

Teachers' and Students' Conception of the Types of Assessments Conducted in the University

According to participants in all the FGD sessions, the list of assessment types conducted at the university includes quizzes, tests, individual assignments, group assignments, projects with presentations, practical activities, case studies, and portfolio reports. Other than assessment types like practical activities, case studies, and portfolio reports, which were mentioned in some sessions but not in others, the overall list given by both teacher participants and students across all FGDs was similar. This depicts that, with very few variations, the assessment types employed by all teachers in the university across all programmes seem to be similar and uniform. In connection with this, teachers in some of the FGDs noted that the type of assessment that they are expected to provide

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to their students is usually guided by the department, and the guidelines given to them outline the same modes (types) of assessment. This is consistent with Rust's observation that the type of assessment chosen should be related to learning outcomes and governed by decisions about its purpose, validity, and relevance (2002).

Concerning the number and frequency of assessments, all participants in all teacher FGDs indicated that they are expected to assess their students at least seven times in the form of a C.A. for every course they teach, and the type has to be as per the aforementioned list. For every course offered at the university, assessing seven times is mandatory because the maximum weight of each assessment is only 10% and the total weight of C.A. required for each course is 70%. The eighth one is certainly the final exam, which consists of 30% of the total value for each course. For a student who takes six courses a semester, the total number of assessments expected to be taken is 48 (8×6), and if the number of courses per semester is seven, the frequency of the assessments will be 56 (8×7). This indicates that students and teachers are highly overwhelmed by these assessments, which are likely to be conducted at very close intervals and/or on an overlapping basis. This situation could result in boredom, frustration, and a lack of interest in assessment activities, which in turn diminishes the ultimate purpose of assessment practises. One of the male teachers participating in the FGD from the college of natural and computational sciences put it as follows:

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For example, in economics, whenever redundancy increases, marginal utility decreases. Obsessing students with every day assessment—today assessment, tomorrow another, assignment, quizzes—their marginal utility decreases from time to time and their interest too. So, they do not bother about anything. Even when they score ‘0’, as students are familiar with assessments, they don’t get surprised. They are not eager. Thus, to increase the marginal utility of our students, it is preferable to minimise the frequency of exams. (MTP12)

From this, it can be understood that there is an ideal frequency at which assessments have to

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be conducted, which increases the benefit students get out of them.

Students’ and Teachers’ Preference of Assessment Types

Despite the types of assessments prescribed by the university, teachers’ and students’ preferences can have their own effect on the effectiveness of assessments in contributing to students’ learning. Accordingly, teachers and students who participated in the FGDs were asked about their preferences for assessment types and their reasons for such preferences. The following table shows types of assessments, students’ preferences, and their reasons for preferring and not preferring them, as mentioned in most of the FGDs.

Table 1: *Assessment Types Preferred by Some Students, and not Preferred by Others*

Assessment type	Reason for preference	Reasons for not preferring it
Individual Assignment (I.A.)	I can do it the way I feel better	-
Group Assignment (G.A.)	We help each other Each contributes as per his/her talent Better to learn from each other Experience sharing Teachers may be generous in giving good marks than for tests Better to refer many sources and do it well Enriches our understanding when working on assignments	Simply copy from books without understanding Challenging because of lack of reference materials Only done by one person (the representative) Only group leader writes it No participation, the burden is on the representative who lonely does the assignment Conflict between members We write it without understanding it.
Test	We read while we prepare ourselves for the test With preparation Less anxiety We read for knowledge and understanding Better to get prepared When I study for tests, I get the concepts.	

Source: *Compiled from Students’ FGDs*

As can be seen from the table, even though some students in the FGDs showed their preference for tests and I.A. with some reasons,

much of the participants’ preference has been found to be G.A. Some reasons were forwarded from those who favour it, and some more

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reasons from those with a feeling of contempt towards this assessment type.

Teachers, on their part, contended that they prefer tests and mid-exams, as these could minimise the copying of students from each other, unlike other assessment types such as G.A., which are highly prone to such malpractices. These teacher participants further argued that students prefer assignments because they enable them to copy from one another and score good grades. Other teacher participants maintained that they prefer all types of assessments, as each type has its own weaknesses and strengths in contributing to students' learning and in evaluating the acquisition of the necessary learning outcomes. One teacher participant from CNCS had the following to say:

Unlike the unique practise in our university concerning assessing students, logically speaking, all assessment types are acceptable. I prefer all types, including the G.A. Had there not been large class sizes, it would have been possible to differentiate between good performers and those who are not and grade them accordingly. Another typical practise in the university is that if students fail exams, the burden and responsibility remain on the teacher. (MTP14)

Another participant made the case that every assessment is important and that the choice should depend on the ability and understanding level of students. This participant further asserted that low performing students may prefer assignments, whereas those competent ones prefer tests than G.A. That finding seems to echo Phillips,(1999) observation that "differences in students' learning and testing preferences lead to performance differences;

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students who preferred problem-solving tasks tended to perform better than students who preferred simple, quick, and easy problems" (Birenbaum, 2007, p. 750). Other authors (e.g., Birenbaum, 2007) correspond. They argue that students' preferences regarding instruction and assessment reflect their perception of the learning environment, their learning conceptions, and their approaches to learning, which consequently affect their achievement.

Students' and Teachers' Views on Feedback

As noted earlier, if assessment is to be integral to learning, feedback must be at the heart of the process, as it is the fundamental area in which educators can influence the extent to which assessment practises are developmental rather than solely judgmental (Brown, 2004). Keeping that in mind, I asked students in all the FGDs if their teachers gave feedback while assessing their work. Mixed views were observed from their responses. While some of them responded that there is no feedback, others asserted that it is available in the form of writing the answers on the blackboard but is rare. Other participants further explained that they were given no or little feedback. And they attributed the rarity of feedback provision to lack of time, lack of interest, or rushing to finish or cover the portion. Another participant noted that no comments are given by teachers; they simply show them the result or mark. From these views of students, it can be understood that irrespective of the few initiatives observed by some teachers, the practise of giving feedback to students at the university seems to be very limited. Without timely and constructive feedback, it is hardly possible to say that the assessment practise is student-centred and effective in contributing to the intended objective. The absence of feedback apparent in the university under study in fact defeats the real purpose of proper assessment. Assessment contributes to effective learning when the assessments are

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well designed and the results of assessments are fed back promptly to learners (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2008). Feedback contributes to effective instruction in that it informs students of the level of their understanding of what they have been taught and also helps them identify their gaps so that they can work hard towards improving their weaknesses. Feedback provides learners with information on how well they are learning and how they can improve (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2008). With this understanding, the views of teachers on this practise were garnered in all the FGDs conducted with them.

Teachers' views on providing feedback

Here too, mixed views (some claiming to provide feedback and others failing to give one) were observed from teachers' responses towards this practise. Below are typical comments from those who claimed to have given feedback:

I give detailed feedback for every assessment I offer to my students. I give the feedback orally if the error is common and in written form if the error committed by the students is very serious; I even call them individually and show them that this is not expected from them at this level. (MTP5)

My feedback depends on the type of assessment; if it is objective, I simply mark, but for subjective items, I give feedback. It is on the guideline, so I show them. I give timely feedback. Students need to get feedback. High achievers expect feedback from us. But students do not benefit, or they never work to be better; they only check whether they have a pass mark or not. (MTP2)

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From these excerpts, it can be noted that there are some attempts to give feedback to assessments provided to students. On the other hand, those who acknowledged that they don't give feedback to their students said the following.

I am late in providing feedback for my students. One reason is that they are too many in number, so I can't give on-the-spot corrections, and even I am not using appropriate feedback techniques. So I don't think that my students are getting good advice from the feedback I provide them. (MTP8)

As can be understood from these participants, the practise of giving feedback to assessments at the university seems to be very minimal and not appropriate for helping students learn from them. This view is similar to the students' claims in the previous section. It is also reflective of Glazer's observation that "in practise, this area is still in its infancy, and many instructors still struggle with providing productive and timely feedback" (2014, p. 278).

Teachers' Views of Assessment Policy in the University

Regarding the implementation of such assessment practises in the university, teachers in all FGDs and the director were asked about the availability of any policy or guideline that governs this practise. Accordingly, most of the participants maintained that there is a harmonised academic policy (legislation) that stipulates the implementation of C.A. A review of this document also shows that C.A. shall account for not less than 50% of the total module or course mark. Teachers further indicated that Wollega University has revised it

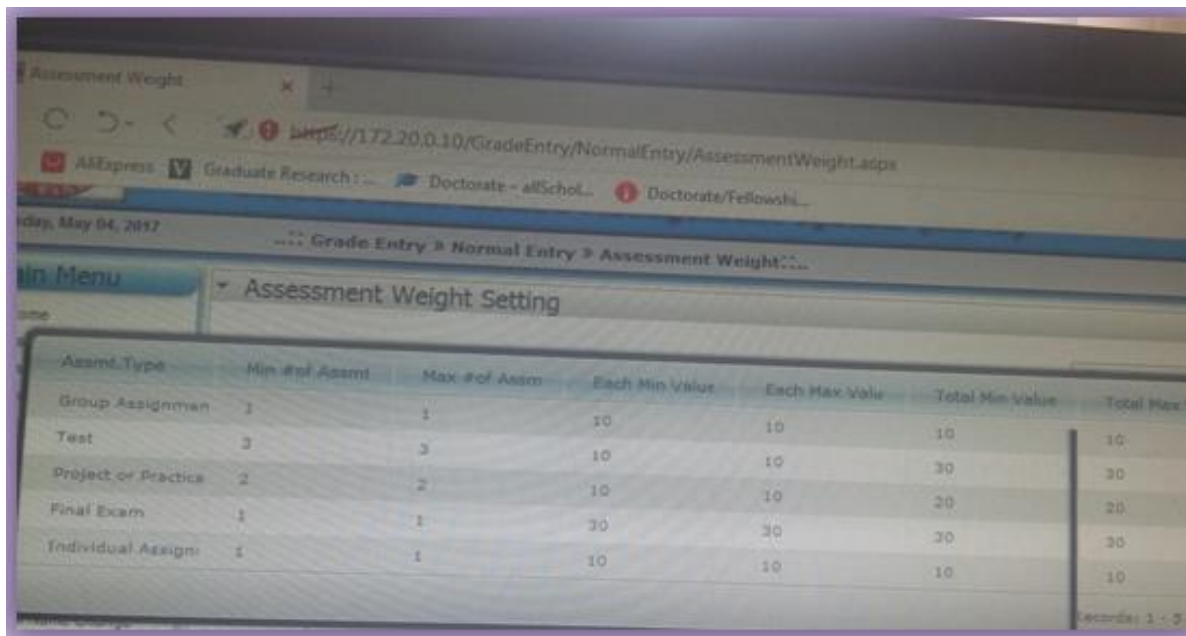
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to make C.A. even bigger, which is 60%. Even so, there is a discrepancy between the way it is put in the revised academic policy and the way it is practised in the university (the current practise is based on the SIMS). According to the director, the assessment proportion has grown to 70:30 (70% C.A. and 30% final exam issue). Regardless of the legislation, that has come to be the practise through management decisions. This shows that, unlike the written policy guidelines, assessment practise in the university is guided by decisions from the university authorities. After such an arbitrary decision by the management, one of the participants observed,

The legislation is not governing us. For example, last year, at a certain time and point, we were asked to give an unknown midterm

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., Jan.-March 2019, 8(1), 71-86 examination. We were surprised. It is individuals or authorities who are guiding us, not the legislation. That is the case, despite the belief that assessment is a professional activity that has to be decided and conducted by the concerned professional in charge of it.

In addition to the harmonised academic policy, all participants mentioned SIMS, which guides the type and number of assessments they are expected to give to their students. They stated that the SIMS has eight boxes to be filled, seven for the C.A. and one box for the final exam. They further asserted that this system is quite rigid and doesn't even accept any mark greater than 10% for the C.A. part. The picture of this SIMS platform on which teachers fill up their students' assessment results looks as follows:



Assmt. Type	Min # of Assmt	Max # of Assmt	Each Min Value	Each Max Value	Total Min Value	Total Max Value
Group Assignment	1	1	10	10	10	10
Test	3	3	10	10	30	30
Project or Practice	2	2	10	10	20	20
Final Exam	1	1	30	30	30	30
Individual Assignm	1	1	10	10	10	10

Figure 1 *Wollega University's SIMS Platform*

As can be observed from the picture above, the assessment types, minimum and maximum number of these assessments, together with the minimum and maximum value for each assessment type, is vividly outlined in the SIMS platform. The types of

assessment prescribed by the system are: at least one group assignment with a maximum value of 10% each; at least one individual assignment with a maximum value of 10% each; at least three tests, each with a maximum value of 10%; at least one

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project or practical, each with a maximum value of 10%; and finally, one final exam, which accounts for a maximum value of 30%.

Interestingly, some participants admitted that they were filling out the assessment entry forms, irrespective of certain courses' nature, which may not really have projects or other types mentioned in the SIMS. They argued that they were just filling in the form as if they had delivered them and complained that such practise is not something teacher-guided but something imposed from outside (to mean from the top level).

From this and the preceding discussions, it can be understood that teachers in the university are guided by uniformly prescribed assessment types, together with the value each of these assessments should consist of. It seems that assessment practise in the university is a kind of 'one-size-fits-all type' decided by university authorities to be implemented by teachers. This could limit the flexibility in the practise as well as the professional autonomy of teachers to adjust assessments as per the nature of the courses and competencies expected of their students. Regarding this, one of the teacher participants in the FGDs said the following, and the comment summarises the concern of most of the participants:

We must give seven assessments in the form of C.A. and the final exam, together with eight assessments. This is simply to say that teachers are teaching for tests, and students are learning to pass exams. This type of top-down approach lacks flexibility, and implementing it seems artificial or superficial. (MTP8)

This shows that teachers in the university perceive assessment practises as something imposed upon them by top-level authorities, and they view this as something that jeopardises their professional integrity and responsibility. As assessment is part and

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parcel of the teaching and learning activity, it too has to be done professionally and left to teachers to flexibly and professionally implement it as per the unique features of the different courses offered across the many programmes in the university. Otherwise, the top-down approach could hamper the effective implementation of assessment in the university and could lead to artificial marking and grading of students, which in turn could also hamper the quality of the whole educational activity in the university. In view of this, one of the teacher participants from the ILSJ said the following:

It is a kind of top-down. We simply take it and make it practical. Otherwise, giving an assessment of such frequencies is not plausible, and at the same time, it seems kind of artificial to me. We may sometimes give assessments at 20% or so and be forced to convert them to 10% to fill out the prescribed boxes. Because we are dealing with large class sizes, scoring, giving feedback, comments, and the like, for me, it is very difficult and unmanageable. It is very demanding. But if we are forced to do it, we are doing it regardless of a lot of factors. It is a way of facilitating free promotion for students and minimising the attrition rate. (MTP5)

From this, it can be deduced that such top-down imposition could result in teachers' opposition, which hampers the effective implementation of this practise. In fact, in extreme cases, as observed in other related studies (Crossley & Wang, 2010; Marrs, 2009; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003, cited in MacDonald, Williams, Lazowski, Horst, & Barron, 2014), faculty may even react with

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resistance, particularly when they perceive that assessment is being imposed upon them from external sources such as administration or from accrediting agencies. Additionally, Kramer (2008) contended that "some faculty may view assessment as a threat to academic freedom, either inhibiting their autonomy to choose what they teach in their own classrooms or infringing upon their methods of evaluating their students" (MacDonald et al., 2014, p. 75).

CONCLUSIONS

Assessment practises in the context of higher education institutions are meant to serve several purposes. For such practises to be effective, serve the learning of students, and help them be competent in their future careers, it is not the number or frequency at which different assessment types overwhelm students. What matters more is how it is conceived by teachers and students alike, concerning its benefits and contribution to the realisation of quality teaching and learning and the production of quality and competent graduates. I would argue here that providing different assessment types to students could be beneficial, provided that such a decision is left to the discretion of professional teachers who could diagnose the advantages and disadvantages of each assessment type as per the competence and profiles expected of students. Thus, the top-down command and one-size-fits-all approach towards such professional activity puts the effectiveness of this important and core part of the teaching-learning activity at risk. Additionally, establishing a system that encourages students to work hard, take responsibility for their own learning, and

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strive to acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitude expected of their level is worth mentioning. Other than the grades accumulated, additional mechanisms have to be in place so as to ensure the efforts exerted by students and the responsibilities discharged by teachers and the university leadership.

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