

Investigating The Undergraduate Experience Of Assessment In Higher Education ¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a doctoral study in progress, which is situated in the context of quality in higher education, and is premised on the view that the student learning experience is ultimately the most meaningful and lasting measure of academic quality. The literature on assessment in higher education clearly places assessment at the heart of student learning and it is claimed that “the truth about an educational system” may be discovered by examining its assessment procedures (Rowntree, 1987, p.1). Using a qualitative case study approach, the study aims to reveal the values inherent in assessment, to show how these are conveyed through institutional discourses and through practices of lecturers, and how students’ learning behaviour may be affected by their perspectives of assessment. Data gathering activities for the entire doctoral research include focus group discussions and individual interviews with final-year undergraduates, interviews with their lecturers, observations of lectures and classroom assessments, examination of documents related to the course descriptions and assessment, as well as a study of the administrative and procedural aspects of assessment which are part of the assessment praxis. The emerging themes reported here, based solely on the analysis of two of the focus group discussions, indicate how assessment praxis in higher education seems to be a reproduction of dominant power structures that have inculcated patterns of student passivity in learning. This has serious implications for the

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university's agenda for transformation, and broadly, the shaping of participatory democracy in citizenry.

Keywords: assessment, higher education, undergraduate experience, student perspectives of assessment, influence of assessment on learning.

Introduction

This paper is based on an ongoing doctoral study² which uses a qualitative case study approach to investigate student experience of assessment in higher education. This study is situated in the context of quality in higher education, more specifically the improvement of quality in learning in higher education. Barnett (1992) distinguishes between two dominant and rival paradigms of quality in the modern age: one is the institutionally dominated “performance” paradigm that views higher education as “the issuing of products, with inputs and outputs” (p. 7), and the other is the paradigm that sees higher education as “practice”, focusing on the interests of the academic community as researchers rather than as educators. The irony, as he points out, is that neither of these is driven principally by educational considerations. He therefore argues for an alternative approach alongside these two approaches, which is “an educational approach” to quality which places the student at the centre, the concern being “what is it to educate in higher education?” (Barnett, 1992, p.8). This study is based on the view that the student learning experience, situated at the nexus of market driven forces and traditional academic praxis, is ultimately the most meaningful and lasting measure of academic quality (see for example, Erwin & Knight, 1995; Hinett & Knight, 1996; Tam, 2001; Bramming, 2007).

Assessment, Student Experience of Learning and Institutional Quality

In the literature on assessment in higher education, it is well-established that assessment is at the heart of student learning. As Rowntree has so succinctly put it, “If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedures. What student qualities and achievements are actively valued and rewarded by the system? How are its purposes and intentions realized?” (Rowntree, 1987, p.1). This is the dominant view shared by published researchers in higher education as well as in assessment (Knight, 1995; Brown et al., 1997; Messick, 1999; Brown & Glasner, 1999; Falchikov, 2005). It is also accepted that it is assessment that tends to define for students what is worth learning, ie assessment drives learning. Boud (1995), another well-known researcher in assessment in higher education, says that “Assessment acts as a mechanism to control students that is far more pervasive and insidious than most staff would be prepared to acknowledge” (in Knight, 1995, p.35). He also suggests that “assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students

² The first writer, Lee King Siong, is the doctoral candidate, hence the use of the first person refers to her personally. The co-writers named on the first page are her supervisors.

learn than any other single factor. This influence may well be of greater importance than the impact of teaching materials” (Boud, 1988, as cited in Brown & Glasner, 1999, p.4). The seed of discontent from which sprang the main motivation for embarking on this study was my acute sensitivity to the disjointedness between teaching, learning and assessment, and my observation of how little real concern there is about the impact of assessment on learning. Over the three decades of my experience as an educator in higher education, I have observed that there is a prevalent lack of interest in assessment, that methods of assessment have remained much the same year after year, and that the institutional concern is generally with reporting positive student performance (which probably would be seen to reflect good teaching) rather than about ensuring real engagement with learning. Nearly two decades ago, Astin (1991, p. ix) observed that much of the assessment carried out in America’s colleges and universities was “of little benefit to either students, faculty, administrators, or institutions”, and that, “on the contrary, some of our assessment activities seem to conflict with our most basic educational mission”. Hinett and Knight (1996, p. 3) noted that data from assessment of student learning is used both in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America for “management and accountability purposes”, but “it sometimes seems as if assessment procedures are in place for the benefit of university management, not for the benefit of learners”. These observations could well apply to the state of assessment in Malaysian higher education today.

The State of Higher Education in Malaysia

Recent developments in Malaysian higher education also serve as the background and the wider context of this investigation into undergraduates’ experience of assessment. Globalization has inevitably impacted higher education worldwide, and Malaysia has recognized the urgent need to transform its higher education system to achieve a competitive edge or be left dismally behind. The recent moves in Malaysian higher education to transform itself into a world-class higher education system included the anointment of four public universities as research universities, and subsequently one of these was selected for the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX). It is generally accepted that the three basic goals of a higher education system are education, research and public or community service and while it is normal for different universities to emphasize research or community service, the primary emphasis on education cannot be diminished (Astin, 1991). However, it appears that the research universities in Malaysia may be subject to the same criticism levelled at more established research universities elsewhere - that competitiveness to maintain the status quo has resulted in an obsession with research funding, quality audit and ranking, leading to the neglect of high quality teaching and learning. There does indeed seem to be a disproportionate concern with research, ranking, rating – resulting in a shift of focus from the fundamental business of the university, which is to educate, to achieving measurable targets or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in quality audit and rankings. My concerns compel me to examine the discourses of higher education and to interrogate the stated aims of Malaysian higher education.

At the same time, the problem of unemployable graduates in Malaysia since the turn of the millennium seems to bolster the thinking that the main aim of higher education is to produce “employable” graduates. There is a sense of urgency to trigger the process of transforming higher education in the country (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007) because institutions of higher learning are seen as playing a pivotal role in developing first-class human capital which is crucial in supporting one of the national development thrusts to transform Malaysia into a developed nation. Thus, the undergraduate is objectified as “product” that has to be repackaged for better employability, to meet the needs of industry, but it is clear that the holistic development of the main stakeholder in the process called “higher education” is being sidelined. Even though there are proposals for curriculum reform, the approach is the traditional focus on pedagogy, without the realization of the centrality of assessment, and the role that it plays in engaging and sustaining learning. Hinett and Knight (1996, p.4) claim that “traditional assessment systems can fail to foster high quality learning” because (citing Burke, 1995) the particular moral stance behind traditional systems may be out of step with current thinking about the relationship between higher education systems and the quality of student learning.

Assessment as Socially-constructed Practice

In the field of assessment, there are also basically two paradigms: one view of assessment is primarily in terms of psychometric issues and the technology of measurement (the technicist view), while the other views assessment as fundamentally social and socially-constructed practice (Broadfoot, 1996; Filer, 2000). Research in language assessment in Malaysia has hitherto been confined to technicist interests of test construction and issues of validity. While there has been some academic dissertations that investigated these aspects using test-takers’ perspectives (Kartini Md Khalid, 1999; Foziah Rahman, 2004), and a couple of small-scale studies on the impact of assessment on teaching and learning (Lee King Siong & Wong Fook Fei, 2000; Lee King Siong, 2004), there seems to have been little interest in investigating assessment as social and socially-constructed practice encompassing issues of power relations. The current view in the literature is that assessment plays a key role in the social restructuring of modern societies (Barnett, 1992; Broadfoot, 1996; Filer, 2000), that it is a social product of values and traditions of particular cultures and the interests of specific groups within them (McNamara & Roever, 2006) , and also that assessment practices reveal “the truth about an educational system” (Rowntree, 1987, p.1). This resonates with Messick’s (1980, 1989, 1996) views of test constructs as embodiment of social values, to the extent that he proposed that the social consequences of tests (impact) should be considered as part of a broader definition of validity.

Educational assessment is not confined to judging individual potential and performance; it has always also been about judging institutional quality (Broadfoot, 1996). The problems of rising unemployment and the critical need to be internationally competitive are always linked to the education system, especially higher education. However, in efforts to “fix” such problems, attention is always directed towards curriculum reform,

which subsumes some superficial review of assessment, but never really gets to the heart of the matter.

Aim of Study

The aim of my study is to reveal the values inherent in assessment, to show how these are conveyed through institutional discourses and through practices of lecturers, and how students' learning behaviour may be affected by their perspectives of assessment. The findings will have serious implications as they relate to issues of quality that are high on the university's agenda.

The site of my study is the B.A ELS (Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies) programme in the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and the focus is on the undergraduate experience of assessment. The main reason for the choice of this site of investigation is that it is where the researcher, as part of faculty, has for a long time made keen observations of assessment practices and their impact on learning. Hence, she has an intrinsic and altruistic desire to contribute to the quality enhancement initiative of the university. Another reason why the BA ELS programme makes for an interesting site of investigation is the fact that there has always been a variety of modes of assessment other than the traditional final (written) examination.

While they are the major and majority stakeholders, students are also the most disenfranchised. In reality, students are positioned as passive, powerless subjects acted upon, their voices muted by decree (the Universities and University Colleges Act, Malaysia, 1971), their views never formally solicited or officially taken into account in academic decisions affecting their learning and their future. Koo Yew Lie (2004, p.72) describes a "general feeling of disempowerment among graduates and undergraduates in tertiary institutions" stemming from their prior experience of an exam-oriented, authoritarian style of education. Thus, the decision to position the undergraduate's experience of assessment as the central object of my study marks the critical stance of my study.

Research Design, Instruments and Subjects

My approach can be described as institutional ethnographic, and since the focus is on a specific group of people (final year BA ELS students) in a specific context (the BA ELS programme in a local public university), it can be considered a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998, Merriam & associates, 2002). Generalizability is not the thrust of this research, but veridicality as is true of qualitative research. Qualitative research is based on assumptions of reality and worldviews different from those of quantitative research (Lincoln, 1995; Merriam, 1998), and is meant to "provide perspective rather than truth" (Patton, 1990, p.491). In fact, as Stake (1995) puts it, "The

real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (p. 8). Scholars have suggested that the notion of generalization in qualitative research be replaced by such notions as working hypotheses (Cronbach, 1975), concrete universals (Erikson, 1986), naturalistic generalization (Stake, 1994, 1995) and reader or user generalizability, also referred to as case-to-case transfer (Firestone, 1993, as cited in Merriam, 1998).

Data gathering activities for the entire doctoral study include 3 focus group discussions (a total of 13 students), individual conversations with 6 students, semi-structured interviews with 6 of their lecturers, observations of lectures and classroom assessments, examination of documents related to the course descriptions and assessment, as well as a study of the administrative and procedural aspects of assessment which are part of the assessment praxis. This paper is a preliminary report on the analysis of data mainly from the first two focus group discussions, comprising 5 and 4 students respectively, with a few references to relevant data from interviews with lecturers. The first focus group comprised 3 girls and 2 boys, while the second focus group comprised 2 boys and 2 girls. Final year students, all aged 21, were selected because they would have had sufficient experience of assessment to provide a broader perspective, and would generally be more confident in expressing their views. They were first identified by one of their lecturers, then, they were personally invited by the researcher to join the focus group discussion. All the students who accepted the invitation to participate in the study were curious and excited about being part of such a research study. The discussion in both groups was lively, the first taking up to 77 minutes and the second 70 minutes. The discussions were recorded with a digital recorder, transcribed and content analysis was carried out to uncover emerging themes.

The following table sums up the profiles of the participants in focus groups 1 and 2:

Table 1: Profiles of participants of focus groups 1 and 2

Focus group no:	Student referred to as:	Gender	Ethnicity
1	Rom	Female	Malay
1	Naz	Female	Malay
1	Nad	Female	Malay
1	Hass	Male	Malay
1	Hus	Male	Malay
2	LT	Male	Chinese
2	CJ	Female	Iban
2	JR	Female	Indian
2	YP	Female	Chinese

In the B.A ELS programme, English is the sole medium of instruction (except for electives and other compulsory Faculty subjects which may be taught in Bahasa Malaysia), and it is therefore expected that competence in English is particularly crucial to achieving good grades. The core courses require a fair amount of reading both academic as well as literary texts in English, and listening to lectures in English, and the coursework and assessment tasks involve written assignments as well as oral presentations. All the students would have gone through the public school system which uses Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction and where English is taught as a second language. Most of the students admitted to the programme may be described, according to their performance on the Malaysian University English Test (known as MUET, a compulsory requirement for entry into institutions of higher education) as ‘Modest Users, with a fair command of the language’. With such a description of their entry level, having to engage with the B.A ELS course content in English, let alone achieving good grades, would seem daunting. Surprisingly, many students seem to perform well, judging from the grades and the cumulative grade point average (CGPA) every semester, and all who pass (with a minimum CGPA of 2) are conferred a degree with honours .

My investigation interest is premised firstly, on the belief that the student is the main stakeholder in the process called “higher education”:

“Whatever else we may be interested in, whether in the success of graduates in securing employment or in widening access or in the value of research, there remains at the heart of higher education the individual student, his or her educational development, and the quality of that development.” (Barnett, 1992, p.62)

The second premise is that the fundamental mission of higher education is to educate (Astin, 1999; Barnett, 1992; Barnett, 2007; Boud & Falchikov, 2007a; Boud & Falchikov, 2007b) . This is taken to mean: “preparing students for a lifetime of learning in work and in the community” (Boud & Falchikov, 2007b, p.5), “acquiring high-level knowledge, understanding and skills” and fostering “the development of human qualities and dispositions, of certain modes of being, appropriate to the twenty-first century” (Barnett, 2007, p. 29). These certainly resonate with the stated purpose of education in Malaysia which is “ the holistic development of character and capabilities, the acquisition of specific skills, the realization of intellectual, physical and spiritual potential, and the training of human capital” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007, p. 13).

And the third premise is the centrality of assessment in higher education (Brown & Knight, 1994; Knight, 1995; Brown et al., 1997; Brown & Glasner, 1999; Falchikov, 2005; Messick, 1999). Rowntree (1987) claims that “the truth about an educational system and what student qualities and achievements it values can be found in its assessment procedures” refers to the way students are assessed as the “DNA evidence of their learning experience” (Knight, 1995, p.13). This is because “ assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor” (Boud, 1988, as cited in Brown, 1999, p.4). Brown et al. (1997, p.7) also explain that:

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“Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. Students take their cues from what is assessed rather than from what lecturers assert is important.”

This third premise is based on research that has mainly been carried out in first world contexts, so the interpretation of my data will either lend further support to this theory of the centrality of assessment, or contest it.

Emerging Themes

This preliminary report focuses solely on the qualitative analysis of data from only two focus group discussions, the first group comprising 5, and the second group 4 students. At a later stage, the discussion will need to incorporate analysis of data from the other sources mentioned earlier, as well as insights from analyzing the discourses of official documents.

The following are a few themes that have emerged from a preliminary analysis of the data from the first two focus group discussions with students:

- **General perceptions of assessment**

All the students in the two focus groups viewed assessment as a very important aspect of their lives as students. As Hus from focus group 1 expressed it:

“assessment must be high priority because the assessment is determine our futures” (sic)

Naz (also from focus group 1) said *“it’s top of my priority”*, while LT (from focus group 2) summed up what it was like for him and his friends by saying that *“Everything is planned like to accommodate assessment”*. JR, another member of his group, explained that *“We have to sacrifice a lot.”* In some cases, students claimed that they sacrificed a trip back to their hometown (sometimes possible only once in a few weeks because of the distance and cost of transport) or frequently went without sleep to meet assessment schedules. A more pragmatic student, Hus (focus group 1) however, said that the effort he would put into an assignment depended on the marks given for it.

As for preferences for certain modes of assessment, students had varied individual preferences, but practically no one expressed a fondness for examinations. As Hus (focus group 1) explained, it was easier to *“achieve”* for ongoing assessment than for the final exam: he claimed that the final exam made him *“study a lot of things and I need to memorize a lot of things because for my final exam”*. In fact, most students said that they would prefer not to have examinations, if that was possible. The students in focus group 2 agreed with YP when she said: *“ongoing assessment... it’s nicer la. It’s better than the exam thing – sometimes a lot of factors would cause problems during exam...”*

Students generally preferred project work to quizzes or written examinations as the latter modes of assessment were associated with stress. CJ in focus group 2 was the only student who said she preferred quizzes “*because it’s in stages, can study chapter by chapter*”, and also because she basically did not like making presentations in front of the class. They were generally happier with learning in the university because they felt that school was too exam oriented, testing “*too much on the syllabus*” (LT, focus group 2) so the exam was the only one chance they had of getting good grades. As Hus explained, “*the main obstacle in my experience to achieve a good grade is the final exam.*” They were happy with having “on-going assessment” in the university because the marks were not entirely dependent on the examination or written quizzes (short tests) and because the assessment took on a variety of modes, such as designing a website, designing a poster, compiling a folio, putting up a play or making an oral presentation. They claimed that these assessment projects enabled them to learn skills, such as learning how to use new computer software and working in teams, and to develop confidence. LT, for example, preferred designing a poster for assessment because “*it encourages us to be more creative, taps into our creative mind - to express ourselves.*”

A few students considered the project paper which was an individual research assignment to be very challenging. LT felt that “*this assessment tested our ability to evaluate, plan and execute*”, and that it forced each student to be independent, analytical and critical. YP however felt that, like many of her course mates, she had not been adequately prepared for the work involved in the sense that their content base was too limited.

Group projects were popular mainly because most of the students generally enjoyed working together with friends. However, one may also be unfortunate in having a ‘sleeping partner’ or absentee team member. Partly for that reason, YP declared her preference for oral presentation or any kind of individual work because “*when we do in a group, sometimes if the friends don’t do well...sometimes you wonder is it because of the group work*”. She preferred to be solely responsible for her performance. When a team member fails to pull his/her weight, the others “*get very angry*” or “*very irritated*” but generally, students do not tell on him/her - this is mostly to avoid confrontation and unpleasantness, and also guilt: “*if the fella fails because you say (i.e. tell on him)..., you’ll feel guilty throughout your life!*” (YP-focus group 2). Some students also believed that the slacker would be found out by the lecturer during the oral presentation of the project. Almost all the students enjoyed the oral presentation as a mode of assessment, explaining that, since many courses used this mode of assessment, it helped to build up their confidence to speak in front of a crowd and they believed that they had improved over the duration of the programme.

Thus, assessment by way of group project work may be said to train students in many of the “soft skills” such as team-work, communication and presentation skills deemed necessary for employability.

- **Impact of assessment on learning behaviour**

Students seemed to respond in very much the same way when under pressure to study or prepare for an assessment: they resorted to memorization or regurgitation of lecture notes. Most of them claimed that that was the main method of studying in school. JR, from focus group 2 probably spoke for most of her course mates when she said:

“...since schooling, my habit is that. I have to memorize”

However, there was also the insistence among some students that it was important to understand the material before attempting memorization. JR explained: *“I try to understand that things first then only I’ll memorize.”* As LT put it: *“If the subject is really tough, if you try to memorize... you won’t be able to memorize”*

When they did not understand something that they had to learn for a quiz or exam, memorization was the strategy they resorted to in the university. This may work well for written assessments such as quizzes and final exams, but for other forms of formative assessment (or ‘on-going’ assessment, as it is referred to) such as creating a poster or folio, or an oral presentation, this was not such a viable strategy.

It is apparent that the more interactive the mode of assessment, the more likely it was to engage students in learning. The “poster” assessment for a particular Literature course, for example, resulted in students not only having to read the relevant texts more closely, and to engage in thinking and exchanging opinions, but also learning IT skills. Although Adobe Photoshop (the software for producing images and graphics) was a necessary tool in the production of the posters, no training was provided for students, so students were left to their own devices of either learning to use the software themselves, or enlisting the help of more IT-savvy friends. The lecturer who gave the assignment explained that incorporating the use of IT skills in the assignment was a way of giving them exposure to other media, and encouraging them to explore learning on their own. Thus this method of assessment may be seen as affording an opportunity for “value-added” learning.

- **Expectations of feedback**

Students claimed that in school, they had never ever received feedback on their written assignments, so in the university, they did not seem to mind too much the absence of detailed feedback on written assignments. YP said she had expected “more feedback” than what she actually received, and that she was not satisfied with what she received. However, lecturers provided opportunities for consultation by students in the process of writing the assignments (feedforward), but apparently, according to the lecturers interviewed, only the more interested

and better students would turn up for consultation. Those that seriously needed help would not seek consultation, probably because they were not sufficiently prepared.

JR felt that the feedback given was “too general”, and that if she asked too many questions, it might appear to be challenging the lecturer. That was partly why students displayed the passive behaviour that they seemed to have cultivated in school and while they admitted that life as a student in the university was different from school in some positive ways, they still regarded lecturers as having almost absolute power over them where grades are concerned. For example, some students said they would not dare question a lecturer for fear of being perceived as bold, and possibly consequently suffering some kind of “retribution” in the form of poorer grades. No one, however, could provide even anecdotal evidence to support this belief.

Apparently, feedback is not taken seriously as an opportunity for learning, hence formative assessment as practised in this site lacks the power for enhancing learning.

- **Value of the cumulative grade point average (CGPA)**

The students in Becker et al’s study (1968) were said to have the grade point perspective because apparently their lives on campus revolved around securing good grades. It was very high priority and everything they did - from studies to fraternizing- was in some way related to achieving a high grade point average. The BAELS respondents in this study, however, while admitting that achieving good grades was important, did not seem to be as driven by good grades as by just getting the assignment done or getting through a quiz. A few students seemed to set a target CGPA to achieve, but generally, the others just accepted whatever grade they happened to get.

Grades were seen as a kind of cultural capital: if a student had a low CGPA, s/he felt ashamed and would not disclose it to others, but if s/he was a “3-pointer”, it gained her/him some respect. Other than the CGPA, perceived English language competence, especially in speaking, was recognized as an asset which could enable a student to achieve good grades. While students generally did not seem to be openly informed or to be very curious about how the other students were faring, those who had a better command of English were perceived to be advantaged and favoured by lecturers. Thus, perceived competence in English could be regarded as a kind of cultural capital that facilitated the achievement of better grades.

- **Reproduction of values and beliefs**

Notwithstanding widely claimed beliefs in learner-centred teaching, the teacher/lecturer is still the sole authority in the lecture hall or tutorial room, as

well as in matters of assessment. This exchange in the focus group 2 discussion is quite telling:

Researcher: *You think lecturers can have power over you?*

Student LT: *Absolutely!*

Student YP: *Because they're the markers!*

The same power structure of the school system seems to be carried over, despite students' perceptions that things were more equitable in the university because there are different types of assessment, and not just one major exam that they have to cram for. However, the decisions of what to assess and how to assess are in the hands of the course coordinator and it does not occur to either the assessor or the assessed that it could or should be otherwise. In fact, students perceive of themselves in a submissive position in the assessment game: they try to comply with the requirements without question or complaint, they accept whatever marks or grades they receive without seeking redress even when they feel they deserve better. Their perception is that their achievement or failure is largely dependent on the lecturers' assessment of their work: YP says that when they write up an assignment, *"sometimes our flow of ideas, the way we write, it might be understandable, but if the lecturer don't like it, we're dead!"* They are also generally accepting and uncritical of their lecturers' judgements, to the extent that they attribute good results, when they are surprised, to luck, and when they receive unexpected unsatisfactory results, they blame themselves for inadequate preparation or having written out of point. In short, the power over their fate is seen to be vested solely in the lecturer/assessor.

The administrative attitude towards them is that *"they don't know about assessment"* (quoting an administrator), hence there is no point in seeking students' views or feedback on assessment. Thus, in a sense the discourses of assessment in the school system that convey the power structure and dictate how the rules of the game are played, are reproduced in the university even though this new context is perceived as different in many aspects.

At this early stage of my analysis, there are already clear indications that the students do carry over from their school experience of assessment certain ways of behaving (habitus) such as resorting easily to memorization when understanding fails. It is a copping-out strategy, and even the few students who claimed that learning was more important than good grades confessed that they resorted to this strategy. In addition, the general lack of interest in seeking consultation with the lecturers, or seeking feedback from lecturers, when working on their assignments or projects probably reflect a lack of the sense of agency in their role as students. In other words, students generally merely comply with assessment requirements, and then commit their fates to their lecturers without considering the possibility that they could actively affect the outcome.

Concluding Remarks

There is already evidence from the data that the mode of assessment seems to affect learning, for example, certain assessment modes seem to engage students better and cause them to pay closer attention to their texts, or make them think a little harder. What needs to be done is to study how these modes of assessment help students become better learners.

Students' learning behaviour is clearly the result of their schooling experience, particularly of their experience of being trained for performing on examinations. It is quite apparent that the BA ELS respondents in this study seem accustomed to occupying a submissive position: such a habitus is certainly not fertile ground for transformation. The university's plans for transformation and its focus on quality enhancement initiatives will not take root if students retain the habitus carried over from their school experience. Furthermore, the institutional academic culture and practice in the university is still rather traditional, and assessment is seen as a means of measuring how much students have learnt rather than as a means of helping them to learn. This is reflected, for example, in the practice of assigning grades rather than using descriptive benchmarks in reporting students' performance, whether on formative (on-going) assessment or in the final examination. The lack of emphasis on establishing the practice of providing feedback to students on their written assignments means that they are deprived of a valuable means of learning from their mistakes and weaknesses. At the same time, students seem to be only concerned with the grades they get rather than with the pursuit of knowledge, and they also perceive of their lecturers as all-powerful where grades are concerned. As such, students seem to be neither active nor independent participants in the learning process, actually preferring to be acted upon, to pass out of the university as products.

This paper has reported only on some preliminary findings from data from two focus group discussions, hence it is premature to make any strong conclusions. It is expected that continuing analysis of data from the other sources will elucidate how lecturers' practices and views of assessment may be seen as either encouraging the habitus carried over from school or breaking it down; and how institutional structures around assessment that are intended to support learning and improve the quality of education may in reality be somewhat dissociated from the lived experiences of students. There are therefore serious implications not only for the university's agenda for transformation, but also for the shaping of participatory democracy in citizenry.

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