



Perception of Distance Education Students of their Involvement in Assessment Decisions in Ghana

Frank QUANSAH

Department of Education and Psychology, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
fquansah99@gmail.com

Vera Rosemary ANKOMA-SEY

College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
yankomah-sey@ucc.edu.gh , & verasey@yahoo.com

Simon- Peter Kafui AHETO

Department of Mathematics & ICT Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
saheto@ucc.edu.gh , & kafuiaheto@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT :

Students' involvement in assessment decisions is considered as a critical to effective teaching and learning. This study examined students' perception of their involvement in assessment decisions in the University of Cape Coast Distance Education. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach. Through multi-stage sampling technique, 618 distance education students were sampled from centres in three regions in Ghana. The study adapted a scale from Fisher et al. (2005) with 9-items which were measured on 4-point Likert scale. It was found that students were clear about the assessment types being used and details were given on how assessment tasks are scored. It was found that how each assessment type was used was explained to students. Although students reported that they received feedback from assessment, it was stated that the feedback was not quick. It was recommended that management of College of Distance Education should provide prompt feedback for students concerning their assessment.

Keywords: Assessment, students' involvement, students' perception

1. INTRODUCTION

In schools, assessments are an indispensable part of the teaching and learning process (Goodrum, Hackling, & Rennie, 2001). Assessments are not only a means to allocate grades and examine whether set objectives are achieved but have also become a tool for learning (Watering, Gijbels, Dochy, & Rijt, 2008)

. Customarily, assessment practices (i.e., feedback, item writing, etc.) employed in schools in Europe have been greatly decided by teachers and thus, inappropriately implemented (i.e., assessment incongruent with planned learning, are inauthentic and not transparent) (Fisher, Waldrip, & Dorman, 2005). Institutions of higher education all over

the universe are largely involved in the development of intellectual competencies among students which eventually results in faster economic development through active contribution to productivity diverse professions as well as in the entire society (Lobanova, & Shunin, 2008). Assessment is a key to the development of these competencies and, consequently, plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process. From Nitko's (2001) viewpoint, assessment can be described as a process of obtaining information that is used for making decisions about students, curricula and programmes, and educational policy. Assessment, therefore, involves the utilisation of empirical data on students' learning to improve programmes and enhance students' learning (Allen & Yen, 2002). Assessment procedures also help in evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, instruction and teaching methodology (Kankam, Bordoh, Eshun, Bassaw, & Korang, 2014).

Information obtained from assessment is significant in making informed decisions regarding students' learning abilities, their placement in appropriate levels and their achievement (Kankam et al., 2014). As a measure of educational outcomes, it is expected that assessment leads to improvement in teaching and learning, and contributes to general school improvement (McMillan, 2001). A number of studies have shown the significance of assessment and the key role it plays in students' learning (Laird & Garver, 2010; Fernandes, Flores, & Lima 2012). Assessment has, therefore, become a crucial component in determining the manner in which students spend their time and what they perceive as essential in learning, and either positively or negatively influences their learning (Flores, Simão, Barros, & Pereira, 2016). Assessment is an essential tool in supporting students learning. Brown (2004), for instance, emphasised that assessment procedures should foster and promote student learning instead of

simply measuring student learning. Boud and Falchikov (2005) equally reiterated that assessment does not only involve grading and certifying students but also promote further learning. Assessment generally informs students about their learning achievement and how they can progress in their learning (Carless, 2006; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). From Falchikov's (2005) perspective, assessment is deemed fundamental for teaching and learning, and getting students involved in learning.

Students' involvement in assessment decisions is considered as a critical to effective teaching and learning (Fernandes et al., 2012; Sharma & Kawachi, 2012). This explains why students need to be involved. Fisher et al. (2005) explained students' involvement as the degree to which students are consulted and informed about the nature and forms of assessment as well as feedback from the assessment. Alkharusi, Aldafri, Alnabhani and Alkalbani (2014) argued that when students are consulted and involved in assessment decisions, they perceive assessment environment as learning-oriented. Students' involvement in assessment makes them accountable for their performance. This is because students tend to prepare well for assessment tasks, and sees assessment procedures are transparent and fair when they are involved which foster teaching and learning (Meece, Herman, & McCombs, 2003).

Despite the importance of students' involvement in assessment, it appears teachers do pay little attention to it. Gao's (2012) study, for instance, revealed that High School students had little or no say in the assessment planning procedures. This indicates that teachers were mainly the decision makers in assessment. Supporting Gao's findings, Dhindsa et al. (2007) indicated that there is low students involvement and consultation in secondary schools in Bruneian. Similar findings were discovered by other scholars (e.g., of assessment practices in the Senior High Schools (SHS) (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013; Alkharusi et al., 2014;

Koul & Fisher, 2006). However, it appears gender difference exist in students' perception of their involvement in assessment decisions (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013; Meece, Herman, & McCombs, 2003). Other studies have reported nonsignificant gender differences in students' perception of their involvement in assessment decisions (e.g., Dhindsa et al., 2007). This indicates that the previous research findings are inconclusive regarding gender effect. This might be because of inconsistency in the measurement of students' perceptions, or the techniques used in dealing with structured data. Nevertheless, it is clear that gender might play a role in the relationship between classroom assessment and student outcomes (Alkharusi, 2013; Alkharusi et al., 2014; Meece, Herman, & McCombs, 2003).

The trend of results, however, differed when university students' perception of their involvement in assessment was sought. In Quansah's (2018) study in Ghana, it was discovered that students generally perceived that they were involved in assessment decisions in the University of Cape Coast. Quansah's study was limited to regular undergraduate students. This means that the College of Distance Education (CoDE) was, however, not included. Since assessment practices in the College of Education tends to be a bit different from that in other colleges, Quansah's result tend not to be applicable to CoDE students. What is the view of CoDE students of their involvement in assessment in the University of Cape Coast?

Students on the distance education programme of the University of Cape Coast meet their respective course facilitators for face-to-face interaction every two weeks. For each course, students meet their facilitators for 3 hours on six different weekends to complete the content of the course. During the semester, facilitators as well as course examiners are expected to organise teacher-made-test and quizzes

respectively. Examinations are also conducted for students when the semester ends. It appears that CoDE students spend little time with facilitators, college staffs, and course examiners unlike the regular students who spend a lot of time with lecturers, faculty and departmental staff. It is unlikely that CoDE students would be involved in assessment decisions. Observations from the authors indicate that whereas some facilitators do not provide feedback on assessment tasks conducted, others do not even conduct any formative assessment at all. With respect to the summative examinations, it seems little involvement is reported. This might be due to the fact that all the summative assessment in CoDE is external in nature such that facilitators have little idea about it. These observations are, however, not empirical and as a result the need arises for a study to be conducted to examine the CoDE students' perception of their involvement in assessment decisions in the University of Cape Coast.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study further raises the following questions:

1. What is the perception of CoDE students on their involvement in quizzes and end-of-semester examinations?
2. What gender differences exist in the perception of CoDE students on their involvement in quizzes and end-of-semester examinations?

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach. This design was appropriate in measuring current practices in assessment in the University of Cape Coast. The study was targeted to undergraduate students of the College of Distance Education in the University of Cape Coast. Through a multi-stage sampling technique, distance education students in centres in the Western Region, Greater

Accra, and Central Region were sampled for the study. Specifically, 618 second and third year students were sample from the various study centres across these three regions. First year students were not involved in the study because they had little exposure to the assessment procedure of CoDE. From Creswell’s (2012) perspective a sample size greater than 350 is likely to be a good estimate of the characteristics of the population. The instrument used for the data collection was adapted from the standardised scale called “Students’ Perception Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ)”. SPAQ was developed and validated by Darrell Fisher, Bruce Waldrip and Jeffery Dorman in 2005. Several authors have validated the SPAQ and have indicated that the scale is appropriate in measuring the construct of interest (e.g., Alkharusi et al., 2014; Cavanagh, Waldrip, Romanoski, Fisher and Dorman, 2005; Dhindsa et al., 2007; Koul & Fisher, 2005). The adapted scale has 9-items which were measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Samples of items on the students’ involvement scale of SPAQ include: “I am given details on how assessment tasks are marked”, “I am involved in deciding the form of assessment tasks used in CoDE”, and “I

do not receive feedback from submitted assignments”.

During the data collection, efforts were made to ensure the validity and reliability of data gathered. The data was gathered at the various centres. Ethical considerations were deemed important during the data collection. The data was analysed using mean and standard deviation as well as one sample t-test to answer research question one. An independent t-test analysis was also used to analyse data to answer research question two. The data was found to meet the normality assumption.

4. RESULTS

What is the perception of CoDE students on their involvement in quizzes and end-of-semester examinations?

In analysing the data, a mid-point of 2.5 was used as the baseline for comparison because the items were measured on a 4-point scale. That is, mean values above 2.5 indicated that most of the respondents are in agreement to the statement. Conversely, a mean value less than 2.5 showed that most of the respondents were in disagreement to the statement. Nevertheless, a mean of 2.5 depicted that the greater proportion of the respondents were neutral about the statement.

Table 1: Perception of CoDE Students’ Involvement in Assessments in UCC (n=618)

Statement	Mean	SD
I am clear about the types of assessment used in UCC CoDE	2.89	.786
I am given details on how assessment tasks are marked.	2.59	.894
I am involved in deciding the form of assessment tasks used in UCC	2.07	.841
How each assessment type is used has been explained to me	2.60	.844
I have a say on how I am assessed in UCC.	2.11	.924
It takes a lot of time before my quiz papers are marked and returned	2.52	.815
I do not receive feedback from quizzes.	2.31	.815
The quiz papers are quickly marked and brought back.	2.43	.817
I am not aware of my continuous assessment scores before exam starts.	2.34	.874

The respondents averred that they are clear about the types of assessment being used (\underline{M} =2.89, \underline{SD} =.79) due to the fact that they were given enough details on (\underline{M} =2.59, \underline{SD} =.89). The respondents disagreed to the statement that they were

involved in deciding the form of assessment task used (\underline{M} =2.07, \underline{SD} =.84). It was found that students did not have a say on how they were assessed in UCC (\underline{M} =2.11, \underline{SD} =.92). It was argued that it takes a lot of time before quiz papers were

marked ($M=2.52$, $SD=.82$). Although the respondents stated that they received feedback from assignments given them ($M=2.31$, $SD=.81$), the scripts were not quickly marked and returned ($M=2.43$, $SD=.82$). The respondents indicated that they were aware of their continuous assessment scores before examination starts ($M=2.34$, $SD=.87$). What gender differences exist in the perception of CoDE students on their involvement in

quizzes and end-of-semester examinations? The study also sought to examine gender differences in the perception of CoDE students on their involvement in quizzes and end-of-semester examinations. The homogeneity of variance test assumption was tested and was found to be violated. Hence, values in Table 2 represent values for homogeneity assumptions violated.

Table 2: Gender Differences in the Perception of Students' on their Involvement in Assessment Decisions

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Male	412	22.51	3.56			
Female	206	22.56	3.17	-.163	455.43	.870

Levene's test: $F(616) = 5.062$, $p = .025$

The result revealed a statistically non-significant difference in male and female students' perception on their involvement in assessment decisions, $t(455) = -.163$, $p = .870$. This implies that male and female CoDE students have similar perception on their involvement in assessment decisions.

5. DISCUSSION

Students' involvement and consultation during assessment is critical to teaching and learning. It was evident that CoDE students were clear about the assessment types being used and details were given on how assessment tasks are scored. However, students were not allowed to decide the form of assessment tasks to be used. This is a step in the right direction since the form of assessment tasks to be used depends on the instructional and learning objectives, what has been taught and the form of skills to be measured. Teachers are experts and they are required to decide the form of assessment to be used after considering these factors. In the case of distance education in the University of Cape Coast, course examiners are assigned to this responsibility.

The students reported in this study that even though they received feedback from their quizzes, assignments, and examinations, it took some time before they received their marked scripts whether

quizzes. It must be stated that feedback is necessary in ensuring effective teaching and learning. Several scholars have supported the fact that feedback supports students learning (Asghar, 2012; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002). Fernandes et al. (2012) also found that students reported the importance of giving feedback in tutorial sessions, group presentations and midterm reports. These students recognised they could improve their performance and were able to set new strategies to achieve learning outcomes. This shows how important feedback is and this has implication for the result of this study since feedback was not prompt. The implication is that as at the time students would be in need of feedback, it would not be available to help them develop. Carless (2006), in line with this, argued that feedback occurring too late can be harmful to students learning. Carless (2006), by this, stated that immediate feedback helps improve teaching and learning. It was, however, stated that although feedback was not immediate, students always became aware of their continuous assessment scores before examination started. This gave an indication that the management of CoDE followed the academic policy of the institution which requires every lecturer or examiners to post the continuous assessment scores of students

before examination starts (Academic Programmes, Policies & Regulations for Undergraduate Studies, 2017).

It appears that the feedback received by students in this present study is not quick and this did not promote effective learning. This corroborates with the findings of Wren, Sparrow, Northcote, and Sharp (2009). In Wren et al.'s study, students of Edith Cowan University reported that feedback given was too brief and unlikely to help them grow. Their study was qualitative as opposed to this present study which was quantitative. Although both studies were conducted among university students this study was carried in Ghana via survey, whereas that of Wren et al. was conducted in Australia through an action research. Despite differences in the methodology, similar results were found. This can explain the fact that the examiners in both universities in the two countries have similar practices.

The findings of this study is consistent with that of Dorman et al. (2006) which was found that Secondary School students in Queensland reported high student consultation and involvement in the assessment procedures. Despite the similarities in the findings, Dorman et al. (2006) used secondary school students whereas university students were surveyed in this study. The results are consistent due to the fact that assessment practices in students' consultation in these two universities can be similar and hence reported by the students. Unlike the findings of this study, Gao (2012) revealed that American high school students in Northeast Arkansas had little to no say in the mathematics assessment process. Dhindsa et al. (2007) also revealed that secondary students reported low levels of students' consultation in the assessment of their school. The differences in the methodology of this study, and that of Gao (2012) and Dhindsa et al. (2007) can explain the discrepancies in the results.

It can be concluded that distance education students are aware of the assessment procedures in the college. This might be explained in the light of the fact that students are given enough information on assessment procedures when they are newly admitted into the college. We believe the management of CoDE is doing well in this direction. Because students become aware of these procedures, they do well to prepare for their assessment. Although, students acknowledged that they received feedback from assessment, they reported that the feedback was not quick. This means marked assessments did not come as when students really expected it. The delay in releasing assessment result may stem from the large number of CoDE students who take the assessment. Enough time also needs to be taken in scoring and grading these scripts might also explain why students' held this perception. This study, however, failed to find out how long it takes for them to receive feedback from assessment. Therefore caution should be taken in the generalisation of this result since it only represent the perception of students. It is recommended that the management of CoDE should educate students on the processes their scripts go through before results are finally released. The management of CoDE should also do well to provide quick feedback from assessment to students.

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Frank QUANSAH, is a final year MPhil student reading Educational Measurement and Evaluation in the University of Cape Coast (UCC). He obtained a B.Sc. (Psychology) degree with a First Class Honours from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana after which he served as a Teaching Assistant in a number of courses (Research Methods, Psychometrics, and Measurement and Evaluation) in the Department of Education and Psychology in UCC. Mr. Quansah has specialization in educational research and statistics, and assessment in education. Currently, he is a course tutor in the College of Distance Education (CoDE) in UCC and a reviewer for one of the Journals. With his specialization, he served as a member of the data management and analysis team of Complementary Basic Education (CBE) 2016 Programme Evaluation organized by the Ghana Education Service in collaboration with USAID, DFID as well as non-state actors like UNICEF.

Frank Quansah, Department of Education and Psychology, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
frank.quansah1@stu.ucc.edu.gh

Vera Rosemary ANKOMA-SEY holds a PhD in Educational Administration and Planning. Currently, she is a lecturer at the College of Distance Education at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. She has held various academic and administrative positions in the university. Currently, she is the Co-ordinator in-charge of Teaching Practice and Project Work at the College of Distance Education at the University of Cape Coast. She has a number of published articles and Distance Education modules to her favour.

College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana,
E-mail: verasey@yahoo.com or yankomah-sey@ucc.edu.gh

Simon- Peter Kafui AHETO is a Lecturer of Educational & Information Technology at the Department of Mathematics and ICT Education, Faculty of Science and Technology Education, College of Education, University of Cape Coast. He holds a Doctor of Technology (Information Technology) from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa. His academic interest areas are rhizomatic learning, learning analytics, social network analysis, open and distance learning, entrepreneurship education and youth development. He has over 13 journal and conference articles published in international indexes, a book, an international book chapter, technical reports, and papers submitted to international meetings.

Dr. Simon-Peter Kafui Aheto, Department of Mathematics and ICT Education,
College of Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
Phone: +233 244222904, E-mail: kafuiaheto@yahoo.com or saheto@ucc.edu

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