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## AN ASSESSMENT OF INSTRUCTORS' CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT PRACTICE IN SELECTED HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS, TANZANIA

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**Abstract:** This study sought to examine the instructors' assessment practice in selected higher learning institutions. It is an overview of assessment practices in Tanzanian Higher Learning Institution. The study was conducted in two universities and one college in Dodoma region. Simple random technique was used to obtain 96 instructors whereas purposeful sampling procedure was used to select 20 heads of departments. Data was collected by using both questionnaire and interview. The study revealed that instructors rely heavily on traditional methods of assessment such as written tests and examinations. Most of the instructors seemed to still work in the view of traditional learning theories that formative assessment is a separate element that is not integrated with daily instruction but a tool that comes at the end of lesson to evaluate students' learning. Therefore, there is lack of continuous collection of students' learning evidences during the teaching learning process to adjust instruction and to fill the gaps in students' learning due to many factors. Hence, it was concluded that assessment practiced in higher education in Tanzania serves an administrative purpose and as a result, the professional purpose of assessment, which is that of giving feedback on instruction and learning is suffering. It was recommended that, improvements are required by the participants in the assessment process in higher education in order to allow the use of assessment practices that they consider more appropriate to improve learning and more suitable to higher education purposes.

**Keywords:** *Formative Assessment, summative assessment, assessment feedback, alternative assessment, traditional assessment*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Assessment is viewed as “the process of gathering and evaluating information on what students know, understand, and can do in order to make an informed decision about the next steps in the educational process” Clarke (2012). Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning which involves the process of gathering, interpreting and recording information related to student progress in learning and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies (Brookhart, 2011; Clark, 2012; Iannone and Simpson, 2015). It aims at bringing about improvement for both the teacher who is assessing and the students who are being assessed. According to Gijbels and Dochy (2006) assessment enables teachers to gather information about the students' progress as well as the extent to which methods of instruction used are helping the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Through assessment teachers can explore better ways of supporting students' learning and regulating their teaching strategies. On the other hand, assessment helps the



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students to know the areas that they need to work hard so as to attain the desirable learning outcome.

Assessment is used to improve both teaching and learning and is crucial in ensuring the quality of education offered. Assessment can contribute to enhancing quality of education if appropriate decisions and measures are taken based on the information revealed through assessment. However, determining what to assess and how to assess effectively and establishing remedial measures required, is a complex process. Other scholars view assessment as an essential tool for engaging students in learning as well as for sustaining their commitment and efforts to study (Gordon, 2008).

Students tend concentrate and pay keen attention to their studies if they know that at the end of topic they will be assessed. Their commitment tends to correlate highly with the stakes associated with the decisions to be made based on assessment they undertake. For instance, when promotion to the next class depends on attaining a certain pass mark score, they will tend to take studies more seriously than they would if the scores were to be used only for reporting purposes (Leahy *et al.*, 2005). Assessment plays an important role in motivating students' learning and in formation of good study habits. Encouragement and reward of individual efforts would have been difficult if there was no assessment and excellence in achievement would be less demonstrable (Wiliam and Thompson, 2008; Iannone and Simpson, 2013; Yamtima and Wongwanichb, 2014).

Despite of aforesaid assessment benefits, educators and educational leaders have continually debated student assessment in higher education (Wiliam, and Thompson, 2008; Vaden-Goad, 2009; Yamtima, and Wongwanichb, 2014). Academics expressed concern that the methods used to assess students are not linked to student learning (Firestone and Mayrowetz, 2000; Falchikov, 2004; Gijbels, and Dochy, 2006). Ongoing discussions center on such topics as whether a student's success in examinations relates to high standards, what assessment tasks are best for learning, whether assessment practices promote lifelong learning, and how feedback could help improve student progress (Carless *et al.*, 2015). Scholars have established that instructors do not always link assessment with quality teaching (Black, and Wiliam, 2005; Brookhart, 2011). Instead, they view assessment as a practice that signifies evaluation and the formation of grades (Black, and Wiliam, 2005; Gotch, and French, 2011). Since the focus of this paper is on the Tanzanian context, the analysis puts much emphasis on the instructors' assessment practices in selected Higher Learning Institution in Tanzania. Hence, this paper aims at describing how assessment is conducted in Tanzanian Higher Learning Institution. The general objective of the study was to critically analyze the practices of instructors in assessing students' learning in selected HEIs in Tanzania. The specific objectives of the study are to (1) examine the extent instructors' practices different assessment methods in their instruction to improve students' learning, (2) examine instructors' assessment communication practice (3) identify type of support instructors provided for the effective practices of assessment for learning and (4) examine how instructors give feedback to students in their teaching-learning process to improves quality of students learning and instruction.



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## 2.0 Research Methodology

The study was conducted in two universities and one college in Dodoma region. This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches informed by case study design. Case study is defined as “the study of an instance in action” (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:181). However, most authors understand case study to be the examination of a phenomenon (Thomas, 2004). Merriam (1988) went a step further and gave examples of phenomena, which may be programmes, events, persons etc. and these, according to some authors, are units of analysis. On the one hand, Mitchell and Jolley (2004) looked at case study as a thorough analysis or an investigation of a single or many cases. Expanding on Creswell's definition, Yin (1989) demonstrated that a case study does not only analyse the case, but it also describes it extensively.

Case study as the research design used in this study has all the characteristics that match the definition of a research design according to Mouton (2001). According to Mouton (2001), research starts with the research problem/question and so does a case study. It asks the questions: 'what, how and why,' depending on the type of case study. The type of research is an important aspect in the planning of the study (Mouton, 2001). When looking at the nature of the research question for this study together with what has been said about the 'how' question, it is obvious that a lot of description is going to be made, describing the ways in which assessment is done by HLI instructors in Tanzania. 'Thick or rich' description, therefore, is the desired end product for this study if we can refer to what has been said by Merriam in her explanation of the factors that determine the selection of a research design. This descriptive nature of the case study is evident in some of the definitions that were given earlier on in this section. It has been further confirmed by Merriam (1988) as she demonstrated that thick or rich description characterises a complete case or phenomenon under investigation.

In this study purposive sampling was used to select 20 heads of departments whereas random sampling technique was used to obtain 96 instructors. To ascertain the use of assessment methods and techniques by instructors, the researchers triangulated the interview and questionnaire with document review and observation checklist. The documents that were to be analysed were: one course outline from each instructor, coursework result from every head of department, one classroom exercise/test from every module and one marked test/assignment from each subject. Course outline of instructors were examined in order to find out whether instructors include the part about assessment during planning the lesson.

To ensure triangulation interview guide, questionnaire, and observation checklist and document review were used to collect the study information. Collected qualitative data were analyzed by using thematic content analysis in which they were first coded and then classified according to themes generated from the responses. On the other hand, descriptive statistics was used to analyze questionnaire findings with the help of SPSS. For the purpose of protecting the informants' rights to privacy, private data identifying the participants and their affiliated institutions have not been reported in this study.



### 3.0 Research Findings

Findings are presented according to the emerging categories arising from the data analysis: i) assessment methods mostly used by instructors (2) assessment communication practices, (3) support instructors provided for the effective practices of assessment for learning and (4) application of assessment feedback.

#### 3.1 Most Used Assessment Methods

The study finding revealed that most of the instructors used written test 96(100%) followed by those who used seminar presentation 68(54.1%). Other assessment methods, although less used, included homework assignment, projects and quizzes/class exercises as summarized in table 1.

**Table 1: Multiple Responses**

Assessment strategies	f	%
Written test/examination	96	100.00
Seminar presentation	68	54.1
Homework assignment	7	5.3
Projects	5	3.8
Quizzes/class exercises	2	1.5

**Source:** Field data (2018)

As observed in table 1, written test or exam is one of the most recurring methods Interview findings corroborate with questionnaire results. Interviewed heads of departments said that instructors mostly use written tests because they considered them to be valid, fair and objective. They are convenient to use and can be adopted and implemented quickly. They also assess a large number of learners at once and they make learners controllable. This implies that instructors are failing to use a variety of assessment techniques in order to capture as much information as possible on the student's attainment.

With regards to the effectiveness of assessment methods used by HLI instructors, the heads of departments claimed that written test is the more effective assessment method. Other methods are also considered to be as effective methods such as seminar presentation, group or individual work.

Heads of department stated that written tests require students' effort and they are more efficient than other assessment methods: in this regard, one head of department noted that;

*"...Written test require students to make an individual effort and that can be later seen as beneficial in their professional lives".....another head of department said... "Written test or examination force students to make the information more systematic and they reflect they effort individually"*



### 3.2 Assessment Communication Practices

Instructors were asked to indicate their levels of agreement to various statements that they were given regarding assessment communication practices. Table 2 present the summary of the findings.

**Table 2: Assessment communication practices**

Statement	Instructors (n=96)					
	Often		Sometimes		Never	
1 Returning assignments and tests to students with marks and comments	6	6.2	25	26	65	67.7
2 Providing students with suggestions of ways to improve their performance	6	6.2	18	18.7	73	76
3 Informing students about the purpose of assessment prior to its administration	21	21.8	30	31.2	45	46.8
4 Praising high achieving students in front of the whole class	9	9.3	17	17.7	70	72.9
5 Providing written assessment feedback to each students	4	4.1	7	7.2	85	88.5

**Source:** Field data (2018)

Data in the table 2 shows that majority 85(88.5%) of the instructors said they never provide written assessment feedback to each student whereas 7(7.2%) said sometimes and only 4(4.1%) said often. Further analysis also revealed that a considerable number of instructors 73(76%) said they never provide students with suggestions of ways to improve their performance whereas 18(18.7%) said the sometimes and only 6(6.2%) said often they did so.

**Table 3: Students' involvement in assessment**

Statement	Instructors (n=96)					
	Often		Sometimes		Never	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 Providing students with systematic ways to monitor their learning progress	12	12.5	21	21.8	63	65.6
2 Allowing students to choose assessment activities they want to work in the class	7	7.2	13	13.5	76	79.1
3 Providing students opportunities to write test questions based on their understanding of the instructional objectives	2	2	3	3.1	91	94.7

**Source:** Field data (2018)

It was also found that about 70(77.7%) instructors said they never praise high achieving students in front of the whole class whereas 17(17.7%) said sometimes and only 9(9.3%) said often they did. This implies that only few number of HLI instructors provide written assessment feedback



to each student, provide students with suggestions of ways to improve their performance and praise students' good performance in front of their class fellows and pinpoint their strengths, weakness to them in their academic works and return their assignments and classroom test with proper comments and feedback.

In the follow up question, Instructors were asked to indicate how often they involve their students in assessment activities at classroom level. Table 3 present the summary of the findings. Table 3 shows that most 91 (94.7%) of the instructors said they never provide students opportunities to write test questions based on their understanding of the instructional objectives whereas 3(3.1%) said sometimes they did and only 2(2%) said they often did it. Further analysis also shows that 76(79.1%) of the instructors said they never allow students to choose assessment activities they want to work in the class whereas 13(13.5%) said sometimes they did and only 7(7.2%) said they often did so. The study also revealed that a considerable number of instructors 63(65.6%) said they never provide students with systematic ways to monitor their learning progress whereas 21(21.8%) said they sometimes did and only 12(12.5%) said they often did so. This implies that the involvement of the students in assessment activities was low. Interview finding corroborate with questionnaire findings as it was insisted by one of the head of department during interview;

*“...Emphasizing this, one head of department noted of the test because they know it is for the course work...I only tell them when the test will be conducted, time and venue only”* (Interview, with head of department, May, 18, 2018).

This shows that in sampled HLI students are not involved in planning classroom assessment activities.

### **3.3 Support Instructors Provided for Effective Practice of Assessment for Learning**

As Table 4 shows that only 39(40.6%) and 37(38.5%) instructors revealed that they regularly encourages students to share ideas and encourage class participation. Moreover, only 26(27%) and 18 (18.7%) revealed that they advise students to assess their own work of learning objectives and create opportunities for students to act on the feedback provided.

The results of the classroom observation also showed that most instructors in the selected HLIs did not encourage their students to actively participate in the lesson. In all of the observed classes only some fast students participate in answering questions and sometimes ask questions. If the expected answers were not forwarded; most instructors immediately answer the question and proceed to the next explanation; students' were not given time to share ideas in group and to reflect it.



**Table 4: Support provided to engage students actively**

Item	Instructors (n=96)					
	Often		sometimes		Rarely	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 Provide examples of quality work that shows the standards required	9	9.3	32	33.3	55	57.2
2 Encourage class participation	37	38.5	35	36.5	24	25
Repeat the learning objectives and criteria during the lesson	6	6.2	58	60.4	32	33.3
3 Advise students to assess their own work of learning objectives	26	27	41	42.7	29	30.2
4 Encourage students to share ideas	39	40.6	44	45.8	13	13.5
5 Engage every student to answer questions	12	12.5	47	48.9	37	38.5
6 Create opportunities for students to act on feedback provided	18	18.7	41	42.7	37	38.5

**Source:** Field data (2018)

The interview findings from head of department also verified it. During the interview session most heads of departments stated that instructors regularly used lecture methods and simple oral questions because of students' expectation about themselves as a student who passively receive information and the role of the instructor as a good reservoir and impart of knowledge. For example:

*"...Mostly, I used teacher-centered methods to explain important point in the lesson, because, most of my students expect me to clarify each point in the lesson to understand it better. If I did not explain it, they consider me as lazy instructor, who is careless and who does not worry about their learning. Moreover, they perceived the lesson that is not explained by the instructor as less important for their learning and ignore it."* (Head of department A, Feb. 19, 2018).

Furthermore, one instructor reported that he encourages his students to share ideas in groups, ask and answer questions during the lesson. He emphasizing that:

*"...After explaining the important points of the lesson, I ask oral questions randomly and let them to ask questions, which are not clear for them. If they ask questions, I clearly explain the answer for them. However, still, I do not use other formative strategies to actively engage them in the lesson such as peer to peer questions, self-assessment, peer assessment, and peer feedback."* (Head of department C, Feb. 18, 2018).

### 3.4 Application of Assessment Feedback

As shown in Table 5 data, majority 76(79.1%) of instructors' regularly used assessment results for the purpose of recording for final marks.



**Table 5: Application of assessment feedback**

Item	Instructors (n=96)					
	Often		sometimes		Rarely	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 Permit students to resubmit their work once they improved it	5	5.2	31	32.2	60	62.5
2 Identify the gaps in students' understanding	4	4.1	23	23.9	69	71.8
3 Modify my teaching strategies accordingly	26	27	35	36.4	35	36.4
4 Plan what to teach next	15	15.6	28	29.1	53	55.2
5 Allow peer discussion on how to improve their work	2	2.08	57	59.3	37	38.5
6 Advise students about how to fill the gap in their learning	7	7.2	47	48.9	42	43.7
7 Suggest means for students to plan their future learning	8	8.3	39	40.6	49	51
8 Record assessment results	76	79.1	15	15.6	4	4.1

**Source:** Field data (2018)

From Table 5 data, further analysis shows only small number of instructors, 26(27%) and 15(15.6%) agreed that they regularly used the collected assessment evidences to modify their teaching strategies and to plan what to teach next respectively. Similarly, only 8(8.3%) and 7(7.2%) of instructors suggest means for students to plan their future learning and advise students about how to fill the gap in their learning respectively. The interview result also confirmed that most of the instructors were guided by the traditional use of assessment results, which have no value for future learning.

In general, the results of this study clearly indicate that HLIs instructors need intensive support to effectively use collected assessment evidence to adjust their instruction and to improve students' learning. The observation result also confirms it. In the observed lessons, there were no student to student and instructor to student dialogues; self-reflection through concept mapping, drawings, ideas...;peer to peer questions; provision of constructive feedback; self-and peer assessment; and all 5 observed lessons, instructors even did not write their learning objectives on the board; which are the main components of formative assessment to collect learning evidences and as a result to integrate it into the lesson to improve students' learning.

During interview, when head of departments were asked about formative assessment tools they used in their own lesson all heads of departments appeared to share similar practices. The common assessment methods they employed were tests, assignments, mid exams, homework, and seminar presentation and for some class works. However, these assessments are not effectively integrated in their daily instruction, but they are given at the end of the topic or module to assess students' understanding. Moreover, evidences collected through such





assessment methods cannot reflect the full range of learning goals to identify learning gaps; rather, it will be applicable for recording and reporting results.

Some heads of department viewed assessment and marks as two sides of the same coin and practiced accordingly, rather than embedding assessment with their daily instruction to collect learning evidences for the purpose of further learning. One example: ...I always give mark for any assessment task. For example, when I give group assignment ...I randomly call students to present what they have done in the group. It helps me to identify those students who actively participate in the group and who did not, to give marks accordingly. ....sometimes I also give marks for quizzes and tests

Arguably, formative assessment presents multiple benefits to the learning process. The monitoring of learning and the knowledge construction are positive aspects reported by the heads of departments;

*“...I think formative assessment is important. If I could I wouldn’t give grades. For me it is more important to see what the students do, the difficulties they have ... and then having to turn it into numbers is really hard.”* (Interview with head of department, February, 17, 2018).

Although formative assessment is said to have benefits for learning, some head of departments said that it is not feasible in higher education due to the number of students, lack of resources and available time: “Formative assessment is important but we are unable to use it for example; in a lecture hall with 400 students it is unthinkable”; “In undergraduate education the formative assessment does not make sense, it only makes sense at the master degree level”;

*“...Most of instructors they cannot use formative assessment because they have no time and it forces them to do something that they are not good at, I mean to distribute the interactivity with the students and it is difficult.”* (Interview with head of department, February, 09, 2018).

This implies that HLI instructors do not use formative assessments or assessment for learning strategies regularly with their students to gather evidences. Most felt that large number of students in one class and limited instructional time were factors for them to effectively integrate such strategies into their lesson. That is why; most of them did not feel good to implement such assessment for learning strategies in their lesson to improve students’ learning. Thus, they did not give clear direction for their students to have knowledge of where they are going, where there now, and which strategies will help them to achieve the learning objectives.

Generally, findings show that most of the HLI instructors seemed to still work in the view of traditional learning theories that formative assessment is a separate element that is not integrated with daily instruction but a tool that comes at the end of lesson to evaluate students’ learning. Therefore, there is lack of continuous collection of students’ learning evidences during the



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teaching learning process to adjust instruction and to fill the gaps in students' learning due to many factors.

#### **4.0 Discussion**

This study sought to assess HLI instructors' assessment practice. Results revealed that the written test is the most used assessment method. Seminar presentation, project, oral presentations, individual work and quizzes are also used too but their use is less frequent. This finding is in line with previous studies (Goodwin, 2000; Harlenand Crick, 2003; Gibbs, and Simpson, 2004; Griffin, and Hett, 2004; Popham, 2004; Struyven *et al.*, 2005; Gulikers *et al.*, 2006). These studies found that higher education instructors primarily assess student learning through testing. For example, in a study that specifically addressed science instructor's views of assessment, the majority of teachers used summative, written exams every year. Also, it was common for them to use many of the same questions year after year (Griffin, and Hett, 2004). The reasons for this view were that teachers felt it treated students equally, students were familiar with this method, and teachers believed that students only concern was to pass the course (Gulikers *et al.*, 2006). Gulikers *et al.* (2006) also found that testing was the primary method of assessment. They interviewed 28 teachers and found that 20 of them used traditional methods consisting primarily of summative assessment. Only eight of these teachers implemented alternative assessment strategies that "ranged from essays to peer assessment, portfolios, diary logs, and group projects" (Gulikers *et al.*, 2006).

The study findings showed that most of the HLI instructors seemed to still work in the view of traditional learning theories that formative assessment is a separate element that is not integrated with daily instruction but a tool that comes at the end of lesson to evaluate students' learning. Therefore, there is lack of continuous collection of students' learning evidences during the teaching learning process to adjust instruction and to fill the gaps in students' learning due to many factors. There is a mutual relationship between learning objectives, learning processes, teaching processes and assessment procedures (Biggs, 2003; Linn and Miller, 2005; Herrera, 2007; Heritage, 2007; Iannone and Simpson, 2013). These four variables are in a state of dynamic tension and balance in which adjustment or disturbance of one variable calls for a considerate adjustment of the other three. However, the relationships of these variables largely depend on the social, cultural and political context in which they operate. Wiggins (1993) argues that serious problems in assessment reform have to do with a "pervasive thoughtlessness about testing and failure to understand the relationship between assessment and learning" (p.3). Thoughtful teachers should realise that high quality classroom interactions that promote thinking and demonstrate learning and development lie at the heart of assessment as part of the learning and teaching processes.

When assessment is integrated with teaching and learning, both students and instructors benefit. Students are more likely to improve their learning because the teaching is focused and because they are assessed on what they are taught. Instructors are also able to focus and use their time more effectively. Because assessment involves real learning, instructors can integrate assessment into daily teaching and learning and other classroom activities. For instructors, assessment may



help them not only in determining the level of students' knowledge, but also the effectiveness of the teaching process. Effective assessment helps in generating information that is useful in making informed decisions about the students, curriculum, institution and the general education system.

Ongoing assessment in particular that seeks to diagnose and to improve the learning, instead of merely classifying learners, is vital in learning to boost the adaptability of the systems and the personalisation of learning, increasing motivation and the quality and productivity of the learning. Assessment for learning plays an important role in determining the quality of learning due to the truth that learning activities and assessment are connected very closely in well-designed courses (Firestone, and Mayrowetz, 2000; Falchikov, 2004). That is to say, higher education syllabuses have to clearly outline basic information such as learning objectives, teaching/learning methods and how assessment will be conducted and use.

### **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the light of what has been said in the research findings and discussion about instructors' classroom assessment practices in selected HLIs in Tanzania, it can be concluded that HLI instructors rely heavily on traditional methods of assessment such as written tests and examinations. Most of the HLI instructors seemed to still work in the view of traditional learning theories that formative assessment is a separate element that is not integrated with daily instruction but a tool that comes at the end of lesson to evaluate students' learning. Therefore, there is lack of continuous collection of students' learning evidences during the teaching learning process to adjust instruction and to fill the gaps in students' learning due to many factors. In other words, the kind of assessment practiced in HLIs in Tanzania serves an administrative purpose and as a result, the professional purpose of assessment, which is that of giving feedback on instruction and learning is suffering.

So, improvements are required by the participants in the assessment process in higher education in order to allow the use of assessment practices that they consider more appropriate to improve learning and more suitable to higher education purposes. Consequently, there are some tensions between what they want to do and what they can do in in the light of the conditions that they face. This study also suggests that assessment influences the teaching and learning process. Through assessment, or depending on the assessment method used, learning and teaching is developed in different ways. Motivation and students' performance, self-regulation of learning and the nature of the skills to be developed are related to the assessment methods used. Deeping instructors and heads of departments' skills and knowledge about assessment that promote learning is critical. The in-service training or professional development should address this issue.



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