

Research Article

International Students' Experiences of Assessment Practices in Chinese Higher Education: A Case-Study

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Abstract

Assessment is part of teaching and learning at all levels of education and when it's taken into consideration it impacts students' academic performance. At different levels of education, assessment takes different trajectories. From summative, formative, diagnostic and learning analytics, assessment for learning plays a major role in assisting instructor to provide best experiences to their students. In higher education, performance-based assessments for learning are most likely to dominate. This study sought to investigate the experiences of students in higher education as far as assessment is concerned. To explore their experiences, researchers applied a qualitative research method, a case-study research design. A purposive sampling technique was employed to lure students' participation in this study. The total eligible sample for participation was N=7. Data collection was in two phases: there was an in-depth interview with the participants at their convenience place and time with all ethical approvals and consent attended to. Secondly, document analysis which included students' modules' outlines were considered. Data was analyzed thematically through coding, clustering and theme development based on the patterns it showed. The findings show that almost all the instructors instruct students to complete the course papers as the main parts of the assessment for their course at the end of each course. In additions, students complete at least one or two presentations during the semester per module and one academic saloon as part of their assessment. Furthermore, instructors' criterion for communication of what is expected from students from the course influences students' experiences both positively and negatively. Teachers' feedback and support also influence how students conduct themselves towards their courses. Students also plea for higher active, engaging interactive dialogues and peer collaboration among themselves. This study recommends consistent robust communication between learners and instructors regarding course demands and implementation of measures that encourage students' active engagements throughout their course.

Keywords

Assessment for Learning, Assessment Practices, Active Engagement, Peer Collaboration

1. Introduction

University assessment is in the midst of transformation, and assessments are no longer designed solely to determine that students can remember and regurgitate lecture content, nor to rank students to aid with some future selection process [1].

Instead, assessments are expected to drive, support, and enhance learning and contribute to student self-assessment and the development of skills and attributes for a lifetime of learning [1]. There are several ways in which assessments can

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be administered, however, assessments in the field of education, especially in higher education, are classified into two forms: formative assessment and summative assessment. The formative assessment is a process through which assessment-elicited evidence of student learning is gathered and instruction is modified in response to feedback [10]. Formative assessment provides valuable information to both students and teachers. [11] notes that students use available information to decide if learning is worth the effort. If students believe learning is important, they will exert greater effort. Students who believe learning is not worth the effort tend to give up. The “assessment FOR learning” model provides students with clear standards, examples of strong and weak work, and feedback so that students can set personal learning goals [11]. Assessment informs students about their learning and daily progress in meeting their goals. Teachers can improve the clarity of student learning targets by providing examples of both weak and stellar work [11].

The other method is called summative assessment, which is usually applied at the end of a period of instruction to measure the outcome of students after learning a given task. This approach also offers some benefits that are worthy of being considered. Data extracted from this method may be used for course improvements, to assess teaching effectiveness, and for program-level assessments such as accreditation [7]. Apart from all these benefits, assessment may be used as a method for accountability to the stakeholders in education, it can serve as a source of motivation for students in higher institutions of higher learning [5]. However, assessment practices normally differ from one teacher to another, from one professor to another, especially in most autonomous institutions of higher learning. Assessment itself contributes to students’ continuous improvements, institutional accreditations, and quality of education for educational stakeholders. In this regard, knowing how it is conducted may contribute to constructive improvements in the education sector, especially in higher learning.

Nevertheless, little is known about how international students from widely distinct cultural backgrounds experience and interact with their instructors and peers in a learning environment, especially for assessing their academic achievements. Therefore, this research intends to address the following questions

- 1) What are the common assessment practices employed in Chinese higher education?
- 2) What are international students' experiences in Chinese higher education on teachers' assessment practices?
- 3) How do international students perceive the assessment practices in the case study of the university in China?

The aims and objectives for this study were to explore the assessment practices employed by the case of one university and investigate international students’ perception of assessment practices in the case of one university in China. This study is also aimed at contributing to the understanding of the assessment practices employed by instructors in institutions

of higher learning in the Chinese context. To further raise awareness and improve self-development among higher education educationalists about their viable assessment procedures in the learning environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Background

Assessment for Learning (AfL) and its variations are used in educational institutions all over the world; it originated as a unique movement in the United Kingdom based on concepts to help learners via assessment [11]. AfL has distributed four interventions: inquiry, feedback through marking, peer- and self-assessment, and formative and summative exam usage [11]. The major instigators of AfL make theoretical claims, and their academic status is deemed adequate to support the assertion [11, 12]. No major difficulties, such as reliability and validity, are not examined in AfL since assessments are not used for accountability or certification; rather, AfL serves a vital educational goal, boosting students' learning and instruction [11]. It is often informal, integrated into all elements of teaching and learning, and carried out by many instructors as part of their own distinct and distinctive teaching styles [11]. Furthermore, the same author affirms the same sentiments in which he portrays that evaluation is important for each class, and according to this publication, evaluation procedures are often divided into two main types: Formative and Summative assessment [10]. Practically, teachers apply these two forms of assessments on students to examine students’ understanding during interactive teaching and learning and to further alter and re-design meager teaching techniques whenever there is a need to do so [10, 6]. According to Dolin et al. (2028), literature adjoining the distinction between formative and summative evaluations dates as far back as the 1960s and emerged as an attempt to answer questions relating to how curriculum materials should be developed [4]. Even though these concepts have been developed a long time ago, because of time and developmental changes in teaching and learning, some scholars in recent years have nevertheless delivered different definitions for more clarity. Formative assessment is defined as the type of evaluation that teachers use to conduct an ongoing process of judgments or evaluation on students’ comprehension, their learning needs, and academic progress within a short time [6]. This method of evaluation, according to Ketabi and Ketabi (2014), can be done at any time during teaching and learning, and it is mostly done when learners are being introduced to new content or knowledge that should be integrated into what they already know. In this regard, teaching techniques and assessments can be day-to-day, which frequently respond to different strategies such as immediate question-answer sessions, a quiz, or a short class test, which can allow a teacher to provide instant feedback to students in a classroom. Summative evaluation, on the other hand, typically takes place at the end of a sub-

stantial portion of the learning period, and its outcomes are essential for multiple parties in education, including teachers, schools, and government administrators, to make decisions and transform policies concerning teaching and learning programs [3]. The goal of summative assessment is to reflect on students' degree of achievement at a certain moment rather than just to influence continuous learning, as has been the objective with formative assessment [2]. Summative assessment is usually less frequent because most times it takes place

after many set goals to assess if they accomplished or unsuccessful [6]. The same scholars' further postulate that summative assessment tenacities encompass the collections, interpretations and reporting's of evidence that learning really occurred throughout the set period of times [6]. It is therefore worth noting that the main aim of summative assessment is to grade students' performances at the end of the stipulated timeframe.

Table 1. Overall Comparison Between Formative and Summative Forms of Assessments.

	Formative Assessment	Summative Assessment
Goal	To monitor student learning and provide ongoing feedback that can be used by students to improve their learning.	To evaluate student learning and overall competencies at the end of an instructional module by comparing it to a benchmark.
Characteristics	Assessment of learning focuses on the process. Provide information about the improvement of knowledge and skills. Requires little time from students and lecturers. Done in class.	Assessment for learning focuses on the outcome. Provide information about attainment of knowledge and skills. Requires more time from students and lecturers. Done outside of class.
Advantages	Can be used to: improve learning, provide adequate academic feedback, motivate students, and diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses.	Can be used to: derive a final grade, allow progression to further studies, assure suitability for work, predict success in future studies, and signal employability.
Disadvantages	Final grades cannot be derived.	Information can only be used in future offerings.

Researchers have attempted to get a better hold of how educators really implement several types of assessments in their educational settings using research, yielding varying outcomes. The following review will illustrate some findings.

2.2. The Uses of Assessment for Learning

Leung and Mohan (2004). conducted a case study in schools that teach English as an Additional Language (EAL) using observations in different classrooms, and results of this study show that teachers and students in the classroom implement formative assessment in the classroom and together they decide on themes that need to be corrected in future lessons [13]. Leung and Mohan (2004) further recommend that educators should use discussion, peer assessment, and other formative assessment techniques rather than only standardized/summative assessment, where students will only be given marks without deeper explanations [13]. Action Research was conducted in which one of the aims was to assess how English teachers implement formative assessment in their classroom [14]. The result of this study depicts those English teachers, while the study has illustrated a good knowledge of formative assessment methods. Therefore, their knowledge of formative assessment was significantly effective in promoting learners' motivation and performance in a classroom. However, the same study described that partici-

pants are facing difficulties in implementing lessons that demand them to fully engage in concurrent formative assessment. Harmer (2004) argued that instructors should be fully involved in the activity and assess students' understanding accordingly [15]. Recently, the works of literature indicated that students feel inspired when playing roles in a second language; they are keen to understand the content of the language, respect the fact that they are given time to practice and experience other learning advantages with their instructors, for example [8].

3. Materials and Methods

In this study, we employed an interpretivist paradigm approach [17]. The interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed [17]. This approach only allows us to understand participants' realities through their experience of that reality, which may be different from each other and are shaped through historical and social perspectives. For the study design, we chose a case study design, since this approach allows in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues using multiple data collection methods [3]. A purposive sampling was applied to select the participants of the study, which was composed of master's and PhD students from one University in China. The criterion used was that each participant should have at least

completed a semester at this University, taking his or her modules. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews (see Appendix I) and document analysis. Thematic

analysis was employed to analyze the data [3]. This study was composed of seven participants, as seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Participants' Demographics.

Participants	Program/Major	Years in China as a student
Participant 1	PhD/ Applied Psychology	3 years
Participant 2	PhD/ Educational Economics and Management	5 years
Participant 3	PhD/ Curriculum and Instruction	3 years
Participant 4	PhD/ Mathematics Education,	3 years
Participant 5	Master's/ Education Economics and Management	1 year
Participant 6	PhD/ Teacher Education	1 year
Participant 7	PhD/ Educational Technology	2 years

4. Results

This study sought to explore students' evaluation experiences at a higher education institution. The data was gathered at a single university in China. This section will elaborate on the study's findings to fulfill the research goals.

What are the common assessment practices employed in Chinese higher education?

The participants have responded that in most of their courses the final course paper is commonly used as part of their assessment and to get their scores for almost all the courses. Class presentations also contribute to this part of the assessment, as all other students must at least make a presentation during the semester. Other respondents indicated that a take-home assignment has been employed by their instructors. Some courses demand that learners engage in personal research to find useful information relevant to their course modules or research interests, such as article reviews and reports.

How do international students experience/perceive assessment practices in Chinese higher education?

Criteria and communication for assessment: For this theme, the participants had mixed feelings about how teachers communicate the criteria and assessment requirements. They have expressed their feelings about the lack of communication from professors and teachers in their respective courses and how such a lack and effective communication differently affects their performance and personal experiences during the course of the semester.

This one also differs from professor to professor, they would be telling us what they will be looking at from our work, from theoretical backgrounds, the type of literature review they will be looking and the word count, they will even tell

you how much work you can get from class participation, class attendance they are very precise, you make a mistake they don't tolerate it. (Participant2)

It depends on factors such as clarity in expectations, alignment with course content, and students' effort and understanding. Clear communication and consistent evaluation criteria tend to make meeting grading demands more achievable for students. (Participant1)

Teachers' feedback and support: The majority of the participants had positive perceptions of the instructors' feedback. The findings show that most instructors provide constructive, comprehensive, timely, and immediate feedback, which is viewed by participants as important for their learning. However, some of them suggested the need for improvements, for example, one participant suggested that:

I think laoshi (teacher) of the faculty of education gives good feedback and constructive, comprehensive feedback. Their feedback does not only tend to encourage you as a student to do better and to improve your deficiencies. They give really good feedback. (Participant3)

Most of our instructors will identify your problem and give you a solution and even suggest papers of high quality and books you can read including theories you can use. Other professors are more focused on the formatting and things that need to be left aligned things you normally don't think about while others focus on the APA, so it differs with professors. Other professors just give you the marks you don't know where to fix and where to improve. (Participant2)

Interactive dialogue and peer collaboration: For the interactive dialogue, participants believe that instructors give them a fair chance to interact with their peers during class sessions and encourage them to collaborate in group work. However, this opportunity for interactions in the classroom is not gen-

eralized among all instructors. According to the findings, some instructors allow students to interrupt the class and ask questions where they need clarification, while other instructors give the opportunity to ask and interact with peers at the end of the class session.

The teacher with which I have participated, most of them can participate anytime you want. For example, you can stop the laoshi in the middle of the class and ask questions and maybe provide your suggestions to the rest of the class, you can participate with no problem. And most of them love this participation of the students, the interaction. (Participant3)

Yes, at the appropriate time, meaning not to be disruptive in the class session but at that time that is allocated by the teacher or if the student, we get permission to ask questions based on whatever discussion that is taking place. (Participant4)

Active engagement with the course: For the engagement with the course, students had different views on how they are engaged with the course. Some of them found the courses interesting and relevant for their future career and professional growth. Some also said the courses need to be specific and related to their area of specialization.

Most of the courses are relevant and most of the course you have to contextualize. For example, we have to know that education does not function in a vacuum, there must be some element of economic factors such as students' socio-economic background so here there where the Economics of education becomes more relevant. (Participant2)

My future profession... I will talk about my major, I can say it is not relevant, cos I can say before enrolling in this program my expectation was like, maybe we are going to have many courses related to economics, management, yeah stuff like that, but it seems, it turns to be educational, not economic side, as I think like, so far I've gone through more 15 than courses but I only got chances to have two, only two courses that are related.... that I can say are related to my major: One is the economics of education, and the other is education leadership and administration. (Participant5)

5. Discussion

The study shows that most of the instructors communicate and make students aware of the criteria that they will employ for their assessment. These findings suggest that students, when students are informed about what is expected from them in the course ahead of time, they are more likely to be engaged in this course and excel in academic performance. This is supported by other research, which concluded that providing the criteria and communication for their students appears to enhance their academic performance [9]. While teachers' feedback and support are paramount to students' learning and academic engagement, other studies highlighted that teachers' feedback plays an important role in

influencing students' academic performance and learning strategies [4]. Moreover, the interactive dialogue and students' collaborative activities had been viewed by students as an important element to their active class participation and motivation for learning. This is consistence with other research in their study where they explored how class motivation positively influences Asian international students' views on assessments, leading to effective learning strategies, particularly metacognitive strategies [5]. Finally, active course engagement served as one of the assessment strategies that the instructor employed to encourage and stimulate learners to understand the concepts and topics of the course. Active learning methods can positively influence inclusive positive change regarding different students' course engagement over time [16].

6. Conclusions

From this study's findings, it indicates that instructors use multiple methods of AFL to assess students' understanding of the content. This is done through traditional methods where students write papers for the course and take-home assignments. In addition, during the learning period, there are however more robust assessments strategies applied including different multiple methods of engagements with the course. Peer assessment has been reflected as one of the strategies used by the instructors, however, it has been shown that it is only reflected and limited to the classrooms most of the time. Teachers' feedback and support was indicated by participants as timely and rigorous among other instructors while it still lacks some. Teachers' continuous communication regarding modules' expectations have also been reflected to lack behind thereby making it difficult for learner to prepare well for their learning activities.

Abbreviations

AFL	Assessment for Learning
APA	American Psychological Association
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy

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Author Contributions

Tebatso Namanyane: Conceptualization, Resources development, Methodology, Software, Data Curation and formal analysis

Okoye Chineta: Data collection and Data curation and

Analysis

Mulugeta Zemuy: Formal Analysis

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Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTION

DEMOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

- 1) When did you enroll in SWU?
- 2) Which program are you enrolled in? Master/PhD?

LEARNING ORIENTED ASSESSMENTS

- 1) Are there any tests you have ever taken from your faculty since you enrolled?
- 2) What do you think about your teachers' feedback and support?

FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT

- 1) How do you think of teachers and support in the courses that you have taken?
- 2) After how long were you given the feedback?
- 3) How detailed do you think the feedback from your teachers is?

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE AND PEER COLLABORATION ASSESSMENT

- 1) During class sessions, does your teacher allow you to ask questions?
- 2) In your classroom, are you allowed to ask questions to your classmates and respond to some? How?
- 3) Do you cooperate with other students when doing classwork or assignments?

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COURSE (Psychomotor, Affective, and Cognitive)

- 1) What activities are you usually assigned to that are related to your courses?
- 2) How do you find your courses relevant and interesting to your future development and profession?
- 3) How do you think your teacher helps you to achieve your goals in your future profession?
- 4) Do you think teachers' demands when giving you grades are difficult or easy to achieve? How?

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