

University Students' Sentiments Regarding Levelling the Assessment Terrain: The Zimbabwean Experience.

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ABSTRACT: The realisation that examination results are used by numerous stakeholders for making life changing decisions regarding the examinees acted as an impetus for the current study. The central focus of the study was to examine the variables which can be manipulated to level the assessment terrain so that examinees stand a better chance of demonstrating their best intellectual prowess. The study was perceived from a psychological point of view with psychological theories such as Bandura's social learning theory, the humanistic theories of Maslow and Rogers and the Yerkes-Dodson law acting as the theoretical framework. The phenomenological research design was used and questionnaires with open-ended items were used as data gathering instruments. A gender balanced sample of 60 respondents comprising university students studying different degree programmes was obtained using the stratified random sampling method. The research participants indicated that a number of factors can be manipulated to ensure that they get the chance to demonstrate their accurate intellectual abilities. Among other things, the university students who took part in the study stressed that they need to be equipped with techniques for answering examination questions. The respondents also indicated that a propitious examination environment needs to be introduced and objective scoring is needed for them to get examination results which reflect their academic abilities. It was recommended that stakeholders such as lecturers and examination administrators should endeavour to level the assessment terrain so that students can fairly be assessed.

Keywords: Assessment, examination fairness, examination administration, examination scoring, halo effect

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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Educational institutions in the entire world play a pivotal role of establishing the skills, attitudes, and knowledge as well as competence levels of learners of different age groups. One of the duties of educators at virtually all educational tiers is to collect and maintain clear records of different learners' abilities across a diverse section of competence areas. This brings in the subject of assessment. The information which is generated during assessment is consumed by a myriad of stakeholders and a multiplicity of decisions regarding each individual learner can be arrived at on the basis of such information (Brookhart, 2004; Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani, & Alkalbani, 2012). Baharloo (2013) and Stobart (2005) acknowledge that assessment is complicated and multifaceted exercise in which making the right decision is crucial but dicey. The fact that information generated during assessment can be used to make life-changing decisions about a given student or learners makes it imperative that the entire assessment process be done meticulously with the intention of ensuring that each individual's level of competence is accurately established. The main focus of the current study was to explore the variables which university lecturers and examination administrators can manipulate to make the assessment platform even for virtually all students.

Assessment is one of the duties of educators and it is a process rather than an event. Essentially, assess is the process of collecting information regarding a learner or a student across dimensions such as manual skills, intellectual knowledge and / or attitudes (Gronlund, 2006). According to Alkharusi et al (2012:217) educational assessment is a process whereby educators gather information regarding students' abilities, knowledge, skills or attitudes either as individuals or in groups to establish the extent to which the students achieve certain predetermined instructional objectives. The type of information which is gathered depends on the nature and level of education or training. Tests, examinations and assignments are examples of assessment devices which educators can employ (Mwamwenda, 2004; Chakanyuka, 2000). Assessment entails both objective and

subjective procedures and this brings in the subject of examination fairness. According to Lam (1995) fairness in assessment deals with homogeneity of assessment conditions, that is, examinees should be assessed in a standardised way using uniform assessment devices with identical administration, scoring and interpretation procedures. Xi (2010:154) in Baharloo (2013:1931) defines fairness as the “comparable validity for all the identifiable and relevant groups across all stages of assessment, from assessment conceptualization to the use of assessment results”. The concept of test fairness stretches its tentacles to domains such as test construction, administering and scoring, appropriate coverage of relevant subject matter and variables related to the examinees (Willingham & Cole, 1997; McNamara & Roeber, 2006; Kunnan, 2000; Saville, 2005; Shohamy, 2000). The current study delved into the suggestions made by university students regarding how they can be assessed with fairness.

The information which is collected during assessment can be used by numerous stakeholders such as parents, guardians, educators, learners, employers, the community and professional specialists such as counsellors and psychological experts as well as medical experts (Brown & Hudson, 2002). Firstly, students benefit from assessment by getting feedback regarding their unique skills, levels of content mastery and their efforts (Koh, 2011; Alkharusi et al, 2012:217). It is through assessment feedback that students can establish whether they need to exert more effort or whether they have the capability to pursue a particular career path. Students' levels of motivation and self-efficacy also hinge upon the feedback generated during assessment. Educators can utilise the information gathered during assessment to evaluate their instructional methods and also their teaching acumen (Walvoord & Anderson, 2000). Curriculum planners and educational policy makers rely on information produced through assessment to effectively carry out their professional duties. Parents, guardians and the community also use assessment information to decide whether to continue sponsoring the educational ambitions of their children and dependants or not. At university level, assessment information is used for certification purposes (McInerney & McInerney, 2002). Such certificates can be used by employers when they recruit employees (Lam, 1995). Institutions of higher learning also use the certificates offered on the basis of assessment information to determine whether a given individual can be admitted into a training programme or not, either at undergraduate or postgraduate level (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). This is backed by Baharloo (2013:1930) who avers that the decisions which are made regarding an individual on the basis of the information collected during assessment can have far-reaching consequences on the individual with regard to dimensions such as motivation, psychological self-efficacy and social status. In fact, assessment decisions made by educational institutions can completely and permanently alter the life trajectories of students (Baharloo, 2013:1930). Given the crucial and diverse uses of information generated through assessment, it remains arguably critical for all stakeholders involved in the assessment process to use assessment devices which enable the true intellectual and attitudinal capabilities of examinees to be reflected.

University students' intellectual abilities can be influenced by a wide range of factors (Kubiszyn & Borich, 2003). Assessment results can be affected by examinee variables, that is, factors having to do with the students themselves. For instances, motivational levels, anxiety tolerance, and commitment to one's studies, intellectual endowment, learning styles, manual dexterity and study habits (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908; Mwamwenda, 2004). These are variables which students can manipulate to put themselves at an advantage. With proper counselling and training, students can play around with the above variables to increase the probability of manifesting their true academic and intellectual abilities. For example, students who have been exposed to examination answering skills are likely to do academically better than their ignorant counterparts (Kufakunesu, 2015). Moreover, students who are familiar with a wide range of anxiety management skills stand a better chance to have their true abilities reflected during different forms of assessment.

An examination is the assessment device which is meant to trigger responses which indicate the extent to which students have mastered certain concepts (Chakanyuka, 2000). Consequently, the examination has to be of high quality. Examination fairness can be enhanced by ensuring that examinations are valid. The validity of an examination is the extent to which it measures what it is meant to measure (Chakanyuka, 2000). Of critical importance in the university context is content validity. In simple terms, content validity is the extent to which an examination mirrors the body of knowledge which students were exposed to in a given semester or academic year (Gronlund, 2006). Module outlines normally define the parameters of the content domain which students expect to be tested on during the final examinations. Therefore, examinations in which crucially important concepts are excluded have poor content validity. In most cases, examinations written at university level are constructed by lecturers and are validated at sectional and departmental levels within the university before further validation is done by external assessors, that is, subject specialists who are not part of that institution. A number of studies have confirmed that one of the variables which militate against fair assessment is incompetence on the part of educators who undertake it (McMillan & Lawson, 2001). Alkharusi et al (2012:218) empirically established that educators such as teachers sometimes have questionable knowledge and attitudes regarding educational assessment. If lecturers take their time to cover all the content which feature on the module outlines and construct items based on that very content, content validity would be high and a

resemblance of test fairness would be attained. According to Chinyoka, Kufakunesu and Ganga (2011), content validity can be enhanced by using a test blueprint in which the content items are generated on the basis of their relative importance and also at an appropriate level of cognitive functioning as stipulated by Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. The current study attempted to establish the extent to which university students in Zimbabwe rated the assessment as fair and propitious for their optimum scholastic performance in examinations.

Test administration in this context refers to the procedures and processes surrounding the actual writing of examinations. Test administration needs to be thought about well in advance, ideally during the test planning stage. It is desirable that students write examinations in venues which they are familiar with (Cheung & Bucat, 2002). This is meant to allay anxiety on the part of the examinees. Moreover, the examination venue must have good ventilation and lighting coupled with good sitting arrangements. Noise is one of the factors which can negatively impinge upon examinees' ability to concentrate on the examination (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). Therefore, examination venues should be located in areas where there is minimum or no noise. Test administrators and invigilators must be imbued with professional connoisseurship regarding examination administration (Chakanyuka, 2000). For instance, administration and invigilators should try to avoid needlessly showing hostility to examinees since animosity may trigger anxiety. However, test administrators and invigilators must be firm enough to limit the chances of cheating during examinations.

Test scoring is the stage of assessment when the abilities and efforts of a student are quantified (Kubisyzn & Borich, 2003). This implies that numerical marks are attached to the work presented by the student, that is, scoring is the measurement part of the assessment process. If examiners are not competent to undertake sound scoring or adopt a lacklustre approach during scoring, students may either unfairly benefit or be grossly disadvantaged as their abilities are distorted. Ideally, scoring should be done using a marking guide which is prepared during test construction (Jacques & Salmon, 2007). Sardar (2013) defines marking schemes as guides for marking that consist of the points, demands and issues that are considered in allocating marks to examinees. The expectation is that scorers will employ the same marking guide consistently and meticulously for the examinees. Priyadarsini, Rao and Rani (2004) posit that it is only through the use of a marking guide that uniformity in scoring can be achieved. According to Kizlik (2012) students are likely to be assessed comparatively more fairly when scorers mark each item for all the examinees rather than marking all the items on a given student's script at once. It is also during test scoring that the halo effect can distort the assessment landscape. The halo effect is a phenomenon in which an assessor is influenced by impressionable factors which are not relevantly related to the work to be assessed (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). The halo effect occurs when "ratings tend to be influenced by good impressions of the examinee" (Drummond & Jones, 2010:36). According to Goffin, Jelley, and Wagner (2003) together with Palmer and Feldman (2005) a closer look at previous empirical investigations suggests that the halo effect potentially influences the rating of educators in practically all disciplines. For instance, factors such as linguistic flamboyancy, penmanship and social relationships between the examiner and examinee should not override the stipulations of the original marking guide. The general recommendation during scoring is that the halo effect must be shunned at all costs.

Numerous studies regarding assessment at different educational levels were conducted by many researchers in different parts of the world. For instance, Alkharusi, et al (2012) undertook a multidimensional study to explore the educational assessment, competence, knowledge and practices of teachers in Sultanate of Oman. The study established that teachers exhibited low practical knowledge and competence to undertake educational assessment despite holding high favourable attitudes towards educational assessment (Alkharusi et al, 2012:217). Teaching experience was found to be a determinant of teachers' ability to undertake effective assessment. The need for in-service training to enhance teachers' competence in educational assessment was recommended. The study by Alkharusi et al (2012) did not focus on introducing fairness in assessment at university level. Moreover, the respondents were not the examinees whose abilities were assessed. The current study attempted to close such gaps by exploring the views of university students on how the assessment terrain can be made even for all examinees.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are two compatriot American psychologists who pioneered the humanistic paradigm (Feldman, 2009). Maslow developed the need theory in which he maintained that human beings have needs which are hierarchically arranged so that a person will only contemplate satisfying higher order needs when the lower order ones are reasonably satisfied (Feldman, 2009). Starting with physiological needs, the hierarchy entails security needs, belonging needs, cognitive needs and self-actualisation (Mwamwenda, 2004). The current study pays attention to security needs which apply to assessment procedures. Rogers propounded the person centred theory in which he claimed that human beings need to be loved unconditionally and they also need to be understood, that is, Rogers maintained that unconditional positive regard and empathy are basis needs (Kufakunesu, 2011). In connection with assessment, Rogers criticised the

use of formal examinations and tests particularly because they trigger extortionate anxiety on the part of the students thereby preventing them from demonstration their true abilities (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017).

Albert Bandura is a Canadian cognitive behavioural theorist who advanced the social learning theory which entails principles such observational learning, self-efficacy, self-regulation and reciprocal determinism (Lahey, 2009). Of relevance to the current study are the principles of self-efficacy and reciprocal determinism. According to Bandura (2002) self-efficacy is the set of beliefs held by an individual regarding the extent to which that individual can engage in an activity and produce the desired results. In the context of the current study, self-efficacy on the part of university students is the degree to which the students rate themselves as ready to demonstrate their best academic potentials during assessment exercises. An individual's self-efficacy level has a positive correlation with the effort applied by that individual when performing a given task (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). Unlike mainstream behaviourists such as Skinner who maintain that the organism is affected by environmental experiences, Bandura amplifies this notion by claiming that the individual, the environment and the context mutually influence each other (Lahey, 2009). This is what Bandura named triadic reciprocal determinism (Feldman, 2009). The concept of reciprocal determinism has some implications for examination administration since the venue in which examinations are written can impinge upon examinees' psychological and affective states during the examination.

The Yerkes-Dodson law is a psychological theory which was advanced by Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in 1908 and managed to amplify the impact of various forms of arousal such as stress and anxiety in virtually all aspects of human existence (Kufakunesu, 2015). The Yerkes-Dodson law claims that an individual's performance is low when arousal is too low or too high and the best performance of an individual in any task is registered when arousal is moderate (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2006:451; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). The Yerkes-Dodson law has a lot of implications to examinees, test constructors and examination administrators. If anxiety as a psycho-affective intra-student variable is not properly regulated, it can distort the outcomes of assessment thereby exposing examinees and other stakeholders to the negative consequences of inaccurate data.

III. GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions which guided the current study:

- What can university lecturers do to promote fairness in assessment?
- How can examination administration be undertaken to make it propitious to students' optimum scholastic attainment?

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study was qualitative in nature and the phenomenological research design was employed. The phenomenological research design engages individuals who participated in or witnessed a phenomenon under exploration (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). The researcher collected data from university students who were empirically subjected to various assessment procedures. Data collection was done by means of questionnaires with open-ended items. The researcher decided to use questionnaires after considering the literacy level of the research participants who happened to be university students.

The stratified random sampling method was used to obtain a gender balanced sample of 60 undergraduate and postgraduate students. The stratified random sampling method is a sampling technique in which the distinct categories of sample members are proportionately represented in the ultimate sample (Chiromo, 2006; Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). The stratification was done according to gender, level of study and area of specialisation. Throughout the entire research process, the researcher was sensitive to research ethical principles such as anonymity, informed consent and non-maleficence (Kufakunesu, 2011). The research instructed the respondents not to indicate their names on the questionnaires which they responded to, thereby remaining anonymous (Chiromo, 2006). Moreover, they were given all the relevant details pertaining to the purpose and procedures of the research before they ultimately decided to participate in the current study, thus observing the principle of informed consent (Chiromo, 2006; Kufakunesu, 2011). Data collection was done in such a way that the researcher tried to insulate the research informants from any form of physical, emotional or psychological harm as stipulated by the principle of non-maleficence.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Below are the major outcomes which were generated by the current study:

- The respondents proposed that university lecturers can enhance examination fairness by adequately covering the subject matter indicated in the module outline, undertaking test construction using professional procedures and exposing students to examination answering techniques.
- The respondents pointed out their lecturers should attempt to score their work as objectively as possible.

- Students remarked that lecturers should foster healthy academic relationships with students so that the students would be psychologically geared to demonstrate their best academic abilities.
- The respondents highlighted that examination regulations and all the specifications regarding examinations should be articulated to examinees at least a fortnight before the commencement of examinations.
- Conducive and familiar examination venues should be used for examination administration.

VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Regarding what lecturers can do to enhance fairness in assessment, 44 university students who took part in the study comprising more undergraduate students than postgraduate students, suggested that lecturers must endeavour to cover all the material indicated on the module outline. They expressed the idea that as far as they were concerned, a module outline is an intellectual contract between lecturers and students where the content domain which must feature in the examination is indicated. This category of respondents lamented some situations whereby lecturers ignore certain sections of the module content during instruction and then proceed to construct examination items involving the neglected content areas. In agreement with the Yerkes-Dodson, the students pointed out that encountering questions on content which was not sufficiently covered is a source of anxiety which can negatively impinge upon the students' academic performance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908; Kosslyn & Rosenberg 2006). The responses given by students in such cases would not be a true reflection of the students' intellectual abilities.

The respondents went on to point out that one of the reasons why they may not demonstrate their optimum intellectual and academic abilities is the way the examination items are constructed. Fifty percent of the respondents remarked that they once encountered situations whereby the question papers had to be amended in the examination venue just before or even after the examination had started. They wondered how examinations items would remain conspicuously faulty after being validated by a number of subject experts. The sentiments of the respondents to some extent translate to the aspect of incompetence on the part of examination constructors as alluded to by Zhang and Burry-Stock (2003). Some postgraduate students recommended that in-service training on examination item writing be done so that the lecturers are imparted with professional test construction principles as recommended by Alkharusi, et al (2012). The students remarked that such in-service training would remind or familiarise lectures with technical procedures of item writing particularly through the use of a test blueprint (Chinyoka et al, 2011). Such measures, according to the research participants, would generate examination items which go a long way towards promoting examination fairness.

Forty per cent of the respondents remarked that one factor which can negatively affect students' chances of demonstrating their best academic abilities in examinations is the quality of the student-lecturer relation. They reiterated that the sentiments of Siegel and Wissehr (2011) who remarked that some educators have negative attitudes towards their students. The respondents indicated that modules taught by lecturers who value striking healthy academic relationships with students during the time of instruction were dominantly bearable to them. Such healthy academic relationships would motivate them to work hard and ultimately demonstrate their best abilities during examinations. This was in agreement with the humanistic principles of Maslow and Rogers. Lecturers who accord students unconditional positive regard or refrain from needlessly threatening them normally help the students to be psychologically geared to demonstrate their best academic abilities (Feldman, 2009; Mwamwenda, 2004). Moreover, the respondents opined that a working collegiate relationships between students and lecturers can foster academic self-efficacy on the part of the students thereby boosting their chances of doing well academically (Bandura, 2002; Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). Furthermore, the respondents suggested that lecturers should indicate how they generally expect students to answer examinations. Some informants even suggested that where possible, lecturers should expose students to examination answering skills and also anxiety management techniques. All such efforts would boost students' chances of being assessed with a reasonable degree of fairness.

The respondents unanimously recommended that lecturers should endeavour to score the students' work as objectively as possible. The students acknowledged that they did not know how their lecturers mark their examination scripts since they would not be given back their marked examination scripts. They based their recommendations on the way their coursework assignments were rated by lecturers. More than half of the informants expressed the view that some essays were not marked objectively especially because of variables such as poor hand writing or linguistic challenges on the part of the students. The recommendation to avoid the halo effect was reiterated by virtually all the 60 respondents. The findings agreed with the view by Goffin et al (2003) and Palmer and Feldman (2005) that the halo effect pervades virtually all forms of assessment in a diversity of disciplines. They felt that some lecturers do not attach any premium to creativity and novelty on the part of the examinees. The majority of the postgraduate students recommended that lecturers should generate marking guides which they would adhere to throughout the scoring episode. The recommendation by Jacques and Salmon (2007), Priyadarsini et al (2004) together with Kizlik (2012) that marking guides should be

thoroughly adhered to during scoring were reiterated by the respondents. One female postgraduate respondent wrote the following remarks on her questionnaire:

While some lecturers mark our work with a reasonable degree of fairness, there are some situations whereby one is cannot be sure how the indicated marks have been earned. There are cases where a large tick is put across the entire page without specifically indicated the point or points which are crucial. If this is how examinations are marked, then students are tempted to be worried.

To ensure that students would be familiar with the technicalities of how to behave during examinations, some undergraduate students recommended that examination regulations and all the specifications pertaining to examinations should be articulated to examinees at least a fortnight before the start of examinations. This group of respondents suggested that new students should be shown templates of examination booklets and how they enter their personal and examination details such as student numbers, the module codes and the numbers of the items they would have attempted. They also expressed the need to be informed of whether they have to bring special items such as mathematical instruments and scientific calculators. As far as the respondents were concerned, such preliminary preparatory procedures would ensure that students were not needlessly anxious during examinations. The examination would not appear like an intellectual ambush. Moreover, students would have the chance to demonstrate their optimum academic abilities when they have the required technical materials outlined above.

The majority of the respondents proposed that examinations should be written in settings which are conducive for academic concentration. Some respondents regretted situations where they write examinations in venues which are completely new to them. They complained that such a practice would distract them as they try to acclimatise to the new physical environment. Such sentiments tallied with the recommendations made by Cheung and Bucat (2002) that examinees must write examinations in settings which they are accustomed to. Moreover, some respondents pointed out that examination fairness could be compromised when examinations are written in venues which are adjacent to noisy places as opined by Kaplan and Saccuzzo (2009). Ventilation and lighting in examination venues were also mentioned as basis prerequisites especially for adult university students. The need to have comfortable furniture during examinations was mentioned by some respondents. The findings backed Anastasi and Urbina (1997) who made reference to a study which established that the comfort of the furniture used during examinations can impinge upon the examinee's academic attainment.

Twenty-seven out of the 60 respondents expressed the view that sometimes examinees they felt that invigilators and examination administrator should be at least friendly when conducting their duties during examinations (Chakanyuka, 2000). Thirty-one research participants recommended that clocks in the examination venue be strategically positioned in places where all the examinees could easily see. Some respondents narrated unfortunate situations where they had to habitually inquire of the time from the invigilators because clocks in the examination venue were missing, faulty or wrongly positioned. All such variables regarding examination administration were implicated for making the assessment terrain uneven. One respondent made the following remarks regarding the quality of examination venues:

The chairs and desks which are found in some examination venues are unconformable for tall or heavily built examinees. A stroll around examination venues can confirm that some heavily built examinees would be struggling to concentrate due to discomfort emanating from the small chairs they would be sitting on.

VII. CONCLUSION

The current study explored the views of university students regarding what lecturers and examination administrators could do to make sure that students are fairly assessed. While some of the suggestions of the students seemed idealistic, part of what they proposed can to some extent ensure that the assessment landscape is smooth enough for each student to demonstrate his or her optimum academic potential. The need to have a true reflection of each student is accentuated by the realisation that examination results have a myriad of uses some of which are life-changing.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Guided by the outcomes of the current study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

- University lecturers should endeavour to construct examinations with high content validity especially through the use of test blueprints.
- Lecturers should partner with university Counselling departments to familiarise students with examination answering skills and anxiety management techniques.
- Examination invigilators and administrators should adopt a humanistic approach when conducting their duties to minimise the negative effects of examination anxiety.
- Other researchers can replicate the current study in a different setting with variations in the research methodology, theoretical perspective or educational level.

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