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Learning Assessment Quality at Universities: Acquaintanceship and Publicity

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Abstract: The study intended to assess the level of acquaintanceship and publicity of learning assessment quality at four Ethiopian universities. A quantitative approach was employed in the course of the study. Data were collected through questionnaires from instructors, and PhD and MA students in Education and Behavioral Studies (CEBS) and Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the four universities. The results have shown that instructors and students at the universities had great acquaintance with learning assessment quality, particularly regarding the benefit of assessing students through multiple forms of assessment; the learning activity nature of assessment; the motivating effects of assessment requirements on learners; the centrality of assessment within the overall quality of learning in universities; the role of assessable learning outcomes to guide teaching-learning; the role of the tasks assessed to mold learning and teaching; and the role of assessment to provide comparable scores across administrations, and its power of involving in real learning. The level of publicity of the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality among pertinent university communities, nonetheless, was minimal-creating dichotomies among the different communities in general and among designed curricula, taught contents, and assessed tasks in particular. The universities are, therefore, encouraged to uphold and advance the prevailed acquaintanceship of learning assessment quality, and yet make utmost concerted efforts to publicize the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality among pertinent university communities with the ultimate purpose of creating common understanding and expediting the effectiveness of student learning.

Keywords: Learning assessment, Assessment quality, Acquaintanceship

1. Introduction

The study dealt with the level of acquaintanceship and publicity of learning assessment quality taking four Ethiopian universities. The paper, therefore, outlines the conceptual and theoretical background of the study; results; discussions, conclusions, and Implications.

1.1. Conceptual and theoretical Background of the study

Assessment quality is a basis for effective student learning owing to the fact that it "includes the quality of all aspects of assessment practices, such as test items, tasks, assessments, tests, the process of assessing, a program of assessments in a course or a curriculum and the procedures, policies, and administration of the assessment process" (K.J. Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkamp et al., 2017). Equally, proper staff and student acquaintance with learning assessment quality serves as a surface symptom to surmise their level of practicing quality learning assessment to result in effective student learning. A learning assessment that

results in effective student learning is considered as effective assessment, which "helps to improve student learning and informs the teachers of their teaching process" (Sanga, 2016).

Proper staff and student acquaintance with Learning Assessment materializes the constructive alignment among teaching, learning and assessment in such a way that change in one compels a sympathetic adjustment of the rest (Stiggins, 2007). That is why the quality of learning assessment has fundamentally attracted the interest of stakeholders who have different purposes. Notably, teachers as well as students develop confident in using assessment data in their decisions respectively in teaching and learning. This in turn leads to the improvement of current and future teaching and learning. This is because, learning is an active process wherein learners need to know what, why, and how to learn under the facilitation of a teacher. For teachers to be able to properly guide their students, and facilitate learning properly, they need to be critical about their students' learning, their teaching, and the quality of learning assessment.

Assessment, therefore, should reflect the simultaneous demands of multiple audiences and/or actor groups for multiple purposes, among others: test takers, students, score users, teachers, the governments, university management, employers, financing bodies, funding stakeholders, and the society at large (Brown & Knight, 1994; Luoma, 2001; OET, 2017). This shows that there are different purposes for assessment. The purposes, nonetheless, are "neither separate nor entirely compatible" (Brown & Knight, 1994:13). The different purposes learning assessment lead to searching answer to a question: what is a quality assessment? Quality assessment for Ainslee (Ainslee, 2018) "basically focuses on the targeted areas with complete precision". He went on describing that assessment in the education industry should have content validity, reliability, generating interest by the student, and consequential relevance. Reliability with reference to assessment signifies that each and every aspect of the assessment has a measurable outcome, and the quality of being accurately measured without the build-up of any flaw. Ainslee (2018:2) further explains that generating interest by the student deals with "the reason why tests should be objective in nature. Subjective tests are lengthy in nature not even generating interest of the teachers, leave alone the students. So, assessments should be explicit and creative which does not give a sense of boredom to the candidates".

Finally, consequential relevance deals with the reason for conducting an assessment, which requires a lot of time, dedication, and resources. This is because, "nobody would want so much of hard work to go in vain. By implication, assessment result should be so exact so that it can be used as a tool to compare and analyze the data for future reference of the candidate's performance (Ainslee, 2018: 2). The interests in the quality of learning assessment in higher education by stakeholders have come with due recognition of: 1) the fact that the quality of higher education graduates depends on what they have effectively learnt and authentically assessed; and 2) the need to account for the politics of accountability. The politics of accountability can be achieved by assessing quality outcomes of higher education, guaranteeing fair assessment practices responsive to human diversity, assuring success in higher education, and readiness to facing the technological future of higher education (Messick, 1999). Cognizant of the fast changing assessment practices and contexts, Ethiopia has put in place.

Curriculum requirements, and assessment modalities in which expected learning outcomes (LO) are pre-defined and stated in national and institutional curricula. Recently, nonetheless, Addis Ababa University has customized the Program to its context by reducing the duration to a maximum of intensive four months by integrating different competencies, truncating redundant topics, and arranging intensive schedules (Firdissa, 2021). Universities are no longer remote, ivory towers, and can no longer be regarded as diarchies whereby institutional autonomy and academic freedom seem to obscure accountability for efficiencies including poor assessment practices. Inherent within the heightened interests in assessment

matters (globally, nationally as well as institutional) is a quest for assuring quality outcomes of higher education one of which can be achieved through learning assessment quality.

Though "there is no uniform conceptualization of assessment quality" proper acquaintance with results effectiveness of teaching and learning (K.J. Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkamp et al., 2017). These authors further indicated that "assessment quality evolved in the 20th century, and it is subject to change". It is, therefore, imperative, to investigate the level of staff and students' acquaintance with assessment quality. This is because staff and students are the major stakeholders in the teaching learning process. Their acquaintance and perspectives are essential to assume the possibility of implementing quality learning assessment. "Stake holders' perspectives" for K.J. Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkamp et al. (2017:106) "appear to be on assessment quality, in general, or on criteria within the themes of the assessment quality criteria, such as students' perceptions of authenticity or fairness. This is remarkable because stakeholders are most affected by inferior assessment quality".

1.2. Problem Statement

Proper acquaintanceship, publicity, and clear conceptualization of assessment quality among pertinent stakeholders serves as a surface symptom for maintaining assessment quality for effective learning. Possession of proper views and knowledge of teachers and students on the quality of learning assessment has been seen as a catalyst to maximizing the potential benefits of assessment to inform teaching and improve learning. On the other hand, "[a] lack of a clear and overarching conceptualization of assessment quality can cause difficulties in guaranteeing assessment quality" (K.J. Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkamp et al., 2017). The same authors term the case as "inferior assessment qu", which "in tertiary education…is a problem that has serious consequences for students, teachers, government, and society" (Ibid).

Formal and informal observations show that teachers as well as students lack the required views and knowledge that would enable them balance the three processes, namely teaching, learning and assessment. Students' may fail to meaningfully learn, acquire skills and knowledge, and achieve mastery of the learning outcomes (LOs). Teachers also fail to properly prepare (self and professional) to make use assessment for the purposes it purports to serve and consequently abuse assessment practices by manipulating and invalidly subverting marks bay raising scores without changing the phenomena and without enhancing learning and behavioral change to learners (Firdissa, 2021). This practice puts both teachers and students in dilemma to choose from either students' meaningful learning or earning high grades (Sanga, 2016). As the same authors indicate, most teachers "have survived this approach to professional learning reasonably intact but it is not a recipe for enhancement; it provides no reliable route for ensuring that research on assessment reaches those doing the assessing.

1.3. Objective of the Study

The study aimed at investigating teachers' and students' level of acquaintance with learning assessment quality taking four Ethiopian universities as a case. Connectedly, the extent the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality were widespread among pertinent university communities have been explored. The objectives are based on the assumption that proper understanding and clear conceptualizations of the case can serve as surface symptoms for effective learning assessment wherein both teachers and students act reflectively rather than technically. Reflective action has the quality of reflective rationality, which entails empowerment, ownership and commitment of the practitioners as opposed to the technical rationality (produced through the technical interest) that is based on the idea of power control (Firdissa, 2010).

1.4. The Research Methodology

The study employed a quantitative method. 1Data were collected from four Ethiopian universities. For the sake of anonymity, the universities have been labelled as U1, U2, U3, and U4 standing respectively for university 1, university 2, university 3, and university 4. The selection was made using a lottery method from the universities functioning prior to 2015. That is, writing and putting the names of each university in a container and drawing 4, U1, U2, U3, and U4 have been selected for the study.

From the selected four universities, staff members (teaching and research), and PhD and MA students in Education and Behavioral Studies (CEBS) , and Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) were selected to participate in filling questionnaires. All the selections were purposely made on the basis of seniority, age, and availability of the required cohorts of students in Masters, and PhD programs.

Two types of questionnaires - closed and open-ended (one for staff members/researchers, one for MA and PhD students) were utilized in the course of the research work. Both of the questionnaires were dispatched to the subjects (teachers and students) by hand delivery. All the returned copies of the questionnaires were numbered as TR (TR1, TR2, TR3…TR109) for teacher- and SR (SR1, SR2, SR3…SR267) for student- respondents. They were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 23 and tabulated, analyzed, interpreted, and discussed leading to conclusions and recommendations.

2. Results

Whereas 400 copies of the questionnaires were dispatched at the four universities, 376 copies (94, 117, 112, and 53 respectively from U1, U2, U3, and U4) were properly filled in and returned. The return rate was 94%. This section, therefore, presents the respondents' biodata on sex, respondent groups within the universities, Respondent Group per colleges, qualifications, ranks, students' Program Level and Years of Study, and years of experiences at their respective universities. This has been followed by presentation of the results on impediments/challenges to maintain learning assessment quality at the Universities/Departments.

2.1. Biodata of the respondents

Whereas 36 (9.6%) is a missing system, 299 (88%) of the respondents were males whereas just 41 (123%) were females showing male dominance. For the fact that the data sources were selected using purposive and availability sampling, no conscious efforts were made to get representative female subjects. The case, nonetheless, could signal the prevailing females' underrepresentation in teaching as well as in research posts at HEIs in Ethiopia. The result on the respondent groups within the universities has been presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Overall Respondent groups within the Universities

University	Students		Instructors		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%age
U1	53	56	41	44	94	25
U2	98	84	19	16	117	31
U3	91	81	21	19	112	30
U4	25	47	28	53	53	14
Total	**267**	**71**	**109**	**29**	**376**	**100**

Table 1 shows that 267 (71%) and 109 (29%) of the respondents were students and staff members respectively. When it comes to disciplines, whereas 187 were from the CEBS, the remaining (i.e. 189) were from TEFL. The details can be seen from Table 2.

Table 2: Respondent Group per colleges and the data

School/College/Institute			Respondent Group				Total	%
			Students		Instructors			
			Count	%	Count	%		
CEBS	University	U1	21	60.0	14	40.0	35	18.7
		U2	64	94.1	4	5.9	68	36.4
		U3	47	73.4	17	26.6	64	34.2
		U4	10	50.0	10	50.0	20	10.7
	Total		**142**	**75.9**	**45**	**24.1**	**187**	**49.7**
TEFL	University	U1	32	54.2	27	45.8	59	31.2
		U2	34	69.4	15	30.6	49	25.9
		U3	44	91.7	4	8.3	48	25.4
		U4	15	45.5	18	54.5	33	17.5
	Total		**125**	**66.1**	**64**	**33.9**	**189**	**50.3**
Overall sum			**267**		**109**	**29**	**376**	**100**

It can be depicted from Table 2 that almost equal respondents participated from CEBS (187), and from TEFL (189). Also, the result on the educational qualification of the staff respondents has shown that the majority (63%) of them had doctorate degrees, followed by master's degree holders (37%). The staff respondents were also requested to indicate their respective ranks. The results have been presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The respondents' academic rank.

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Associate Professor	13	12
	Assistant Professor	51	46
	Senior Lecturer	8	7
	Lecturer	36	35
	Total	109	100.0

Table 3 shows that the majority (46%) of the respondents had the rank of assistant professorship, followed by 35%, 12%, and 7% lecturer- ship, associate professorship, and senior lecturer respectively. When it comes to student respondents, just 241 indicated their Program Level and Years of Study as can be seen from Table 4.

Table 4. Student Respondents' Program Level and Years of Study Cross tabulation

		Program Level of Study		Total
		MA	PhD	
Years of Study	1st	121	22	143
	2nd	12	28	40
	3rd	9	14	23
	4th	12	15	27
	others	3	5	8
Total		157	84	241

Table 4 shows that the majority (157) of the student respondents were MA and just 84 were PhD students. When it comes to their years of study, the majority (143) were 1st year, whereas 40, 27, and 23 were respectively at their 2nd, 4th, and 3rd years of study.

Requested to indicate their years of experiences at their respective universities, 327 reacted whereas 49 was a missing system, as can be seen from Table 5.

Table 5. Teaching/research experience in years

Years of Experience	Students	Instructors/Researchers	Total			
				%	cnt	%
Under 3	74	31	7	8	81	25
3-6	36	15	15	17	51	16
7-10	27	11	14	16	41	13
above 10	100	42	54	60	154	47
Total	237	100	90	100	327	100

Table 5 shows that the majority (154) of the respondents had above 10 years of teaching and research experiences. The Table also shows that 81 had under 3 years of teaching and research experience. A further look at the data shows that from those who had under 3 years teaching and research experiences, 74 were students and only 7 were instructors. Furthermore, of those who had above 10 years teaching and research experiences, 100 were students and just 54 were teachers.

2.2. Acquaintanceship and publicity of learning assessment quality

Ten close-ended questions were presented to the respondents to indicate their level of acquaintance with Learning Assessment quality listed. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability of the closed items is .86. Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted for all also range from .836 to .885 (see Appendix 1). The case signifies that the items in the questionnaire are correlated and are internally consistent for generating dependable evidence.

For the first nine questions, the respondents were instructed to indicate their level of agreement to the items showing their acquaintance with learning assessment quality by circling "1" for Strongly Disagree, "2" for Disagree, "3" for Neither Agree nor Disagree, "4" for Agree, and "5" for Strongly Agree. The results of the first have, therefore, been presented in Tables 6.

Table 6: Respondents level of agreement to the statements showing their acquaintance with Learning Assessment quality

No	Items on Assessment quality	Count & %	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	No Response	$\overline{X}^2$
1	Assessment is a learning activity	No.	15	15	10	108	211	359	17	4.35
		%	4.0	4.0	2.7	28.7	56.1	95.5	4.5	
2	Teaching-learning at universities must be guided by assessable learning outcomes	No.	12	11	36	143	157	359	17	4.18
		%	3.2	2.9	9.6	38.0	41.8	95.5	4.5	
3	Assessment is a central element in the overall quality of learning in universities	No.	10	16	39	123	173	361	15	4.20
		%	2.7	4.3	10.4	32.7	46.0	96.0	4.0	
4	Assessment involves real learning	No.	8	13	53	148	140	362	14	4.10
		%	2.1	3.5	14.1	39.4	37.2	96.3	3.7	
5	Assessment has to provide comparable scores across administrations	No.	7	23	71	160	93	354	22	3.87
		%	1.9	6.1	18.9	42.6	24.7	94.1	5.9	
6	Assessment requirements have powerful motivating effects on learners	No.	6	16	34	133	166	355	21	4.23
		%	1.6	4.3	9.0	35.4	44.1	94.4	5.6	
7	Learners benefit greatly when assessed through multiple forms of assessment	No.	6	12	28	82	228	356	20	4.44
		%	1.6	3.2	7.4	21.8	60.6	94.7	5.3	
8	Learning and teaching are modelled alongside the tasks assessed	No.	7	15	52	152	131	357	19	4.08
		%	1.9	4.0	13.8	40.4	34.8	94.9	5.1	
9	Changes in curricula become ineffective if not accompanied by pertinent assessment practices	No.	13	18	43	117	169	360	16	4.14
		%	3.5	4.8	11.4	31.1	44.9	95.7	4.3	

Note: X=Mean Average of each item

It can be depicted from Table 6 that the overall average means for learners benefit greatly when assessed through multiple forms of assessment, assessment is a learning activity, assessment requirements have powerful motivating effects on learners, assessment is a central element in the overall quality of learning in universities, and teaching-learning at universities must be guided by assessable learning outcomes were respectively 4.44, 4.35, 4.23, 4.20, and 4.18. This shows that the respondents' level of agreement was below "strongly agree" and just at "agree" against the statements meant to gauge their level of acquaintance with learning assessment quality.

When seen per se, only 160, 152, and 148 of the respondents showed their just agreement respectively to the statements: Assessment has to provide comparable scores across administrations, learning and teaching are modelled alongside the tasks assessed, and assessment involves real learning. On the other hand, 228, 211, 173, 169, 166, and 157 of the respondents indicated their level of agreement as "strongly agree" respectively to: learners benefit greatly when assessed through multiple forms of assessment, assessment is a learning activity, assessment is a central element in the overall quality of learning in universities, changes in curricula become ineffective if not accompanied by pertinent assessment practices, and assessment requirements have powerful motivating effects on learners, and teaching-learning at universities must be guided by assessable learning outcomes.

Furthermore, requested to indicate the extent to which the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality were widespread among pertinent university community, 257 properly responded whereas 119 was a missing system as can be seen from Table 7.

Table 7: Publicity of the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Overall Mean
Valid	Very Low	9	2	4	
	Low	42	11	16	
	Somewhat	119	32	46	
	High	67	18	26	
	Very High	20	5	8	3.18
	Total	257	68	100	
Missing	System	119	32		
Total		376	100.0	100	

Table 7 shows that the extent to which the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality were widespread among pertinent university community was rated as somewhat with an overall mean of 3.18. When seen per se also the majority of the respondents (119) rated as somewhat followed by 67, and 16 who rated as high and low respectively. On the other hand, whereas 20 respondents rated as very high, only 9 respondents rated as very low.

3. Discussion

Of the properly filled and returned respondents, the majority were males; and had doctorate degree, the rank of assistant professorship, and above 10 years of teaching and research experiences. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability of the closed items is .86, and if items deleted for 8 all also range from .836 to .885 (see Appendix 1). The case signifies that the items in the questionnaire are correlated and are internally consistent for generating dependable evidence.

Analyses of the data on the level of acquaintanceship and publicity of learning assessment quality at four Ethiopian universities have shown that the respondents had great acquaintance with the issues under discussion. More specifically, the respondents had great acquaintance with 1) the benefit of assessing students through multiple forms of assessment; 2) the learning activity nature of assessment; 3) the

motivating effects of assessment requirements on learners; 4) the centrality of assessment within the overall quality of learning in universities; 5) the role of assessable learning outcomes to guide teaching-learning; 6) the role of the tasks assessed to mold learning and teaching; and 7) the role of assessment to provide comparable scores across administrations, and its power of involving in real learning.

When it comes to the extent of publicity of the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality among pertinent university community, it was not to the required level as the majority of the respondents rated it as somewhat with an overall mean of 3.18.

Whereas the finding regarding the level of publicity of the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality among pertinent university community is in contravention with available literatures, that of the level of acquaintanceship go along with many authors' views. For instance, Muñoz (2017) has the view that "students benefit more when assessed through alternative or multiple forms of assessment by which their ability to perform particular tasks is assessed". The same source further indicates that "tasks are designed considering the types of tasks that the students will encounter in a real-life situation; thus, they are concerned with problem solving and understanding, and serve the dual purpose of assessing content and language".

Similarly, Bloxham, & Boyd (2007) indicate that "… to a large extent, assessment activity in higher education is the learning activity" wherein students may learn through the prescribed activities in laboratories or on field trips, or taking notes in lectures, seminars or from their readings, and above all through seriously engaging with the activities given within the learning materials. In describing the multiple roles of assessment, James, Mcinnis, and Devlin (2002), have also indicated that "[t]he powerful motivating effect of assessment requirements on students is understood and assessment tasks are designed to foster valued study habits".

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, therefore, instructors as well as students at the Universities included had acquaintance with learning assessment quality. The publicity level of the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality among pertinent university communities, nonetheless, was minimal. Consequently, there could be unavoidable dichotomies among the different communities in general and among designed curricula, taught contents, and assessed tasks in particular. By implication, therefore, the universities are encouraged to uphold and advance the prevailed acquaintanceship of learning assessment quality among instructors and students, and yet make utmost concerted efforts to publicize the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality among pertinent university communities.

Appendix A: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability and Item-Total Statistics

No	Cronbach's Alpha=.861			N of Items= 10	
		Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1	Assessment is a learning activity	36.01	34.678	.634	.842
2	Teaching-learning at universities must be guided by assessable learning outcomes	36.19	34.717	.683	.838
3	Assessment is a central element in the overall quality of learning in universities	36.18	34.219	.699	.836
4	Assessment involves real learning	36.23	35.732	.673	.840
5	Assessment has to provide comparable scores across administrations	36.51	36.416	.571	.848
6	Assessment requirements have powerful motivating effects on learners	36.14	35.120	.675	.839
7	Learners benefit greatly when assessed through multiple forms of assessment	35.92	35.485	.647	.841
8	Learning and teaching are modelled alongside the tasks assessed	36.32	36.019	.606	.845
9	Changes in curricula become ineffective if not accompanied by pertinent assessment practices	36.19	36.398	.490	.855
10	To what extent are the instrumental roles of learning assessment quality widespread among pertinent university community?	37.13	42.461	.051	.885

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