



## Research Article

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**Concerns of Students on How Lecturers Assess Their Work in Teacher Education Colleges in Zimbabwe: Are Students Short-Changed in The Process?**Faith N. Tlou\*<sup>1</sup>, Zibulo Sibanda<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>National University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Science and Technology Education, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe**Article History**

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**Abstract:** The study set out to scrutinize the processes of assessing students in Teachers' Colleges to establish students' concerns with regards to how their work is marked. A qualitative approach using a case study design was adopted. Data was collected from three administrators, ten lecturers and twenty four students, six being semi-structured face to face interviews and three focus groups of six students each. The study revealed that in some cases assessment was not efficiently done, while administrators and lecturers on their own admission disclosed that some of the assessments left a lot to be desired. Overwhelming evidence indicates some cases of serious delays in feedback to students with instances missing assignments which lecturers failed to account for. The paper argues that there is a dissonance between the set assessment standards the colleges of education aim for and what actually happens on the ground. The study recommends closer supervision and monitoring of lecturers when executing their duties. The study also recommends that colleges put in place rubrics and guides to ensure efficient marking using valid instruments.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Diagnostic Formative, Summative, Critical Theory.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Research points to dissatisfaction by students in higher education about how their assignments and examinations are assessed by some lecturers. This is especially so considering assessment is at times high stakes and may be the deciding point for students attaining their degrees or getting to make it to their dream job or not (Ndebele & Maphosa, 2013). Grading that is viewed as unfair by students reduces students' confidence in their lecturers and damages relations between them setting them on a collision path of conflict. It has also been argued by some scholars that at times assessment is not done with validity, reliability or objectivity but that while it does rope in intellectuality it also has a lot of situational subjectivity (Allal, 2013). In this paper we argue that some of these failings are prevalent in teacher education college assessment. Since assessment is a multi-purpose tool used to size-up students' competency by evaluating their skills and abilities through set manifest indicators it has to be efficiently done (Alm & Colnerud, 2015) Thus it is a requirement and of utmost importance to stakeholders like students and parents who invest in the outcomes of educational programmes that lecturers do assessments right. In higher education, assessment functions in three ways.

First it is used for a diagnostic function, where activities of assessment such as essays, demonstrations, portfolios, and projects are carried out during instruction for the purpose of identifying the level at

which a student is operating at. The student's competences are then targeted so they are raised to the level that is intended using improvement teaching by the lecturer (Harlen, 2007).

Secondly, it is used as a formative process to inform the lecturer about a student's abilities in order to identify his strengths and weaknesses. The lecturer then has insight and opportunity to select the strategies he needs to use to build on identified gaps and weaknesses to reinforce his/her teaching to focus on targeted skills and knowledge and provide continuous feedback to the student as well as guide intervention steps (Yorke, 2003; Anderson & Parmer, 2017).

Lastly, assessment is also used in the learning context summatively to benchmark the standard of skills and knowledge achieved at a given point (Maree & Fraser, 2008). In this sense, assessment is used as a yardstick to inform an evaluative judgment on the students' abilities (Irons, 2008). This is when it comes into play at the end of an instruction period where it is used to grade a students' work for the award of a certificate or for onward placement in further courses or for job selection (Harlen, 2007). Assessment becomes a tool used to evaluate whether or not objectives have been achieved. Given its importance, such an exercise is expected to be performed with the highest competency.

In teacher education colleges, assessment is done at various levels, from the classroom tutorial level

where it may take the form of verbal feedback exchanges, to the departmental level as written feedback for learning assignments given by lecturers. It is also done at the level of college internal assessors, where grading and marks are compiled for presentation to external assessors of the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Teacher Education (DTE). This department has an associateship arrangement which enables the university to certificate the students. At all these levels the processes are guided by strictly laid guides of what constitutes various levels of quality grading (DTE handbook, 2007).

The issue of quality rests on the premise that specifications of excellence attained at a given level should be succinctly spelt out (Ndebele & Maphosa, 2013). To this end DTE is expected to make quality audits where during moderation they undertake activities that measure the assessment process as part of quality control and quality assurance (Ndebele & Maphosa, 2013). The internal and external assessor actually form a board that scrutinizes each students' profile case by case to ensure that all processes are done as per regulations. It is this meticulous interface of the University appointed experts in the various subjects with proven records as academics and years of experience that evaluate the grading. They assess by sampling some middle range, all failing and all distinctive range performances of candidates (DTE Handbook, 2007).

There are some crucial aspects of assessment that should be incorporated in procedural processes of doing it. These criteria spell characteristics of good assessment. They include reliability which refers to the degree of accuracy and consistency of the assessment. For an assessment to be reliable, it has to be accurate and dependable to the extent that qualified markers are likely to grade the same category of work the same way (Irons, 2008, Harlen, 2007; Maree & Fraser, 2008).

Validity, which is another fundamental factor, concerns how the same instrument or test would yield similar results if administered to the same students under the same conditions. A valid assessment should measure the behaviour prescribed in the goal of focus (Maree & Fraser, 2008; Wiliam et al., 2010).

Fairness, is yet another characteristic which is crucial in the practice of assessment as it entails consistency for the levels of quality grading where similar quality work is graded the same for all students (Webber & Tschepikow, 2013; Irons, 2008; Harlen, 2007). A case where two students raise similar points argued strongly but one is awarded a failing mark and the other a distinctive mark by one marker would not only demonstrate inconsistency but serious bias (Irons, 2008; Wiliam et al., 2010). Fairness should reflect the students' current level of performance measured against the expectation or standards of the diploma. Fairness

also entails all students being fore warned of the assessment so they are ready and their having knowledge of the exact criteria required for them to meet the expected outcomes (Chapman et al., 2005; Maree & Fraser, 2008; Harlen, 2007).

Another very important feature of good assessment is that it should be practicable. This implies that tasks for students should be realistic. That means it should not be over challenging for their level of learning. It also should have reasonable time allowed for students to work on it just as lecturers should have adequate time to mark the assignments in view of their workloads. Above all, it should test knowledge and skills that students have been taught (Maree & Fraser, 2008; Carless, 2006).

It is also a characteristic of good feedback that it should have both positive and negative aspects reflecting its value to the student. If assessment has overly harsh and critical comments it hurts students and makes them feel downgraded and personally insulted (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Harlen, 2007; Irons, 2008).

Good assessment and feedback should be timely to allow students to use it to correct and improve on their skills before they attempt the next task. If it comes long after they have done some assessments that are summative then it will serve no purpose (Maree & Fraser, 2008, Hall, 2009; Harlen, 2007, Irons, 2008). Harlen (2007) argues that feedback is useful in closing the gap between a student's actual operational level and the level he or she is expected to operate. In view of targeted objective parameters delayed feedback is damaging in that it frustrates students who build high expectancy levels that then get destroyed when results are not delivered (Hall, 2009; Harlen, 2007; Mortimer et al., 2006; Spiziale, & Carpenter, 2007).

Driven by student demand indications are that feed-back should actually come after students are made to expect it, understand its benefits to them, and should not use numerical values only all the time albeit the fact that students usually concentrate on awarded symbols and ignore the comments (Irons, 2008; Weaver, 2006). Maree & Fraser (2008) advocate that students should be made to know when to expect feedback and that such a date should be honoured by all means.

However in the colleges, there is a gap created by questionable efficacy of the internal assessors' proficiency. Complaints of students arise from this point with some students challenging results of marks awarded for particular tasks. There have also been concerns of delays in feedback as well as the quality of the assessment itself. Other complaints have been raised in the area of missing assignments.

It is against this background that this study sought to investigate whether observation of classroom practices of lecturers with regards to assessment in the college learning context has shaped appropriate competencies in students towards the teaching profession.

To gain insights into the key issues in the main question above, the question posed in the study was: What concerns do students have regarding their lecturers' assessment practices?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical theory was used as an overarching framework because it helps to analyse situations of unfair practice where some groups of people have enormous power such as lecturers have, and use it to dominate less powerful groups such as students (Vaandering, 2010). Situations of power differentiation and dynamics such as those operating in classrooms are grounded in the critical theory (Willis 1977) In McGrew (2011). The appraisal of the critical theory reflects that the relationship and interaction of students learning in institutions is based on power. Power is conceived by McGrew (2011) as a negotiated two way dynamic often attracting dialectical forces. The power differentiation reproduced and challenged by the resistance of the subordinated group against the competing powerful one who in this context of the classroom happen to be students versus lecturers, plays out in assessments. The goal of critical theory is to detect factors that curtail human freedom but resultantly evoke reaction by students consequently leading to a plan of action to overcome such factors. Critical theory in this case empowers the dominated group such as students to prevail when under siege and use this empowerment as a vehicle of change in order to better their human condition. If thus employed, critical theory gives hope of removing the hopelessness students feel when unfairness is not addressed and so gives them resolve to struggle and find voice to question and get redress that dismantles unfair practice (Dell'Angelo, Seaton & Smith (2012). It has to be noted that this is not easy, as oppressive mechanisms are resilient and capable of adaptation. It is important to see this kind of struggle as one that has to create alertness and vigilance that whenever unfairness happens, the dominated have to rise to occasion and voice concerns.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. The design was selected for the advantage of hearing straight from the participants involved in the assessment in the capacities of students, lecturers and managers. Purposive sampling was used to select twenty five students, ten lecturers and three administrators considered to be relevant participants. Semi-structured interviews were held with lecturers, with first, second and third year students as well as

managers at one selected teacher education College in Zimbabwe. The interviews focused on concerns by students on assessment. They also targeted strategies put in place to ameliorate the students' concerns when they arise. Documents such as marked scripts, and disciplinary committee minutes and the D.T.E. handbook (2007) on policies were also used as information sources to triangulate the findings on students' concerns.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In an effort to find concerns of students as well as assessment practices of lecturers the following themes emerged: Poorly marked assignments, delayed feedback, lack of feedback, unfair assessment practices, overly critical comments, contradictory feedback ,and unbalanced comments.

### Theme 1: Poorly marked assignments

Data obtained from respondents indicated that while some lecturers provided meticulously done work to students in terms of assessments, there were other lecturers who did a sloppy job to the point of outright incompetence. There was overwhelming evidence that some lecturers actually did not provide reliable assessment. That was because there were cases where there was no evidence of marking in terms of ticks or comments. An impressionist mark was all the assignment carried with a dismissive comment like "satisfactory", "adequate", "confused", "wordy", or "you can do better". This is what students raised concerns about as they felt this lacked competency. Such lecturers had questionable skills as well as commitment in doing their work. Students also pointed out that this showed that the institution had no quality assurance as far as assessment was concerned. Students also argued that some lecturers did not follow the marking guides closely hence the poor manner of marking. Further, students indicated that there was no verification that they had acquired competitive skills that would make them work with confidence of being professionally sound coming from a partly crippled examining system.

Commenting on messages conveyed by poorly processed assignments respondent SA said:

*"Poorly marked assignments where lecturers read the introduction and conclusion ending of students work imply that there is no quality assurance in us as products of the college. We may not hold our own in the world as competent educators. It conveys the message that we are questionable in terms of our capability. We could be very incompetent for all we know."*

In response to the concerns raised by students on poorly processed assignments respondent L3 disclosed:

*“Assignment processing is a core task in training. It spells out the evaluation that certifies the quality and standards achieved by the trainees. When it therefore gets messed up by poor marking, it means the student teachers as products are not ingrained with high skills. They are incompetents who can only further cripple their own classes.”*

It then emerged from data gathered from administrators that respondents confirmed the observations by other respondents that poor marking reflected inadequacies in the products groomed by the college. In fact administrators continued to point out that poor marking reflected a serious college deficiency in that it exposed the college to be a malfunctioning institution that has highly articulated virtues and ideals of excellence but in real terms produces incompetents that can only be of poor service to the society. This has also been corroborated in research (Allal, 2013; Alm & Colnerud, 2015). Disclosing weaknesses in lecturer processing of assignments respondent M1 said:

*“Instruction crowned by evaluation of course programmes through assignments given to students is the core business of learning and training. When this is found to be shadowed in discrepancies and inadequacies through poor marking, then it does not serve the purpose of establishing the standards and competencies students have acquired. So instead it serves to show how incongruent the course and products will be to the goals and targets of the course as set out in the mission and objectives of the programme.”*

On examining students' marked assignments it was apparent that in some cases there were no indications of comments or a sign that marking had been done on most pages save for a summarised remark at the end declaring the essay was a 'weak' or 'mediocre' or 'good' attempt. There were also cases where many ticks led one to expect high marks only to be shocked to see a failing or average mark. The documents generally reflected serious anomalies and inconsistencies. Given these concerns, the pertinent question that arises is whether or not the diagnostic and formative assessments were achieved and informed both lecturers and students to direct teaching and learning.

## **Theme 2: Delayed feedback**

Data also revealed that students were concerned with delayed feedback. Students indicated that in many instances some lecturers completed their marking and gave out feedback to students within the prescribed deadlines but then other lecturers never met the set deadlines for giving feedback. As a result students complained that they underwent a lot of stress by being made to wait for long periods without relief of having their assignments returned on time (Rae &

Cochrane, 2008; Harlen, 2007; Irons, 2008; Students indicated this state of affairs tormented them. (Alm & Colnerud, 2015) This is because these were high-stakes summative assessments with finality to them that implied students were at cross-roads where their fate would be determined and sealed. From a formative point of view students also indicated that they in fact wanted their feedback in time to be able to use it (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

From focus group SFA, the main concern registered was delayed feedback which they clamoured to be unfair substantiating their concern respondents in this group shouted:

*“Those lecturers intentionally torture us psychologically. They really have no respect for us as candidates. Imagine writing a piece of work with the effort and attention to detail required, as well as with absolute hurried urgency. After that deadlines set for return of feedback come and go and some students get their feedback because some lecturers will have processed work in other subject areas with efficiency and you get none. It is cruel and downright unfair”.*

Lecturers were also asked to react to the question of messages conveyed to students when feedback is delayed. The same view was also validated by respondent L9 who gave a detailed account of delays encountered in feedback of students saying:

*“Some lecturers do not honour marking deadlines. They delay giving students their feedback and after procrastinating for extended periods they end up faking marks, proven by students studying in one group, writing very closely related answers and getting widely varying marks without specific comments. Lecturers usually get away with delays because it is lecturers in charge and HODs who get pressurized for mark profiles which individuals end up producing at the last minute.”*

When managers were consulted about delayed feedback of students' assignments by lecturers, they mirrored the views by other respondents. When the question of delayed feedback was posed respondent M1 disclosed that:

*“Indications are that some lecturers are dead on time in marking and compiling marks. However, there is a breed of lecturers who despite all training and urgings by administration exemplify incompetence and unprofessionalism by missing marking deadlines thus delaying giving students' feedback of their work until new work is assigned which is then done without the input and correction of errors previously made.”*

*These way?? students' skills are not properly developed.'*

### **Theme 3: Lack of Feedback**

Data sourced from students also indicated that there were many cases when students did not get any feedback because assignments had gone missing while in the care of the lecturers. Irons (2008) Gibbs & Simpson (2004) argue that failure to give students their feedback is the worst case scenario ever. That is because not only will they fail to correct errors on subsequent work attempts but that they will also get demotivated. It is these kinds of occurrences that convey hidden messages to students that feedback is not valuable for their growth but a powerful tool used as a lever by lecturers to score points against those they dislike and reward those they favour.

Still on students' concerns the group raised the concern of assignments lost by lecturers. One of their members outlined her experience exposing that:

*"There is a lecturer who lost my assignment which had gone for marking. The assignment was sent in through distance education where it was recorded and signed for by the lecturer when it was handed to him. After deadline, I went check for my mark after other students received theirs and I had not got anything, there was no mark and no assignment. I was arrogantly told to use my draft and re-write because I had no mark and would fail if I did not re-write it. There was no apology, just threats. The problem was that there was no guarantee that the re-submission would be properly looked after and processed*

When interviewed some students indicated they had been asked to use drafts to rewrite and submit assignments without receiving feedback to earlier work which lecturers indicated they could not find. What made students irate was the fact that they were not politely requested and that no apology had been proffered but that they were arrogantly commanded, seeing if they failed to do so they were simply disqualified. Lecturers reasoned that external assessors passed only those with marks. There was no attempt by the lecturers to be accountable. This sent messages to students that lecturers professionally negate their rights. Considering the findings unearthed by the study the issue of missing assignments and the impact of messages it sends to students becomes crucial for instructional leaders to tackle. This is a situation that critical theory addresses Vaandering (2010) as it is unfair that students are treated this way with lecturers appearing unconcerned with the way they hurt and discouraged students (Dell'Angelo, Seaton & Smith 2012).

### **Theme 4: Unfair assessment practices.**

Data also raised on the students' concerns also indicated that some respondents were concerned about biased feedback. Respondents cited cases where they had read assignments from colleagues with high marks and noted how they had raised more, better argued points but surprisingly had been scored much less marks. This conveyed implicit messages to students that merit was not the way marks were earned but that connectedness to lecturers mattered more. That actually blew away their ideals and left them confused because in direct contradiction, officially hard work and commitment to work were idolized values. Critical theory talks to such situations, giving rise to the argument that unfair practices are sometimes embedded in institutions labelled as excellent but need to be uprooted when students raise concerns and bring them to the surface (Dell'Angelo, Seaton & Smith (2012).

### **Theme 5: Overly critical comments**

Students were also concerned about feedback that was overly critical and given in harsh language. Respondents cited comments like "rubbish" "idiotic" "not diploma level" that seemed to demean and attack the person as unhelpful, insulting and de-motivating. Sometimes these came in the form of biting sarcasm such as "In academia we value quality not quantity" The main concern raised was that the comments were unduly harsh and in respondents' views quite undeserved.

### **Theme 6: Contradictory feedback.**

There was over-whelming evidence that students deplored feedback they considered contradictory. The cases respondents cited were of assignments that were declared "good" or had abundant sprinkles of ticks, sometimes double ticks which students read as approval of points then the award of a failing mark such as 20%. Students felt this was confusing and tantamount to playing bizarre tricks with their feelings and careers. This inconsistency with something as sensitive as summative pieces of work was intolerable to students who could not understand the motive of a lecturer who appears to blow hot and cold (Harlen, 2007; Chapman et al., 2005; Irons, 2008). The messages conveyed by this practice reflected inconsistency because it sends contradictory signals about the same piece of work.

Respondents from focus group SFB in consensus explained that sometimes both approval and disapproval were given as feedback to one assignment and really confused the student. Citing such a case the group indicated that:

*"At times the feedback is absolutely disorienting. The lecturer gives many ticks, then pronounces the assignment mediocre and awards 40% which is a failing mark. It is better for the marker to be clearer by giving a*

mark that is aligned to the spirit of the comment”.

Asked to comment on this concern raised by student respondents with regards to the message it implicitly conveys to students, respondent L5 shook his head from side to side and remarked:

“Some lecturers need re-training in processing of assignments. That is outright confusion. And sends messages to students that lecturers actually do not know what they are doing .It signifies a hopeless situation”

Managers were also requested to interrogate this concern and one of the managers M3 derided this kind of marking insisting that it really was shocking to see so much confusion from one of the lecturers.

“I am totally shocked by this kind of unreasonable assessment. A lecturer is expected to come up with better performance than that.”

### Theme 7 Unbalanced comments

Data elicited from respondents also revealed that in many instances lecturers gave feedback that was one sided, usually showing negative comments without providing positive comments too. This sent a message to students that they were failures who had nothing good to show. It therefore was a very discouraging practice that appeared under-play their effort. This was particularly agonizing to students because summative examinable assignments are high-stakes pieces of work that decide their fate career-wise.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following strategies are proposed as a way of ameliorating the impact and occurrence of the ill practices of lecturers that groom students to hold negative dispositions towards assessment in their teaching. Colleges should include articles that guide and detail the monitoring of assessment by supervisory staff in policy documents. These should include such issues as: (i) Lecturers should be periodically work shopped on helpful assessment practices that provide examples of students’ concerns on poorly processed assignments. (ii) There should be monitoring by heads of department to engage lecturers who do not mark assignments to the directive of marking guides, given that students are not in dissonance with material in marking guides but that what presents a gap is how lecturers implement the marking.(iii) That, besides aligning the feedback return deadlines to summative work submission, computerized monitoring should be activated where the system can be alerted if a lecturer has delayed or not returned students’ work.

## CONCLUSION

The study therefore concludes that if assessment is to service students meaningfully as

intended by all key stakeholders in teacher training colleges, there is need to carefully consider some observations raised in this study. . The implications of the study are that while a lot of good practices as regards assessment go on in teacher education colleges, a lot of other unwanted ill-disposed practices that short-change students also go on.

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