Suggestions for Assessing Students' Knowledge and Abilities in Higher Education in the EU and Africa

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Abstract*: This paper aims to provide guidance on crucial assessment issues, such as ways of assessing knowledge and aptitudes/practice, innovative tools for conceiving and incorporating computing and information technology in teaching, learning and especially assessment, encouraging reflexive practice and self-evaluation, how to develop group learning and learner autonomy through assessment, how to address culturally diverse student populations' learning needs and strategies by using culturally responsive assessment tools, how both students and teachers can benefit from these assessment methods, strategies and techniques, some challenges and contradictions, etc. Besides the literature review, the paper will show how this extremely complex process of assessment can be applied in classes covering theological subjects. However, similar assessment plans can be applied in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes as well, or when assessing multicultural education subjects. In this respect, several assessment criteria will be discussed.*

Keywords*: formative; summative; assessment; strategies; tools;*

Introduction

Assessment will be viewed in this paper in close relation to teaching and learning, being a key element which can improve the whole process of education, teachers' methods and students' learning strategies and experience. The assessment means used by the teaching staff and educators establish whether or not the topics have been learnt, diagnose learning difficulties, certify accomplishment, evaluate educational programs. Thus, assessment can enhance students' knowledge and develop their abilities in order to make them able to pursue a career, to socially act and participate in a democratic society.

1. Literature Review

In his book, *Enhancing Learning through Formative Assessment and Feedback* (2008: p.7), Alastair Irons defines the following types of assessment used in higher education: *Summative assessment* as "any assessment activity which results in a mark or grade which is subsequently used as a judgement on student performance […] at the end of a course or program", *Formative assessment* as "any task or activity which creates feedback (or feedforward)

for students about their learning" and *Formative feedback* ("any information, process or activity which affords or accelerates student learning based on comments relating to either formative assessment or summative assessment activities": formal and informal interactions, one-to-one tutorials, online activities, pair work, groupwork, activities for subject understanding, for evaluating communication and academic skills, style and approach, student effort, alignment to learning outcomes.)

It is important for students to understand how formative assessment activities contribute to their learning, and how they can benefit from them. In this regard, activities must be well planned, integrated into courses, modules and programs, the timing being also important. The same author mentions the principles of assessment regarded as: evaluation of student ability and understanding, a tool for observing students' behavior and collecting data, a means of motivating students, a way of enabling student learning during assessment activities, a way of helping and judging students, teachers, administrators and even schools as a whole and as monitoring standards, measurement of the success of learning and teaching, a way of preparing for life. Thus, students should be engaged in discussions, exercises, tutorials, projects, presentations, they should be encouraged to create portfolios, reflective logbooks, participate in tests and interviews.

Referring to the benchmarks for all disciplines set by the Quality Assessment Agency and the learning outcomes, Graham Gibbs (2006: 19) highlights the necessity of assessing "'key skills', 'transferable skills', 'generic skills' or 'graduate attributes' rather than assessing solely the acquisition of knowledge", in connection with the major phenomena and changes existing in higher education nowadays:

Declining resources (in terms of governing funding, class sizes depending on the program), the volume of assignments and study time, 'Modularisation' (students having the opportunity to choose courses in order to construct their own programs and take credits), the growing phenomenon of plagiarism due to the use of internet, Computer-aided assessment (the creation of more sophisticated and demanding questions, not the easy multiple-choice type of questions), declining student retention (students not completing their courses) are often the result of inappropriate assessment.

David Nicol and Colin Milligan (2006: 65-66) refer to some principles of good feedback practice: clarifying what good performance is, the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning, delivering high-quality information to students about their learning, encouraging teacher and peer dialogue, positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem, providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance, reshaping the teaching process.

When discussing issues concerning workplace learning, Steinar Kvale (2007) relies on psychological concepts and factors, such as: Intrinsic motivation for learning; learning goals; feedback and reinforced learning. He states the principles of assessment in relation to goals, to models, assessment through use, assessment by users, by colleagues, assessment responsibility and assessment as a task ladder of increased responsibility.

1.1. Cultural diversity, "minority students" and multicultural education

James Banks, a famous American scholar, (2004: 5) refers to ways of studying multicultural education (ME), the features of a multicultural environment, the whole process of education by considering what he calls "dimensions": "Content Integration", based on concepts, principles, theories; "The Knowledge Construction Process" (helping "students understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it"); "An Equity Pedagogy" relying on modified, adapted teaching methods, strategies and styles meant to "facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, and social-class groups"; "Prejudice Reduction" also done through adapted teaching methods; and "An Empowering School Culture and Social Structure".

Cultural diversity raises questions pertaining to culturally responsive assessment. Dorit Alt and Nirit Raichel (2021) have identified two major barriers related to developing academic skills in a multicultural environment while bridging two different cultures: language proficiency and scholastic skills.

1.2. Assessment in higher education in the European Union documents

The Council of Europe (2016: 12) provides "a summary list of the competences which enable an individual to participate effectively and appropriately in a culture of democracy", based on *values* (human dignity and human rights; cultural diversity; democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law), *attitudes* (openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices; respect, civic-mindedness; responsibility; self-efficacy; tolerance of ambiguity); *skills* (autonomous learning skills; analytical and critical thinking skills; skills of listening and observing, empathy; flexibility and adaptability, linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills, co-operation skills; conflict-resolution skills); *knowledge and critical understanding* (knowledge and critical understanding of the self; of language and communication; of the world: politics, law, human rights, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability). Thus, "all cultures are internally heterogeneous, contested, dynamic and constantly evolving" (19).

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) contains some guidelines for its implementation at the national or local level, for creating effective education systems, for promoting learners' competences in democratic cultures. Two more concepts (and acronyms) should be considered by education ministries, teachers and educators in general: education for democratic citizenship (EDC) and human rights education (HRE), which focus on the empowerment of learners as active democratic citizens. The Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture is mainly based on the three principles of transparency, coherence and comprehensiveness, and "takes a holistic perspective on democratic learning processes" (3). The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture – Volume 3 (3-5) explains that the principles of assessment discussed in this document rely on a set of criteria: *validity* for accurately describing a learner's level of proficiency or achievement of the intended learning outcomes; *reliability* for a consistent and stable-result assessment; *equity* means a fair assessment, which does not favour or disadvantage any particular group or individual; *transparency* is related to explicit, accurate and clear information about the assessment process, types and criteria; *practicality* means that the assessment methods are in connection to the given resources, time and practical constraints; *respectfulness* for developing competences for a democratic culture.

The European University Association, in its "LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #16 Curriculum and assessment Thematic Peer Group Report", whose chair was Stephen Rutherford from Cardiff University, United Kingdom and coordinators, Ulf-Daniel Ehlers & Thérèse Zhang, support

> the concept of "assessment as (and for) learning" as an interesting paradigm for progressing towards assessment which enhances student-centred learning, and nurtures a fair, inclusive, and efficient assessment culture. 'Assessment as/for learning' requires a real cultural shift, from evaluation of learning and a "teaching for testing" attitude, towards making assessment an active and integral part of the student learning process. (European University Association 4)

The document stresses the need for aligning assessment with the curriculum, and its incorporation from the beginning of the curriculum design. Assessment should also be viewed as a learning activity. To implement this recommendation, digital approaches to assessment must be analyzed; new digital tools should be used to increase the inclusivity of assessments; an assessment framework should be designed for different courses to "develop workplace-related assessments and other authentic (i.e., real-life) assessments to sustain motivation and develop work-related skills".

Certain recommendations (12) are made: Students and teachers need training and development of their assessment literacy; creation of more formats for assessment; continued professional development (CPD); students could become valuable partners in developing assessment; training in the online or e-assessment; students' involvement in assessment matters, such as the design, review, and revision of assessment processes; guiding peer evaluations and self-evaluations as a means of developing self-regulation and self-evaluation skills; active engagement with employers; "shifting the focus from preventing cheating and plagiarism towards promoting and making explicit what academic integrity is"; "training for properly referencing/quoting as part of academic practice"; "the design of assessments that encourage application, rather than recitation".

Assessment in higher education in South Africa
In the studies of Wildschut and Silubonde (2020: 1), it is indicated that since 2005, there has been a swift expansion in the development of monitoring and evaluation, including assessment courses, in South Africa. This increase has transpired simultaneously with the evolving context in which evaluators operate. The development context is influenced by economic and financial crises, evolving interconnected global trends, technological advancements and communication patterns, increasing inequalities, and escalating concerns regarding climate change. The alterations in the operational context affect the nature of interventions and, consequently, evaluation practices. To remain relevant in a dynamic operational environment, providers of evaluation education must consider contemporary global and local trends. Evaluation education encompasses the instruction of consumers, diverse stakeholders, as well as evaluation practitioners and scholars. Despite the growth in evaluation education development, aspects such as the availability of offerings, considerations for providers in course content creation, and the role of evaluation education in cultivating proficient evaluators have garnered insufficient focus. Furthermore, the diverse contextual factors that define the environment and affect evaluation are rarely examined in detail within evaluation literature. An analysis of the status of formal evaluation education opportunities in South African academic institutions, along with the primary factors influencing monitoring, evaluation, and assessment discourses and practices, will elucidate the South African evaluation education landscape and its capacity to address both present and future evaluation needs.

Moreover, assessment policies enhance learning and academic performance by establishing fair, equitable, and standardized evaluation criteria. In recent years, the assessment policies of South African universities have been evaluated. These policies, relative to their predecessors, reflect transformative methodologies adopted in assessment practices in South Africa

amidst widespread disruptions in higher education. Moreover, in South Africa, document analysis reveals several significant trends, notably a transition in the purpose of assessment from assessment of learning to assessment for learning and assessment as learning. The paradigm shift is characterized by a transition from a rules-based approach, which includes specific prescriptions, to one that is based on principles and values. The increasing adoption of alternative and technology-enhanced online assessment methods, coupled with the demand for flexibility, are significant components of these new policies following COVID-19 (Sims et al., 2023: 139).

In the South African context, assessments are instrumental and are characterized as the process of acquiring pertinent information from an educational system to monitor and evaluate the performance of learners and other key stakeholders, as well as the operation of relevant structures and programs, such as North-West University, South Africa, where the subsequent case study is conducted (Kanjee, Moloi, 2014:92).

Furthermore, the primary attribute of any assessment must position the learner as the foremost participant in a nation's education system, thereby enhancing learning, arguably through teaching as the most essential outcome to achieve. Moreover, any evaluation should aim to enhance educational outcomes, such as ensuring accountability, guaranteeing quality control, facilitating instructional diagnosis, and identifying needs for resource allocation. Assessments can notably enhance learning and teaching, positively influencing teachers' assessment capabilities and class- and lecture room assessment activities (Kanjee, Moloi, 2014: 92).

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing acknowledgment of the significance of assessment in enhancing educational quality, particularly the implementation of continuous assessment (CA) to improve the teaching and learning process. This has led to a substantial rise in the number of countries formulating policies and systems for implementing and utilizing continuous assessment. Numerous nations have engaged in regional studies organized by UNESCO/UNICEF, including the MLA, SACMEQ, and PASEC. As of now, 47 countries have engaged in MLA I and II studies, 15 in SACMEQ studies, and 12 in PASEC studies. An increasing number of countries, including Botswana, Eritrea, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia, have commenced their own national assessment studies.

In South Africa, the final Grade 12 examination grade is determined by the examination score, which accounts for 75%, in addition to the continuous assessment score. Assessment practices and systems were instrumental in upholding oppressive apartheid policies. Assessment was the most overlooked component of the new government's initiatives to reform the apartheid-era education system, despite its foundational role in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) that supported the

new educational paradigm. Information regarding the influence of assessment policies and practices on teaching and learning within the new educational framework in South Africa is scarce. Nonetheless, each system and each format presents its own challenges and repercussions. In this context, the ramifications and difficulties of continuous assessment are that the data are abundant, while the information is deficient.

Furthermore, there is insufficient information regarding costs, no details on how assessments can be utilized to improve decision-making, and restricted access to data. In conclusion, quality is a crucial yet elusive objective in education; assessment is vital for enhancing quality, serving as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The challenge of converting information into actionable changes should be used to enhance learning, to emphasize the support for teachers in South Africa to refine assessment practices in the classroom, along with the focus on publications including papers, books, and colloquia series (Kanjee & Sayed, 2008: 16-19).

2. Case Study

The authors will present a module taught at a Theology Faculty in South Africa, which can serve as an example for continuous assessment in the Teaching and Learning core business. It contains an assessment plan or tool for an effective and practical-based format for the success of students (Freeks, 2019). The title of the module is "Pastoral Studies: Pastoral care of marriage and family within the broader framework of relationships". Twelve credits are allotted to it, i.e., it counts 12 credit points. Therefore, 120 hours (12x10 study hours) need to be scheduled for the successful completion of this module and to successfully master its outcomes. Some additional resources or requirements to complete the module successfully are: access to a computer; full-time access to the internet for the use of eFundi (where the lecturer posts all the necessary information); access to the library in terms of references/sources pertaining to the assignments.

The module's primary goal is to impart to the student the fundamental knowledge and abilities of pastoral care for marriage and families within a larger context of relationships. During contact sessions, this module's teaching, learning and assessment take the form of group discussions, individual Q&A sessions, and feedback on written assignments. Students need to complete the assignments on time, show up to class on time, and write the tests in order to pass this module. Should they fail to meet submission deadlines, the workload will become excessive.

After having completed this module, students should be able to:
- demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the various theories concerning marriage and family pastorate:
- apply skills concerning family pastorate including the pastoral care of

children and adolescents;
- identify what pastoral principles form the basis of marriage and family counselling;
- demonstrate what the pastoral care of marriage and family entails.

The assessment criteria for this module rest on ways/tools of evaluation of the students' ability to:
- demonstrate and describe the different theories concerning family and marriage pastorate:
- discuss the skills concerning family pastorate which include pastoral care of children and adolescents;
- name and discuss the different theories concerning family and marriage pastorate and apply in actual life situations within the field of family and pastoral care;
- apply own knowledge, insight and understanding of pastoral principles in termsof marriage and family pastorate.

The syllabus consists of discussions on different theories regarding marriage and family pastorate, on the pastoral principles underlying marriage and family counseling, demonstrations of what the primary pastoral care of marriage and family entails, what the advanced pastoral care of the marriage and family entails, an exploratory discussion is conducted for counseling married couples and family members within a class session under the guidance of a qualified and experienced facilitator, an exploratory discussion is conducted by means of a role-play at married partners under the guidance of a qualified and experienced facilitator, an exploratory discussion is conducted by means of a role-play with family members under the guidance of a qualified and experienced facilitator.

Assessment

For completing the module, a final grade of 50% is needed. Therefore, there is an assessment plan in place. The framework for formative assessment throughout the semester consists of assignments, dialogue, practice-oriented conversations, practical performances in class and field trips. The summative assessment through the form of oral or written exams is not applicable.

The formative assessment that supports and gives feedback on students' learning will rely on the interaction with the module's content during class sessions through exercises like group discussions with feedback, student presentations, polls and surveys. These exercises help students with their learning and give them quick feedback on what they have learned.

A portfolio of evidence (PoE) must be submitted for the module, which is offered on a full-time and online (virtual) basis.

The directions given to the students include action verbs, such as:
Analyze

Identify parts or elements of a concept and describe them one after the other.

(1) EXAMPLE: Analyze credible ministry.

Compare

Point out the similarities and differences between objects, ideas or points of view. The word "contrast" can also be used. The comparison between two or more objects should be done systematically - completing one aspect at a time and in the students' own words.

(2) EXAMPLE: Pastoral guiding and psychology

Define

Give the precise meaning of something. Very often definitions have to be learnt word for word.

(3) EXAMPLE: Define marriage.

Describe

Say exactly what something is like; give an account of the characteristics or nature of something; explain how something works. No opinion or argument is needed.

(4) EXAMPLE: Describe the pastoral principles regarding marriage and family.

Discuss

Comment on something in your own words. (It often requires debating two viewpoints or two different possibilities.

(5) EXAMPLE: Discuss the different viewpoints of primary and advanced pastoral care of marriage and family.

Distinguish

Point out the differences between objects, different ideas or points of view.

(6) EXAMPLE: How does Biblical guidance differ from psychological counseling?

Explain

Clarify or give reasons for something, in your own words. You must prove that you understand the content. (It may be useful to use examples or illustrations.)

(7) EXAMPLE: Explain the Niddah principle according to the Jewish Law.

Identify

Name the essential characteristics or aspects of a phenomenon, e.g., a good research proposal.

(8) EXAMPLE: Identify different pastoral principles.

Motivate or substantiate

You should give an explanation of the reasons for your statements or views. You should try to convince the reader of your view.

(9) EXAMPLE: Write an essay about your own counseling model. Motivate your views.

Name or mention

Briefly describe … without giving details.

(10)　　EXAMPLE: Name the different theories regarding marriage and family pastorate.

Summarize

Give a structured overview of the key/most important aspects of a topic. Always do it in your own words.

(11)　　EXAMPLE: Summarize the key points of the pastoral model.

The assessment plan

The lecturer uses continuous assessment as a teaching tool in the Module's assessment plan. To help students pass or succeed in the module, they must complete five assessments. Additionally, the criteria for every assessment are clearly defined and organized so that students learn the material and apply it to every assessment. These assessments consist of the following:

Assessment 1 – *The assignments* (1 & 2)

The assignment which counts *20%* of the first type of assessment. An example is: Choose between two assignments, namely, marriage counseling or fatherhood and broken families:

Assignment 1

(12)　　Example: Marriage Counselling

The topic: You have a choice between a marriage counseling problem you have already encountered and a hypothetical problem. You can also select a theme that has interested you for some time. *The theme must have a counselling focus!*

The assessment requirements and criteria are:

- You have the choice to formulate your title for the assignment.
- Discuss briefly in your introduction the problem of father absence.
- Give a description or definition of *broken* in your assignment.
- The length should be about 5-6 typed pages, 1.5 spacing, and use Arial or New Times Roman as a font.
- The assignment should be uploaded on the eFundi site, under the assignments section.

Table 1. Assessment Criteria for Assignment 1 & Assignment 2

Assessment Criteria	Classification of Marks/Grades
1. Logical Structure	15%
2. Creativity and Innovation	15%
3. References and Bibliography	10%
4. Content	30%
5. Own approach or Model or Guidelines to Pastoral Care	30%
Total	100%

The rubrics for the assignment include:
- Front page – name, surname, and student number (you can put a picture or image which relates to the topic of your assignment)
- Length - approximately 5 A4 typed pages with 1.5 line (1½) spacing and Arial or New Times Roman font and justified (block page).
- Your assignment must be in a Word Document and not PDF. The total is 100 points.

Assignment 2 – Broken families are caused by father absence and gender-based violence.

The topic: "Father absence and gender-based violence are the core reasons and problems of broken families". Discuss these two causes as social ills in society. The assessment criteria and rubrics are also applicable to assignment 2.

Assessment 2 – Case study
The case study assessment counts 10% and is scheduled as follows for the students:
Case Study 1 – Marriage Counselling [Ronald & Yvette] (Freeks, 2019); or
Case Study 2 – Counseling [Armand & Petronella] (Freeks, 2019).
The following assessment criteria are applicable:
- The students read one of the two case studies thoroughly and answer the questions about the specific case study (narrative).
- It is expected from the students to reflect and elaborate on the questions in order to gain good marks/grades.
- All answers should be typed.
- Line spacing is 1.5

- Font is Arial or New Times Roman
- The text should be justified (block).

Assessment 3 – The Class Test

The class test counts 40%, and the students are compelled to prepare and compare the Jewish Perspective, the Catholic Perspective, the Protestant Perspective and the Secular Perspective according to the study guide.

Assessment 4 – The reflection & dialogue

The reflection and dialogue count 20%. The Reflection part is 10%, and the following material should be consulted in the reference of Kath Phanemo (2021:15-24): "Family means that no one must be forgotten, and no one must be left behind". However, today, families are in crisis! Reflection question: Reflect on chapter 2 about families in crisis: Pastoral care and family counseling models on pages 15-24.

The assessment criteria
Students' reflections must have the following:

- Own introduction (5%)
- Definition of a family (5%)
- Types of family (5%)
- Family counseling and goals (5%)
- The reflection must be typed in Microsoft Word and be no longer than two (2) pages.
- Use Arial or New Times Roman with 12 as font size, 1.5 line spacing, and justified (block).
- Add Kath Phanemo as a reference in the bibliography according to the Harvard Referencing Style.

The dialogue counts 10%. The students participate in a dialogue about social issues where one student simulates as the counselor and the other one the counselee. The issues which will be discussed in the dialogue are marriage problems; divorce issues; cancer or an HIV/AIDS patient; a mother with teenagers with a drug or alcohol/drinking problem; suicidal thoughts and peer group pressure.

The assessment criteria are, as follows:

- Students formulate any five (5) questions to discuss in the dialogue.
- The dialogue must be typed by using the Arial or New Times Roman as font.
- The font size must be 12 and 1.5 line spacing, as well as justified (block).
- Name, surname and student number must be typed on the paper.

Assessment 5 - Portfolio of Evidence [PoE]
The PoE counts 10%. The students are compelled to submit a video recording as a Portfolio of Evidence before the end of the semester. They must consult the book of Dr. James Dobson (2000:375-388): Complete marriage and family. Home reference guide on pages 375-388 on the topic of great marriage killers - "Marriage and family as an institution of God".

Table 2. Assessment criteria in terms of the PoE video (10%)

Criteria item / rating	Excellent	Competent / Satisfactory	Needs Improvement	Total
Introduction [10]	The introduction is motivating, orientates the viewer and hooks the viewer from the beginning.	The introduction is clear and coherent and evokes moderate interest/response from the viewer.	The introduction does not orient the viewer to what will follow.	
Was all/ at least one of the questions answered? [20]	The question was clearly discussed and answered.	The question was vaguely mentioned and discussed.	The student did not answer the question at all.	
Understanding of topic [10]	The topic was well discussed, and the presentation clearly showed the student understood the topic.	The topic was understood, and the information was accurate, but not enough was said.	Not enough insight was portrayed.	
Concluding thoughts [10]	After the argument, the student skillfully summed up the discussion.	The student attempted to summarize their thoughts.	The video ends abruptly and does not summarize the key points discussed.	
Technical				
Video content and organization [20]	The presentation was very easy to follow.	The student attempted to create a flow in their argument, but at times	The presentation was not easy to follow.	

		deviated.		
Time [10]	No longer than 5 min.	-1 for each minute over	Over 8 min = 0	
Creativity [10]	The students show innovation in their presentations.	The student used some originality in their presentation.	The student showed no originality in their presentation.	
Presentation skills [10]	The student presented in a clear voice and did not distract from the message.	The student presentation was well thought through, but at times distracted from the message.	It was difficult to hear the student and could not follow the argument.	
Total = 100				Total divided by 10

Table 3. Total weights and percentages of the assessment plan

Module	Assessment 1	Assessment 2	Assessment 3	Assessment 4	Assessment 5	Total
	Assignments	Case Study	Class Test	Reflection & Dialogue	PoE Video	
%	20%	10%	40%	20%	10%	100%

Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the types of assessment in higher education from two perspectives: the general knowledge about assessment, and the principles and particularities of this process as explained in EU documents and exemplified through a case study conducted in South Africa. The study shows that in higher education the balance between class contact time and independent research and studying is essential, along with continuous assessment, not necessarily the traditional oral or written examination. Moreover, the paper highlights the importance of improving certain values, attitudes and critical thinking skills through the educational systems of different countries for empowering the young people and helping them to become socially active in their democratic societies.

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