

Effectiveness of Implementing Continuous Assessments in Tanzanian Universities

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Abstract

This study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of implementing continuous assessments in universities in Tanzania. The study made use of concurrent sequential design whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected at from third year students, lecturers, examination officers, quality assurance directors and heads of education departments concomitantly. Stratified and purposeful sampling techniques were used to obtain the study respondents which comprised of 336 students, 48 lecturers, 4 examination officers, 4 heads of education departments and 4 quality assurance directors selected from four universities. Questionnaires were used to collect data from students and lectures while interview guides gathered information from heads of departments, examination officers and quality assurance directors. The research tools were validated though member checking and their reliability was ensured using Cronbach alpha. It was found out that continuous assessments are not effectively implemented as lecturers and students reported to be less involved in continuous assessment tasks thus the tasks do not adequately assess the contents intended.

Keywords: continuous assessment, assessment tasks, effectiveness, implementation

1. Introduction

Literature suggests that students do read more when they are faced with assessment tasks. For example, Hopkins, Stanley and Hopkins (1990) documented that when learners know that they will be evaluated from what they read, they retain the information better than the ones who are not expecting to be evaluated. This is further supported by Gibbs and Simpson (2003) who indicated that students do learn more from doing their course assignments than just studying the course materials. Therefore, the frequency of students' engagement in continuous assessment tasks is an important consideration as the more students are engaged in assessment, the more they read.

It is through the use of assessment results a lecturer can make meaningful conclusions about students' learning and the mastery of desired skills and knowledge. Assessment can either be in formative or summative form. Formative assessment is conducted periodically during the course of instruction to provide continuous feedback to both learners and educators about learning success and failures (Ogula and Onsongo, 2009). On the other side, summative assessment comes at the end of a given course for the purpose of determining the extent to which instructional goals have been achieved (Gronlund and Linn, 2000). In this study however, the focus was only on formative assessment.

The results of formative assessment are used to monitor the learning process during instruction for the purpose of improvement (Popham, 2008; Gronlund and Linn, 2000 and Nitko, 2001). This form of assessment calls for lecturers to collect continuous data from their students to see the extent to which they are achieving the desired goals of a particular course, identify learning difficulties and then take corrective measures in improving the learning process. If formative assessment is effectively done, it plays a critical role in shaping students' academic motivation and performance leading to better learning outcomes for students in their preparation for professional service in the field (Hey et al 2015; Ogula and Onsongo, 2009).

An evaluation study conducted in Nigeria by Osadebe (2015) found out the practice of university lecturers in continuous assessment to be low. Having a low level of continuous assessment practices may neither permit lecturers to make meaningful generalization about students'

learning in a particular course nor motivate students to learn. Students may not be frequently engaged in learning since they are not expecting to be frequently tested leading to low understanding. Another study from the same country by Obiekezie, Nwadiaro, Timothy and Essien (2016) found out that despite early release of results being an important examination related factor for quality of education, some lecturers do not give timely feedback to students. Continuous assessment are mainly meant for providing ongoing feedback to improve learning as suggested by McMillan (2007), the feedback needs to be given on time so as to help the students remedy their shortcomings.

A survey study by Serra, Gomez and Saiz (2016) also found feedback to be the most important aspect of the assessment process. The importance of giving feedback was also pinpointed by Hong and Mukhale (2017) that teacher education needs more assessment and feedback than other disciplines. These two studies therefore signify the importance of having feedback after each assessment practice. Lectures need to give feedback so that students can reflect on what they have done so far and determine the best ways towards improvement. Bayerlein (2014) also demonstrated that students do perceive feedback that is extremely timely as being more constructive than the one that is given late.

In Tanzania, a study conducted by Lyamtane (2013) revealed the absence of a policy that guides the number of tasks to be given during continuous assessment. The absence of such a policy may lead to having discrepancies in the number of assessment tasks given by different lectures whereby some will give many task and others few tasks each depending on his wishes. If only few tasks are given, the students may not be well prepared in course and hence are likely to miss some skills that are not tested. Therefore, the researcher in the current study assessed the effectiveness of implementing continuous assessments with the major focus on the number of assessment tasks given and extent to which students are provided with feedback.

Research Objectives

General Objective: To assess the effectiveness of implementing continuous assessments in universities in Tanzania.

Specific objectives:

1. To determine the extent to which lecturers engage students in continuous assessment tasks.
2. To assess the extent to which continuous assessment tasks given cover the contents expected.
3. To determine the participation of students in group assignments.
4. To determine the extent to which lecturers do give constructive feedback.

Research Hypotheses

1. There is a significant relationship between the numbers of assessment tasks given and content coverage.
2. There is a significant relationship between group size and students participation in group assignments

2. Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methods approach whereby a convergent parallel design used. This design allowed the researcher to collect qualitative and quantitative data concurrently. The target population for the study included third year students, lecturers, heads of departments of education and quality assurance directors from universities offering teacher education in Tanzanian. Examination officers, heads of departments and quality assurance directors were purposively selected while stratified sampling technique was used to select lecturers and students. The basis of stratification based on gender, experience, highest qualification and possession of training in the teaching profession.

The study sample therefore consisted of 336 students, 48 lecturers, 4 heads of departments of education, 4 quality assurance directors and 4 examination officers making a total of 398 respondents selected from four universities. Questionnaires were used to collect data from lecturers and students while interview guides were used to get information from heads of departments, examination officers and quality assurance directors. These tools were firstly pilot tested into two universities (private and public) and modified to suit the intended purpose. Content validation was done through the use of experts in the field of research and assessment to check language clarity and whether the tools adequately addressed the objectives. Comments from the experts were incorporated to improve the tools.

The collected data were analyzed both descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive analysis included organizing the data into frequency, percentage and means. Inferential analysis on the other side included the use of Chi-square test for independence in testing the hypotheses. Results of analysis were presented using tables while qualitative data were presented using words and supported by direct quotations.

3. Findings

Extent to Which Lecturers Involve Students in Continuous Assessment Tasks

Lecturers and students were asked to indicate the average number of assessment tasks (tests, assignments and projects) that they either give or do per semester per course. Responses on this question are summarized in table 1

Table 1: Lecturers' and Students' Responses on Number of Tasks per Course

number of tasks	Lecturers' responses		Students' responses	
	f	%	f	%
one	8	16.7	11	3.3
two	13	27.1	124	36.9
three	7	14.6	66	19.6
four	11	22.9	56	16.7
five and above	9	18.8	79	23.5

Result in table 1 show that 13 (27.1%), 11 (22.9%), 9 (18.8%), 8 (16.7%) and 7 (14.6%) of lecturers indicated to be giving two, four, above five, one and three activities for students' coursework respectively. This shows that there was a variation in the number of tasks given by different lecturers with a slightly higher percentage of them giving two tasks. On the other side, 124 (36.9%), 79 (23.5%), 66 (19.6%), 56 (16.7%) and 11 (3.3%) of students indicated to be doing two, above five, three, four and one task for their coursework respectively. As it was seen from lecturers, a slightly higher percentage of students (36.9%) indicated to be given two tasks as continuous assessment. Therefore there was an agreement in the responses of students and lecturers on the number of assessment task given per courses whereby both groups indicated to have a varying number with two tasks being dominant.

Based on the findings on this question, there are some lecturers (the ones who give more than three tasks) that highly engage their students in continuous assessment tasks and there are others (who give less than three tasks) that lowly involve students in continuous assessments. Having this difference may be due to lack of a clear policy that governs the number of assessment tasks to be given for students' coursework as observed by Lyamtane (2013).

These findings are in agreement to Osadebe (2015) who also found the level of lecturers engaging students in continuous assessment to be low. Low level of engaging students in continuous assessment tasks reduces the time which students could spend reading and doing other academic related works. This is because students do read most when an assessment tasks are ahead of them (Hopkins et al 2015). When students are not given adequate tasks to work on, they are likely to use their time for other activities that are not related to academics. If this continues for a long time, there is a possibility of having graduates with no expected skills.

According to McMillan (2007), continuous assessments are meant at improving students' learning by providing ongoing feedback. Lecturers who give only one task may not be in a good position of improving students' learning or they can effectively determine the extent to which students are achieving the learning objectives. The results therefore suggest that in universities in Tanzania, there are lecturers who just give assessment task for the sake of having students' scores as the requirement but are not aware of the academic purposes of giving such tasks. This is because the use of only one task (written test) to assess students in coursework does not reflect the role of continuous assessment in education.

The researchers further inquired information from examination officers and heads of department of education on the number of assessment tasks given for students' coursework though conducting interviews with them. During the interview, examination officers reported to have no policy that governs the number and kind of assessment tasks to be given for students' coursework. For instance one officer said.

The number of tasks depends on the subject modules whereby some modules have two and others have three. However our office does not receive or verify results from each task but we only deal with consolidated results.

Another examination officer added:

At the university level, we do not have the exact number of assignments and tests to be given for students; however, we depend on the results that are submitted to us either by heads of departments or subject lecturers.

Results from examination officers show that universities do not have clear policies that govern the number and nature of tasks to be given for students' coursework. This might be the reason as to why lecturers and students indicated to experience a variation in the number of tasks given by lecturers. At the national level also, the researcher did not find such a policy despite the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) emphasizing on content representativeness in assessments and an early release of assessment results (TCU, 2012). Having no such policy both at national and university levels makes lecturers too autonomous in assessment whereby lazy lecturers may end up at giving lesser activities.

Presence of a national policy that guides the conduction and evaluation of continuous assessments would make all lecturers in the country to adhere to uniform and more reliable ways of assessing students in universities. This is in agreement to Christie et al (2015) who observed that lecturers in USA where there is no national policy concerning assessing students had different methods of assessment while the ones in Australia where such a policy exists had common rubrics. The importance of having common and adequate methods of assessment is to ensure that all graduate teachers possess the required knowledge and skills. If this is not done, there is a possibility of having two graduate teachers of similar subjects but having a significant difference in the skills and knowledge demonstrated. The assumption here is that the one who was more assessed will have accumulated more skills than the one tested less.

During an interview with head of departments of education, it was noted that some departments had guidelines set for continuous assessment practices but others did not have. Heads of departments said to have either two, three or four tasks but none of them said to be making follow-ups to ensure that lectures in that particular department adheres to the set guidelines. One head said;

At our department, a lecturer should give at least two tasks that is one test and one assignment which is usually done in groups. Since the coursework carries 40%, the test should contribute 20% and the remaining 20% comes from the assignment but the lecturer may decide to give more tasks.

The same head of department was further asked on whether the use of two tasks only (one group assignment and one test) can be effective in making valid interpretations about the possession of knowledge and skills desired in a particular course. The question aimed at finding out views on the adequacy of the assessment tasks given in relation to the content taught. The head of department replied and said;

We encourage lecturers to give more tasks because having only one test with 20 marks is not fair to students. This is because when a student fails in that test, there is no chance for him to correct his mistakes. But if multiple tests are given he can recognize his mistakes and do better.

Another head added

We normally give two written tests and one assignment. But his depends on the nature of the subject and complexity of the course contents for example for practical subjects, students are engaged more in practical works than in written tests. However, this is not done always due to large number of students in our courses.

In contrast to these two heads who responded to have some guidelines, one head of department said.

We once held a meeting and this issue was one of the agenda but we did not reach into agreement as lecturers had different views and reasons. Therefore the number and kind of tasks to be given up to the moment is left in the hands of lecturers.

Responses from heads of departments imply that some departments have guidelines for continuous assessment while others do not have. Even those with guidelines, there is no assurance that the guidelines are followed by all lecturers. Lack of principles at the level of university might be the reason for such negligence to the guidelines. Therefore, universities need to set guidelines and develop monitoring mechanisms that will ensure that all lectures do adhere to the principles and guidelines. By doing so, students may be effectively assessed and thus the results of assessment will allow the making of valid interpretations.

Content Coverage by Assessment Tasks

The researcher further inquired the perceptions of lecturers and students on the coverage of assessment tasks. Being guided by validity test theory, it was assumed that for meaningful interpretations to be made based on results of assessment, the assessment tasks should adequately represent the entire domain being tested. For example, if ten topics were taught, the assessment tasks should then be sampled in a way that they reflect the taught topics. Lecturers and students indicated their perceptions as summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Lecturers' and Students' Responses on Coverage of Assessment Tasks

coverage	Lecturers' responses		Students responses	
	f	%	f	%
adequate coverage	21	43.8	56	16.7
good coverage	22	45.8	211	62.8
moderate coverage	4	8.3	61	18.2
less coverage	1	2.1	8	2.4

Results in table 2 show that 22 (45.8%), 21 (43.8%), 4 (8.3%) and 1 (2.1%) of lecturers respectively indicated that assessment tasks have good, adequate, moderate and less content coverage. This means that almost an equal high percent of lectures do consider assessment task to have either good or adequate content coverage while few of them consider assessment tasks to have moderate and less content coverage. Based on the results, lecturers do perceive assessment tasks to have a good coverage of contents taught. On the other side, results from students show that 211 (62.8%) indicated continuous assessment tasks to have good content coverage, 61 (18.25%) responded on moderate coverage while adequate coverage was selected by 56 (16.7%)

and 8 (2.4%) opted for less coverage. The findings imply that a large percent (62.8%) of students considered the assessment tasks to have a good coverage of contents. These results are in agreement to what was indicated by lecturers.

Therefore, though assessment tasks were found to have good content coverage, such coverage is still not adequate. As the researcher observed different lecturers giving give different numbers of assessment tasks, he hypothesized that content coverage depends on the number of assessment tasks given. To test this hypothesis, data from students were used and a chi-square test was run at 95% confidence level. Results for this test are summarized in table 3.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between number of tasks given and content coverage.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test for H₀₁

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	63.630	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.514	12	.007
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.768	1	.184
N of Valid Cases	336		

Results of hypothesis testing show that $X^2(12) = 63.63$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$. Since the $p\text{-value}$ is less than significance level (0.05), the null hypothesis was rejected. Rejecting the null hypothesis means that content coverage of an assessment procedure depends on the number of tasks given. This implies that the more activities given to students, the more they are likely to cover the contents taught and vice versa. Lecturers who give many tasks for their students' coursework therefore are in a good position of ensuring that almost all aspects of contents taught are assessed. Having a good coverage of contents in an assessment procedure will permit making valid interpretations based on the obtained results.

On the other side lecturers who give few tasks (less than three) may not adequately assess all the aspects of the contents and therefore results obtained from such assessment procedures may have less validity. This therefore calls for lecturers to engage their students in more activities (more than three) so that almost every aspect of the content taught is assessed. This argument is in agreement to Murdan (2005) who put forward that a very small component of the content is

measured in each coursework task. If only one assessment task is given, there is a possibility that only one aspect of the content will be assessed. Failure to assess all the contents taught makes the results less valid. Therefore increasing the number of tasks enables lecturers to test almost every aspect of the content.

Large number of students in universities offering teacher education was indicated by heads of departments to be the main reason for having a less involvement of students in formative assessment tasks. For instance one head said

This depends on the number of students per course, for courses with many students like eight hundred and above, lecturers have no options as they find themselves giving less activities.

Having too many things to accomplish within a limited time was also mentioned as being one of the reasons for having few activities for students' coursework. For instance one head of department said;

We have a lot of deadlines and some of them are set without considering the workload we have, therefore lecturers end up at giving few tasks that are easy to mark and give results so as to meet the deadlines.

Given the responses from heads of departments, it is seen that the system (at national and university levels) is the one to blame. This is because it is through it more students are enrolled to make large classes and deadlines are set. However, if lecturers were equipped with skills to handle assessment practices even in large classes, the situation could not have been the same. Therefore this shows a need of equipping lecturers with skills on managing assessments of large classes so that they effectively involve students in continuous assessments.

Students' Participation in Group Activities

Group assignments to have been reported to be the most favored method of assessment among lecturers (Kitula, Kireti and Wambiya, 2018) and (Lyamtane, 2013). It was therefore important to determine the extent to which students do participate in group assignments. The researcher

started by asking lecturers and students on the number of students per group and their responses are summarized in table 4.

Table 4: Students’ and Lecturers’ Responses on Number of Students per Group Activity

Number of students per activity	Students responses		Lecturers responses	
	f	%	f	%
2-5	11	3.3	16	33.3
6-10	246	73.2	22	45.8
11-15	47	14.0	8	16.7
16-20	27	8.0	-	-
21 and above	5	1.5	2	4.2

Results in table 4 show that the highest percent of students (73.2%) and lecturers (45.8%) indicated that the average number of students per group activity to range from six to ten. However, some lecturers (33.3%) indicated to have between two and five students per group and a small percent of students (8%) indicated to have groups of sixteen to twenty per activity. A very small percent of lectures (4.2%) and students (1.5%) indicated to have groups of more than twenty one. This implies that the preferred number of students per group ranges from six to ten. This number is still high and may not permit lecturers to effectively determine the strengths and weaknesses of individual students as supported by Seifu (2016) that it is difficult to provide effective feedback though the use of group assignments.

The researchers further inquired information from lecturers and students on the extent to which group members do participate in group activities. The researcher had an assumption that participation of students in group activities enhances validity of the obtained results. Lecturers and students responded to this question and table 5 presents a summary of their responses.

Table 5: Students’ and Lecturers’ Responses on Participation in Group Activities

Views on participation	Students’ responses		Lecturers’ responses	
	f	%	f	%
every student participates	112	33.3	22	45.8
most of the group members participate	145	43.2	16	33.3
few members participate	62	18.5	7	14.6
very few members participate	17	5.1	1	2.1

Not sure about their participation	-	-	2	4.2
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Results in table 4.7 show that 145 (43.2%), 112 (33.3%), 62 (18.5%) and 17 (5.1%) of students indicated that most of group members, every member, few members and very few members participate in group activities respectively. These findings mean that students experience varying degrees of participation in group activities with the highest degree being most participation. Therefore according to the results, the participation of members in group activities is good but not adequate as not all members do participate. Failure of some members to participate lowers the validity of scores given for such tasks. This is because the score given is generalized to all students (either or not participated). There is a possibility for students (non-participants) to have good scores which do not reflect their efforts or abilities.

In contrast to students, the highest percent (45.8%) of lecturers indicated that every member participates in group activities followed by 33.3% who pointed out that most of the members participate. Therefore, there is a gap between what is believed by lecturers and students' experiences on participation in group activities. While lecturers to believe that every student participates, students on their side see that not every member participates. The findings suggest that lecturers are deceived that students participate in group activities while in reality it is not true. Given these two contradicting results, the researcher takes information from students to have more meaning than that given by lecturers. This is because students are the ones who participate in these activities so they real know about the degree of participation. The argument is further supported when 2 (4.2%) of lecturers indicated not to be sure about students' participation in group activities.

The researchers further asked lecturers to state different techniques that they use to ensure maximum participation of students in group activities. This was a free response question where lecturers were required to provide their responses in the space given. Their responses on this question are summarized in table 6

Table 6: Lecturers' Responses on Strategies to Ensure Participation in Group Tasks

Strategy	f	%
Oral presentations	39	81.25

Appending individual works	14	29.17
Reporting on none participants	10	20.83
Reprimanding before hand	6	12.5

Results in table 6 show that a large number (81.25%) of lecturers indicated to be using oral presentations as a strategy to ensure students participation in group activity. Having such a high number of lectures who indicated such strategy implies that most of lecturers in Tanzania do make use of oral presentations to ensure students' participation in group activities. The selection of individuals to present was found to be random so that each member of the group had an equal chance of being selected. The essence of group presentations is to ensure that each member of the group reads and understands the work for him or her to be in a good position of making a meaningful presentation.

This was further supported by one examination officer who said;

I also have at least one course to teach per semester and I do teach large classes. Whenever I give group assignments, each students is given time to present. I therefore do not award equal scores to all the students but each one scores based on his or her ability to present.

In addition to oral presentations, 14 (29.17%) of lecturers reported to be asking students to append individual works to the group work. This means that after a group work has been completed, each participant is required to attach a piece of paper indicating his or her contributions to the whole work. This encourages each member to participate and contribute to the group activity. Other strategies identified by lecturers included encouraging group leaders to report cases of non participants and using strong verbal warning while giving the work.

Given the varying levels of participation and different sizes of groups, the researcher was interested to find out whether the degree of participation depends on the number of members per group. Therefore, a chi-square test for dependence was run at 95 confidence level and the results are summarized in table 7.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between group size and students’ participation in group activities.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test for H₀₂

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.044	12	.015
Likelihood Ratio	20.058	12	.066
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.122	1	.289
N of Valid Cases	336		

Results in table show that $X^2 = 25.044$, p-value = 0.015. Since the p-value (0.015) was less than significance level (0.05) the null hypothesis was rejected. Rejecting the null hypothesis implies that there is a significant relationship between group size and students participation in group activities. Therefore, students’ participation in group activities was found to depend on the size of the group whereby the larger the group, the lower the level of participation and vice versa. Lecturers then should maintain a small number of students (maximum of five members per group) so as to ensure maximum participation of group members. This is in agreement to what was recommended by Gross (1993) that groups of four-five members give a good opportunity for each member to participate while larger groups decreases such an opportunity.

Provision of Timely Feedback

Giving timely feedback was found through literature to be the most important aspect of the assessment process. Therefore, it was important for the researchers to determine the extent to which lecturers do give feedback on time. Lecturers were firstly asked this question and their responses are summarized in table 8.

Table 8: Lecturers Responses on the Extent to Which They Give Timely Feedback

Statement	always		sometimes		rarely		never	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Giving assessment feedback on time	26	54.2	17	35.4	4	8.3	1	2.1

According to results in table 8, 54.2% of lecturers indicated to be giving assessment feedback on time always. These findings imply that not all lecturers do give assessment feedback on time.

Since the number of lecturers who indicated to be giving feedback on time was slightly higher than 50%, it is inferred that almost half of university lecturers do not provide timely feedback to students after an assessment task. Failure of lecturers to give timely feedback makes the major role of continuous assessment that aims at improving learning not to be realized. This argument is further supported by Obiekezie et al (2016) who found an early release of results to be an important factor for improving learning.

Keeping students waiting for their result makes the students stranded as they do not know what may to go. This is also supported in the university qualification framework (UQF) of 2012 that delays in release of results make students unable to plan their learning and there by act as disincentive for hard work and dedication in education issues (2012; 38). It is also in agreement to Bayerlein (2014) who found students to perceive feedback that is given soon after the task (automatically generated feedback) to be more constructive than manually generated one that was considered as coming late.

4. Conclusions

Continuous assessment in universities in Tanzania is not effectively implemented. This is because lecturers were found to be less engaging students in assessment task whereby most of them ended at giving two tasks. These few tasks do not cover the contents taught and hence may not have content validity. Moreover, students' participation in group activities was found not to be good as groups were too large with some lecturers not even bothering to check if each member participates in group assignments. Less participation of students in group tasks lowers the validity of the scores given to the group members. Lastly, not all lecturers were found to be giving timely feedback to students. The tendency of delaying feedback makes students not knowing the way to go through and therefore the major role of formative assessment that is to improve learning is not well achieved.

5. Recommendations

Lecturers need to increase the number of tasks that they give for their students' coursework so as to make students more engaged learning and ensure content coverage. The number of students placed for group activities should be minimized so as to ensure proper participation of each student in the group activities and lastly lecturers should strive to give feedback as soon as

students finish an assessment task. This will make students realize their weaknesses and find proper ways towards improvement.

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