QUALITY ASSURANCE OF ASSESSMENTS: A CASE STUDY

Tryna Edwards

Abstract

Higher education institutions find themselves on the brink of a completely transformed educational scene. However higher education institutions are also influenced by international trends in higher education and these influences impact on the roles of the educators and students. In pursuit of quality, academics and students must be continuously engaged in a process of finding opportunities for improving the teaching and learning process, the quality of the learning experience and the way it is delivered and assess. The focus in this paper will be on quality assurance of student learning, but with a special focus, on quality assessments as used in the module Public Human Resource Management III at the Central University of Technology Free State. The purpose of this article is to investigate to what extent a group of 87 third year students according to their own perceptions attach value to the assessment methods (self-assessments, assignment and formal test) associated with the critical outcomes of the Public Human Resource Management III Module.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The adoption of an outcomes-based education approach posed important challenges for the higher education institutions provision of learning. With implementation of such an approach the higher education institution have to deal not only with the requirements indicated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) 1995, (Act 58 of 1995) but also with the norms and standards laid down by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (Council on Higher Education 2003:1). Quality and service mindedness in higher education means that academics have to ensure that the goals, needs, desires and interests of the students are met (Steyn 2000:174). In the light of this it is important to ensure that all education processes contribute directly or indirectly to quality as the clients (students) descr be it Applying principles of outcomes based education means also that the learning and assessment processes needs to be assessed to determine the quality as defined by the students. This article discusses the findings of an investigation on the use of outcomes-based assessment methods at the School of Government Management, Central University of Technology, Free State. Many of these findings have a direct bearing on the development of quality assessment methods in a changed educational environment.

2.   DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this article, the following concepts need to be defined

Assessment: Assessment is the process by which academics make judgments how well the learning has occurred. The assessment of student learning is generally understood to mean the practice of designing formal tasks for students to complete and then of making inferences from and estimating the worth of their performances on these tasks (Council on Higher Education 2003:2).

Formative assessments: This is used to improve learning through the provision of feedback to students on their progress, serves needs intrinsic to the educational process (Makoni 2000:112).

Outcomes-based assessment: Outcomes-based assessment refers to the process to assess student's ability to demonstrate the outcomes that they have to achieve. With this as the prime purpose of assessment, it is easy to maintain a strong-link between the outcomes that learners have to achieve, the education strategies that academics use to facilitate learning and the assessment of learning (Killen 2000:79).

Self assessments: Self-assessments refer to the activities where students judging their work (test, presentation or assignments) by providing written feedback and a grade, by using a criteria sheet and model answers (Brown & Knight 1994:10 and Ellery and Shutherland 2004:102). Lucket and Sutherland (2000: 112) also indicated that with self-assessments students are invited to assess themselves against a set of given or negotiated criteria, usually for the formative purposes. For the purpose of this article self assessments refer to the range of learning assessments in the prescribe learning material that each student have to do at the end of each learning unit. With the self assessment s students are able to assess whether they achieve the learning objectives stated at the beginning of each learning unit. The consequences with self assessment is that students take responsibility for their own learning, consolidate their learning and become more reflective and effective learners.

Summative assessment: This is used to certificate the attainment of a certain level of education and to make educational decisions, formalised assessment used to serve needs extrinsic to the educational process (Council on Higher Education 2003:9). Summative assessments provide judgment on student's achievements in order to establish student's level of achievement at the end of the course/programme (Makoni 2000:101).

Outcomes: Outcomes refer to the knowledge, skills and values within particular contexts (Nelson & Futter 1998:153).

Quality Assurance: This in turn involves measuring and evaluating performance to these standards, reporting results and taking appropriate action to deal with deviations (Ireland 1991: C-7).

3.   HOW IS STUDENT ASSESSMENT CHANGING

While academics have favoured traditional assessment methods for years the current shift in educational practice towards outcomes-based education emphasise the adoption of a new approach of assessment. Also with the implementation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act 1995 (Act 58 of 1995) higher education institutions is moving away from the traditional examination driven approach to an outcomes-based assessment approach that is seen to have greater educational value in terms of the kinds of education and learning it encourages (Ellery &Sutherland 2004:100).

In the new approach of assessment students will be asses in relation to the learning outcomes of the unit standards they are to achieve. Outcomes based assessment encourages careful reflection on education strategies and the provision of learning opportunities that ensure that students are enabled to attain a set of learning outcomes and to demonstrate them in assessments (Killen: 2000:79). With this as the prime purpose of assessment it is easy to maintain a strong link between the outcomes that students have to achieve and the assessment of learning.

When academics consider methods of assessment they will find that there are no method unique to outcomes-based education. In fact there are no methods that can never be used in outcomes-based education (Killen 2000:79). However care needs to be taken by academics not to be overburdened with too many assessments. The key to outcomes based assessment is to specify learning outcomes and to assess student performance. This involves making explicit the learning outcomes that the students have to achieve and then designing assessment instruments that will effectively assess student attainment of these outcomes (Council on Higher Education 2003:3). Explicit assessment criteria are derived from the learning outcomes in order to assess a particular performance. Outcomes-based assessment approach pose enormous challenges for assessment practice in higher education. In the light of this assessments should contribute to:

- Improve the quality of education and training

- The process of assessment should be based on outcomes, unit standards and moderation

- The basic assessment principles (criteria) are validity, reliability, flexibility, fairness, a holistic approach to assessments

- Increase the emphasis on the learning enhancement purpose of assessment

- Increase attention to formative assessment rather than only on summative assessments

- Assess students abilities to integrate knowledge and skills to achieve specific outcomes

- A move away from one main method of assessment that take place at the end of the course to the implementation of a wide range of continuous assessment methods (Council of Higher Education 2003:2-3 and Guidelines for Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies 2001).

With the above in mind it is clear that the development of fair, effective and efficient assessment provision in higher education requires a more comprehensive role for assessment than has traditionally been the norm. The real challenge is how should academics go about to create the conditions for outcomes-based assessment. One means of attempting to do so is the development and implementation of teaching and learning policies and strategies that emphasise outcomes-base education and assessment.

4. THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE OF ASSESSMENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING.

It is widely recognised that assessment is a critical component in higher education and influences the type of learning that take place (Ellery & Sutherland 2004:99). Assessment is also the educational event that holds the highest stakes for students in terms of their achievement. In fact according to Gibbs 1996:5-6) assessment can be used strategically to change the way students learn. Assessment procedures and methods influence not only the learning styles and strategies, but also their attitudes, motivation, sense of ownership and even their self esteem. Measures to ensure the quality of assessment practices are for these reasons critical. Keeping this in mind, the role of quality assurance used to provide judgment on the education system in order to

- provide feedback to academics on the effectiveness of their teaching and assessment methods;
- assess the extent to which the learning outcomes of a module, course or programme have been achieved;
- evaluate the effectiveness of the learning environment;
- monitor the quality of assessment methods used.

Quality assurance requires the necessity to reaffirm the higher education institutions commitment to quality learning, education and assessments. This outcome will only be attained by identifying and implementing measures of quality and performance in order to facilitate the quality process. The development of a reliable and valid instrument for assessing high quality teaching, learning and assessments is crucial. By using the feedback from such measures can contribute to the improvement of quality assessments.

5.   AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION INTO LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS

5.1   Overview of the Public Human Resource Management Module

The Public Human Resource Management III module is part of the Public Management Programme. In 2002 the School of Government management at the Central University of Technology adopted the outcomes based education approach. The New Public Management programme consist of 24 modules that are presented from the first year up to the BTech (fourth year) level. Each module is indented as a unique contribution to the field of public management and to provide students with the necessary skills and competencies to be able to manage public institutions effectively and efficiently. The Public Human Resource Management III module consists of six learning units. In each learning unit specific learning objectives are provided. The current assignment, self-assessment and the formal test for this module was introduced in 2002 to assess whether a student achieved the specific learning objectives. At the end of the semester students have to write a formal written evaluation (summative assessment) to make a judgment of the standard of achievement of the learning outcomes.

5.2   Purpose of the investigation

This empirical investigation attempts to determine whether the third year Public Management student's benefits from the assessment methods (self assessments, the assignment and the formal test) used to achieve the critical learning outcomes of the Public Human Resource Management IV module. It does so by investigating whether the students according to their own perceptions

- Benefits from the assessment methods (Assignment, Self-assessments and the formal test) used to achieve the outcomes of the different unit standards
- Benefits from the formal written feedback and the feedback lecture about their progress with the assignment

5.3   Research methodology

The investigation was conducted at the Central University of Technology Free State, a higher education institution in Bloemfontein, South Africa with the third year Public Management (full time students). Approximately 107 full time third year students enrolled in January 2004 in the Public Management programme. A total of 87 questionnaires, which constituted 81.3% of the total population of the third year Public Management students enrolled for the module, were analysed. This can be regarded as valid and useful (representing 81, 3% of the population).

5.4   The research instrument

The questionnaire posed thirteen questions to the respondents.   Respondents had to answer these questions by plotting their answer based on their perception on a four point scale.   (1) Strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) agree (4) strongly agree.

5.5   Research findings

The research findings are presented in table 1.   The table is a combined analysis of the responses to the items of the assessment (assignment, self-assessment and the formal test)

TABLE 1: COMBINED ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES TO THE ITEMS OF THE ASSESSMENT USED IN THE PUBLIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT III MODULE

ITEM	RATING SCALE	FREQUENCY (AMOUNT OF STUDENTS)	PERCENT %
A. ASSIGNMENT			
1. Did you attend the lecture about how to compile an effective assignment?	4	53	60.9%
	3	33	37.9
	2	1	1.14%
	1	0	-
2 Is the topic of the assignment relevant to the module?	4	63	72.4%
	3	24	27.5%
	2	0	-
	1	0	-
3. Did the assignment assist you to achieve the outcomes stated in the learning unit?	4	52	59.7%
	3	34	39.0%
	2	0	-
	1	1	1.14%
4. Did you buy the guidelines how to compile a good assignment from the Library and Information Centre?	4	9	10.3%
	3	0	-
	2	0	-
	1	78	89.6%
5. Did you benefit from the	4	53	60.9%

memorandum to improve your writing and research skills?	3	32	36.7%
	2	1	1.14%
	1	0	-
6. Did you benefit from the feedback lecture?	4	53	60.9%
	3	34	39.0%
	2	0	-
	1	0	-
7. Did you benefit from both the memorandum and the feedback lecture to improve your research skills?	4	70	80.4%
	3	17	19.5%
	2	0	-
	1	0	-
8. Did the assignment assist you to enhance your knowledge, and skills about the specific module?	4	57	65.5%
	3	30	34.4%
	2	0	-
	1	0	-
B. FORMAL TEST			
1. Were the questions in the test in line wi h he learning outcomes of the specific units in the module?	4	55	63.2%
	3	31	35.6%
	2	1	1.14%
	1	0	-
C.SELF-ASSESSMENTS			
1. Did the self-assessments at the end of each unit help you to prepare yourself for the summative assessment?	4	59	67.8%
	3	28	32.18%
	2	0	-
	1	0	-
2. Did the self assessments assist you to achieve the outcomes of the different units?	4	50	57.4%
	3	37	42.5%
	2	0	-
	1	0	-
3. Did you benefit from doing the self-assessments to gain extra knowledge in this specific module?	4	59	67.8%
	3	27	31.0%
	2	1	1.14%
	1	0	-

Responses to all the activities were very positive, expect for the item dealing with the purchasing of the guidelines how to compile a good assignment. Only 10.3% indicated that they make use of this opportunity where as 89.6% of the respondents indicated that they did not purchase (at a very low cost) the guidelines from the Library and Information Centre as requested. These guidelines assist students how to compile a good assignment. The reason why students did not make use of this opportunity could be that they are not serious enough about the assignment as an effective assessment method. However in future these guidelines will be distributed to all the third year students in class. The main findings of this empirical investigation can be summarised as follows:

- Responses to all the activities about the assignment as an assessment method are very positive except for item number four that were discussed above. For instance 72.4% strongly agreed and 27.5% agreed that the topic of the assignment is relevant to the module Public Human Resource Management III. Only 1 respondent disagreed on item 3 regarding whether the assignment assists them to achieve the outcomes stated in the learning unit about performance management. Whereas 59.7% strongly agreed and 39% agreed that the assignment assist them to achieve the outcomes stated in the performance management unit. Respondents indicated that they strongly agreed that they benefited from the memorandum and the feedback lecture to improve their writing and research skills (60,9%). In fact 65% of the respondents strongly agreed and 34.4% agreed that the assignment contributed to improve their knowledge and skills about performance management systems. None of the respondents disagreed on this item.

- Moreover 63.2% strongly agreed and 35.6% of the respondents indicated that the questions in the formal test were in line with the learning outcomes of the specific learning units in the Human Resource Management III module. Only one respondent of the total of eighty seven respondents disagreed on this item.

- The majority of the respondents indicated that the self-assessments assist them to prepare for the main summative assessment (67.8% strongly agreed and 32.18% agreed) with this item. On the question if self-assessments assisted them to achieve the outcomes of the different learning units, 57.4 % strongly agreed and 42.5% agreed. None of the respondents disagreed on the abovementioned items. However only one respondent disagreed on item 3 of the self-assessments. Item 3 was about whether they benefit from the self-assessments to gain extra knowledge in the specific module.

6.   CONCLUSION

No matter how formal education is organised, it will involve the continuous planning, instruction, assessment and reporting of student achievement. With

the adoption of the outcomes based approach to education it becomes critical important to measure whether the current assessment used contributed to the learning process of achieving specific learning objectives.

To promote learning, assessments must incorporate genuine feedback and quality assurance. In other words, assessment information must reveal to students an understanding of their work compares to specific standards and learning outcomes, as well as information about how to improve their skills and knowledge if improvement is needed.   This article demonstrated how the School of Government Management at the Central University of Technology, Free State has embarked on the quality assurance journey to ensure that the adopted assessment approach assist with the achieving of   specific standards and learning outcomes.   It seems that the assignment, the self-assessments and the formal test used has succeeded in assisting students to achieve the specific learning objectives in the module. Evidence was given that the students benefit edfrom the assessment methods used towards a quality learning process.

7.   BIBLIOGRAPHY

Biggs D.,
1996. Assessing learning quality.   Reconciling institutional and staff demands. Assessments and Evaluation in Higher Education 21(1, 5-15).

Brown, S., & Knight, P.
1994. Assessing Learners in Higher Education. London, Kogan Page.

Council on Higher Education, Higher Education Quality Committee.
2003. Improving Teaching and Learning Resource. Pretoria, South Africa.

Ellery K. & Sutherland L.
2004. Involving students in the assessment process. Perspectives in Education, Volume 22(1), March, 99-109.

Ireland, L.R.
1991. Quality Management for Projects and Programmes. Upper Darby, Pa: The Project Management Institute.

Killen R.
2000. Linking Teaching and Assessment in Outcomes-Based Education. Paper presented at the Southern African Society for Education (SASE) Conference 31 August – 2 September 2000, Richards bay, South Africa.

Makoni S.
2000. Improving Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. A Handbook for Southern Africa. Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg.

Nelson R., & Futter B.
1996. Using the portfolio for enchaning student learning: a case study. South African Journal of Education. Vol 12 No 3, 152-158.

Republic of South Africa.
2001. Guidelines for Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies. Establishing criteria for the registration of assessors. Discussion documents no 2 for public comment. Vol 431. 11 May 2001 No 222288. Pretoria, SAQA Office.

Republic of South Africa.
1995. The South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 of 1995. Pretoria. Government printers.

Steyn GM.
2000. Applying the principles of total quality management to a learning process: a case study. South African Journal of Higher Education Volume 14 no 1, 174-184.