

Assessment Practices in Higher Education: Myths and Realities

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Abstract

Assessment is an integral part of any teaching learning process. Assessment practices have a large number of functions to perform in the context of the teaching learning process. Do contemporary assessment practices perform these function is a critical question to be analysed. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the myths and realities of the assessment practice in the higher education sector.

Key Words: Assessment Practices; Internal Assessment; Assessment Issues; Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of any teaching learning process. Whatever may be the nature of the curriculum, assessment is a 'necessary evil'. Assessment has a large number of functions to perform in the context of teaching learning process. It varies from providing feedback to learners and teachers to making predictions of the future probable performance of learners. Do the contemporary assessment practices at the higher education sector perform these functions is a critical question. Every assessment is said to be valid, reliable, comprehensive, etc. Whether the contemporary assessment could claim these features is a debatable issue. Whether students are really getting the benefits of continuous assessment and evaluation is another issue to be addressed especially in the context of digital reviving of teaching and learning process at the higher education sector. Many times the assessment practices are criticised by students and other stakeholders as biased, subjective and as a tool for oppression.

2. The Myth of Validity

Validity is the quality of any assessment that it really assesses what it intends to assess. There are different types of validity like content validity, construct validity, criterion reference validity, etc. These are ensured by following systematic procedures while developing assessment tools. Since the systematic procedures are often violated while developing the assessment tools, the validity of assessment practices is in question. There is an agreement among academicians that the contemporary assessment practices in higher education sector do not assess truly real competence and skills of learners. Hence, the assumption of validity is still a mirage as far as assessment practices at the higher education sector are concerned.

3. The Myth of Reliability

Reliability is the consistency of the assessment results. It checks the subjectivity in assessment practices. But there are as many instances to show that assessment practices are subjective especially at the higher education level. Even the valuation of answer scripts is too subjective as examiners fail to make it objective. This failure may be due to the problem of the scheme of evaluation or not observing the scheme of valuation strictly. At the university valuation camps, it is observed that there are 'extreme liberalists' and 'misers'. Whatever the level of competence of the examinees, the scores or grade awarded by them always lies within the 'predetermined range'. It is a very difficult task for the chief examiners to make reconciliation between these two extremists. If the same answer script has been submitted to these 'extremists' one may award very high score while the other may award below average score. These differences we can find not only in the valuation of answer scripts but in every sphere of assessment practice both internal and external assessment.

4. The Myth of Comprehensiveness

The assessment practice must be comprehensive. That is it has to assess the multidimensional aspects of learners. To make assessment comprehensive there must be provision for different techniques of assessment with written, oral and performances types of assessments. The higher education system in India still heavily rely on written examination to assess students' abilities and competencies. Performance and oral examinations are rarely used or minimum weightage is given to them. Techniques except testing are rarely employed for assessment in the higher education sector. As comprehensiveness of assessment is still a myth, assessment of learning and learners became partial and narrow. It leads to wrong inferences and ambiguous predictions on learners and their competences as the assessment practices are not comprehensive.

5. The Myth of Assessment as a Tool (But it act as an End in Itself!)

Assessment is a means or a tool that lead the learners and the entire education system to the desired ends. But in contemporary contexts, assessment became an end in itself. It is paradoxical. Assessment practices have a large number of functions to perform in the context of teaching learning process. It involves giving feedback, motivating, directing of learners, etc. But the contemporary assessment practices in higher education do not perform these functions. Assessment ends with the assessment. In a question paper oriented education

system like ours, every educative process starts and end with narrow assessments and learners shrink into meaningless scores or grades.

6. The myth of Systematic Procedure

There are well-defined steps and procedure to follow while developing different assessment tools including question papers. But the majority of the universities are not following such steps and procedure while preparing question papers. What usually question paper setters are doing is cloning some set of question paper based on the model question paper supplied. I am not sure whether the 'question paper setters' of different universities are aware of the procedure involved in the question paper development like designs, deciding different weightages, development of blueprint, item generation, etc. It may be the reason why students complaining that the questions are out of syllabus, no quality, limited coverage of curriculum, etc.

8. The Myth of Scheme of Evaluation

The purpose of the scheme of valuation is to make the valuation objective, valid and reliable. A well-designed scheme of valuation will be supposed to contribute to these qualities of assessment. But many times the nature and quality of the valuation schemes prepared by the examiners and supplied by universities are not contributing to but distracting to such qualities. Sometimes the value points given in the valuation scheme and test item in the question paper will be the same. For example for the test item what are the qualities of a good test, the value points in the scheme may be: 'different qualities of good test'. As an examiner, I have seen value points in like 'any four steps', 'a brief description of, different roles of, different functions of etc. Do these are actually value points? These statements cannot be considered as value points as they are not serving the purpose.

9. Ritualistic Practice of Internal Assessment

Internal assessment has been introduced with a purpose of ensuring continuous evaluation of learning and to provide immediate feedback to the learners, teachers and other stakeholders as the (written) examination performed at the end of the academic session or year fail to do so. The active participation of all learners in the learning process and the general academic activities was the focus of the argument for the introduction of internal assessment at the higher education level. At present, there are criticisms among the different stakeholders of education that the internal assessment became a ritual. Teachers assign marks to students not based on objective criteria but arbitrarily. The internal assessment scores generally range from 80 to 100 percent in many cases. Is it truly depicts the real competence and ability of diversified learners? Is it actually providing true feedback and motivation to the learners?

10. Continuous Assessment through Semester End Examination

It looks surprising but a reality.....! Some universities practice continuous assessment through semester end examinations. With the introduction of internal continuous assessment at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, 20% of the total score of each course has been assigned through continuous internal assessment and 80% through semester end written

examination in different universities. Here 20 % of the scores of the course will be based on the continuous assessment by the concerned teachers themselves. But in the case of students who learn different programmes through distance education mode, it is found that for this 20% they have to write another examination along with the usual semester end examination. This 20% has been assigned by a university on the basis of an examination consisting of 20 multiple choice type questions. Extra 15 minutes will be granted for this special examination along with the three-hour semester end examination. Wow.... continuous assessment with a 15-minute examination....! This is the way how a practice introduced with a genuine purpose has been ridiculed by short-sighted academicians and administrators in universities.

11. Supremacy of Content in Assessment and the Myth of Content Free Assessment

The teaching learning process at the higher education level still continues in the transmission-reception model, where content is transmitted to the learners and the ability of the learners to memorise the same content is examined through assessments. If the competence and development of the learners matter in assessment, it should be content free. But content free assessments are rarely practiced in the present day higher education. In our classrooms contents are repeated blindly and the learners are required to create the carbon copies of the same in the name of assessment. Supremacy of content reproduction in the teaching and assessment neglect the higher order thinking skills and competence of the learners. I think if the higher order thinking skills and competencies like analysis, creates, judging, etc are given due importance in the assessment, supremacy of the content in the teaching learning process became a fade and learning became a constructive process.

12. Development and Use of Rubrics

Rubrics are guidelines for assessing complex tasks or behaviour which are subjective in nature. It helps to make assessments more accurate and objective. Whether the teachers or institutions develop and use such rubrics is doubtful. In many instances, even if the curriculum provides the rubrics for assessing different learning, teachers are not making the assessment based on them but making a blind guess of the learner competencies. It makes assessment very subjective and inefficient and thereby fails to satisfy the real purpose. The practice of blind assessment contributes to subjectivity, and partiality became a built-in feature.

13. Conclusion

Assessment is an integral part of an educative process. It helps in the formulation, monitoring, directing towards and reviving the goals and objectives of the programmes. Hence the practice of valid, reliable, justifiable and fair assessment is a prerequisite for the success of any education system. There must be deliberate efforts from the part of academicians and authorities to make assessment practices at the higher education level more dynamic and fruitful. Then only assessment became a motivating and joyful process to the learners as well as to the teachers and other stakeholders. It is the duty of the teachers and educational administrators to redefine the assessment practices and inculcating the culture of

fairly assessing learners and facilitating the unlearning of the dysfunctional and mechanical practices.

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