Undergraduate Student Assessment in Selected Public Universities of Ethiopia: A Qualitative Exploration of Conceptions and Practices

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Abstract: Despite its importance in the teaching-learning process and student motivation and engagement, student assessment in universities has received very limited research attention. This study explored conceptions and practices of student assessment in four public universities in Ethiopia. We obtained qualitative data from officials, instructors (through interviews), and undergraduate students (using focus group discussions). Most instructors conceptualized planning for student assessment as a very simplified plan comprising short descriptions of assessment tools and their relative weights that often appear in the course syllabus. Most participants rightly conceptualized continuous assessment (CA) as a procedure that comprises a variety of assessment tools that are administered continuously. In contrast, only a few instructors understood feedback as a comprehensive procedure useful for monitoring and improving students' learning. The findings also indicate problems in the practices particularly in adequately planning for student assessment, in implementing CA effectively using a mix of methods; and in the provision of feedback that benefits students. The findings disclosed several gaps in both conceptions and practices of student assessment. However, we observed no clear differences in the conceptions and practices of undergraduate student assessment due to generations of universities. The views of the participants rather suggest, more or less, similar conceptions and practices of student assessment across the four universities.

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Introduction

Assessment practices at higher education institutions (HEIs) are processes that can be used to appraise students' knowledge, abilities or skills, comprehension, and understanding of the concepts learned (Hernández, 2012). Assessment involves identifying appropriate standards and criteria and making judgments about the quality of the instructional process (Boud, 2000; Bearman et al., 2016). Assessment has two components: formative and summative assessment. Whereas the former intends primarily to improve learning and instruction through regular assessment and feedback, the main purpose of the latter is to grade or certify students' learning achievement (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1991).

Assessment experts use other terminologies as synonyms for formative and summative assessment. These are "assessment for learning" and "assessment of learning" (Mafenya, 2016). Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the priority is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It is the type of assessment that supports the learning process through diagnostic feedback. It is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners in their learning to decide where they need to go and how best to get there (Black & William, 1998). Assessment of learning, on the other hand, refers to strategies designed to confirm what students know, demonstrate whether or not they have met curriculum outcomes, certify proficiency and make decisions about students' future programs or placements. Assessment of learning is summative in nature and is used to confirm what students know and can do, to demonstrate whether they have achieved the outcomes, and occasionally to show how they are placed concerning others.

A related concept is "continuous assessment." Studies show that leaders of HEIs advocate for continuous assessment (Aytaged, 2013). Continuous assessment (CA) is a form of assessment that is conducted continuously. The distinguishing feature of CA is the use of a variety of

data collection instruments and methods. The use of several measures or tools will help instructors obtain different kinds of data and interpret and synthesize the information about students. The information also helps to plan and monitor the different components of the teaching-learning process. Some of the methods or instruments of CA include checklists, portfolios, projects, individual and group presentations, short tests, and quizzes. Students' involvement in their learning in the form of self- and peer assessments is also another important feature of CA.

Assessment, in any educational system and at any educational level, ascertains the extent to which educational learning outcomes are achieved and also the extent to which students have mastered the subject matter. Teachers, through assessment, can determine whether students are developing desired competencies and values, or whether the curriculum provides the vital knowledge and skills of the discipline. Classroom assessment is particularly useful in monitoring the learning progress of students and making decisions about how to improve instruction. Progress monitoring refers to conducting ongoing assessments to determine students' learning progress and the effectiveness of the instructional program (Salend, 2009). Thus, assessment data are continuously collected over time and promptly analyzed to identify students who are progressing and ready for new instruction as well as those students who have not yet demonstrated mastery and need additional or revised instruction (Yell, Busch & Rogers, 2007). In HEIs, the assessment of student learning is a fundamental phenomenon and it is also a continuous process geared toward promoting and understanding students' learning outcomes.

Assessment of learning outcomes is usually done to provide feedback for students and teachers about learners' progress both to be able to improve the efficacy of their work and also to provide feedback to educators, parents, policymakers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services (Stephens & Moskowitz, 2004). Assessment, particularly in HEIs, plays an important role in student learning and is considered the most important factor for student motivation and

engagement (Ramsden, 2003). According to Carless (2015), assessment has three main functions: 1) to assign grades that judge the quality of student achievements, 2) to provide evidence or certification to external partners, and 3) to support student learning. Boud (2007), on the other hand, argued that assessment has two main purposes: certification (summative assessment) and aiding learning (formative assessment). Summative and formative assessments are inextricably woven together, and it is probably impossible to separate them in practice.

Boud (2009) pointed out that assessment practices in universities are implemented in a traditional way mainly involving examinations, assignments, and other kinds of tests, which are unlikely to help prepare students for lifelong learning. Boud and Falchikov (2006) also stressed that university education has traditionally focused on preparing students for the acquisition of knowledge rather than participation in learning. Knight (2002) argued that assessment in universities, particularly summative assessment is in disarray. In his view, the current assessment practices have negative effects on students' learning due to an overemphasis on grades and learning outcomes, and thus did not necessarily take learning processes into account. Hence, offering a variety of assessment methods is often recommended as good practice in response to numerous critiques of the over-reliance on traditional tests. Researchers (e.g., Marzano, 2000; Furniss, 2003) suggested the need to use different strategies to appropriately assess different kinds of learning processes. Furthermore, there is a need to cater to differences in students' learning preferences and styles and a need to enhance learners' psychological approaches to learning (Bearman et al., 2016).

Studies show that assessment practices in public universities in Ethiopia are below expectations. Aytaged (2013), for instance, found that program units at Addis Ababa University are more concerned with summative assessment than formative one. A survey study among university instructors in Ethiopia disclosed that for the majority of the

participants, the purpose of assessment is the assignment of course grades (Teshome, 2015). According to this study, the practice of formative assessment which focuses on checking students' regular progress and instructors' day-to-day effectiveness is almost non-existent. Similarly, a recent study on assessment methods in an Ethiopian university (Abatihun, 2019) indicated instructors' overreliance on written tests at the expense of innovative assessment methods. According to some studies (e.g., Aytaged, 2013; Birhanu, 2018; Teshome, 2015; Teshome, Manathunga, & Gillies, 2018), most university instructors do not seem to have a clear understanding of what CA is. For example, many instructors consider CA a frequent administration of tests (Birhanu, 2018).

Another study (Teshome, 2015) directly asked instructors in one of the colleges of Addis Ababa University whether they have clear conceptions of test blueprint, the general principles of evaluation, and the specific guidelines of test item construction. In response, two-thirds of the instructors admitted that they do not have clear conceptions. These findings generally show how serious the problem is given that assessment is an important component of the teaching-learning process. However, it is not easy to ascertain whether the findings are generalizable to instructors in other colleges. However, a relatively larger study (Dawit, 2008) that investigated the awareness of 172 instructors from five universities in Ethiopia also showed that instructors have a low level of awareness at least in some areas of student assessment. Thus, one cannot consider the instructors' limited awareness of student assessment a problem that concerns only a few instructors. On the contrary, it appears to be a serious problem and we need to address it sooner rather than later. The instructors' awareness is important because it has a significant relationship with the instructors' practices. Dawit's (2008) study has presented evidence supporting this. The study showed that there is a significant moderate correlation (0.48 – 0.65) between instructors' awareness and practices about student assessment.

A review of study findings on the actual practice of CA does not appear to be encouraging either. For example, Teshome et al. (2018) disclosed that both students and teachers were dissatisfied with the practice of CA. Another study (Aytaged, 2013) reported that most instructors in Ethiopian public universities do not prepare plans for student assessment. Teshome's (2015) study similarly reported that most instructors do not prepare a table of specifications for the tests that they develop. Teshome's study further disclosed that 71% of the instructors who participated in the study do not prepare test items following test construction guidelines, and 60% of the instructors admitted that their assessment methods are not aligned with curricular contents and learning outcomes. Teshome et al. (2018) also support the idea that the majority of instructors in Ethiopian universities do not attempt to align student assessment with the learning outcomes when they develop tests.

There are several problems in student assessment in Ethiopian universities. These range from gaps in awareness to problems in the actual practices. The few available studies on the subject indicate that the major reason for the problems in student assessment is the knowledge gap (Aytaged, 2013) or lack of adequate awareness (Teshome, 2015). Other factors include a shortage of instructional time (Birhanu, 2018), large class size (Teshome, 2015) or an increase in enrolment without a matching increase in university capacity and resources (Teshome et al., 2018), students' and instructors' negative perception of formative assessment (Birhanu, 2018), heavy teaching load, and assuming other responsibilities in addition to teaching and research (Aytaged, 2013). Nevertheless, evidence on student assessment in universities in Ethiopia is highly fragmented and sparse. Assessment practices in public universities in Ethiopia have not been investigated in-depth involving different universities and stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and leaders.

There have been tremendous and continuous reforms in the higher education sector in Ethiopia. These reforms have resulted in a commendable massive expansion and increased access, but there remain great concerns about the deterioration of the quality of education and the lack of employability of graduates (Karorsa & Polka, 2015). One of the factors associated with the deteriorating quality of education and unemployable graduates is student assessment practices in universities (Teshome et al., 2018). Public universities all over the country have been implementing a harmonized undergraduate curriculum for more than eight years or so. The harmonized curriculum requires instructors to use CA (60%) and a final exam (40%) to assess students learning and learning outcomes (Wondifraw, 2019). However, it does not specify what kinds of CA and final exam instructors have to use. Besides, despite the adoption of CA by the universities as a strategy for student assessment at the undergraduate level, little is known about the prevailing conceptions and practices in Ethiopian universities.

To the best of our knowledge, there have been no previously published comprehensive and in-depth studies on assessment practices in the context of universities in Ethiopia. The present study, therefore, aimed to examine conceptions and practices of assessment in selected public universities of Ethiopia.

Method

Study design

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the views of different stakeholders on the situation of student assessment in selected public universities in Ethiopia. We used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to understand how student assessment is conceptualized and practiced in the selected public universities. We collected the data from March to June 2019.

Study sites

The study was carried out in four purposively selected public universities in Ethiopia: Assela University (AU), Debre Berhan University (DBU), Hawassa University (HU), and Worabe University (WU). These universities were selected to represent the four generations of universities as per the classification of Ethiopian universities by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Van Deuren, Kahsu, Mohammed & Woldie, 2016). We selected the universities because of their proximity to Addis Ababa.

HU belongs to the first generation, DBU to the second, AU to the third, and WU to the fourth generation. All the sampled universities have both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. However, these universities differ in student population, infrastructure, and human and material resources profile. The current study focused only on the undergraduate program as universities in Ethiopia have been using harmonized undergraduate curricula for some years now.

Participants

Data were collected from students, instructors, department heads, faculty/college deans, and higher officials (including academic officers, teaching-learning directors, and academic vice presidents). We selected the participants in three stages. First, four public universities were selected purposively as research sites representing the four generations and different geographical locations in Ethiopia. In the second stage, colleges/faculties/schools were selected in each study site for accessing data sources. The colleges/faculties/schools were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The main criterion was to obtain data from as many departments and colleges as possible which could reflect diverse perspectives on student assessment.

In the third stage, students, instructors, department heads, and deans/directors were purposively selected and involved in the study. Regarding instructors, efforts were made to capture diverse perspectives on the notion and practices of student assessment as they are purposively selected from different academic backgrounds and areas of specialization. Instructors were drawn from several colleges in each university: social sciences, humanities and language studies, education and behavioral studies, health, agriculture, business and economics, natural sciences, engineering, law and governance studies, and from different departments under these colleges. Students were similarly selected from different departments at each university. Further, as leaders of the academic work and faculty in charge of coordinating and monitoring student assessment practices, concerned higher officials (academic officers, teaching-learning directors, and academic vice presidents in each study site) were invited to share their experiences.

Overall, from each university 21 students, 10 instructors, two department heads, one college dean and one quality assurance officer, one teaching-learning officer, and the academic vice president were involved in the study. Hence, a total of 84 students, 40 instructors, eight department heads, four college deans, eight academic officers, and four vice presidents or delegates from the four universities participated in the study.

Data collection methods and procedures

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data. Sixty in-depth interviews were carried out with instructors (n=40), department heads (n=8), college deans (n=4), directors for university-wide centers (n=4), and academic vice presidents or their delegates (n=4). Twelve FGDs were conducted with students. In each FGD, on average seven respondents were involved.

All in-depth interviews and FGDs were conducted in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. Researchers of the larger thematic research project, where this study is nested in, conducted all FGDs and in-depth interviews. All the researchers have the training and several years of experience in qualitative data collection. While these researchers were moderating FGDs, their respective note-takers or field assistants summarized the discussions and noted the non-verbal communication. In-depth interviews were conducted in the respective offices of instructors, department heads, college deans, directors, and academic vice presidents. The FGDs with students were carried out in a free classroom at each study site.

All interviews and FGDs were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants. The in-depth interviews lasted between 25 to 60 minutes, whereas FGDs lasted 90-110 minutes. As part of the main study, participants were asked about three relevant issues related to teaching and learning: student engagement, instructional methods, and assessment practices. The assessment component of the questions dealt with the conceptualization of student assessment, practices in terms of nature and types of assessment methods being used, assessment feedback, and problems related to student assessment in the respective universities. Planned probes were identified from the existing local and international literature and discussions among members of the research team.

Data analysis

The interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim by experienced transcribers. Data analysis was undertaken with frequent discussion of the emerging themes among members of the research project. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to identify the prominent issues from the data. Themes and categories were compared between the different respondent groups. The first author coded two transcripts, and coding schemes were discussed with the second author. The first author coded the remaining transcripts applying the

already identified codes and drawing upon additional codes where the data required, frequently discussing with all the other authors. Higher-order codes were derived from the primary codes with a thorough discussion between the first and the second authors. Similarly, overarching themes were developed from the higher-order codes. Illustrative quotes were selected for each theme. We used to track changes to facilitate data analysis and data management.

Ethical considerations

A technical committee established by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Technology Transfer (VPRTT) at Addis Ababa University reviewed and approved the study proposal for the larger thematic study. We secured a support letter from the VPRTT to collect data from the study sites. Permission to collect data was obtained in all the study sites by presenting the letter of support. Participation was voluntary and verbal informed consent was obtained from all the participants after the nature of the study was fully explained to them. Confidentiality was assured throughout the research process.

Findings

The data analysis produced two main themes and three subthemes under each main theme. The main themes are conceptions and practices about student assessment whereas the three subthemes are (i) planning for student assessment, (ii) student assessment: its meaning and the methods often used, and (iii) providing feedback to students. The findings are presented under the two main themes and the three subthemes under each main theme.

Conceptions of Student Assessment

Before presenting the findings, it should be noted that whenever we asked questions about student assessment, all participants answered the questions in terms of CA. That is, they used "student assessment" and "CA" interchangeably. We later found out that the universities have adopted CA to assess students' academic performance at the undergraduate level. We also used the two terms interchangeably in this paper. The participants' conceptions of student assessment are presented under the three subthemes: planning, CA (meaning and the methods often used), and feedback provision.

Instructors' Conceptions of Planning For Student Assessment

For the majority of instructors, planning for student assessment is considered concerning the course syllabus only. Every instructor very briefly describes in the course syllabus how students will be assessed to determine the final course grade. These statements include the list of assessment methods the instructor plans to employ and the relative weight allotted to each method (e.g., test, assignment, quiz, etc.). Whenever the participants were talking about "planning" they were referring to the few statements that they often include in the course syllabus.

Supporting this idea, a department head (HU-10) stated "when assigned a course, every instructor prepares a plan for the CA in the course syllabus. The instructor describes each CA procedure along with the specific time of administration." An instructor (AU-1) also affirmed "instructors prepare course syllabus in advance. They indicate the CA procedures they will use in the syllabus. Nevertheless, there are gaps in preparing appropriate plans because it requires considerable time."

As shown above, for one reason or another, instructors do not plan effectively for student assessment or at least there are gaps in the planning. The problem appears to be in the instructors'

conceptualization of planning. Most instructors conceptualized planning for student assessment in terms of the limited statements they often include in the course syllabus. Strictly speaking, this conceptualization oversimplifies the tasks involved in planning because planning entails much more tasks than the "plan" included in the syllabus.

Instructors' and students' conceptions of CA

One instructor (HU-6) expressed his strong belief saying, "it [CA] helps me to monitor the students' daily improvement. It also helps me to understand their weaknesses and strengths." Another instructor from a different university described his understanding of CA as follows.

Assessment is a means to collect data to judge the performance of students. CA aims to distinguish gaps in students' performance. It aims to support students after identifying the gaps. CA means the assessment for learning. How shall we teach students? How are students progressing in their learning? After distinguishing the students' progress, it is a way of supporting those who are in need. (DBU-15)

The above excerpt provided a more in-depth understanding of CA, focusing not only on identifying weaknesses of students or monitoring students' progress but also on supporting students based on the identified weaknesses or gaps. Similarly, an instructor from one of the universities stated,

Continuous assessment supports students. They [CA procedures] help students address the different topics they have been taught at different stages. One topic serves as input for the next topic. The administration of CA for each topic gives a chance to know students' periodic performance. It can also help to take urgent measures if there are gaps. (AU-10)

Instructors' and department heads' responses generally indicated that they have a good understanding of the diagnostic purposes of student assessment. For example, a department head (DBU-4) elucidated his conception, "within a semester CA shows students' weaknesses progressively and ways of bridging the gaps. So it is a process in which you identify students' gaps and try to work on them." In other words, student assessment is seen as a means by which both students and instructors learn about their work; that is, teaching and learning.

Students' responses similarly showed that they have a good understanding of student assessment. In one of the FGDs, a student (DBU-14) stated, "In general, assessment is a mirror for us. If it is done properly, we can see our competence. For us, it is something with which we see our strengths, weaknesses as well as our results." As implied in this quote, the students believed that whereas there are instructors who conduct assessments properly there are others who administer student assessments improperly (in terms of time, representativeness of the items, etc.).

However, unlike the above correct and expected conceptions, several other instructors clearly showed that they have erroneous conceptions of CA. This pertains to the understanding that CA is introduced and being conducted simply to help students receive passing scores rather than genuinely assess students' achievement of learning outcomes. In this connection, one instructor (HU-5) indicated, "If we administer tests only, the scores would not be good [for students]. The assignment is a way of supporting students. Even the students themselves demand to have assignments. Thus, CA is meant to support students." But how do assignments support students get good scores? Apparently, in group assignments, high-achieving students often complete the assignments on behalf of the group. Even in individual assignments, very few students often do the assignments while the remaining students simply copy the answers from them or use the internet to produce perfect answers. Many instructors, therefore, believe that only tests, quizzes, and final examinations do provide a somewhat genuine assessment of

students' academic performance. One reason for this belief presumably is that the assessment procedures are administered in the presence of the instructor(s) and the latter can monitor every move of the students in the class. Students complete the assessments independently (unless there is student cheating) and that provides a better assessment of their performance.

Overall, most interviewees rightly understood CA as a procedure that comprises a variety of assessment tools to be administered continuously. However, some instructors erroneously understood CA as the continuous administration of tests.

Instructors' Conception of Feedback

We examined instructors' conceptions of feedback from two angles. The first relates to what feedback is and how it should be given to students and the second is about the appropriate time when feedback should be provided to students. One instructor (DBU-11) shared his understanding as follows, "After conducting student assessment, it is necessary to provide feedback. We need to provide feedback so that students can learn and improve in the process."

Describing his conception with an example, a department head indicated:

… If a student scores six out of 10 and you record this in a mark sheet or laptop and the paper remains with you, it does not have any value. It is useful for students to know their errors and to learn from them. I see feedback as a way of studying again; it is giving me another chance to student. (WU-2)

Regarding the emphasis that should be placed on feedback, several instructors pointed out that feedback "focuses on questions that were answered wrongly or questions which were not answered at all. This

would help students to have better knowledge." A department head (HU-1) also confirmed: "feedback is one way of learning through knowledge of results particularly from knowing the errors we committed."

Overall, except for very few instructors who do not know what exactly feedback is, most of the instructors have a good understanding of feedback. But their understanding of how feedback should be provided differs. For some, feedback is tantamount to showing students their scores on the assessment or releasing the assessment results online. For others, feedback consists of showing assignments and test papers to students. Still, for others, feedback should go beyond showing scores to students or even returning assignments or test papers. The latter group understood feedback as a procedure that needs to be as comprehensive as possible in keeping with its aims of improving students' learning. According to one instructor (DBU-12), showing merely total scores communicates to students "neither the errors that they should rectify nor the behavior that should be encouraged." In other words, viewed from the perspective of the support feedback provides to students, showing scores or releasing them online is not good enough, to say the least.

Regarding the appropriate time for providing feedback to students, most instructors agreed that it should be provided immediately after conducting the assessment. There appears to be very little difference among instructors' conceptions of the right time for providing feedback.

Student Assessment Practices

When examining the practices of student assessment, the same three subthemes emerged as is the case with conceptions. Thus, under this theme, we looked into practices of planning, CA, and feedback.

Planning for Student Assessment

We asked instructors and students whether instructors indeed plan for student assessment. Many of the participants tended to focus not only on what they referred to as a "plan" but also on whether the "plan" is translated to practice. Regarding the "plan," only a few respondents pointed out that instructors do not plan for student assessment. One instructor (DBU-15), for example, stated, "So far, I have never seen instructors planning for CA." Another instructor (DBU-12) also said, "This is the most challenging task for the instructor. Assessment is done in a haphazard way rather than in a planned and useful way." Regarding the reason for the absence of planning for assessment, instructors indicated that for those whose pre-service training was in teacher education and who took courses in measurement and evaluation, perhaps it could be a matter of negligence rather than a knowledge gap. But for those who did not go through this same training, the knowledge gap could be the main problem.

In contrast, the majority of the participants stressed that every instructor plans for student assessment. According to an instructor (DBU-11), "… They [assessment methods] are put in our plans in advance... The instructor plans the kind of assessment procedures to be administered at the beginning of the semester." This idea was supported by students. One student (DBU-14) reflected on the point as follows to which others agreed. "The assessments are planned. When I say the plan, I am not referring to the time but to the different types of assessments, they will be using and their weights. These are specified in the course syllabus." Many instructors and students agreed that every instructor shows the different assessments comprising the CA in the course syllabus.

Overall, the findings indicate that most instructors do not prepare a detailed plan for student assessment. Responses about the implementation of the plan were not encouraging either. In the FGDs, for example, students (HU-3) expressed their disappointment stating, "Instructors assess us as they wish… They do not even follow the course

syllabus they prepared." FGD with students (DBU-14) in another university similarly showed that "because the schedule for the assessments is not set at the beginning, most of the teachers conduct the assessment after covering the course." But even when the administration time for each assessment is set and shown in the course syllabus, the implementation still suffers as reflected in the same FGD.

In fact, at the beginning of the semester, the course syllabus shows when assignments and tests are given. However, it will not be done according to the schedule set. We have for example taken several assignments and exams within a short period, close to the final exam. (DBU-14)

Whereas the administration of tests and other assignments around the end of the semester is mostly reported by students, some instructors have confirmed that this is common among instructors. According to them, most instructors focus more on covering all content areas of the course than administering assessments continuously.

Implementation of CA

We asked students, instructors, and officials about the implementation of CA in their respective universities. Participants confirmed that instructors use CA in evaluating students' academic performance. A closer look at the responses, however, indicated that such positive responses for the most part came from department heads, deans, or vice presidents. A college dean (HU-9), for example, stated **"**We use CA for undergraduate students; we expect every instructor to conduct student assessment at the end of each chapter. At least, five CA [procedures] are expected for each course." It is worth noting that the response of the dean focuses on expectations rather than the reality on the ground. We obtained a somewhat similar response from a department head from the same university. The head said,

When assigned a course, every instructor prepares a plan for the CA in the course syllabus. In the plan, the instructor describes in detail each CA procedure along with the specific time of administration and submits this to the coordinator. (HU-10)

It is important to note that the head talked about the plan of instructors to implement CA rather than the actual practice. The management from other universities similarly affirmed that CA is being implemented in their respective universities based on expectations and plans rather than actual practices.

Most interviewees, however, indicated that CA is neither fully nor effectively implemented. Though the group comprises a majority of instructors, there were also a few department heads and a dean. According to a department head (AU-3), for example, "Even if the conditions and the nature of the courses are not conducive, there are attempts [to implement CA]. However, when the course is given in block mode and should be completed within 2-4 weeks, it is difficult to implement CA." Many instructors also raised block teaching as a hurdle to implementing CA due to time constraints. Large class size is another obstacle that came up in the interviews frequently. Regarding this, a department head stated the following.

If we consider the proper implementation of CA, it is set at a lower level. Though CA was introduced with good intentions, there are many problems in practice. One can say that in all departments CA does not serve its purpose. (DBU-4)

Apart from block teaching and large class size, several instructors expressed their feeling that CA was something about which they did not have a say. One instructor, for example, shared his view as follows.

There is CA but it is something imposed on us rather than something to which we consented. You know, if something is imposed on you, its full

implementation is questionable. Because you have to do it, you will do it. It creates that kind of feeling and that is not good. (WU-1)

Irrespective of the reason, many course instructors administer assessments around the end of the semester and some consider this a practice that is not acceptable. One instructor had the following to say in this connection.

… I don't think most teachers are implementing CA. I say this because there were instances where quizzes and tests were administered in the final week of the semester. The aim of this quiz is none other than to gather scores [to fulfill the requirements]. (DBU-13)

Several students similarly expressed their complaints over the burden of taking several tests and quizzes around the end of the semester. If assessments are conducted this way, one cannot call it CA in the first place because such a practice does not serve one of CA's purposes, namely monitoring students' progress periodically.

On the other hand, even when instructors administer different assessments throughout the semester, it is dubious that they use the resulting information to monitor students' progress. Supporting this, one instructor (WU-1) stated, "We do not use assessment for diagnostic purposes. The time is also very short. So we cannot distinguish students in terms of their progress. It would have been good but this is not the case here."

Other participants have reported malpractices in the implementation of CA and these provide clear indications that at least many of the staff in the four universities are not properly implementing CA. One of the malpractices emphasized in the interviews is the use of tests only. Several instructors, knowingly or unknowingly, administer five tests during the semester and avoid the use of other assessment procedures such as assignments or quizzes.

A second malpractice in the implementation of CA concerns those instructors who deceitfully report to their department that they have administered five assessments (e.g., quiz, individual assignment, group assignment, test, and presentation) during the semester (e.g., each with 10% weight) even though they have administered only one test (e.g., with a 50% weight). In this connection, one instructor (HU-6) stated, "… I heard that some teachers administer one test but report as if they had conducted all the required CA procedures."

Very few interviewees further stated that CA exists in name only; implementing CA properly is very difficult because of the large class size among other things. Explaining this, a department head had the following to say.

… In reality, it is not utilized as a device to assess students' achievement of learning outcomes. Assessment is administered for the sake of reporting scores which I believe do not reflect behaviors, feelings, or knowledge of students. I don't believe that CA serves as input to help change students' and instructors' behaviors. (DBU-12)

Commonly used CA tools/procedures

The most commonly used CA procedures reported by participants are quizzes, assignments, and tests. Few instructors have also reported projects, presentations, term papers, class attendance and participation, group lab work, lab report, and fieldwork as tools for student assessment. About this, a department head from a health science college had the following to say.

Even though this varies with the nature of the course, we use quizzes, tests, group assignments, individual assignments, and presentations. When it comes to medical courses, in particular, there are seminar presentations. There are morning sessions as well. Apart from this, there is project work. (AU-3)

FGDs with students (AU-14, AU-15, WU-4, WU-5) also confirmed instructors' use of a variety of tools such as tests, quizzes, class participation, assignment, and project in their assessment. Students further added that they do labs in groups and submit reports as a requirement. Overall, students noted that their instructors frequently rely on quizzes and assignments as CA tools and complained about the ineffective use of the various CA tools.

Prescriptive versus suggestive use of CA

The interviews show that instructors in some universities are more flexible in their use of CA tools than their counterparts in other universities. An instructor (HU-5) from one of the universities, for example, stated that instructors use different methods of assessment, all of which would be scored out of 60 percent. He pointed out, *that this varies from one instructor to the next.* Another instructor (HU-8) from a different college but the same university indicated that he usually conducts *two quizzes and one assignment for a course*, the scores of which would add up to 50 percent.

An instructor (AU-8) from a different university, however, reported that he uses most of the time tests, assignments, and projects depending on the nature of the course. He said, *most instructors use tests, assignments, and final exams. They less frequently use quizzes, however.* Another instructor (AU-10) from the same university indicated that there are six ways of assessment. The instructor stated, *overall, before the final exam, we are required to conduct five assessments.* Instructors from WU (e.g., WU-3, WU-2) similarly reported that they use different mechanisms (tests, individual and group assignments and projects, quizzes, and class activity) in student assessment.

The data show that instructors in the three universities (AU, HU, and WU) flexibly use CA tools as well as the overall weight allotted to CA in the range of 50 to 60 percent. The universities appear to provide the general framework for student assessment that guides instructors

whereas the instructors conduct student assessment within the general framework. However, this does not seem to be the case in DBU in particular.

In DBU, it appears that there is no flexibility. That is, instructors uniformly conduct the same CA procedures with fixed weight irrespective of the nature of the courses they offer. Participants from DBU uniformly reported the use of specific CA tools along with their corresponding weights that are prescriptively stipulated in the Senate Legislation of the University.

Provision of feedback to students

Three sub-themes emerged under this theme: (i) provision (ii) modality of provision and (iii) timeliness of the provision. In general, the responses obtained can be categorized into three. The first group, comprising instructors, believed that they certainly provide feedback to students and the instructors in this group raised very few problems of implementation if any. The second group, consisting of both instructors and students, in essence, showed that there are attempts, among instructors, to provide feedback but the practice is hampered by several problems. The third group stated outright that although they feel that they are providing feedback, actually they are not; the feedback they provide is neither directed toward improving students' performance; nor does it help instructors to revise their instruction. The views of the three groups are presented below.

The first group, comprising instructors, believed that they certainly provide feedback to students. They thus raised very few problems of implementation. One instructor (DBU-2) reflecting on his recent experience stated, *… for example, I administered the test on Monday and have shown students their scores on Wednesday. I properly implemented this.* Other instructors from the same university stated their practices and that of their colleagues in the university at large. For example, an instructor indicated his general impression as follows.

Except for very few, instructors provide feedback to their students. For example, after administering a quiz, we correct and return the papers to students. In addition, we do the questions in class. In the case of an assignment, some instructors require students to present it in class, which will be followed by general discussion and feedback. (DBU-4)

Another instructor (AU-6) from a different university stated, y*es, I do provide feedback; there would be no trust between the instructor and students if there is no feedback*. When asked whether he provides feedback on time, the instructor replied, *even though I don't dare to say that I provide feedback immediately, I score [the assessment] as soon as possible and provide feedback.* Another instructor confidently stated that there are no problems concerning feedback. The instructor stated his view as follows.

We provide feedback on time. We try to show students their results without delay. At present, we release their scores online… If students think there are problems in our scoring, they come to us and we will talk about it. (HU-7)

The interviews further showed that there are instructors who provide detailed feedback to students. Unfortunately, the instructors who participated in this study and who claim that they provide detailed feedback appear to be few in number. One of them, a department head, mentioned himself and the department staff as a whole. He explained the procedure as follows.

In our department, the common feedback provision procedure after marking the test or the assignment is doing the test/assignment in class together. The students will also be informed about the appropriate ways of studying. A week or two can elapse before completing marking. But if students take Test 1, then they will get feedback on it before taking Test 2. The students will be available physically to see their scores. (HU-10)

As shown in the above excerpt, the feedback provided this way is comprehensive because both the instructor and students do every item of the assignment or test in class. Besides, instructors help students get useful information on how to study.

The second group, comprising instructors and students, agrees that instructors provide feedback to students but admit that such instructors are very few. According to this group, most instructors do not provide feedback for different reasons including large class sizes, time constraints, and heavy teaching load. Students also provide clear answers on how instructors provide feedback to students and what proportion of instructors does provide detailed feedback to students. One of the students explained his point in the following manner, to which other students agreed.

Instructors provide feedback once in a while. In general, I would say only a few instructors provide us with detailed feedback… Most of the instructors, however, complete everything and release our scores online. Even when there are errors, there is no chance to correct them. (HU-2)

Students from other universities have also raised similar points. They emphasized that most instructors do not care about providing feedback to their students. Following the same line of argument, one instructor explains the problem as follows.

We do not usually provide feedback on time because we conduct assessments now and then. Before you score one assessment, you will administer another. … So we score all assessments at the end and show students their scores. Because of time constraints, the provision of feedback is not as effective as it should be. (WU-1)

Many instructors have indicated large class sizes, time constraints, and teaching load as reasons for not providing feedback to students on time. One of the reasons attracted our attention much more than the others

because it was odd. One instructor (DBU-3) stated *because students commit so many errors, it would be difficult to provide feedback; so, what we are doing is telling the students the overall CA score out of 50, … not their scores on individual assessments.* Contrary to this instructor's view, feedback should primarily target students who perform poorly.

A third group, apparently taking the term "feedback" seriously asserted that instructors do not provide feedback to students. A dean from one of the universities shared his opinion as follows.

There are many problems surrounding the feedback given to students at the university level or at our college level. First, feedback is not provided to students. Second, even those who provide feedback to students do not go beyond showing scores. (DBU-11)

A department head (HU-1) from a different university supported the dean's opinion and said, *we do not often provide feedback to students in such a way that they can learn from their errors. Because of this, I can say we are not providing feedback.* Joining this group, some students (HU-3, HU-4) claimed that they do not receive any feedback from most of their instructors other than seeing their final grades online.

Most instructors stated that even though they do not provide feedback in classrooms, they invite students to come to their offices for a detailed discussion of the assessment in a group or individually. Many students also agree that their instructors tell them so but that they do not use the opportunity. Although some instructors argue that students do not come to their offices because they do not care, other instructors (HU-8) admit that instructors do not encourage students to come to their offices for the purpose.

Discussion

The findings of the study are discussed under two subheadings: conceptions of student assessment and student assessment practices.

Conceptions of Student Assessment

The findings of the study showed a mix of instructors' overall conceptualization of student assessment. Although most instructors rightly conceive CA as a means of monitoring and improving students' learning progress through the administration of various assessment methods continuously some others understood CA erroneously as the continuous administration of tests. Other instructors conceived CA as a means of helping students get passing scores. One point behind this latter conception is the fact that students do not genuinely do both individual and group assignments on their own. Some copy their responses from the internet; others submit papers copied from their classmates. Group assignments, in particular, are mostly completed by one member of the group who, in the eyes of the group members, is a high achiever. This way, students in a group earn the same score on an assignment even though at least some of the group members do not contribute at all.

In addition to the gaps in instructors' understanding of the overall essence of student assessment in general and CA in particular, problems were observed in instructors' conceptualization of the basic components of student assessment mainly of planning and feedback. The findings showed that there is a misunderstanding among the majority of instructors as to what constitutes planning concerning student assessment. That is, except for very few who appeared to have a good understanding of planning, instructors consider the limited statements included in the course syllabus that describe the methods of student assessment (along with their relative weights) as a plan of student assessment.

These statements are meant simply to communicate to students how their performance or achievement of learning outcomes will be assessed in a particular course. The statements do not include, in any form, a detailed plan of the assessment methods. Admittedly, preparing the course syllabus and distributing it to students is vital to have a contract between the instructor and the students. However, it cannot substitute the actual plan that instructors should prepare for each assessment. This, therefore, shows that the majority of instructors' conception of planning as it relates to student assessment is inaccurate.

One can observe that this conceptualization of planning student assessment is not accurate because it misses the main point of planning. One of the main objectives of planning student assessment is to develop assessment tools that are fair to all students. For example, this could be achieved by attempting to develop achievement measures/tests that represent the course content fairly well. That is, planning student assessment requires a different set of activities rather than simply preparing a course syllabus and it should be understood as such. According to Mehrens and Lehmann (1991), for example, developing a table of specifications, a two-way table that relates the learning outcomes and the contents of the course, helps a great deal to prepare a test that is representative of the course content. It is worth noting that these tasks require the instructor to invest a certain amount of time and effort. Besides, the actual preparation of the test items, which is done strictly following the table of specifications, requires additional time and effort. These and other related activities constitute what we call planning concerning student assessment. Finally, as in the present study, small-scale studies (e.g., Teshome, 2015; Aytaged, 2013) have documented such misunderstanding of instructors not merely as an erroneous conception but also as a misconception that leads to student assessment malpractices.

Instructors' conception of feedback is limited to showing students their results. If students are to benefit from the assessment, then the instructor should mark or score the test/quiz and return the papers to

students. This would help students to see the items and their correct and incorrect responses, thereby learning from them. While knowledge of results is one form of feedback, it is not the only one. A comprehensive feedback schedule should go a step further in clarifying the correct responses by the instructor or by students who are willing to do that with the supervision of the instructor. Overall, consistent with the findings of this study, studies (e.g., Birhanu, 2018; Teshome, 2015; Teshome et al., 2018) have reported that most university instructors do not seem to have a clear understanding of what CA is.

Student Assessment Practices

In brief, the findings showed that the majority of instructors have problems implementing CA effectively. First, most instructors do not plan effectively for student assessment. Second, though many instructors attempt to administer diverse assessment methods (e.g., tests, quizzes, individual and group assignments, etc.), some instructors administer tests only. Third, strictly speaking, only some instructors appeared to provide comprehensive feedback to their students on time. Even though most instructors provide feedback, they do not deliver the feedback on time nor is the feedback comprehensive enough to support students. Consistent with these findings, previous research (Aytaged, 2013) has shown that most instructors do not prepare plans for student assessment. More generally, other researchers (e.g., Teshome et al., 2018) have also reported that both students and instructors are dissatisfied with the overall practice of CA.

On the other hand, the findings indicated differences among instructors on several fronts including the timing and more importantly how feedback should be provided to students. For some, it seems the timing does matter while for others it does not so far as they provide the feedback. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that feedback, to be useful for students, needs to be provided immediately.

Instructors provide feedback to their students in different ways. Some simply show students their scores or release the same online. Other instructors return assignment/test papers to students in which case students know both their scores and the correct and incorrect responses. Still, others reported having gone a step further and discussed the tasks in class together with students after they return the test/assignment papers. In general, showing scores to students or releasing the scores online is not good enough. To be effective, returning the test papers as well as doing all questions in class and conducting discussion is necessary and this may be considered comprehensive.

The findings also indicated that there are instructors who, for some reason, are engaged in several malpractices concerning the implementation of CA. Notable among these are three malpractices. One of these is the use of tests only. Instructors, knowingly or unknowingly, administer five tests during the semester and avoid the use of other assessment procedures such as assignments or quizzes. In principle, this practice does not comprise CA for CA calls for administering diverse assessment methods or tools continuously. Some of the instructors do this because they do not have a clear conception of CA. However, some instructors are involved in this malpractice knowingly. The main argument the latter instructors advanced for using tests but no other tools are that other assessment tools (e.g., individual and group assignments) do not truly reflect each student's performance as the students often copy a good student's work and that tests are better in this regard.

A second malpractice is the administration of assessments around the end of the semester, just before the final examination. In this connection, it is worth noting that timing is important because if the assessments are administered at the end, the mere objective of such assessments would be summative rather than formative. That is, the assessment results would be useful only to grade students' performance. More importantly, the results could be useful for instructors neither to monitor students'

progress nor to provide feedback to students. Assessments conducted at the end of the semester could not help instructors review and revise instruction either. The instructors who are involved in such practices do so, according to some participants, because for them covering course content is more important than conducting assessments. However, CA in particular can guide the teaching-learning process and is therefore as important as covering course content. Consistent with the findings of the present study, past research (Aytaged, 2013) has reported that instructors are more concerned with summative assessment than formative assessment. Going a step further, another study (Teshome, 2015) concluded that the practice of formative assessment is almost non-existent in one of the colleges of AAU.

A third malpractice in the implementation of CA concerns those instructors who deceitfully report to their department that they have administered five assessments (e.g., quiz, individual assignment, group assignment, test, and presentation) during the semester when in fact they have administered only one test. Irrespective of the reason, such malpractices are unacceptable. Not only is the malpractice unfair to students it is unethical for the instructors to do that; thus, these instructors should be held accountable.

The findings further show that the specific CA tools and the relative weights allotted to them vary across universities. In three of the four universities (AU, HU, and WU), instructors appear to be free to flexibly use different CA tools so far as they respect the overall weight (50% or 60%). Besides, the 50 or 60 percent weight allotted to CA appears to vary not only from one college to another within the universities but also from one department to the next and even among instructors within the same department. In other words, there seems to be flexibility not only in the CA tools instructors use but also in the overall weight within the range of 50% and 60%.

In contrast, the CA procedures or tools and their weights in DBU appear to be prescribed or instituted centrally and instructors have to follow them closely. Some instructors (from the same university) have expressed their complaints saying there is no flexibility in the use of the CA tools even for unique courses (e.g., practical courses). One interviewee, in particular, expressed his disappointment in the lengthy process the matter should go through if an instructor wants to employ CA procedures that are different from those centrally prescribed by the university. Even then, the interviewee added, there is no guarantee that such requests would be approved.

In general, this is the only difference we observed among the four universities. That is, whereas the three universities (AU, HU, and WU) flexibly use various CA tools and an overall weight between 50 and 60 percent, DBU appears to prescribe to instructors the use of certain CA tools with fixed weights. On the other hand, in each of the four universities, the data indicate a mix of both erroneous and accurate conceptions of student assessment in general and the specific elements (that is, conceptions of planning student assessment, what CA comprises, and assessment feedback) in particular. Regarding the practices, the participants' views show several problems in implementing CA across the four generations of universities. Thus, we did not observe substantial differences across the four generations of universities in conceptions or practices concerning student assessment.

Finally, there appears to be no effective mechanism to monitor whether instructors have administered the required number of assessments and this explains why the malpractices occur. It seems difficult for the management to monitor whether every instructor has conducted all the necessary assessments. On the other hand, while students can be good sources of information for the management to monitor this and other malpractices, they may fear exposing their instructor because of the consequences their actions may invite.

Conclusion

The views of the study participants suggest the presence of widespread problems in both conceptions and practices of student assessment/CA in general and in its basic elements (planning, assessing, and feedback provision) in particular. Given the gaps reported in the instructors' understanding of student assessment, the problems reported in the practices are not surprising as inaccurate conceptions lead to malpractices of various kinds.

There are indications that the implementation of CA is plagued by several factors. The study participants attribute the problems in the implementation of CA, among other factors, to heavy teaching load, time constraints, low level of student engagement and motivation, and low level of instructors' commitment. While the findings of this study point to these and other factors as having some influence on the implementation of student assessment, future studies need to investigate the relative importance of the factors, how exactly the factors influence the implementation of student assessment, and how strong the influence of each factor is.

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