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Original Research

Benefits and Challenges of Continuous Assessment Practices in Wollega University as Perceived by Teachers and Students

Biratu Tolesa

College of Education and Behavioural Sciences, Wallaga University, Po Box 395, Nekemte, Ethiopia

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 benefits and challenges 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 II 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 or uniform across all courses and programmes offered at the university. Likewise, both teachers and students who participated in this study held the conception that the practise of C.A. in the university was deficient in that it had little benefit to the improvement of students' knowledge and skills as well as to their reading approach. 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 serving its intended benefits for the learning of students.

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*Corresponding Author:

Biratu Tolesa

E-mail:

s.birtu@gmail.com

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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 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

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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. To guide students' improvement; allow students to check out how well they are developing as learners help students to decide which options to choose; help students to 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 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 &

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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., Swann & Ecclestone, 1999; Tang & Chow, 2007; cited in 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.

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

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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.

In connection with its implementation, the harmonised academic policy of Ethiopian public higher education institutions stipulates that C.A. has to comprise not less than 50% of the total assessment weight for every course, while the remaining 50% shall be allotted for 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 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

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July-Sept. 2019, 8(3), 25-40 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 regarding the benefits of C.A. at the university?
2. What challenges are there in the assessment practises at the university, as perceived by students and teachers?

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 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'

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according to Pastore and Pentassuglia (2016, p.112) means "all that a teacher or a student understands, feels, and thinks about the rationale of complex systems like the education process." 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, Hui, Yu, & Kennedy, 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 (Boud, 1995, p. 2). In so doing, they will be prompted partly by the forms and nature of assessment tasks.

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

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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, 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,

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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 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 guiding and shaping their progress.

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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 (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

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in this study. Additionally, the Academic Quality, Testing, and Assessment Directorate have 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 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

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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 (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 data collected through FGDs and interviews was transcribed, key themes and categories of concepts were identified by re-reading the transcripts and listening to the recorded audios. The identified themes and

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concepts were coded and presented in the 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' Conceptions of the Types of Assessments

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 to their students is usually guided by the

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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:

For example, in economics, whenever redundancy increases, marginal utility decreases. Obsessing students with every day assessment—today assessment, tomorrow another, assignment, quiz... 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

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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 (MTP 12). From this, it can be understood that there is an ideal frequency at which assessments have to be conducted, which increases the benefit students get out of them.

Students' Conception of the Benefits of Assessment at Wollega University

In this part, students were asked how they conceive the benefits of assessment practise in the university with respect to the acquisition of skill, knowledge, and attitude, as well as their reading approach. That was done with the belief that "assessment is important for learning because it conveys what is really important to learn, has a powerful effect on what and how to learn, and reinforces students' learning strategies" ((Pastore & Pentassuglia, 2016, p. 111).

In this study, students were found to have mixed opinions (some saying it is beneficial and others claiming it is useless). Below is an example from a participant who noted that the assessment practise at the university has not been beneficial:

In my opinion, these assessments have no benefit. Today one assessment and tomorrow another assessment; sitting on one assessment, thinking about the upcoming tests or assignments before submitting one assignment, the deadline for the other comes. Students target for mark, not for potential. (MSP16)

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According to this student and others who share this view, they are simply bombarded by a bunch of assessments, and as a result, they are always forced to think about assessments. For this group of students, it is a matter of fulfilling the ritual time-in and time-out, but with no benefit to their skill, knowledge, or attitude development. Their prime target was found to be accumulating grades without acquiring the necessary skills, knowledge, or attitude. The following two excerpts can be considered typical examples of the negative notion of assessment.

I don't think it helps with capacity building. It is a kind of use-and-throw. It simply makes you worry for future assessments. (MSP 3)

Other students stated that the practise of C.A. at the university made them only possess fragmented concepts of courses in their studies. According to those who held this view, since these assessments are given to them only for topics or subtopics they have covered so far, They noted that once they are assessed on such topics, there is no opportunity to reconsider, re-read, or relate them to the next topics or chapters, as they would be assessed independently of the past ones. They also perceive this as if it has fettered their critical thinking and made them focus on only fragmented aspects of concepts in courses, which they perceive as a culture getting popularity in the university. The following quotes substantiate this conception:

In my opinion, C.A. made us have 'yaada rarra'aa' (in Afan Oromo, to mean an unrelated or fragmented

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concept). Chapters in a course are related, but assessments are topic-oriented and very fragmented. C.A. doesn't help to analyse critically. It simply focuses on one aspect and leaves others behind, which has become the culture for us at this university. (MSP21)

What matters and is of great value to us is the mark or grade, not what we know. We are not going to implement what we learn. It is only theory, no practise.

C.A. has no value in enriching our knowledge. We don't remember tomorrow what we learned today. We simply write assignments; we don't understand them. I may not understand it later. Rent seekers, not knowledge seekers. Some think, What if I get my mark or grade?

From these excerpts, it can be understood that C.A. at the university was not serving its intended purpose. Students seem to develop an improper perception of this assessment technique. They simply were accustomed to focusing on the grade and tending to disregard the very important aspect of their learning—the acquisition of the necessary competence expected of them.

Students' Perception of the Benefits of Their Reading Approach

Here, two views were reflected by students who participated in the FGDs. The following excerpt can be considered typical comments of those who noted that C.A. has benefits for their reading:

It led us to read deeply. Had there been no C.A., we might have been tempted to

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relax and waste our time. But now we are focused. While reading for mark, we get knowledge. (FSP 14)

According to this participant and those who favoured this view, C.A. has helped them to use their time effectively. They further acknowledged that their reading is focused on getting a good mark or grade. As opposed to that, one of the participants who refuted this view said:

No, it led us to read on the surface. Teachers may give us different assessments, and as a result, we cannot read deeply. We don't have time. (MSP10)

From this, it can be noted that those who claimed to read have found themselves reading on the surface as a result of frequent exam schedules. Thus, the practise of C.A. has not contributed to a deep approach to reading and learning. One major reason for this is the number and frequency of assessments the students are always overwhelmed by. Other students added the following views:

No critical reading. We may have good grades, but our knowledge could be 'okkolaa' (in Afan Oromo, to mean impaired). Not mature enough. This shows deficiency in C.A. (MSP 26)

If it is in the form of an exam or test, we read. For assignments, we simply copy from resources and submit them, but for tests, we read deeply. (MSP22)

These show that there are certain assessment types that encourage students to read deeply

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and work hard and other types that leave students to read on the surface or even not to bother about reading. If students regard certain assessment types as crucial in determining their fail or pass fortune, they take it seriously and adjust their reading accordingly. This trend is in agreement with Bound's (1995) contention that students would learn to adopt a surface approach to study partly because of the forms and nature of assessment tasks.

Views of Teachers on the Benefits of Assessment

All the teachers who participated in all the FGDs unanimously maintained that assessment practice—especially C.A.—in the university doesn't have the benefits it is supposed to have. They hold the view that such a type of assessment practise makes students grade- or mark-seekers as opposed to knowledge-seekers. This, according to the participants, is the result of the established system in the university, which simply favours student promotion rates without due concern for whether or not students have acquired the necessary competence. The following quotes support this conception:

C.A. doesn't help students get the proper skills and knowledge. This type of assessment is, you know, not learning for knowledge or learning for skill; it's learning for examination; it's learning for grades. Learning to count years; learning to pass years. (MTP 6)

Another participant added the following:

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The university says that every time you just complete a topic, give them a quiz; however, after you give them the quiz, they forget it and throw it away. There are even students who come to class without their notebooks. They don't bother about the past part of the lesson once they have been assessed on that topic or chapter. They are getting chunks or drops of knowledge, not the proper understanding of the concept. (MTP 8) This view corresponds with what students have already mentioned: fragmented concepts.

From these remarks, it can be noted that the established system of assessment in the university simply led students to perceive the accumulation of marks as their major target and success. As some of the participants argued, students get a proper understanding of the concepts of a given course after it is fully completed. At the beginning or in the middle, they may not get the whole picture of the course. While one of the participants stated that the 70:30 approaches was meant to create confusion in students, another one indicated that students only possess temporary knowledge. Some participants further made the case that students soon forget it, and at the end of the day, they remember very few of the contents of a given course. The following quote substantiates this view:

The assessments we are employing do not have any benefit for the students. I think it is that way. Because it tests only shallow understanding, it doesn't encourage an individual's creativity. Students simply read the fragmented material for the purpose of the assessments, and I prepare the assessments from the material, and students directly get the answer from it, or it doesn't ignite an individual's courage and deep understanding. I

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simply test according to what I said in the classroom today and just prove whether they remember it or not. (MTP 5)

From this, it could be discerned that teachers in the university conceived C.A. as a practise that led students to possess fragmented and shallow understanding of course contents, which further signifies that such assessment practise didn't help in building the capacity to think creatively and limited the possession of appropriate skills, knowledge, and capacity for future career performance and life-long learning.

Teachers' perceptions of the benefits of C.A. for students' reading approaches

Many of the teachers who participated in the FGDs complained about students' lack of interest in reading. Some of the participants asserted that if the assessment types had just been tests or midterms, students would have developed the habit of reading. These participants hold the conception that other assessment types in implementation did not encourage students to read deeply and get the necessary knowledge. One of them put it as follows:

I don't believe the existing assessment we are employing helps students with reading. They work together; dependency has developed. Students claim group assignment as a right given to them by the government to support students; they say that their group representative is given to them by the system to help them improve their results. So the majority of them are not interested in reading and getting the intended knowledge, skill, and attitude.

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Even some of the representatives acknowledge that they are beneficiaries of doing the assignments because they are paid by their group members for accomplishing the group task. (MTP 23)

Other participants asserted that students give due attention to the mark they get or the grade they are going to achieve. According to those teachers who held this view, most of the assessments outside of the classroom are given in groups, and these assessments are done by a few capable students. Such an established culture inhibits the reading habits of the students and makes them dependent, which has already been acknowledged by the students themselves.

The way groups are organised (based on the 1:5 team principles) and the due attention given to doing activities in such groups have led to the evolution of such a culture of doing assignments by a few capable students. Some teacher participants maintained that the system itself favours this attitude. The following excerpts depict this trend:

Many students believe that even though they do not work hard, they are confident enough that they would score a 'C' grade without any doubt. This is the result of C.A. The established system itself doesn't allow for the benefit of hard work. If students score 'F' (fail), authorities say why 'F'; but if all students score A, no one asks why. (MTP 18)

Another participant added that:

Students do not appreciate teachers who make them work hard. Since the grading

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system itself is very weak, almost all students can easily get the pass mark, so why do they bother to read? The system has led the students to be careless. Helping students remove the 'Fx' grade is the responsibility of the teacher who taught the course in which the student has scored such a grade. (MTP 15)

These excerpts depict that the system established by the university leadership seems to be skewed towards favouring students by creating conditions that help them score pass marks with limited effort or without commensurate hard work. To the contrary, extensive work load and responsibility for low-performing students were laid on the shoulders of the teachers.

Challenges in the Assessment Practices in the University as Perceived by Teachers and Students

In the practice and implementation of assessment in the university, there were a number of challenges as perceived by both teachers and students who participated in the FGDs. Accordingly, the challenges perceived by the students were categorised into those related to the students themselves, to teachers, to the assessment practise itself, and others. Those perceived by teachers were grouped into those related to students, the assessment practise itself, system- or institution-related, and others. The following table summarises each category with a list related to it as perceived by both groups.

Table 1*Category of Challenges in the Assessment practice*

As perceived by students	As perceived by teachers
Challenges Related to Students	
Less participation in group activities- done only by group leaders	Students' back ground joining the university is poor
Wrong attitude towards C.A.	Students' attitude towards C.A. is very wrong
–	Students copy from each other (all sorts of assignments are copy)
Challenges in the Assessment Practice itself	
Overlapping of assessments	Number of assessments to prepare and mark
overburdened	Test overlapping
overloaded	Shallow assessment techniques
System/Institutional related Challenges	
No concern for course completion, only C.A is the focus	Rigidity of the assessment format/type
–	Wrong perception from authorities
–	Shortage of time for block courses
Other Challenges	
Shortage of time	Large class size (no. of students)
Shortage of materials	Classroom setting

Source: *Compiled by the Researcher from FGDs data*

As can be observed from Table 2, among the challenges related to students, both teachers and student participants commonly perceive that students' attitude towards C.A. is wrong. As previously argued in this study, students perceive C.A. as an escaping hole in that they easily accumulate pass marks through this assessment technique, which in most cases makes them more likely to be grade seekers than knowledge and skill seekers. This could be regarded as one of the serious challenges that put the quality of graduates from this university at risk, as well as its overall teaching and learning activity. Furthermore, students themselves admitted that their participation in doing group assignments is very limited, i.e., such activities are entirely done by their group representatives. In

addition to this, another challenge perceived by teachers regarding students was the poor background students joining the university have at entry level.

In the case of challenges related to the assessment practise itself, while both groups acknowledged the problem of overlapping assessments, students, on their part, objected to the overburden that happened to them as a result of the many assessment types they were provided. Teachers, on their part, complained about the number of assessments they prepare and mark for each of the courses they teach. They also viewed the shallow assessment techniques they employ as one of the challenges in the assessment practise.

For the challenges related to the system or institution, teachers complained about the

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rigidity of the assessment format they were forced to apply as one of the serious challenges in the institution. They further indicated that the wrong perception of authorities and the shortage of time for block courses were among the challenges in the university that could negatively impact the effective implementation of assessment. Students, on their part, perceived the higher concern given to C.A. than that of course completion as an institutional challenge.

In the category labelled 'other challenges', shortages of time and materials were perceived by students as challenges, whereas large class sizes and classroom settings like fixed desks and chairs were considered challenges as perceived by teachers.

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

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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 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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