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Evaluations in Institutions of Higher Education in Africa: The Case of the University of Eswatini

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Cover Page Footnote

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Evaluations in Institutions of Higher Education in Africa: The Case of the University of Eswatini

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The paper attempts to give an overview of evaluation in higher education institutions with particular emphasis on the faculties of humanities, education and social sciences disciplines at the University of Eswatini (Swaziland) in Southern Africa. It describes the general methodology of evaluation and identifies obstacles and relevant strategies for improving existing evaluation system. The paper points out that the nature and quality of assessment instruments used will influence the type of learning that takes place. In other words, if the lecturer evaluates and credits acquisition of knowledge, then the student will tend to study this alone. Therefore, a wider range of evaluation activities covering various objectives of a course will lead to varied learning and teaching experience within a course. Finally, the paper recommends that since the existing examination system is subjective, it is necessary to review it periodically to ensure that it fulfils the purpose for which it is designed to achieve.

Introduction

At the University of Eswatini (Swaziland) in Southern Africa, students' progress is monitored via continuous evaluation throughout the school year. Students must demonstrate a high degree of mastery in the various competencies that correspond to their level of education and these evaluations are carried out through the use of procedures and instruments that obtain data and guarantee validity and reliability in their identification of acquired learning (Bhola, 1989).

To evaluate these competencies, it is essential to select**,** whenever possible, evaluative strategies and instruments that grade students according to their performances when solving problems that simulate real-world contexts and focus on the way they use their knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. Since the University of Eswatini (Swaziland) strives to evaluate its students authentically, lecturers must also use various evaluation procedures to facilitate the assessment of students as an integral part of the teaching and learning process, which, in turn, becomes

an essential tool for improving the quality of education. Additionally, it is important to incorporate strategies that allow students to take part in the evaluation of their achievements, such as self-evaluation, peer evaluation and co-evaluation techniques. These models favour learning through the self-reflection and assessment of a student's difficulties and strengths and calls for the participation of classmates in collaborative activities, as well as the collaboration with teachers in the evolving teaching-learning process. This paper examines the steps to be taken by lecturers at the University of Eswatini (Swaziland) towards the development of an evaluation process that focuses on improving the teaching-learning process. It attempts to give an overview of evaluation in higher education institutions with particular emphasis on Humanities, education and social sciences disciplines at the University of Eswatini (Swaziland). It describes the general methodology of evaluation and identifies obstacles and relevant strategies for improving existing evaluation system. The paper points out that the nature

and quality of assessment instruments used will influence the type of learning that takes place.

University lecturers have always been concerned with evaluating the progress of their students. This exercise enables the lecturers, according to Matiru (1991), to "know more about student achievements to verify their progress, to certify their accomplishments to other educational institutions, to examine their successes as lecturers and to test the whole enterprise of education." Testing and evaluation also involve the lecturer into such decision-making situations as:

- Selection: to accept or admit candidates and reject others (University Admission policy).

- Placements: to place students at different levels of instructions (regulars, honours).

- Assigning grades: by assigning grades to students, feedback is provided to student and teacher.

- Promotion and certification: to evaluate a student's progress in order to allow the student to move from one year to the next and, at the successful completion of the programme, award a certificate, diploma or degree.

- Programme improvement and evaluation: to obtain measures of the institutional process and product to help make an institutional decision.

The educational decisions of university lecturers listed above are usually taken based on value adjustments made possible by evaluation. Seen in this light, evaluation is a powerful and complex element of university teaching and learning. In fact, a university lecturer is expected to spend about 26% of his or her time on evaluation. In spite of the significant role of evaluation in university education, however, the subject remains a controversial one. For instance, some lecturers wonder whether evaluation is not a menace to education (Ashcroft and Palacio, 2010). Others claim that evaluation is a sheer waste of time (Stake and Cisneros, 2000). They argue that education could not go very well without evaluation. Still, others accept evaluation grudgingly as a necessary tool in education (Carless, 2015).

Yet others consider examinations as one of the most frustrating, time and energy-consuming tasks of any university (Shah and Nair, 2012). But, the view of most lecturers is that the periodic assessment of educational progress is essential to effective education (Ramsden, 2003). The Joint Committee of the American Association of School Administrators has endorsed the view that evaluation is an essential tool for the promotion of learning. It stated that:

> To teach without testing is unthinkable. Appraisal of outcomes is an essential feedback of teaching. The evaluation process enables those involved to get their bearings, to know in which direction they are going. (Ryan, 2000)

Arguing in support of the useful role of evaluation in teaching, Parmell, as quoted by Hannah and Detter (2004) puts it as follows:

> Measurement is the hand-maiden of instruction. Without measurement, there cannot be evaluation. Without evaluation, there cannot be feedback. Without feedback, there cannot be a systematic improvement in learning.

Our view is that evaluation is one of the most important instruments of social initiation. It helps the teacher by:

- providing knowledge concerning the students' entry behaviour;

- setting, refining and clarifying realistic goals for each student;

- evaluating the degree to which the objectives have been achieved;

- determining, evaluating and refining the instructional techniques.

It helps the student by:

- communication the teachers' goals;

- increasing motivation

- encouraging good study habits

- providing feedback that identifies strengths and weaknesses.

Sone and Oluwasuji: Evaluations in Institutions of Higher Education in Africa

Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, Vol. 26 No. 9   Page 3
Sone & Gboyega, Evaluations in Higher Education in Africa

Finally, formal education has become more sophisticated, requiring a great deal of time and money and the co-operative effort of many people. Consequently, all those concerned with the complex process of education – students, teachers, parents, taxpayers, university officials and the general public – need to know periodically how successful their efforts have been.

The only way of knowing this is through examination results. It is therefore evident from the above observation that a lot has been said for and against examinations but, as far as we are concerned, evaluation is essential because it helps us to satisfy societal needs by identifying skilled workforce in terms of successful and unsuccessful products. Nevertheless, a recent international cross-cultural study on the critical role of examination postulates that:

> an educational experience dominated by assessment leads to the development of individuals who, among other things, show little interest in the content of what they learn; little interest in their growth as individuals… a lack of independence of spirit and will to innovate … an inability and unwillingness to solve problems (Matiru, 2008)

The above observation implies that the present formal educational system at the University of Eswatini (Swaziland) with its rigid examination mechanisms does not respond to new learning needs. This tendency has been confirmed by the World Bank notably when it observed that "the skills most relevant to development, those acquired when theory is confronted with the exigencies of the real world are exactly the ones that do not get learned" (Matiru et al, 2008). Therefore, if examinations are such a powerful tool of teaching and learning, the crucial question is: how could the dominant frame of reference be changed to support meaningful learning, which leads to social and economic development? If it is such a powerful socialising instrument, how could it contribute to relink university teaching and learning with "the exigencies of the real world?" The underlying message of these questions is that our examinations do not assess what we want them to do. Hence the need to revise our present examination systems to make them more performant. But, before going into the heart of the matter, it may be necessary to define some of the terms commonly used in the field of evaluation.

Definitions

What is Evaluation?

Evaluation is a decision enabling process. It takes place whenever the value or worth of someone or something is to be judged (Hennessy and Forrester, 2014). By its very nature, evaluation is influenced by subjectivity and bias, which can be reduced by testing and measurement.

What is a Test?

A test is defined by Gronlund (2006) as "a systematic procedure for observing and describing one or more characteristics of a person with the aid of either a numerical scale or a category system." Tests are used in the educational system for many reasons and test scores serve as information for a variety of decisions. But, the usefulness of a test depends on the type of decisions to be made.

As a result, it is imperative to understand the decision context in which the test will be used before designing it.

What is Measurement?

Measurement is a procedure for assigning numbers (usually called scores) to a specified attribute or characteristic of persons in such a manner as to maintain the real-world relationships among the persons concerning the attribute being measured (Sambell et al, 2013).

Assumptions Underlying Basic Educational Evaluation

To put together an effective evaluation programme, it may be necessary for the lecturer to understand the following philosophical and psychological issues underlying evaluation.

The Philosophy of Evaluation

The judgements required in assessing an individual's potential are complex in their composition, difficult to make, and filled with error, such error can be reduced but never eliminated. Hence, any evaluation can never be considered as final.

Composite assessment by a group of individuals are much less likely to be in error than the assessment

made by a single person. Every form of appraisal will have critics, which is a spur to change and improvement.

The Psychology of Evaluation

Readiness is an essential prerequisite to learning. A student is ready when he understands and accepts the value and objectives involved.

For evaluation activities to be most effective, they should consist of the best possible techniques, used in accordance with what we know to be the best and most effective psychological principles.

The law of effect states that people tend to carry on those activities which have success associated with their results. Students in any classroom soon come to realise that certain types of behaviour are associated with success – in this case, high marks on a test or grades in a course. Thus, if a particular teacher uses tests that demand rote memory, the student will become memorisers. If a test, on the other hand, requires students to apply principles, interpret data, or solve problems, the students will study with the idea of becoming best fitted to do well on these types of test items. In the long run, the type of evaluation device used determines, to a great extent, the kind of learning activity in which students will engage in the classroom

The motivation of students is one of the most important – and sometimes the most difficult to handle – of all problems related to evaluation. Research has shown that when a student is motivated, his or her performance is much higher than when motivation is lacking.

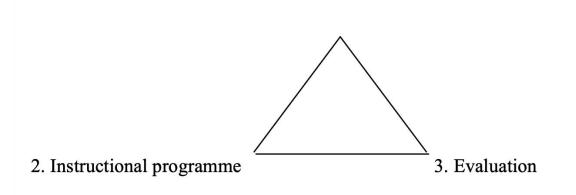### The Place of Evaluation in the Educational Cycle

According to Boud and Falchikov (2007), "when an institution and its academic staff plan an evaluation programme, they must begin with a clear definition of the programme objectives." Then, based on those objectives, an instructional programme will be prepared and implemented. There is the need to develop an evaluation programme hand in hand with the instructional programme to assess the extent to which the objectives of the educational programme are being realised. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the three components of an educational programme.

Preparation of a Course Evaluation Programme

When preparing an evaluation programme, the lecturer needs to ask the following questions (Table 1):

- For whom are you evaluating?
- Who or what is being evaluated?
- What is the purpose of evaluation?
- How are you going to evaluate?

Figure 1. Three components of an educational programme

1. Educational objectives

2. Instructional programme   3. Evaluation

Sone and Oluwasuji: Evaluations in Institutions of Higher Education in Africa

Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, Vol. 26 No. 9   Page 5
Sone & Gboyega, Evaluations in Higher Education in Africa

Table 1. A Summary of What to Ask Under Each Question

For whom?	Who or what is being evaluated?
Students	Students
Teachers	Teachers
Administration	Curriculum
Institution	Resource materials
Society	
For what purpose?	**How? (tools)**
Incentive to learn	Class test
Feedback to student	Projects
Feedback to lecturer	Term papers
Modification of teaching activities	Field reports
Modification of curriculum	Seminars
Certification	Examinations
Selection of students	

Determining Criteria for Evaluation of Student Performance

A lecturer can use the following criteria to determine whether his or her students have mastered the content of the course or not:

- Identify the educational objectives of his or her course in the areas of:
    - Cognitive processes
    - Attitudes
    - Skills
- Make a list of observable behaviours showing that the objectives pursued have been attained
- Make a list of observable behaviours showing that the objectives pursued have not been attained
- Determine the essential behaviours in both lists
- Give positive or negative weighting to the components of these two lists

- Define the minimal performance score

For the last three states of 'cognitive, skill and attitudes', obtain the agreement of several experts.

Summary

An evaluation programme, whether for the institution or an individual, must meet the following conditions to be effective:

i. It must be continuous.

Students learn better when they are continuously appraised in a meaningful manner as to how they are faring. This would provide regular and useful feedback.

ii. It must be based on criteria.

The criteria used for evaluation need to be clearly stated and understood by all the participants – the students, teachers and institution.

iii. It is co-operatively developed.

The faculty, administration and students should be involved in developing the evaluation programme.

Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation, Vol. 26 [2021], Art. 9

Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, Vol. 26 No. 9   Page 6
Sone & Gboyega, Evaluations in Higher Education in Africa

This kind of co-operation will ensure proper use of evaluation; otherwise, it may become a meaningless exercise.

iv. It is concerned with the learner's behaviour.

The education process is concerned with bringing about the desired change in student behaviour.

v. It is credible.

Use of evaluation is related directly to credibility, which is a complex notion that includes perceived accuracy and fairness. The term "credibility" implies trustworthiness, reliability, integrity, authority, standing, and sincerity. In other words, an assessment needs to be reliable, has authority, should be trustworthy and truthful. It also depends on the extent to which an evaluation is understandable. Hence to obtain feedback from students and for such feedback to be of any use, students should be convinced of the use and purpose of examinations. They must see their interest in the operation. Without such conviction, an examination is likely to serve no purpose.

vi. It is reliable.

Reliability is the quality of consistency that the instrument or procedure used to evaluate demonstrates over a period of time. Whatever it determines, it does so consistently.

vii. It is sufficient.

Sufficient in the context would mean that the types of questions asked, and the spread of content definition cover aspects of the work done during the term or year, as stipulated in the departmental curriculum. There must be enough evidence for the teacher to infer that the student is either competent or not yet competent (Dreyer, 2014:76).

viii. It is valid.

According to the Alberta Assessment Consortium (2006), a test is valid to the extent that it measures what it claims to measure. However, there are several types of validity. Content validity shows how adequate the test samples the knowledge, attitudes and skills that the learner was expected to master. Construct validity is the degree to which scores on a test can be accounted for by explanatory constructs of sound theory. Criterion-related validity refers to two different time frames in judging the usefulness of a test. First, how useful is it in predicting future performance? Second,

how valuable is it in closely relating to other measures such as the students' present academic rating?

It is to be noted that many tests are not valid because they do not take into account social and cultural biases.

ix. It is believable.

For an evaluation to have an impact, users must believe in its merits. Hence the primary concern of evaluation in this context should be to determine the degree of success attained.

Some Common Defects to Avoid when Setting Examinations

The setting of examinations can be improved in several ways. One of these is by avoiding the following defects:

- Complicated instructions: this tend to confuse the candidate, thereby lowering the test accuracy.

- Elaborate style: difficult and confusing words, compound sentences etcetera, all help to make it difficult for the candidate to understand the question.

- Triviality encourages students to rote-memorise and indulge in question spotting—tests are essential to learning outcomes.

- Ambiguity also reduces the accuracy of scores. Try to make your questions as specific as possible.

Points to Remember When Constructing Essay Questions

It is common to provide a choice of questions on an essay examination. Example: Answer any THREE of the following seven questions. Experts differ on this issue of providing a choice of questions. The choice of questions reduces the comparability of scores across individuals. However, it helps make the examination survey a much broader content area.

In the light of these arguments, remember:

- If you include a choice of questions in your examination, you should aim for questions of the same inherent difficulty, so no matter which questions students answer, the scores can still be compared

Sone & Gboyega, Evaluations in Higher Education in Africa

- Exercise care when using words like summarise, compare, evaluate, critically analyse, define or discuss to set your essay questions.

- Always give sufficient time to students to answer the questions.

Marking Essay Questions

There are two conventional approaches to marking essay questions that could help reduce subjectivity.
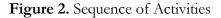
- The analytical approach attempts to reduce marking variability by providing detail marking schemes.

- The holistic approach attempts to evaluate the total worth of response and reduces error by a number of independent ratings.
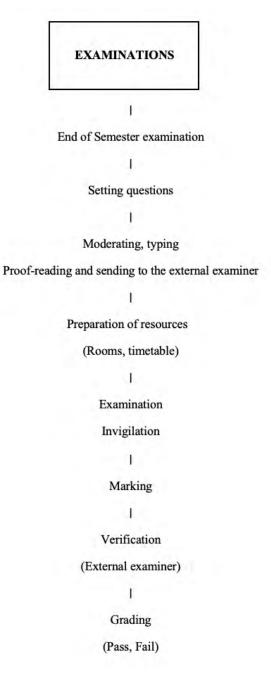
Both approaches have their advocates. The appropriateness of the method selected would depend on the nature of the essay question being assessed. Ideally, the markers should try to identify aspects of the best answer to a question and prepare a scoring sheet (in a checklist form as the example below). This way, the process of marking can be transformed into one of identifying and checking several aspects. The complexity of the question and other factors like the importance of the examination and the time available for marking will, in the final analysis, determine the detail of the interpretation of written responses.

The Management of Examinations

Critical areas in the management of examinations include planning resources, conducting and processing examinations and reviewing the examination process periodically (Kearney, 2013). Setting examinations involves the preparation of the paper, review and moderation, keeping all matters confidential and adhering to the time limit.

During the planning and preparation stage, the time table should consider the spacing of papers, the venue, class size and possible clashes with other papers. A draft time table should be circulated at least three weeks before the examinations. Candidates should be notified about the examination regulations and requirements. Necessary resources should be checked.

When conducting the examinations, the lecturer must check the paper and identify the students. The invigilator must check the number of students and ensure security. Processing the examinations includes marking them within the given time limits, collating and processing results, announcing results and, finally, reviewing the examination process (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Sequence of Activities


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┌─────────────────────┐
│    EXAMINATIONS     │
└─────────────────────┘
           |
 End of Semester examination
           |
     Setting questions
           |
    Moderating, typing
Proof-reading and sending to the external examiner
           |
  Preparation of resources
     (Rooms, timetable)
           |
       Examination
        Invigilation
           |
         Marking
           |
       Verification
    (External examiner)
           |
         Grading
       (Pass, Fail)
```

Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to give an overview of evaluation drawing examples from the University of Eswatini's Faculties of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences. We tried to describe the general methodology of evaluation and, finally, to identify obstacles and relevant strategies for improving existing evaluation systems. We also pointed out that the nature and quality of assessment instruments used will influence the type of learning that takes place. If the lecturer evaluates and credits acquisition of knowledge, then the student will tend to study this alone. Therefore, a wider range of evaluation activities covering various objectives of a course will lead to varied learning and teaching experience within a course. we recommend that since the existing examination system is subjective, it is necessary to review it periodically to ensure that it fulfils the purpose for which it is designed to achieve.

In other words, if higher educational institutions in Eswatini and other African countries intend to equip graduates with attributes necessary for professional practice, for example, critical thinking and life-long learning capabilities, then the current assessment practices must be re-examined. It is also recommended that the University of Eswatini management should mandate lecturers to go for in-service training and refresher courses to update their knowledge and skills of assessment. Also, assessment competence for lecturers be developed by evaluation experts in the humanities, education and social sciences. The lecturers should be trained to choose and develop proper assessment methods; to administer, score and interpret assessment results, connect those results to specific decisions, to assign grades appropriately and to communicate effectively about student assessment. This training will enable the teachers to construct valid, reliable and standardized instruments in order to provide basis for comparability.

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